

A Novel

“MARIA’S FINAL DAYS”

By

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The following story is fictional and based loosely on Biblical events that will happen, or perhaps, are happening to some degree, now---in Earth's Final Days.

All characters in the book are fictional and not based on any living person.

Acknowledgements

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This book is dedicated to God, my husband and to all who are searching for truth, love and God's purpose in life.

The truth, as it has been said before, is "out there." But, we must all keep searching, as the characters in this book have done and hopefully a good ending will come, to all such searching.

Toni's Bio



I have been a freelance writer and author of many articles and books for over twenty-five years. I am also a retired military spouse, housewife and just recently received my MS degree in Business from Capella University. I also have a blog and book site. The reader can find out more about me at: <http://pathwaystochrist.blogspot.com> and www.lulu.com/tstar

I have learned many things in my life but one of the best lessons I ever learned came from living overseas in Germany, during Desert Storm. I found that to keep young in one's mind and heart, to be successful with life's challenges and overcome adversities, one needs to keep moving and learning!

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Chapter One: Fall 2020 and The End

For Christians around the world, the End came as predicted-----with a clashing of cymbals, trumpets and shouts of joy! The sweeping up of men, woman, children and pets was accomplished in a split second and afterwards Maria recalled words from scripture that defined that fantastic day: “Behold, I come quickly!” Rev 22:12 If she hadn’t been looking out the window at that exact moment, she, like others, would have missed the most important “exit” of man and woman kind, but looking out windows was something she did religiously.

There was joy and rapture for those who taken in the clouds but for those who lived on the “dark side,” and for those who remained behind, there was “weeping and gnashing of teeth.” And, oh, what was to come!

Agoraphobic and alone for twenty some years, Maria was used to—but didn’t like--the solitary feelings that came from being separated from others. Now, with those left behind without the comfort and love of loved ones, she wondered how they would survive, how they would handle their “aloneness.” She pondered that for herself, too.

At forty-two, she felt blest with a deep and abiding faith in God and her Bible. This faith in an all-knowing and caring God would keep her going; of that she was convinced. But still she pondered, “Why, dear Lord, was I left behind? Why was I not taken to Heaven?”

Hours and days after the Rapture, she searched her heart and mind for answers to those questions, but nothing came to mind. Being captive in her home for years with such an affliction, she would soon learn fearful truths about herself and society and be a captive audience to the ever-growing, dark side of her neighbors.

Maria often searched her mind on when the agoraphobia began. She recalled that when she was just 10 years old, she was left alone one night to take care of her younger brother—Tommy, while the rest of the family went to a nearby drive-in theatre. While alone, she thought she heard someone trying to break in at the front door and her anxiety grew so strong, that she came close, to having a psychic break—or so the doctor said when he examined her the following day..She was never the same after that and seldom went anywhere unless someone “older” went with her.

It was on the fourth day after the Rapture that she saw something unusual out her living room window....One by one, she saw her neighbors cautiously come out of their homes and look up to the sky. “They look so lost and so alone,” she thought. She could see from their gray faces, expressions of fear, desperation and aloneness. Now, she thought, they would know what it’s like to be alone and frightened. But, she admitted deep inside of

her that she wouldn't wish such fear on anyone. Not being able to go outside and enjoy the day, and being fearful of the night, was a terrible cruelty and so inhuman.

Her neighbors kept staring up at the sky that day—as if hoping for another way out and then one by one began murmuring with one another. Her doors and windows were closed; so she couldn't make out what they were saying. She could tell by their faces that fear was changing their very being. In fact, she thought, they really didn't look human anymore. Kind of like zombies—pale, fearful and looking for someone to hurt or kill.

Later, she saw police and ambulance cars driving down the street. Lights were flashing and horns bellowing. She noticed then that the people began retreating to the sidewalks and then began shouting, “Help us! Don't leave us here! Do something, please!”

The police looked dumbfounded, slowly got out of their cars and tried to console them but it seemed that nothing helped to ease them of their fears. In fact, the police began pushing them away, as if frightened of their appearance and behavior. Seconds later, they returned to their cars and drove off to most likely another fear-driven neighborhood.

Then Maria noticed another uncanny stillness with the huddled group. It was an unnatural quietness, the same kind of quietness when children are doing something they shouldn't be doing... They acted as if they were empty of all emotion and feeling—like zombies, not knowing what to do or where to go. The silent group remained huddled but every now and then, slyly looked around; acting suspicious and quite odd. It was a scary and uneasy scene to watch but Maria couldn't help but stay glued to the window.

Then, something else odd happened. The people in the large circle began forming a long line and then quietly but purposely, began walking down the middle of the street. With quiet resolution on their faces, they began walking towards town. Their purpose known only to them but she could tell the end result would not be good.

“Where were they going?” she pondered. ‘And would they come back?’ With so many abandoning their home, she felt more alone than ever.

Days later, she thought about Annie, her best friend and neighbor. She hadn't heard from her since the rapture. If she were taken, too, her life as she knew it, would be over, soon.

Annie was angel, an angel who took care of her groceries every Tuesday and always had time to chat. This was Tuesday. “Surely, she would come as always!” she mused. After all, Annie was her only connection to the outside world. Hoping against hope, Maria anxiously waited for the visit.

She waited for hours and then it dawned on her, that Annie would not be coming. Her mind began to race.... “What would she do without her help? How would she get food and medication?” There was no one else to count on.... Well, she thought, there was just one other...

Andy Taylor! He lived at the end of the street; and sometimes came to visit her. He was always so caring and helpful. Yes, maybe Andy could help! “But, how to get a hold of him?” Then she thought, “He doesn’t go out often and has a hard time walking. How could he possibly help me? It would be like the blind leading the blind.”

The only way to reach him, she pondered, would be to watch for him at the window. Since she did that often and daily, her chances were good she would see him. He often took walks in the neighborhood. Yes, that’s how she would reach him, when he took his walks! She would wait, yes she would wait and watch. Surely, he could be of some help!.

So, she stayed glued to her window; hoping to catch a glimpse of him. He was usually so routine. Why, one could set their clocks by Andy; he was so on time! So, she waited.....

Two days went by without a soul in sight. Many in the neighborhood, had either become housebound or had left for parts unknown. From the lack of lights glowing inside their homes, she knew that many had left. The streets were now deserted and gone were the familiar outside noises. There were no children laughing, or playing outside; no more children riding bicycles, no cars, no lawn mowers....Simply put, no one could be seen! It was spooky, and just plain scary!

Then about ten days later, on a Saturday, she saw a lone soul walking down the middle of the street. It looked like Andy but it wasn’t...It was Glen Walker and that was not good. He was the meanest man on the block, maybe the whole town. Certainly, he would be of no help. She wondered what he was up to....No good, she thought..

“Leave him be,” she thought. ‘He would just as soon walk over my dead body than help me.’

As predicted, Glen walked by her home, without even a glance her way. She could tell that he saw her at the window, but totally ignored her image, just as always. “What a mean man!” ‘Keep walking, you ignorant cuss! Don’t need or want your help!’ She couldn’t help her thoughts on him, for he had been indifferent and cruel to her many times.

Then, she saw someone else walking down the street. This time it was a woman...And, it looked like Helen Trumbell. Indeed, it was Helen! Helen could help. Helen at least waved at her whenever she walked by, or when she was on the way to buying groceries or visiting a sick neighbor. She seldom stopped at Maria’s house but always seemed interested in Maria and her aloneness.

As usual, Helen looked toward Maria’s house, saw her at the window and waved. She appeared to be nervous and in a hurry and almost didn’t catch Maria’s act of distress. Maria waved and with her hands and anxious face, beckoned Helen to stop and talk.

Helen noticed the startled look and waving hands and even though she was in a hurry, she cautiously walked toward Maria’s front door. She arrived breathless for she was

concerned with what Maria might want. She knew, too, that with the Rapture, Maria surely would need something.

In seconds, she was at Maria's front door. In seconds, Maria opened the door. "Hi, Helen. Thank you so much for stopping by. Sorry I interrupted your walk but I need help. Everything is in a mess for me. The lady who used to help me with groceries and medicine has been taken or left and I am so alone and without help. The Rapture has taken so many! Helen, do you think that you could help me? I'm so afraid, and I need help. I can't leave my home; of course you know that... And, Helen, my nerves just can't take it! I was hoping Andy might stop by but I haven't seen him and I told have his phone number...Oh Helen, what should I do?"

Helen could see that Maria was upset; and with good reason. Like other couples, she was without her husband, He had been taken in the Rapture and she, like Maria, knew what it was like to be alone but with two teenagers to care for, she had reason to continue on... Goodness knows, she was doing her best to continue on—she had enough for food and clothing. She was thankful that she still had her debit card. It was still being accepted in most stores and would help keep them going for awhile...Maria wouldn't understand her sufferings; she was in a world of her own...

"Helen, I hate to ask you but there is just no one else I can turn to. I realize that you have your family to take care of, but could you find it in your heart to do me a favor? I need some groceries and medication--just some necessities and it would be great if you could get them for me.."

"Yes, I can do that, Maria. I'm going to the market to get some things. It wouldn't be hard picking up some things for you, too. Do you still have that cart you used to loan Mary across the street? That would help a great deal when bringing the items home. And of course, your debit card, too."

"Sure, let me get them for you. Will be right back."

While Helen waited, she scanned Maria's home. Clearly, her home had the look of one who had lived a solitary and lonely life—books and folders stacked high and everything in its place. It was an orderliness that defied understanding. What a waste of life, she thought. "How could anyone live like this...so alone, without anyone to talk to?" Helen had always been a very social person, so Maria's lifestyle was incomprehensible to her mind. She decided not to tell her that her husband, John, was taken in the Rapture. It would only add to Maria's feeling of helplessness and aloneness. Besides, she had much to do that day and just wanted to get it done and go home. Shopping was no longer an enjoyable event. No, it was filled with angry, desperate people who had little money, no family and a government ever-watching and knowing.

Maria returned with the cart; her expression now filled with hope, and happiness--sheer happiness in finding someone on earth, and a person who understood and cared whether she lived or died.

“Here it is, Helen and still in good shape. Could you stay awhile and talk before you go? It’s so nice talking with someone like you, someone who knows me. Not many people even know I exist, do you know what I mean?”

“Yes, Maria. I understand. People are more distant now than ever; even neighbors who used to care about each other; they no longer care. And so many are gone...I’m finding that those left behind are so negative and fearful. I’m very fearful just to go downtown to the stores. Many are hurting or killing others—just to get some food or clothes. It is awful!” She began to cry.

Maria never was good at showing compassion for others but Helen was so distraught and had always waved and said “hello” when she passed by. She did her best to console her...

“Oh Helen, it must be awful! I can’t go out like you, but I see a lot of on TV. So many are acting like animals...pure animals! Like you, I wonder, why were we left behind? Did we do something wrong? I keep asking myself the same questions...over and over. I mean, we knew the end was coming; it’s in the Bible. You and I have been living a righteous life...I don’t understand why we were left behind?!”

“Maria, if I knew the answer to that, obviously I wouldn’t be here but maybe we were left to help bring others closer to God and maybe redeem our own lives...I just don’t know!”

Both were crying until Helen replied, “Well, I’d better get going. The stores have been very busy these last two days and with so many people pushing and shoving; it’s down right scary! A neighbor I’ve known for years pushed me until I almost fell down! I can’t believe what has happened to people...Oh well, I’d best be moving on.”

“I understand. Here is a small list of things I need and the government debit card to pay for it. If they won’t accept it, then I’ll pay you cash for the amount when you come back.”

“No problem, Maria. I’ll be back in about two hours. Lines may be long. So, I’ll see you when I see you...” As soon as she left Maria’s, she returned to her hurried pace.

“Bye, and thank you so much!”

She watched as Helen walked down the street. Not far behind Helen were several other older women; all of them walking hurriedly but looking lonely, empty and frightened..

The hours went by at snail’s pace, as Maria waited for Helen. She read and reread the many catalogs that were piled neatly in the living room corner. It helped to pass the time. And time was really all she had. .

The mailman was late; more so now than ever. It had to be because of the Rapture, she thought. Nothing was for certain, or on time; absolutely nothing! So, she waited...

Maria could hardly wait for him to slip the mail in the box and move on to his next stop. She loved going through the mail because it gave her something to do; it filled her life a bit and that felt nice... In fact, she made it a point of ordering almost any type, size or content of a catalog. She was thankful that the mail was still being delivered; that her magazines were still coming through. It was one of the few things one could count on these days. But lately she hoarded away many of the catalogs, for she knew the postal service soon be ending and then one of her favorite pastimes would be over... Yes, it was just a matter of time.

Before opening the door, she cautiously looked through the peephole, then carefully opened the door, looking first looking to the left and then to the right. She always made sure that no one was walking her way, for that would be frightening and push disturbing images that would last all day.

She slowly pulled the mail from the box and quietly closed the door. After the door was closed, she once again felt safe and secure..

Maria sat down on her very old but comfortable sofa. Happy with the contents in her hand, she now could now take some time and peruse the catalogs at her leisure. In the small bundle she also found a curious letter. She noticed that it didn't have a return address. She would save the opening of that one for later. Could be a problem or maybe somebody wanted something. These past few days it seemed everyone was asking for money or a debit card and would say or do anything to get it. Oh, how she hated problems! That always meant confrontations and that kind of stress made her go round in circles....

About an hour later, Helen returned with the groceries. She didn't have to ring the doorbell or knock on the door, for Maria had been peering out her large bay window looking for her and checking on the neighborhood..

Helen walked in, looking tired and stressed. She said that the stores were jam-packed and everyone was panic-buying. Since the Rapture, everyone was frenzied and out of control. She was glad to be back and by her posture Maria could tell that she was weary and just wanted to go home. Maria didn't bother with amenities, but thanked her for her help. She did ask and received, her phone number. Later, she placed the number underneath her phone. Minutes later, Helen left and began walking toward her home. She was weary with life and how awful people had become and was not anticipating the energy and nervousness of her children..

Chapter Two: The Letter

As Maria put away the grocery items, she anguished, "What if something should happen to Helen?" Deep inside she knew Helen was one of the very few left that cared about her. She absolutely needed Helen but she realized that that friendship could end anytime. Nothing and no one could be counted on; only the good Lord.

With grocery items put away, she once again returned to her catalogs and for a brief time escaped into a fantasy world of clothes, trinkets and unnecessary but cheap home items. Flipping through the many pages of worldly goods, she began to relax..

About an hour later she decided that she would examine the strange letter. She lifted the letter, gently tore it open and began reading:

“Dear Gentle Reader,

I know of your condition and would like to offer some help. Being agoraphobic must be troublesome and anxiety-ridden. I would like to offer you some assistance---but in return I must ask something of you.

I would like to move in with you. I am a likeable person, with qualities few people have. I could help you and you could help me escape a situation that is hurting me.

I could act as your companion and do what you need to have done. And, with the Rapture and everyone so selfish and needy, I could take away the loneliness and fear.

If this is agreeable to you, please call me at 775-8478.

Your Secret Admirer,

Ken Abernathy

Maria was shaking as she put the letter down. She thought, “Who was this Ken Abernathy and how did he find out about her? Was he someone to be trusted or was he an opportunist looking for a quick deal, free food or something too hideous to even think of?” She was skeptical and afraid; not just because she knew nothing about him but that he seemed to know so much about her!

She sat there and thought out loud, “I can’t have a man stay with me—someone who I know nothing about! What would people think but worse yet, what does he want? And, how did he find out about me?”

Many fearful thoughts swirled through her brain. Maybe he would come some night and break in or pose as someone innocent during the day and worm his way in and then do her harm. Her mind was filled with “what ifs.”

She got up and began to pace up and down her living room floor. She paced for a good thirty 30 minutes and then came to a decision.

“That’s it! I know what I’ll do!” She began smiling and if anyone would have seen her at that moment they might have said, “That can’t be Maria! That woman looks in control and way too happy!”

She continued her thinking out loud, “The next time Helen walks down the street, I will ask if she and her family would like to move in with me! It would help us all and provide security for everyone! Yes, she might like the idea. Course, they would all have to understand and respect my privacy and everyone would have to pull their weight with housekeeping and such....Surely, it won’t hurt to ask...”

The rest of the day was peaceful and serene. Later, when looking out her bay window, she saw few people outside walking—most likely on their way to a store. Course, that was not unusual, considering the spectacular event that occurred just days ago. She went to bed early that night and was just about to fall asleep when her phone rang...

She saw by her glowing bedside clock that it was 10:45. She let the phone ring three times before answering....

“Hello? Maria? Is anyone there?”

Maria listened nervously and tried to think of something to say. The voice was male, with a deep, nasal quality that at once made it scary and foreboding. For some strange reason she wanted to answer but instead, returned the phone to its cradle.

She lay in bed nervous, wondering who the nasal voice belonged to...Maybe it was Ken Abernathy.

Then, the phone rang again. This time she let it ring seven times before answering...Again, the voice cried, “Hello? Hello? Please answer! I need to talk with you!”

For a few seconds there was nothing else; only some deep breathing--the kind people do when they’re trying to find the courage to speak. Then after what seemed an eternity...

“Hello, Maria? This is Ken Abernathy...Did you get my letter?”

After pausing for a few seconds, desperately trying to regain composure and keeping her words from slurring she replied, “Ken Abernathy? Who are you and why did you write to me and now calling me so late?”

“I’m sorry to disturb you but I need your help, desperately! It’s a matter of life and death!”

Maria was scarred—first the letter, now the phone call and this person named Ken Abernathy, saying that a life could be in jeopardy....But, whose life? “How should she reply?” she thought. After all, maybe he wanted to kill her and then take over her home.”

“What do you mean, a matter of life or death!”

“Now don’t go bizerk on me! I need a place to stay and I’m almost out of money. I didn’t sign up for “The Card” so I can’t buy or sell anything! You know what that’s like!”

Maria’s nerves were getting worse by the minute....This whole thing was turning into a nightmare!

“Ken...I don’t know you! Why would I want to take in a total stranger? Especially with what’s happened and everyone acting crazy! No! I can’t and I won’t take in a total stranger and that’s that!”

She was shaking but she felt compelled to listen on. There was no way was any man going to stay with her, especially someone she didn’t know. She couldn’t begin to imagine the anxiety she would feel, if she allowed a stranger to stay with her...

But he persisted...”Please Maria, just for awhile, at least until this Rapture thing has died down and besides I do know a friend of yours....a Mr. Andy Taylor? I know that you know him and that he’s a good man.”

Maria persisted. “Yes, I know Andy. But, what has that got to do with anything? You could have found his name in the phone book and be using it just to get inside my home!”

“No, Maria. I know him. He’s my uncle and he talks with me a lot. He’s told me a lot about you---about your illness, why you can’t go outside, why you’re so afraid of everything...” He went on and on until....

Maria interrupted, “If Andy is you uncle, why don’t you stay with him? I know he’s a lonely man and that he has plenty of room.”

There was a pause on the line for about 20 seconds and then...”Yes, I know he’s lonely but my family doesn’t visit with him often because he is quite tempermental. He does know that we love and care for him. We always remember his birthday and visit with him on the holidays. Please, just talk to him, Maria and he’ll vouch for me! Please, won’t you at least do that for me?”

“I don’t know. Let me think about it. If I see him in the neighborhood; he used to walk every now and then. But, Ken, I don’t even know if he’s still here!” She paused for awhile and then said, ‘Let me see what happens the next couple of days...If I do see him, I’ll motion him over; and see what he has to say about you. That’s all I can promise.’”

“Thank you, Maria! You won’t be disappointed. In the meantime, you can reach me at 775=8548, when you’ve made your decision.” He hung up and that’s when panic struck her heart. She went to the bathroom and quickly poured out her anxiety pills. She absolutely hated such phone calls! No one calls at night unless they wanted something. That was a cold, hard fact.

Then she recalled that she had Andy's phone number. He gave it to her years ago when they were talking one cold December day. She went to her desk drawer to find it. She would call him; yes she would give him a call. Waiting would not be good. She needed to know...

She sat down on a dining room table and dialed the number...It rang four times before Andy finally picked up the phone....

"Hello?" Andy sounded tired and not up to talking...

"Hello Andy? This is Maria. Hope I'm not disturbing you. I have a question..."

"Sure, Maria....What can I do for you?" His voice was steady but she could tell he was anxious. A person's voice always gave away what was going on inside.

"Andy, do you know a Ken Abernathy? He says that you are his uncle; that you know him well. Is that true?"

"Yes, I know him. Unfortunately, he's my nephew. What does he want? Is he hitting you up for money?"

"Why do you ask that, Andy?"

"Because that's usually what that boy wants! Is he bothering you?"

"Actually, he is! He wants to stay with me! Says that he will help me out in exchange for room and board. He knows that I'm agoraphobic and all alone. That alone gives me pause. What should I say to him? You know me, Andy. I just don't deal with many people. How should I handle him?"

"Don't give him anything! He will take everything you have and then throw you out!" Andy practically shouted his words through the phone at Maria. So loud were his words that she had to hold the phone way back from her ears. It certainly was a violent response; not what she expected from Andy.

"I appreciate your candor, Andy. I had reservations about him from the very beginning. Now I know what I need to do..."

"Good! And, if he gives you any problems, let me know! I know how to handle "the boy;" for he's upset me and my family hundreds of times!"

"Thanks, Andy. I appreciate your candor and help, more than you know...By the way, how are you doing? Being left behind is scary, isn't it? Most of my neighbors have been leaving and the ones staying, are acting strange and desperate. Soon, I fear, I will be the only one left on this street."

“Yes, it’s a fearful time but we must hold fast to our faith in God, Maria. We mustn’t give up, Maria. This is the tribulation and the Rapture that was prophesized years ago, but if we stay close to Him, and do what’s right, we may be taken up, too!”

“Thanks, Andy! I think I needed to hear that but it’s still scary not knowing what’s going to happen from day to day. So many are being robbed, killed and their homes taken. You can’t help but wonder who is going to be next. I’ve noticed that most of the TV and radio programs are reporting only violence and little about what you and I should do to survive this! Course, the media has been doing this for a very long time, haven’t they?... Well, I won’t keep you. Please Andy, feel free to call or stop by anytime... Maybe we could help each other with the loneliness and fear?”

“Yes, that’s a good idea and thank you for calling. Please Maria, let me know how it goes with my nephew. I will do what I can to help you; should he give you any trouble...”

Goodbyes were said and Maria felt strangely better and relieved. Connecting with a neighbor who cared; what a difference it made! And, now that she knew the truth about Andy... Well, she would call Helen soon to see if they could join forces and live together. There was always strength in numbers and they could look out for each other—protect one another from “evil” that continued to grow!

Thinking of Helen and possibly joining up with her and her family, gave Maria a confidence that she hadn’t felt in a long time. That made the coming hours and days smoother and calmer.

She would take care of Ken later; there was no urgency in confronting him with a “no” answer; at least not for now. Helen just might like the idea of moving in with her. There might; however, be a problem with her children, for they had a reputation of being hostile and obnoxious with strangers. But, such behavior would be a small price to pay for the safety and security of bonding together. Well, time for sleep. Tomorrow would be another day... Another day in paradise, she thought.

The sun shone bright the following day; almost as if the good Lord was presenting a better day for those left behind. After breakfast she went to her bay window and cautiously looked out the window. She noticed that almost all of the leaves on her two big oak trees were gone and lay quietly on the lonely neighborhood street and sidewalk. The high wind in the early morning hours left little of the beauty that was once there. But, she would remember the beauty; for the memory of such beauty would help keep her going...

She looked to the left down the street toward Helen’s home and saw her children playing outside. They seemed happy but very quiet, as they rode their skateboards. She figured that they were about 10 and 11. It was strange because they often argued and fought outside. Today they were quite different—quiet and subdued.

Seconds later she saw Helen appear at the front door. She talked with them for awhile; probably giving them instructions for the day, Maria thought. Seconds later, she began walking down the street. Except for her children, Maria could see no one else out. She couldn't help thinking it looked like a scene out of the old TV Series, *The Twilight Zone*, where no one was left on earth, except for a few lonely children. It was a ghostly sight; she saw no one preparing for winter, no raking of leaves, no gossiping on the corner like always...Just an eerie calm and quiet, with only two young children playing.

Helen continued walking and was getting closer to Maria's house. Maria waved at her from the living room window. Helen turned her face toward her as if to wave, smiled but kept walking. She seemed in a hurry and in no mood to talk.

Maria was hurt because she longed to talk with her about the possibility of moving in with her. Maybe she would catch her on the return trip home. Yes, that would be a good time.

Seconds later, she heard the phone ring...She let it ring several times and then walked to the kitchen. "If it's important, they'll call back." She decided that she would make some tea and have a small snack. She just wasn't in the mood to talk.

The phone rang again and this time kept ringing...Ken, it must be Ken, she surmised. He was getting to be a pest and that frightened her.

She decided this time to answer the phone. Besides, if she didn't, he would just keep calling.

"Hello? Who is this?"

"Hi Maria. It's me, Ken. Can we talk? I need to discuss some things with you."

Maria knew what was coming; but this time she was ready. She replied, "Ken, I'm really busy right now. Please don't bother me anymore."

Ken made no bones about it; he wouldn't take no for an answer and replied, "Maria, please hear me out. I'm in deep trouble. My landlord is forcing me to leave my apartment. He is acting very strange and I'm afraid for my life. Please, please, help me!"

Marie's nerves and blood pressure were traveling up at a dangerous pace. What should she do? She didn't trust him and she wanted desperately to speak with Helen. She had to think fast...

"Ken, I understand your predicament but you can't stay with me. It's not that I don't care; it's my illness. I live alone, and I never leave my apartment. I'm ill, Ken and need to be alone. And, I've been hurt many times by people who have lied to me. No! You cannot stay with me!"

Ken interrupted. "I know that you're ill, Maria and that, dear lady is part of the reason why I'd like to stay with you—to help you!"

Marie replied, "Ken, I said no! I simply cannot and will have you live with me! Now, please leave me alone and don't call me anymore!" She hung up before he could reply but before she hung up, she heard a mean and disappointed groan and that awful groan stayed with her all day and on into the evening.....

Chapter 3 Someone At The Door Stop July 29, 2008

The phone call from Ken lingered all day in Maria's brain. Ken was emotionally ill; that was clear to see. She would have to be very careful with him; and Andy said he would help with Ken, so the fear of Ken began to subside.

The next day dawned bright and clear; another beautiful fall day, she thought. Maria was fixing her usual ----a cup of coffee and a muffin. The day was looked bright and hopeful. Peering out her kitchen window, she saw some neighborhood children playing in their backyard. It felt good seeing other children out and having fun. It seemed that they had temporarily set aside the fear and uncertainty of life, and were just being children. "Oh, to be young again," she mused.

With breakfast finished, she took a shower, got dressed and began her daily obsessive housework. Getting the morning work done always made her feel better; for Maria couldn't begin "any" day without cleaning. For Maria, cleaning helped to cleanse and organize her mind. Even as a little girl, she was never happy until her room sparkled with layers of polish and dust moping!

Around ten she decided to give Helen a call. .

She began dialing the numbers when she heard knocking at the front door. Too early for the mailman, she thought. He didn't come until after noon and he seldom knocked. With caution, she proceeded to the front door. Looking through the peak hole she saw that it was a man. It was a strange looking man; his face was lined with fear and anxiety.

Hesitantly, she asked, "Who is it, please?"

The man replied, "It's me, Maria...Ken. I need to talk!?"

Maria quickly pulled herself away from the door and anxiously replied, "Ken, I told you that I wasn't interested in your offer. Now, go away!"

“Maria, please help me! I don’t have anywhere to go! My uncle won’t take me in and there’s just no one else...Won’t you please reconsider?!”

This time Maria was more forceful. She knew that if she wasn’t aggressive, he would be back.

“No! I told you my feelings; now please go!”

Ken was frustrated and angry and replied gruffly, “Alright, if that’s the way you feel. You won’t see me again...But, you will be sorry, Maria!...Very sorry!”

Chapter 4 Memories

Maria wanted to call Helen but the visitation from Ken upset her so much, she had to sit quietly in her soft, recliner for two long hours, just so she could feel normal again and get the shaking of her body to stop.

Why did she have to deal with this “Ken person” she mused? And, why was there always someone like him, bugging or harassing her? This wasn’t the first time someone was wanting something or troubling her. She recalled the pesky neighbor who once lived next door who did everything she could to make her life miserable—like mowing the grass at eight in the morning or singing loudly at midnight...”That was a jerk, for sure!” she thought out loud.

She began ruminating about pesky Margaret. “That Margaret was the absolute worst neighbor of all! And, those late night phone calls, and constantly watching my hone. .She was always waiting for me to peak out the door or check my mail. That woman made it so obvious! That woman was always trying to trip me up, just so she could tell everyone that she saw that “odd” one at the window who never goes anywhere!” Well, she wouldn’t make that same mistake with Ken. She would face him head-on, nerves and all, and then be done with him! No pussy-footing around this time!

Maria spent the rest of the day trying to calm her nerves; perusing some old magazines she had stashed away in the corner of her living room. Later in the day she began her fall cleaning—first the kitchen and then the bathroom. She reminded herself to call Helen after the cleaning.

Around six that night she picked up the phone and dialed. As she listened to the dial rings, she looked out her back kitchen window and its scenery. Sure looked cold and lonely out there, she thought. Not fit for man or beast....The phone continued to ring...

On the sixth ring she heard someone pick up the phone. A young girl answered and said, “Yah, Hello....Who is this?”

“Hello. May I speak to Helen? Is she home?”

First a yawn and then...”Umm., I think so. Let me go check.”

There was a pause, some murmurings in the background and then...”Ah, well, ah...she’s not here right now? Wanna leave a message?”

Maria was getting mad and didn’t appreciate the child’s off-hand manner and the fact that the child was obviously lying. She replied, “That’s alright. Will you have her call Maria when she has time? I would like to talk with her.”

“Ya, O.K....Maria...Ah...Hmmmm...I’ll have her call you when she gets back.”

“Thank you.” The girl didn’t sound positive and Maria knew that a return phone call from Helen would probably not happen.

As she laid down the receiver, she felt an odd feeling rush over her. It was like she knew something was wrong but she didn’t know what...

As she looked out her kitchen window, she saw a figure hunching down low behind some bushes in the back yard. She couldn’t make out who it was but it looked like a young man.

It was getting dark outside and it was difficult to make out shapes. She sat there watching and soon the figure moved....This time she could tell that it was man. Looked around thirty or so...He began edging toward the house, crouching low.. Immediately, Maria rushed to check the lock on the door. Then she hurried to the front door and made sure that it, too, was locked.

Just as quickly she returned to the kitchen, sat down and as if paralyzed watched and waited...The linen curtain on the back door window was thick and brown colored. He wouldn’t be able to see her and that made her feel more secure.

Seconds later she heard someone walking up to the porch. Then she could see his shadow at the back door. .

He began to knock loudly on the door. She sat there transfixed and hoped that whoever it was would just go away! The knocking continued and then a voice cried, “Maria, I know that you’re in there! Come to the door!”

She stayed silent. “Maybe he’ll give up and leave” she whispered out loud.

Again, he shouted, “Maria! I’m not leaving until you talk with me!”

Before she could reply, she heard knocking on the front door...She ran to the front of the house and saw that it was Andy. She opened the door and said, "Andy, I am so glad to see you! Ken is at my back door and is practically screaming at me to let him in so we can talk. Please can you talk to him and tell him to go?"

"Be happy to, Maria. I thought he might show up today. I'm so sorry that he's bothered you. You see, he's bi-polar and doesn't take his medication. Not to worry; I'll take care of this!"

Maria was so relieved to see Andy, that for a few minutes, she forgot completely the restrictions of agoraphobia and even considered making Andy some coffee or tea. She was that relieved...

Andy went to the back door and through the door he talked with his nephew.

"Ken! This is Andy. I want you to go away and leave this poor woman alone. She doesn't owe you anything and neither do I! You have your own place to stay; I talked with your landlord yesterday and he said he would reconsider and let you stay as long as you abide by the rules and don't destroy anymore furniture or be loud at night. Now, can you do that?"

"But Andy, I didn't do anything wrong. That landlord has been against me ever since I moved in and he told me two days ago to leave and never come back. I just don't have anywhere to go. Even you won't allow me to stay at your place...!"

"Ken, I just told you that the landlord reconsidered and that you can stay there if you behave yourself. Now, I want you to leave, go back to your place and leave this poor woman alone. If I hear otherwise, I will call the police and have them take you in...and you know how bad jails have become, these days..."

For a few seconds it was so quiet they thought he had left and then, "Alright, I'll leave. I didn't mean to frighten you Maria. I was just worried about having no place to go and I thought I could help you, too. I'll go; don't want to but I will."

He left, hunched over and from his walk, he looked so depressed even Maria felt sorry for him. But, at least he was gone...

Andy saved the day and living close by, maybe could help her should there be any further emergencies with Ken...Andy stayed for awhile and shared some tea with Maria. It was an experience she would remember for a long time. And it felt strangely nice not being trapped with agoraphobia. Maybe, just maybe, there was hope for her.....

Chapter Five: Another Stranger At The Door

The next morning Maria arose around seven; a ritual she seldom missed. She prepared her usual breakfast of coffee and a muffin and then sat down in her easy chair and watched the morning news. She enjoyed this ritual because it calmed her down and she could take a sneak peak at the world around her and see how others were coping with the Rapture. The news was horrific but here and there a hopeful story. She liked those the best. Since the Rapture she watched the news with a kind of smugness in her heart; especially when she realized she was so much better off than most; seeing how so many were floundering—looking for safety and peace. She knew such smugness was wrong but she just couldn't help herself.

Maria didn't subscribe to a daily newspaper; so it was especially important to watch the news on TV. And, it was so much safer; for she didn't have to be concerned about the paperboy coming every morning, searching for the paper under shrubs or lost in the driveway, the monthly paying of the bill and the boy always hinting for a tip.

Around eight she took a quick shower and then did some housework. "A good house is always a clean house." A motto she began years ago. She remembered her mother always saying that and so she continued the addictive ritual.

After the morning clean-up she decided to watch the last part of the morning news. Her favorite news program, Channel 6 always brought a smile to her face and a warm feeling to her heart. Even though the Rapture brought horrible news events, the station always made time for a cheerful story, titled, "Today's Good News." And, she adored the Weatherman! His name fit him well, Dave Mussleman. He was masculine and extremely good looking and he made her mornings and afternoons, so much more brighter and hopeful. And, it didn't hurt that he reminded her of an old boyfriend. Those were good memories....

It was around 9:30 when she heard noise at the front door. Immediately, she feared that it might be Ken again. Her blood pressure began to soar.

Anxiously, she walked to the door and carefully looked through the peep hole. Her eyes scanned first to the right and then to the left. There appeared to be no one in sight. And yet, she heard a kind of moaning and groaning. The noise sounded like someone was ill. She hoped that it wasn't another problem; she was just beginning to feel good again...

Then, she did something she seldom did. She unlocked the front door and slowly opened the outside screen door to a crack. She peaked through the opening and saw nothing. She opened the door a bit more and still nothing. Just as she was about to close the door, she looked down on to the porch pavement and on the bottom steps saw large droplets of blood.

Someone had been bleeding right on her front porch! She couldn't let someone bleed to death on her porch...And yet, she was under no obligation to help whoever was there or

had been there. After all, she didn't owe anybody anything and for all she knew, it could be a ploy just a ploy to get inside....And besides, she could see no one!

Still, her conscience bothered her and with trepidation and fear rising in her throat, opened up the door wider.

Then, she saw at the bottom of the porch, on the right side, a young man. He looked around twenty-nine. It wasn't Ken and she noticed that he was bleeding profusely. It looked like he had been stabbed in the arm and by his pale face, looked like he might pass out any minute.

Always at a loss for words, she began...“Who are you and what has happened?” She was frightened but after looking at his pale and tortured face, she instinctively felt that she had nothing to fear.

“Please help me! There was a crowd at Steiner's Market and a gang of men were pushing and shoving.....All I wanted to do was buy some food. Please, can you help me?!” She could tell that he was having a hard time breathing.

“You are a stranger! I can't trust you....I can't trust anyone! Now, please, you must go... You will have to find someone else to help you. I live all alone and I'm ill. And, I just don't have the medical supplies to help you.”

“Please, lady! You've got to help me.” He felt dizzy and had a hard time talking; but he continued, ‘I'll die if you don't. I've tried to get help from others on Penn Avenue but no one would even come to the door. You're the only one so far who has even opened the door..Please, please lady...I can't hurt you! I'm much too weak to cause harm to anyone!’”

Against her better judgment, but feeling compassion for the man, she decided to help him. She didn't want his death on her conscience. And, after all, it was the right thing to do.

She reached down and struggled to lift him up from the cold porch. It took awhile because he was weak and nauseous. Finally, she was able to lift him from the porch, opened the front door with her left leg and then guided him gently through the door. Struggling, they made it to the living room and then carefully she eased him into the kitchen. Gingerly she placed him carefully on a kitchen chair, sat down opposite him and began thinking of what to do next.

Maria knew from looking at the wound, that if the bleeding didn't stop soon, he would slip into a coma and die; so she went to the bathroom cupboard, picked out an old but clean sheet, pulled out her sewing sheers and began cutting. Then, she pulled out some antiseptic and cotton balls, and began to treat the wound.

She felt like a nurse, caring for a sick patient; but knowing she was helping another instead of someone helping her, made her feel happy and needed. The poor man was growing paler by the minute; so she kept a steady pace.....

She worked swiftly and within minutes she had him clean and the wound wrapped up securely. About a half hour later she guided him back to the living room and to a daybed in the corner. She eased him into the small bed. She was beginning to take pride in what she was doing; for it had been a long time since anyone had really needed her. And, she was happy that she took that “Caregiver Course” so many years ago. It was a free course and the Instructor was very thorough. As she placed him on to the daybed, she felt almost joyful, helping another.

Caring for him most have made him feel safe and secure, for he lay immobile and oh, so quiet. So quiet in fact that she thought at first he had slipped into a coma. She edged closer to him and took his pulse. His pulse was slow but steady. She then wrapped a blood pressure unit around his wrist and the numbers quickly showed that his BP was 85/60. The reading was low and she feared he wouldn't make it through the day..

She sat down in an old recliner opposite him and for about an hour just sat there, watching him.

Later, she left and went to the kitchen and prepared some tea and toast. He might soon be hungry and if so, she would have something nourishing, ready for him.

Around two in the afternoon, she heard soft moaning sounds coming from the living room. As she approached the living room she could see that his eyes were twitching and his arms that were once lying calmly on his chest, were now flaying to the right and left, as if fending off an attacker. He acted as if he would take flight, he was so in turmoil. His blond hair was mussed and his pale skin, was showing color—color from emotions or fever; she couldn't tell. Soon she would find out.

Maria edged closer to him, but his flaying arms kept her at a distance. She decided to get some cool wash cloths, for he looked like he was feverish. When she returned, she found him sitting up, holding his head within his two arms and murmuring over and over, “Why are you hitting me? I just want some food! I don't have a card! Stop telling me that I have to get one! I don't want one, damn it!”

“Calm down! Please calm down! It will just cause harm if you get all excited...Please lie back down and let me put these cool wash cloths on your head. You look like you're burning up.” She found herself being assertive and oddly, it felt good.

He began to relax a bit and after lying back down, she was able to gently place the cloths on his forehead. She could tell that he had a fever; his skin was hot to the touch.

“That's better; just relax and let the coolness of the cloth work its wonders.”

It seemed that the very sound of her voice began to ease his nerves and he began talking...

“Sorry for all the trouble, ma’am. It’s just that I ran into a bunch of those “heathen types.” I’ve never seen anything like it. My parents warned me before the Rapture that this would happen but I didn’t believe them. I thought they were just exaggerating and being fanatical. They’re gone now and I’m all alone, except for a brother. Look at this wound! A young woman stabbed me with a kitchen knife, just because I wouldn’t get out of her way!”

“I know what you mean. I’ve been watching it on TV and it’s awful. You see, I live here by myself and I don’t go out because well.....I’m agoraphobic.” She felt odd sharing this with another, especially a stranger but with this young man, she felt somehow safe telling him this...

“What is a-gor-a-phobia? What does that mean and how do you get around; how do you get groceries and necessities? Everyone needs food and wants to get out once in awhile...!”

“Agoraphobic means that I can’t leave my home. You see I can’t. I’m too afraid to leave because I feel that something bad might happen; someone might hurt me. I’ve been like this for a very long time.”

“That is strange, but who helps you get groceries and necessities? You must have someone who helps you...”

“I used to have someone that helped but I fear the Rapture took her away. There is another neighbor that might help me. But, like you, I just don’t have anyone that I can trust. There is an older man, Andy Taylor but he’s not in good health.”

There was a sadness that came over his face; a sadness for her and for himself. Two people so alone but maybe not so alone, now.

Maria thought about saying something; something she never thought she would say to anyone....She began...

“Look, I don’t know you. Don’t even know your name and you certainly don’t know me.”

The man interjected by saying, “My name is Ray Summerhill. And, my family used to live in the Western part of town....Goosepond Lake area. I’ve been working as an apprentice for my Dad most of my life, who has worked as a plumber for over twenty five years. I’ve done some odd jobs here and there.... He paused to catch his breath, and then continued. ‘Maybe I could be of some help to you? At least once I’m feeling better. Didn’t mean to interrupt you...just wanted you to know who you’re dealing with....’”

“Ray....You seem like a good person who got caught up in an awful nightmare. Maybe, and I’m saying maybe....you could stay with me--just until you’re feeling better. Then once you’re better you could help me with groceries and necessities...And, there are some “fix-up” projects that you could do, too. I don’t have the Card or Microchip but I do have plenty of cash and a debit card that I use for groceries and such. A store on the corner still accepts cash and debits cards...And, I have a spare room with a key. What do you think?”

Maria couldn’t believe what was coming out of her mouth. Normally, she was afraid of strangers and seldom talked this much to even someone she knew—let alone a total stranger and one who ended up bleeding on her doorstep! But, there was something about the young man she liked and trusted...Maybe it was his eyes. He had the bluest and most sincere eyes she had ever seen in her life! She prayed to God that she was doing the right thing! But, there were times in one’s life when one had to take a chance!

Ray looked stunned. Such unexpected kindness was overwhelming, especially these days. All of his family were taken in the Rapture, except for his brother...And, this woman showing such kindness and concern, and living with, what did she call it? Agoraphobia? Well, he was just stunned!

“Look, lady...”

She interrupted him by saying.... “My name is Maria Campbell...”

“Maria, your offer is most generous but I can’t accept. I would just be in the way and besides, you know nothing about me...” He began coughing and his paleness was returning.

She gently placed a cold cloth on his head and replied, “Ray, this is a risk for both of us but if we don’t join forces, we may not make it through this terrible time! Look what you just went through and who knows what will happen next to either of us!”

“Well, since you put it that way, and the way I am right now....Shoot! You’re offering me something I can’t refuse! It’s a deal, Maria! But, I want to pull my own weight. Run errands, do some cleaning...I will not bum off you!

“Good! And, don’t worry! There’s plenty to do. Now, let’s take a closer look at that wound.” She reexamined the bloody spot and replied, “It doesn’t look deep but you’ve got to take it easy for awhile...No heavy lifting or exertion...At least for a couple of days. And, the wound must be cleansed several times a day...I can take care of that...”

“You won’t have a problem with me on that. It hurts too darn much! And, I don’t want it to get infected....The hospitals around here are no good anymore. Some of my closest friends have died there and they shouldn’t have. Maria, they died from infections that were brought on by sloppiness, being unclean and carelessness!”

And so a deal was made. They would become a team—a team that would look out and take care of one another...And, that was exactly what those two lonely souls needed. And oh the perfect timing of it!

Chapter Six: Partnership for Survival

The winter days of 2020 sped by with its usual dampness, cold and dreariness but Ray and Maria found themselves happy and growing closer to each other, every day. Their relationship was deepening into something unexpected and wonderful. Ray took charge of all the outside and some of the inside work, while Maria did the cooking, cleaning and organizing.

The difference in their ages—he at 27 and Maria at 40--didn't seem to matter because they were determined to make the arrangement work. The TV and newspapers were filled with murders and stealing; everyday something horrendous was happening. Some of the teenagers were committing such crimes because they were lonely and fearful of what was coming. That was the terrible part; no one knew what was coming from one minute to the next....The daily news broadcasts were full of children turning on their parents, just so they could have more material things and some were killing their parents simply because they were bored and wanted to impress their peers. The justice system was no longer working and lawlessness as predicted in the Bible, was out of control and spreading like a virus.

Those left behind, like Maria and Ray, were bombarded daily by the TV and radio to register for the implanted Microchip or Card. Everyday of every hour and minute-- the biased and liberal media loudly proclaimed to anyone who would listen, the importance and timeliness—for everyone and anyone--to register! It was hard for most to ignore the benefits of the Card or Microchip. Why, it was proclaimed that when you signed up for either, you could buy or sell or possess anything! And so, many give in, registered and were living “high on the hog.” Sadly, those who didn't sign up, were those who were robbing and killing—just so they could survive.

One could easily see the panic and fear; it was everywhere! The lowly debit card and cash were now looked upon as ancient, stupid and anti-government. Even hospitals and clinics were succumbing to the pressure. Decent healthcare was becoming extinct; except for the very rich or those with The Card or Microchip.

Word was going around that in six months or less, anyone without The Number or Microchip would be unable to get food, clothing and shelter.

Maria was not frightened with such news, for she had been saving up for such a time. For years she knew from reading the Bible and watching the news on TV that a drastic change in lifestyle was coming. She had stored away hundreds of canned goods, plenty of good drinking water, hygiene products and all other necessary items to survive. She kept

everything in order, in her basement; so she was not afraid but with what happened with Ken just days ago, it did give her pause...

But, with Ray agreeing to stay with her and help out, feelings of safety once again returned.... She knew such feelings were like a tonic; soothing but only temporary.

As with most things in life, changes were coming and they would not be good...

Chapter Seven: Getting to Know You

Daily, Ray's wound improved and Maria found herself letting go of the agoraphobia that had kept her hostage for years. Why, she was even venturing out—albeit—just briefly outside—walking freely in her neighborhood—and enjoying the fresh air and the joyous freedom from fear. It was the first time in 20 years that she had walked outside of her home and she couldn't believe the freedom she felt! It was a shame, she thought, that her joy came at a time when the world was in such turmoil. But, be as it may, the joy remained.

It was ironic that the joy of walking in her neighborhood came when most everyone was gone—gone either in the Rapture or left to parts unknown. It was a lovely quiet but she admitted, it was also eerie and at times, very unsettling.

What a glorious feeling though, it was, to feel the fresh air against her face, feel the warmth of the December sun and know that even though the End Times had arrived and the future of the world in turmoil, she could still enjoy a cold but beautiful December day!

It was the middle of December and the few left behind in Maria's neighborhood were doing what they could to prepare for Christmas—even though for most it would be a Christmas without family members and without money to buy gifts. But, most tried to keep a normal routine and run errands, shovel the soft December snow and doing other normal activities that helped make an abnormal situation, at least tolerable...And, her neighbors and those in the small surrounding area found that by keeping some kind of routine, it helped them get through the day.

Ray never complained about the work he did for Maria—for he was safe and comfortable in her home but he did miss visiting his ill brother and often felt conflicted and guilty about not visiting him. He did feel relieved knowing that his mentally ill brother had plenty of cash and had what he needed to survive but Ray knew that his brother's schizophrenia made life hard; and with Christmas so close, he felt obligated to call and see how he was doing...He didn't want to open a Pandora's Box, but after all, he was his brother.

Chapter Eight: Understanding Ray

Ray ruminated for awhile about his brother and then thought of Maria—how kind she was to let him stay and how she took such good care of him when he was injured. Not many women would have done what she did, especially those housebound, with so many fears.....

“If only Miles had someone to stay with him,” Ray mused. Then, he could stay with Maria and not feel guilty. He was falling hard for her, not because she was so needy or dependent but that underneath those fears and anxieties, there was a beautiful and talented woman, bursting to come out. And, they had several things in common. One in particular was that they loved to write. That one commonality drew them closer each day; for what was more intimate, except for sex, than revealing personal details about one’s life and thoughts?

Ray, in his spare time, was working on some mysteries. Sometimes at night, after reading the Bible with Maria, he would sit in a cozy armchair and think of what might make a good mystery and then jot down some notes on a long notepad. He didn’t like computers but writing by hand worked well for him.. He didn’t think much of computers but Maria thought they had great potential and it helped her to connect with the world—at least, electronically..

Ray tried not to think of his brother but found he couldn’t so he decided to call him. It was hard talking with his brother, for schizophrenics were often had a hard time focusing on the conversation. Their attention span was short and that made communicating with them trying and often, tiring.

He dialed the number 587-345-7829...After four rings Miles answered in a groggy tone, “Hello? Miles, here.”

“Miles, it’s Ray...Ray, your brother. How are you?”

“Hey Miles, long time no see or hear! Where have you been, man? I’ve been sittin here in this lonely, old house, all by myself. I sure could use the company! How about comin over and staying with me for awhile? Nobody comes to see me, not even Mom and Dad. So, how about it, old chum and what do think about what has happened?”

Ray pondered for the right words to say. What could he say to his brother that would make sense—to let him know that he cared about him but wouldn’t be able to visit for awhile? Finally he replied:

“Miles. That’s just why I called. You see....”

“I hear hedging in your voice, Ray. You won’t be coming, will you?”

“Miles. Listen to me. It’s not that I don’t want to but I found someone who needs me more than you and she’s been kind enough to allow me to stay with her... You see...”

“Say no more, brother dear. I get the picture. You don’t want to put up with a “shizo” anymore, do you? Especially at Christmas time, eh brother? Every time you come over, I can tell that you can’t wait to leave.”

Miles replied, “No, Miles. It’s not that way. This woman is all alone and has been alone for many years. She has a fear of leaving her home. She seldom goes anywhere; her fears are so strong. You know what that’s like but you can get out if you want to. But, this woman can’t and she needs me. .Please understand, Miles. When I can, I will come to see you. It just won’t be too often... Will that be O.K. for you? And, how are you doing? Do you need anything?”

“What can I say? You’ve already made up your mind. Do what you have to do, Ray. I understand. Actually, I’m not totally alone. Beth Miller who lives down the street has been helping me. She takes me along on her paper route every morning and once a week and has me over to dinner at least twice a week. So, I’m not totally alone. And, she helps me get things I need—like food and other stuff.” He appeared to be perking up some and Ray was feeling better about his decision.

“Thanks Miles for understanding and I’m happy that you have someone you can count on! I’ll be over to see you, probably in a couple of weeks. I’ll call you ahead of time, to let you know when I’m coming. Take care, Buddy and give my best to your new found friend. And, hey, Bud, I love you... Always will! Merry Christmas!”

“Thanks, Ray. Take care. I know you love me. And, I’m sorry if I got down on you... I love you, too and Merry Christmas!”

After hanging up, Ray stood by the phone, just thinking and remembering how it used to be--growing up with Miles.

He thought of Miles and one cold, snowy day, He was teaching him how to slide down a very narrow, snowy hill. Poor Miles didn’t know the first thing about sledding but Ray was patient with him and showed him how to guide the sled and how to lay on the sled and what to be aware of when sledding down the hill.

Miles would just look up at Ray’s face, listen to his words and then off he would go. Almost always, his sled stopped mid-way, or tip over, with a crying Miles trudging dejectedly back up the hill. Oh, the memories!

Ray looked at the living room clock and saw that it was noon. Maria would be upstairs in her bedroom making another entry in her journal and doing some writing about the Rapture. She seldom shared what she wrote; it was her personal and private way of communicating and Ray thought it would be rude to ask her. And, so he didn’t.

There were times when he felt comfortable sharing with her portions of his writing and found, to his amazement, she reacted favorably—always wanting to know more. Because he was feeling happy and relieved about his brother, he thought tonight after dinner he would share with her more about the mystery he was working on. But, he would have to be careful not to scare her—for his writing was often violent and dark.

Just as he was thinking about lunch and talking with her about his writings and his brother, she descended the stairs. She looked pretty in a pale blue blouse, with dark blue pants. Her hair looked different but nice; she had long curls dangling around her cheekbones—with the rest of her hair hanging softly and gently on her shoulder, with bangs that caressed her forehead in a teasing but innocent way....

Before he could say anything she said, “Ray, I’m surprised to see! You’re usually out and running errands or working on an inside project. What’s up?”

Funny, she always seemed to be way ahead of him—almost like she knew what was coming but kind enough to let give him the benefit of doubt.. He wasn’t sure she was ready for his openness but decided to give it a try..

He began slowly as she approached her recliner and sat down...

“Maria, I have something to tell you and I’m afraid you might take it the wrong way or not be interested at all....I have a brother who is mentally ill, who lives alone. He has a schizoid personality and lives in my parents home. I lived with him for a long time after our parents left for Indiana but later, I got restless, left, made my way in the world as a maintenance worker and of course, much later on, found my way to your home and a new life with you.”

Maria interrupted and said,“ I appreciate you telling me about your brother but where is this going?”

“I just wanted you to know that my life before I met you was quite different and quite stressful. I just had a talk with my brother, and told him that I wouldn’t be coming over as often; that I met someone nice who needed my help and would be staying with her. I feel guilty about my brother but to be honest, I need be with you. He did tell me; however, that there is someone who stops to check on him from time to time and he is able now and then to get out on his own...So, he seems to be doing alright; at least for now. Just wanted to be upfront and honest with you; didn’t want you to find this out from someone else and you thinking that I was hiding something awful from you....”

Maria’s eyes began to water; no had ever said before that they needed her. And besides, no man had ever wanted to stay with her longer than a day; for her agoraphobia turned always turned them off. She could see in his eyes that his words were genuine and true—that he really wanted and needed to be with her.

She was no virgin but it had been over twenty years since she had been close to any man! However, she often had longings to be close with a man and sharing with Ray like this was stirring those up those longings, longings that made her feel like a woman—a woman in love.

She smiled and said, “Ray, what beautiful words! That you’ve decided to stay with me, makes me feel loved and wanted. If you feel that you can live with this decision, then certainly you can stay with me.. And, whenever, you want to visit your brother, feel free to do so. I would never want to keep you from seeing your brother.”

Ray smiled and said, “Funny, those are the exact words I thought you would say! And, yes, I’d be happy to stay with you and help you.. But, I must admit I have feelings for you...But, I would never pressure you forah....sex... or anything like that.” His face reddened and he embarrassingly, coughed a rough cough.

Maria began to chuckle...”Don’t worry, Ray. I don’t feel threatened and let’s just take it one day at a time, and enjoy being together. O.K.?”

“O.K.!”

Chapter Nine: Christmas Time

It was three days before Christmas and even though times were rough everywhere, Maria was happier than she had been in years. Why, she hadn’t felt this joyful since she was 10 years old, living with her mom and dad on Chestnut Street, in the older part of town. Christmas, back then, was wonderful—real trees, real food and relatives that actually cared. “Those were the days,” she thought.

Amazingly, even though the Rapture occurred just months ago and her agoraphobia ever present, she was joyful that Christmas was so close and that this Christmas she would not be alone and miserable!

Ray had been gently nudging her to go out more and she was beginning to enjoy short trips in the neighborhood. And, sometimes she would put on her coat and walk down to the neighborhood store on the corner and actually buy something! The clerks didn’t know her but that didn’t bother her; in fact it was nice that they didn’t know anything about her past or about her fears...It was just nice being treated like a normal person. What was better that the corner store was often empty and free of the “wildness” that was going on in other areas of the town.

She was falling in love with Ray. That feeling of love was exhilarating, scary and wonderful!

Christmas Eve finally came and with it, a foot of soft snow. Ray bought a beautiful spruce tree at Wilson's Farm and Produce store and around six that night, was struggling in the living room to make it stand straight and tall. Even though it was cool inside Ray was sweating and such display of manliness made Maria's heart ache and pound in a delirious and delightful way...

She stood by the living room hallway and with some guilt and a lot of longing, watched him work the tree. He treated the tree like a lover—gently but with firm strokes and agile guidance. He saw her out of the corner of his left eye and said, "Maria! Didn't know you were there. What do you think of our tree?"

She smiled and replied, "I think that it is the most beautiful tree I have ever seen! You're doing a fantastic job, Ray! I'll go down the basement and bring up the ornaments. You can relax once you get the tree situated. I'll take care of the rest!"

Ray grinned because he knew that once she saw the resurrected tree she would not only love it but decorate it to "The Nines."

"Well, okay, if you want. But, I could help, if you like. I won't beg but maybe I could put just a few ornaments on?"

Maria smiled and said, "Well, okay. Let me see what I can find." She quickly left the room and almost ran down the basement stairs.

She thought out loud, "Now, where are those ornaments?" It had been years since she had a tree up. There was never anyone around to help her, so year after year, she went without a tree, only putting up a small wreath on the door—and that took a fair amount of work and bravery—especially hanging it on the outside door where everyone could what she was doing.

Way in the back of the basement, hidden under several big boxes, she finally found the long forgotten bulbs and other Christmas accessories.

Once she spotted the box labeled, ("Christmas 1970's"), she felt as if she had found gold.

She opened the dried out box and found the treasures of old bulbs, lights ornaments and some very old Christmas cards. There were only 30 ornaments and one large strand of large lights but it looked like it would be enough to make a very pretty tree. Yes, she thought, it would make a lovely Christmas tree!

Carefully, she picked up the box and began climbing the basement stairs. The box was heavy but not so heavy that she couldn't handle it. Finally, she reached the top and sighed, "Made it!"

Lugging the box to the living room she noticed that the tree was up and standing straight and tall. Underneath the tree was a container filled with water and she thought she had never seen such a healthy and beautiful looking tree.

But, Ray was nowhere to be found. She brought the box in, set it down and cried, “Ray, where are you? Come see what I found in the basement!”

All of a sudden, Ray popped his head in from the dining room area and replied, “Hey Maria, there you are! Was looking for you, too! What do you think of the tree?”

“Yes, it’s beautiful! Never seen one so lovely, so straight and tall. You did a great job..Now, if you want, come help me put some ornaments on our tree.”

Ray didn’t say anything for awhile; he was thrilled and surprised when Maria used the term, “our tree.” It had been a long time since a woman referred to a relationship with him as “our” or “us.” It felt good and it felt right!

Maria gently pulled out the ornaments from the old and worn boxes and one by one, the tree took on a life of its own. Towards dinner time, the hanging of the tree was done and almost at the same time, they shouted, “What a tree!”

It was beautiful with all kinds of ornaments—red, green and gold, with small candy canes hanging precariously from the strong limbs and garlands of red and white, shimmered under the low ceiling.

For a few minutes they both stood silent together, breathing in the beauty, wonder and greatness of the moment and then Maria cried, “Look at the time! It’s almost eight and I haven’t even started dinner! What should I make for us tonight?”

Ray grinned and replied, “How about I go out and get us a pizza? You’ve been working hard all day and so have I. There’s a pizza joint just four blocks away and they still take case. I’ve got some money; so what do you say?”

“Sure, Maria replied. That sounds great! To be honest, I don’t know if I was up to cooking tonight, anyway...”

“Well then; it’s settled...Want a sausage pizza with mozzarella cheese?”

“Yes! That would be great!”

“Be back in half an hour and have your appetite ready!”

“You bet and be safe, Ray...Will make some ice tea for it while you’re gone..”

“Bye Babe..” The word “babe” slipped out before Ray could stop it. He didn’t look around to see Maria’s reaction.

Maria stood there in the living room; stunned by Ray's words...The "Babe" word took her by surprise. She searched her mind. Only one man ever called her "Babe" and that was Ron O'Dell and that was over 25 years ago, when they were engaged....Boy, did that bring back memories! "Kind of nice" she thought. Nice being called a Babe...She hurriedly went to a mirror in the hallway and took a good look.

"Not bad for 40!" She looked at her dark blonde hair and fair complexion and smiled into the mirror. She still had good teeth—white and even, with a pretty smile. "Yes, she thought, 'Maybe I still am a Babe!"

Later, sitting in the living room and eating pizza and sipping iced tea, Maria felt happier than ever and Ray seemed to be enjoying the moment, too. It was cold outside—around 34 and windy; so the hot pizza and cold drink seemed to be the perfect ending to a perfect day.

After finishing the pizza, Maria took the empty cardboard and empty plates to the kitchen. She refilled their glasses with tea and both sat and just looked at the now, finished tree. There was a quiet interlude for several minutes and then Maria said, "Thank you, Ray for a beautiful day! I love the tree and the pizza was delicious!"

"Happy that you like the tree and pizza. The tree I'll take some credit for but the pizza—well, that came from pizza-ville."

"Want to listen to some Christmas music? I've got some nice DVD's that a neighbor gave to me years ago?"

"Sure, Ray replied. Bring them out and we'll do some Christmas singing...But, I'll warn you, I don't have much of a voice."

"No problem. I'll go get them...Be right back."

They spent the rest of the evening singing "Silent Night," "Oh, Come All Ye Faithful" and "Little Drummer Boy."

As the evening came to an end, Maria thought out loud, "If only every day could be as lovely as this one..."

Ray heard her and replied, "It can be, if we stay together...If you'll have me, I would like to stay with you forever! I love you, Maria."

He edged closer to her and kissed her full and hard on her lips. She responded by pulling him even closer and kissing him passionately and completely, stroking his head as they kissed.

Nothing was said, but Maria held his hand and pulled him gently but firmly to her bedroom. They made quiet but passionate love and then fell asleep in each other's arms...A perfect ending to a perfect day.

Chapter Ten

Maria awoke before Ray and gazed at his handsome and peaceful face. He wasn't great looking like Robert Redford (in his early years), or as handsome as Cary Grant but he certainly had the chiseled good looks of a man confident with himself and his future.

She slowly got up, so as not to waken him and went down to the kitchen to prepare breakfast. What to fix, she thought. Bacon and eggs; yes that would do nicely. As she began to prepare breakfast, she heard a knock at the front door. Hoping that the sound wouldn't disturb Ray, she hurried to the door.

She looked through the peep hole and saw someone she hoped she would never see again in her lifetime....Mother Dearest!

"Not now, she thought. 'Not when I've finally met someone I care about; not when my life is so good!"

Before opening the door, Maria whispered a silent prayer, "Lord, please help with my mother! She has always held me down and made fun of my life. Please, show me the way—how to handle her."

Then, slowly she opened the door.

"Mother, didn't expect you; especially on Christmas! Why are you here and what do you want?"

"Now Maria, is that anyway to treat your mother? And, with gifts in my hand, aren't you going to let me in? Please, dear. Open the door! These packages are heavy."

Maria knew that tone and it did not bode well for a positive visit. And, with Ray upstairs sleeping, how was she going to handle this unwanted intrusion?

"Sorry. Please come in. I just got up and I'm not with it yet. You can place the gifts on the dining room table. I'm afraid I have nothing for you. Didn't know you would be showing up."

"That's fine, dear. I didn't expect anything from you; never have and never will!"

Just two minutes inside, and already the asininity begins!

Chapter Eleven: Mother Dearest and Christmas

Doris placed the huge package on the dining room table and immediately began inspecting Maria's house.

As she surveyed Maria's home, she made the usually nasty comments: "Maria, you're not keeping your home very clean; I see dust and grime on top of your bookshelf and behind the TV center. That's not like you, dear. But, well, I suppose I need to remember your condition." She smirked when she spoke and that bothered Maria more than anything.

She walked toward the kitchen and noticed two coffee mugs by the coffeemaker. She asked, "Having company for breakfast? One of your neighbors coming over for Christmas buffet? That would be a first for you, wouldn't it, Maria?"

Maria didn't reply for she knew that there would be more. She wasn't disappointed.

"Ah Maria, I see a man's jacket hanging on the dining room chair..What's going on Maria? Do tell. Mother wants to know!"

Maria knew she would have to reply or else Mother Dearest would keep pressing for an answer. She began hesitantly but with resolve...

"Yes, there is a man coming for breakfast, in fact he's staying with me now. Very nice man; I'm sure you would hate him."

"Now Maria, let's not be antagonistic! You know how your father and I feel about men living with women and not being married. I just simply asked, that's all."

"Well, rest assured mother. He's a very nice man, with a good background and guess what? He cares and loves me! Now, if you're finished, I think you should go. There is nothing here for you and I want to spend the day with someone who really cares about me..!"

"Well, if that's the way you feel about it dear, fine! I'll be one my way." She grabbed her coat and the large package she placed on the table and headed to the door. Before leaving she turned and said, "Hope you both will be very happy! Going now to your sister Elise's home...She will be happy to see me and will have some nice gifts for me...And, oh by the way Maria, you'd better do something about the bags under your eyes...Men don't stay with women very long if they look like that....Well, gotta go now...Bye, Bye dear! And, oh by the way, try and lose some weight. Men also don't like women who are too fat!"

As she slammed the door, Maria breathed a sigh of relief. She was just happy that the visitation was over and quickly, she returned to making the breakfast.

About ten minutes later, Ray walked down the stairs with his robe on and his hair disheveled. She could tell by his sleepy behavior that he had not heard or seen anything and that was a true blessing! The look of love and caring on his face for her, wiped out any negativity that seconds ago she felt..

Despite the desperate times they were living in, oh what a lovely Christmas they had...Not many gifts—for money and gifts available were few and far between—but the joy and wonder they had with their beautiful Christmas tree, watching the gentle snow fall from above and dancing around the Christmas tree. It was magical! Maria felt reborn and oh so happy!

Chapter Twelve: Living with Ray

January and the New Year began calm but with a biting cold. Ray decided that Maria's house needed more insulation and some repairs, so he began to make preparations to help make her home—safer, warmer and more economical...

For about an hour that January day, Ray sat at the kitchen table and made lists of things that needed to be done: wrap insulation around front and back doors, check the insulation in the attic, put some plastic on the outside windows, check the locks, etc. Maria was impressed with his patience and diligence and the fact that he wanted to help make the house safer and more livable...

“Let's see, I need to get some plastic, some tape, new locks, insulation, measuring tape, and I think I will get some tape for the base of the toilet. I notice that it's not sitting right.”

“Well, I must say that I'm impressed, Ray! I've been noticing some things to be done but there has been never been anybody to help me. I guess I just kept pushing those thoughts away.....It is such a relief to know that somebody now cares and knows what needs to be done...What a blessing you are, Ray!”

“Well, I appreciate your words, but let me see how it goes; I'll make it as good as I can for you...It won't be perfect but it will be an improvement, for sure!”

“You will do a great job, Ray; you always do.”

Ray placed the list inside his jeans and reached for his coat.

“I should be back in a couple of hours. Maybe a bit longer. The lines in stores have been getting longer and more tedious and the clerks are checking I.Ds more and that's making everyone impatient and cranky. Everyone wants to be first. So, don't worry if I'm gone longer than a couple of hours. With luck, I might be back around 11.”

“Be safe, Ray and don't forget to take my Debit Card. That way you should be able to get pass the Card or Microchip. I fear, though, we may not be able to do this much longer.

The commercials on TV are pushing this all the time. When you get back, let me know how it went....If anyone questions you using my card just show them my Verification Number. Here it is...That should get you through safely.”

"Thanks, Babe. Will be back soon, I hope. Keep the doors locked and don't trust anyone!"

He walked out the door and Maria watched him from the window. She watched until she couldn't see him anymore...He walked tall and with purpose; he shouldn't have any problems, she thought. But, these were perilous times. She seldom relaxed until she heard his footsteps coming through the front door. With so much uncertainty out there, one had to be very careful, very careful indeed!

While he was gone, Maria decided did some housework. Mornings were the best time for her and so she began with the bathroom and then did some cleaning in the kitchen and finished up with the living room.

Maria began her work around nine, just minutes after Ray left and was done around 10:30. She thought about making lunch but she wasn't sure when he would return, so she decided to do some reading. Some nice pamphlets and advertisements came in the mail the day before, so she sat down in her recliner, propped up her feet and began to eagerly check them out...

Around 11, she heard someone at the door and immediately she thought it was Ray, returning with his shopping items.

She got up from her chair and walked quickly to the door. She looked through the peephole and saw something that shook her to the bone...

It was two older looking men and they were dirty, desperate looking and up to no good. She could tell by their faces and how they were dressed, that she was in trouble. She asked through the door, "Who are you and what do you want?"

Neither one replied but the one who looked the meanest, pounded on the door again...This time the pounding was louder...

Fear tightened Maria's throat but with her best acting ability asked again, "Who are you and what do you want?"

Seconds later, the tall, ugly one began pulling hard on the door. Frightened, she backed away from the door, but not before checking to see if the door was securely locked.

The man pulled again; this time it sounded like the door was coming off. She then raced to the back door, checking to see if it too was locked. All the while, her heart was pounding and she felt that if she didn't calm down soon, she would have a heart attack or pass out from the fear.

The older and scarier looking man was now working the inside front door—constantly pulling and pushing on it. She ran upstairs to her bedroom and hid inside her huge closet. All she had to protect her was a ball bat but she would use it if they made their way up to her room. She prayed that it wouldn't go that far.

She thought she heard the front door cave in but maybe it was just the hard pounding on the door that made it sound that way. At least that was her hope and prayer.

She felt close to fainting but hung on for dear life. There was only one other time she felt so frightened and that was when she was all alone in her family's home years ago. Anytime she was threatened, like now, that awful fear returned...

She recalled that it was fall and everyone, except her, had gone to the movies and she remained home and alone. As evening fell that night so long ago, her fears began to rise. As darkness thickened, she wondered why she made the decision to stay home... What if someone knocked at the door? What if someone tried to come inside and kill her? There would be no one to protect and help her? Just like now... No one to save her, help her out... Turned out that no one tried to break in or harm her that night; it was just her nerves and being so young...

Jared from that memory she heard someone yell to the intruders, "Hey, what are you doing? Get out of here!"

Then she heard one of the men reply, "We were here first! We need food and money! We heard that this old bat has a lot of both and we just want our fair share! And, who are you to tell us to go away?! Aren't you "mooching" off the old lady?! Who are you to say anything! Now, step aside!"

Then she heard the other voice reply, "Get out of here, all of you or I will start shooting! And since there are no cops around, I can get by with it! Remember, there is no one around who will protect you or stop me from doing what I want to do!" She could now tell that it was Ray's voice and a feeling of relief began sweeping over her.

Ray must have pulled out his gun, the one he always took with him, because seconds later they were gone.

Maria nervously made her way downstairs and found Ray in the hallway, bent over and breathing heavily... Packages laid scattered at his feet and he held up one hand and weakly replied, "Not now, I just can't breathe..."

Maria waited a few seconds and then said, "Ray, thank God you are here and that you're alright!"

Ray straightened up, took in several deep breaths and replied, “It’s O.K. They’re gone but they caused damage to both doors. I’ll fix them both later. They will be back again, for sure. Got what I needed at the store; so I’ll take care of the other projects later.”

“Don’t worry about that now. Just glad you’re back and you’re alright..” She picked up the sacks and placed them in the pantry. She returned and said, “Let me make some coffee and we can relax for awhile...”

“Coffee’s good. But I’d better get busy soon and fix those doors. Don’t know when they’ll return; but they will be back!”

She walked to the kitchen and began preparing the coffee and decided to bring out some rolls, too.

Later he made his way to the kitchen and both enjoyed the warmth and comfort of the coffee and rolls. Ray’s spirits returned and he said, “Not to worry, Maria. I’ll take care of the doors and the next time they return, I’ll be ready for them. After the doors are done, I’ll take care of the bathroom and windows... We’ve got to make this a strong fortress because while I was out I saw other men trying to break into some homes on Elm Street. .It’s getting worse, Maria much worse than I thought. The lawlessness is increasing, almost everywhere! Two hours ago I saw a young woman kill an older woman—just so she could have her groceries!”

Maria was stunned with what he told her. She knew the world outside her door was decaying but it had been awhile since she heard such frightening words.

“Of course. You’re right. We must do what we can to make it safe. I’ll help you in any way...What can I do to help?”

“Don’t worry about it. I can take care of the fixing and repairing. What I need you to do is be on the lookout—to see if you hear or see anything suspicious.”

“Whatever you say...”

Then, Ray got busy fixing the doors and later in the afternoon he did work in the attic with the insulation and some work in the bathroom. By the time he was done, he was exhausted.

It wasn’t until seven at night that Ray was satisfied with his work. He cleaned up in the upstairs bathroom and as he walked down the steps, he smelled the enticing aroma of a pot roast...

“Maria! What smells so good? Is it a pot roast? Smells a lot like what my grandma used to make...”

With her apron on and wearing a happy smile, Maria replied, “You bet! I have a delicious roast cooking, with potatoes and gravy and I made an apple pie, too! I’ll bet you’re hungry...”

“Am I! I think I could eat the entire roast the way I feel!”

“Well, I hope you save some for me!” Maria chuckled and then began placing all of the food items on the dining room table...Everything looked delicious and Maria was proud and happy to be the one helping him!

They sat down and Maria began passing the food to him...He placed big portions of everything on his plate and then began to eat, as if ravished...But, before going further, she said, “Ray, let us give thanks to God for all His blessings and help; for He is the one who provides for everything!”

Ray looked sheepishly at Maria and said, “Yes, you are right. He gives us everything and we thank him!”

Then, they began eating...Maria was hungry too; the fear and excitement of the day made her feel ravenous...

After the meal, Maria brought out the pie and extra coffee. Then, they discussed the day’s events and their future...

Chapter Thirteen: Do We Stay or Leave?

“Maria, I didn’t want to bring up this subject but after what has happened today, we may have to leave soon. I know you suffer from many fears but staying here much longer, may put us both in danger...But if you want, I can put new locks in and reinforce the doors and windows.. That may be enough to keep us safe...I don’t know...But, if worse comes to worse, Maria, we may have to leave and find another place.”

Maria looked sad and worried. She hadn’t left her home for years and here was someone telling her that she may have to leave her place of safety for good and soon! She hadn’t dealt with the outside world for so long, except for the walks she had been taking by herself and with Ray and the thought of leaving her home forever, brought back her old nemesis, anxiety...then she thought, “What if those men come back and what if they bring more people with them and try to hurt us, maybe try to kill us?”

Then, she thought about the medication she took everyday for her fears. She would have to find a way to keep taking them. She had to have her medications! And then the thought of living somewhere so different and far away...Oh, the adjustments that would have to be made! Everything would be so different and new, so scary....

She thought about being uprooted again and without the safety and comfort of her home and she said out loud, “No, that just can’t happen! There just has to be another way!”

It was on a cold, February day when everything in Maria's life turned upside down.....

Maria had been awake for about an hour and was fixing some eggs, bacon, toast and coffee when she once again heard loud voices outside the front door. The voices, this time, were even louder than before--strong and aggressive—and she knew right then that she and Ray were in deep trouble.....

Ray was down in the basement working on a project when she yelled, “Ray, get up here quick! I hear voices at the front door and they sound angry!”

“Be right up; I hear them, too.!”

Ray took the steps two at a time and was soon in the kitchen. He gave her a fearful but very determined look and then raced to the front door.

He looked through the peep hole and saw seven men and three women talking loudly and carrying banners that read, “Leave Now!”

“More trouble....” he muttered under his breath...

He opened the door and before he could say anything, one of the men shouted, “You must share your home with us now, or leave! That woman inside has lived here for a long time and she has not shared anything with anyone! We know that because some of us have been her neighbors! Food and clothing are hard to find and many of us don't have a card or money. We have lost our homes and we need shelter! And besides, we have a government court order to make her and you, leave!”

Ray had to think fast and so he replied, “Look, I know all of you are hurting. Many are hurting. I was in bad shape until Maria helped me out. Nobody has much of anything these days but like you, Maria and I are doing the best we can with what we have...Please leave us alone; for there isn't much room inside and Maria is not well and hasn't been for years...”

“We're not buying that, mister! We know she is mentally ill but she's not physically ill and she's got a whole lot more than any of us! Tell her we want to talk with her, now! She owns the building, not you!”

“No, you can't talk with Maria and you can't move into this home! Court order or not! Now, go away and find somewhere else to live. Check out Main Street; I've heard that they are several empty and available buildings for those who need shelter. Please go and leave us alone...”

One of the older men cried out, “We'll go now but we'll be back and when we do, you will have to leave or pay the price!” He held his fists in the air as if to say, “You will pay for this!”

Maria was in the living room and heard everything. She was shaking with fear and tears began to well up and she began to sob...”Ray, what will we do? I can’t leave here; this home is all that I have! I won’t make it outside in the real world! I know it; I just know it...This is the only place where I feel safe and happy!”

Ray looked at her with pity but also with compassion. He didn’t know her well but he was beginning to understand why she was so fearful and anxious. He remembered what she said about her family and how it was growing up with them. She said that her parents put a lot of pressure on her to do everything and went on to say that she was not allowed to go out with her friends, not allowed to work outside the home, and they stifled her in so many ways...So, he looked at her with love and understanding but knew deep inside that they would have to leave soon or be killed.

“Maria, I know how you feel about your home. It is beautiful and comfortable and you feel safe here. But Maria, you just heard what those men said. And, they meant it, Maria. They will cause harm to you and me, if we don’t leave... We must make plans to leave, soon.!”

“But where will we go? What should we take with us? I don’t have any ideas where we could be safe, do you?”

Ray thought and then said, “There is my brother’s place but it is just too small. And, he’s just too set in his ways and he could be dangerous with his mental illness. He’s quite unpredictable. But, there is an old church on High Street we might try. It has an attached Family Service Center on its east side. Pastor Roy Guardino is a good man and I think he would help us. Last I heard there were 20 families staying there; there might be room for us and it would be safe there, too.”

Maria’s face began to brighten with hope and she replied, “Well, maybe that would work and after all it is a church. When do you think we should leave and what should we take with us?”

“Let me give him a call first to see if it’s possible. In the meantime, why don’t you sit at the kitchen table and make up a list of things we should take with us.”

“Yes, good idea. Let me get my notepad and pen.”

She began writing down a list of things to do and take. She wrote:

1. “Take my Bible
2. Take my Debit card, money and I.D. Make sure that Ray has what he needs, too.
3. Make sure to take some towels, sheets, toiletries, pillows, etc.
4. Take some food and beverages
5. Paper products, medicine and clothing, some blankets.
6. Take Dad’s Gun!”

As she wrote down what to take, Ray finally reached Pastor Guardino.

“Hello, Pastor Guardino? This is Ray Summerhill. Maria Campbell and I need your help. Just minutes ago we were threatened to leave Maria’s home by a group of people. The government wants her home and the people in her neighborhood threatened us with bodily harm; unless we leave...Can you help us? Is there any way we could stay at the Family Service Center?”

There was a long pause and then Pastor Guardino replied, “Ray, so sorry to hear about what’s going on....I wish I could help you but we now have 35 families and it is quite crowded. You might try Liberty Fellowship on Moundview Road. I heard that they have only 15 families there.”

Ray lowered his voice before replying, “Pastor, if at all possible, Maria needs to stay at your Center. She is agoraphobic and would do much better in your environment. Liberty Fellowship is a nice place but I’ve heard they’re more “liberal” in their approach in who they allow to stay. I heard they take in many mentally disturbed and violent people. Please, if at all possible, let us stay with you?!”

“Well, let me check on our supplies first and then I’ll get back with you? What is Maria’s phone number?”

“Great! It’s: 544-294-7097 and thank you, Roy!”

“Don’t thank me yet; let me see what I find out...”

“Good! Talk with you later...” Ray was more fearful now than when he was as a young boy, when his father would continually hit him and throw him against the wall. But, he was older now and Maria needed him. They would survive this and move on. Oh yes, he wouldn’t let himself or Maria be victims of any kind of abuse!

Chapter 14: Spring and It’s Time to Leave

The reply from Pastor Guardino was hopeful but it had been two days and no phone call. The good news was that there had been no more front door threatening episodes but Maria and Ray had heard and seen noisy strangers acting wildly in some of the abandoned neighborhood homes. Most of the former residents had left weeks ago and in their place were desperate people who were loud and obnoxious—often leaving garbage on the front yard and taking pot shots at anyone who looked feeble, vulnerable and looking for a place to stay. Chaos and fear had replaced the usual routine of errands, work and children going to school. There were also rumors that the families who left were living in some kind of modernized caves in California. And, nearby farmers, churches and locals were helping the families left behind with physical and emotional needs. Many

neighborhoods were becoming polarized and gang wars were becoming more common and deadly by the day...

It was on a Wednesday morning, three days after talking with Pastor Guardino, when the phone rang....

“Hello, may I talk with Maria? This is Pastor Guardino.”

Maria replied, “Yes, this is she! Good to hear from you. I hope you have good news for us.”

“Well, I have some good news and I have some bad news. The bad news is we don’t have any room right now for you and Ray but the good news is there is room at Methodist Central on East Avenue. Father Mulligan is in charge there and he’s a good man. I think you and Maria would be safe and happy there. I can give you the details, if you’re interested.”

“Yes, please do. That sounds fine.”

They talked on the phone for about a half hour and as they talked, Maria found herself beginning to relax. It looked like a safe way out..

When she relayed the news to Ray he was happy and relieved; so later in the day they talked of plans for the move..

The next day dawned beautiful but cold and Ray said that he needed to go into town and get some supplies. Maria didn’t want him to go but knew that they needed food and some necessities for the bathroom.

So, off he went...

Maria had just settled into her favorite armchair and was reading the newspaper when she heard a loud BANG on the back kitchen door.

Immediately, fear jumped from the pit of her stomach to her throat and chills went up and down her spine. For a moment she thought she was having a heart attack—there were pains in her left arm and she began perspiring around her neck and chest..

She jumped from her chair, walked cautiously to the back door and slid back the lace curtain. She saw before her three women—all of them over 50 and two men—who looked around the age of 60. She could tell that they were mad as hell and were out for blood!

Immediately, she jumped back from the door and waited...

Then, another loud BANG! It sounded like someone was using a very heavy object and pressing it hard against the door.

She eased closer to the door, and shouted, “What do you want?”

A man shouted back, “We want you out! You’ve had your time in that home and now, it’s our turn! We want you and “lover boy” out in 48 hrs! Do you hear me?! 48 hours!”

After that, they left but the fear and trembling remained inside of Maria. There was no denying it now; it was time to go!

Ray came back an hour later and Maria described what happened.

After putting things away he said, “Maria, we must go! There’s no getting around it, these people mean business. I just heard at the hardware store that almost everyone in this area have been forced out and are heading west. The only ones who are staying are those who have The Card. If we stay, Maria, we will be killed! I know that’s blunt but it’s the truth!”

Maria bowed her head in defeat and said nothing for awhile. She knew they would have to go but she wasn’t sure if she could do it....

After talking with Ray for awhile, she agreed to get busy and put their preparations to leave, into gear....

Ray also made a list to get the car ready, pack up a survival kit--filled with first aid items, get Maria’s only gun and put it safely in the car, pack up some personal items such as his one and only debit card, license, a few necessities for the car, and so on...

That afternoon, Ray helped Maria pack all of the needed items into her car and then proceeded to gently coax Maria out of her home....That took a good half hour but once she was out of the house, she quickly got into the car, strapped her seat belt and waited for Ray to start up the car.

“Funny, she thought, ‘It doesn’t feel as bad as I thought it would. I’m still alive, Ray is with me and we’re going someplace safe.’ As they pulled away from the house, she didn’t look back at the house. She couldn’t believe it but she wanted to go. Leaving something as special and safe as her home was sad and depressing but in a wonderful way, it was freeing...And, she wasn’t alone anymore...She was with Ray! And besides, her home was no longer safe; no longer a place of peace and refuge. Maybe they could find something better. Shoot, they no longer had a choice. It was something they had to do....

As they pulled away from the house, and driving down the street, they saw the same group of people who were pounding on their door just days ago, walking steadily and with purpose, toward her home. As they saw them drive by, they did nothing but stare

with grim faces but she could tell from the poor-looking children walking behind them, that they were and eager and ready—to take over her home. Everyone was carrying a suitcase and a few treasured items. She saw, too, some of the men were carrying large gardening tools. They were going to dig a garden, she thought and probably use those tools as weapons, if necessary. Her anger turned to sadness when she saw how very poor, lost and lonely they all looked. She prayed that they would find peace in her home; as she prayed the same for herself and Ray.

Chapter Fifteen: Methodist Central Spring

After driving for an hour, they pulled into the back parking lot of Methodist Central. As they pulled into the large, half-full parking lot they saw many children playing in the small, fenced in playground adjacent to the church. The children were having fun—playing on the Jungle Gym, the Monkey Bars and The Slide. She tried not to stare; she didn't want to embarrass them but they were too busy having fun to notice a stranger..

“Those were the days,” she thought. No worries, no problems, no agoraphobia...Nothing but pure fun and joy of the day. She recalled her best friend, Rhodi, who always was by her side. She was a loner, like her, and soon they were inseparable. She and Rhodi always played together and that helped so much, especially when it came to dealing with the snobs and twerps...They were always making fun of her and Rhodi and Maria never understood why except that they seemed to enjoy making others miserable. Funny, she heard not long ago that some of those twerps were already dead and the others were living quiet lives of desperation. “Maybe payback,” she thought..

Ray walked around the car and opened the door for her. Together, they walked to the front of the building and then cautiously walked in. It was a two-story building, with about 20 rooms per floor. Toward the back of the church, was a meeting-room and out from a back room, walked Father Mulligan. They knew it was him from his collar and purposeful walk.

He was of medium height, balding, around 50 years old and had a weary but hopeful expression on his face.

As he walked toward them he cried out, “You must be Ray and Maria! Welcome! Come with me and let's talk.”

Maria liked the sound of “Ray and Maria.” Sounded nice, warm and wonderful...

They walked into a small but nicely decorated room, with pictures of the Father, the Pope, the church and credentials. The room had a special feeling to it—like it had been used many times, with good results. Immediately, she felt safe and secure.

Everyone sat down and Father Mulligan began....

“Good to have you both here! As you might know from talking with Father Guardino, space is minimal here, too, but right now we have a small room for you and Ray and possibly 10 other families, if needed. Please tell me a little about yourselves and we’ll set up an account for you and then show you to your quarters.”

Ray looked at Maria and Maria looked anxiously back at Ray. She gave him a pleading look as if to say, “Please go first; I’m just not ready to talk.”

Ray got the hint and began to speak, “Father, first of all we appreciate you taking us in. We know how crowded these Family Centers are getting; so the sacrifice of making room for us makes us happy and secure. I’m a single man—and have done maintenance work all of my life...I’ve worked for my father and Homebuilders, Inc for 10 years. I’ve also cared for my mentally ill brother for several years and currently I have been staying with my good friend, Maria for several months. She took me in after I was attacked in the downtown area and we’ve been together ever since.”

After he told Father Mulligan about staying with Maria, he immediately felt guilty, for he knew that Catholics looked down on couples who didn’t marry before living together. He could see on the good Father’s face a brief look of disapproval but just as quickly, the disapproval vanished and with it, a look of understanding beamed from his face.

“Thank you Ray and now Maria, tell me a little about yourself.”

Maria felt queasy; talking with someone in authority always brought on those awful feelings of fear and anxiety but she pressed down those fears and began.....

“Father, it is a pleasure to meet you. We are so happy that you could take us in. We know of no other place to go, where we would feel safe. We’ve been hearing and seeing so many terrible things, as I’m sure you have. In my neighborhood, almost everyone has left and the homeless have taken over many of the neighborhood homes and all that is left is noise, confusion and fear. And, several days ago, people came to my home and ordered us out! They were becoming violent and we felt pressured to leave. I’m agoraphobic and have been, for many years. I don’t know what else to say except that we’re here and happy to feel safe!”

Maria felt safe with the good Father and continued, “Father we want you to know something....We are living together and we know it’s a sin but Father, we just didn’t have a choice.”

Father Mulligan interrupted her and said, “Oh, my dear lady, you do have a choice! I can marry you both, anytime...Of course, first I want to make sure that you’re both compatible and so I we will need several sessions...And, we can do this anytime, now that you’re here.”

Maria blushed and replied, “Why, yes I suppose we could do that...That is, if Ray wants to marry me.....Ray? What do you think?”

Ray just grinned and said, “Maria, I’ve been wanting to ask you to marry me from the moment I laid eyes on you! Of course, I want to marry you! Father, just tell us what we need to do and we’ll do it...”

Ray reached for Maria’s hand, squeezed it hard and smiled a huge smile. There was no doubt of his love for her..

Father replied, “Well, that settles it. We’ll set up some sessions, tomorrow. But now, let me take you to your quarters and after dinner you can meet with some of the others...”

Maria and Ray looked at each other, smiled and with hope in their hearts, followed Fatherto their small but safe, living quarters....

Chapter Sixteen: Living at Methodist Central

As the good Father opened the door to their new living quarters, Maria felt a moment of excitement and apprehension.

As they took the tour of their tiny home, one of the first things they saw was a large, beautiful, gold cross that hung from the middle of the ceiling in the living room. It was lovely to look at, was about two feet long and immediately gave their place a feeling of protection and welcome.

Then they walked into the kitchen area and found it to be very small—having only the necessities, a small coffee pot, tiny oven and a one-well sink. There were kitchen utensils but only what was absolutely needed. The bedroom and bath were also small but functional and clean..

At the end of the walk-through, Maria gave her word of thanks. “This is much more than we anticipated. Thank you so much! We will take good care of this place, rest assured.”

Ray nodded in agreement and then said, “Yes, thank you! If there is anything we can do to help out, just let us know.”

“Not to worry; we all pitch in and do daily chores and don’t forget, our weekly sessions toward your upcoming marriage will begin soon!”

He continued, “Well, I’ll leave you two to check out your new place. After dinner, if you’re up to it, you can meet some of the others....Now, time to rest..! See you both, later....”

After Father left, Ray and Maria explored their small, new home. It would suit them fine but they noticed noise coming from adjacent units; voices of happy but nervous

children...But, it were alright. There were no sounds of loud banging and orders from strangers to leave....And besides, for now, it was home..

It was one in the afternoon when Maria and Ray unpacked their last items. Maria put out several pictures of her family and set up the small dresser drawer and bathroom—trying to imitate what she had left. She also brought along her cleaning supplies and gave the kitchen and bath a good scrubbing and cleaning.

Ray took notice of her hard work and said, “Maria, you are one of the neatest women I have every known! We will no doubt have the cleanest and tidiest little home in this whole complex!”

Maria, smiled, shook her head shyly but agreed. Cleaning, organizing and over-doing it--that was part of her agoraphobia; and sometimes it was embarrassing to admit it. But, she was!

Around three in the afternoon, Maria and Ray left their living quarters and began walking around the complex. As they walked, they observed many small children with their parents. They were all huddling close to each other, whispering in tones that could barely be heard. The only words that Maria could make out were, “Are you sure we’re safe here, Daddy?” Or, “Why are we here; why can’t we go back home?” With anxious faces, the parents tried to comfort them but it was hard; anyone could see that they were not coping well.

Some of the children and parents were friendly and smiled back at Ray and Maria but weren’t eager or ready to open up and talk. It was clear after awhile that newcomers to the church were looked upon as suspect, a stranger not to be trusted. “Too bad, Maria thought; ‘too bad the world had come to this.’”

Around six, the large inside dinner bell rang from the large back room and everyone rambled to the dining room. Maria and Ray looked for a nice place to sit and soon a meal of potatoes, meat and vegetables were served. Steaming coffee was also served along with a nice piece of apple pie for desert.

It was a lovely meal, she thought and the food helped to calm her down. Later, she and Ray went outside in the back of the building and sat on a bench under a huge Maple tree. There they sat, holding hands and feeling calm and safe. It was around 7:30 and evening was upon them.

“Well, Maria; here we are. I bet you never thought you would end up in a place like this. But, I must say, you seem to be handling all of this well...”

Maria sat there with legs crossed and head held high, looked toward the sky and replied, “No, I never thought I would ever be so out in the open like this and sharing a place with so many others But, here we are and you know what? It’s not so bad! I thought I would be so nervous, so afraid of everyone but somehow, I feel free! I will admit, however, I

was nervous this morning. But now, I feel like this could be the beginning of a better life.”

“Yes, I know what you mean. Even though so much has happened, I’m just so glad we’re here, we’re safe and together. Maria, I just don’t think I could make it without you. You are so strong; much stronger than I am!”

He put his head on her shoulder and she felt so strange...Here she was, an agoraphobic, who suffered with fears all of her life, always looking for someone to lean on and here was a man she knew little of, leaning on her! Imagine that, a man looking to her for safety and comfort!.

Around nine, many of the parents and children wandered back inside; children protesting that they wanted to stay “outside just a few minutes, more!”

Maria and Ray remained outside longer than most, holding hands and just being happy. Ray felt so close to Maria that he kissed her hard on the mouth and she felt herself responding by kissing him back—first gently but then feeling more passion and kissing him again, this time on the soft of his neck.

Later, they went inside and walked quietly to their small room. Neither said a word but each took off their clothes and then made love for several hours. They fell asleep in each other’s arms, feeling safe and secure.

A good night’s sleep is what they needed and that is exactly what they got. That is, until six in the morning when the loud bell in the hallway went off for breakfast. According to the instructions that Father Mulligan gave them the day before, breakfast was served no later than seven and everyone was expected to be there and to be assigned later in the morning for “clean-up.”

Before breakfast, they looked at the job and duties schedule that was posted in the downstairs hallway. It looked like Maria and Ray were scheduled for clean-up the coming weekend in the kitchen. It looked their duties would be washing dishes and putting them away..

Breakfast was delicious—a plate of eggs, bacon, toast and steaming coffee was passed around for everyone. Maria ate as if she had never eaten before and she had to admit that breakfast never tasted so good!

Ray, too, enjoyed the meal and asked for seconds. Luckily, he reached the cooks before the rest of the food was gone and brought back extra bacon for both of them.

“Have some! I got plenty and this is the last of it. So, help yourself!”

“Thank you. This is so delicious! I haven’t tasted bacon like this in years!”

Everyone seemed to be enjoying the breakfast; especially the children. Enjoying good food, especially under such stressful conditions, made the breakfast taste even better. At least Ray thought so. He'd never eaten a better breakfast than this morning! Everything had so much flavor! Later, after breakfast, all of the children practically ran outside, to plan on the "Jungle Gym" and "The Slide." The parents were happy that the children felt free to play; was a blessing, for sure. One of the few and safe ones, they thought.

They also saw from the bulletin board that a meeting would be held around nine and everyone was to attend.

The meeting room filled up quickly and exactly at nine the good Father walked in carrying his briefcase and notes.

"Good morning, everyone! Good to see you all and that everyone has had a good breakfast. I would like to discuss with you this month's plans and what you all can expect in the coming months, as we enter spring and summer."

Everyone appeared attentive, except for the teenagers and young adults in the back of the room. One could tell by looking at them that they were bored and just wanted to be with their friends, talking or going downtown to shop or whatever teenagers wanted to do these days...Maria felt for them; she remembered what it was like being young and wanting to be free and happy. Funny, she was feeling the same way, too and it was a delicious feeling!

He continued, "As most of you know, we are full up here and only have room for about ten more families. It is somewhat crowded here as you can tell, but we are functioning better than I anticipated. One of the first things I must tell you is the need for "everyone" to participate in the preparation of food and cleaning of the apartment units. I won't name names but some are not pulling their weight. I must say again that everyone must do their own job and do it well. If this cannot be attained, then this Mission Home will not work and all of us will be out on the streets...And, I don't have to tell you what that means! So, please, everyone check the work sheets and if there is any confusion, come see me!"

With his action words, he got their attention because everyone knew what was happening outside the church's protective walls. Out the church's window, many could be seen walking aimlessly—homeless and some were being killed and tortured for the little they had on them...Everyone knew the good Father was telling it "like it was."...

He continued on, "So, please everyone, check out the bulletin on the main floor everyday to see what your assigned duties are. If there are any questions, just come to me and I will answer your questions. Now, let's talk of other business."

He went on for about a half hour more and then finished by saying..."Folks, I want to say again how happy I and my staff are that you are here. It is a wonderful feeling to offer

safety for you all but remember this, this mission home will last only as long as we all help out and for as long as the good Lord allows it. But, keep in mind that there may come a time when we will all have to split up and seek other places to stay. But, until that time, let's give thanks to the good Lord for all of His blessings and continue on with life!"

He bowed his head and began reciting the Lord's Prayer. Everyone joined in and Maria loved hearing those precious words and the sound of them was so beautiful that she could barely keep back the tears..

It was good that no one in the room had a clue of what would happen next..

After the meeting everyone went out on the Main Floor and checked out the schedule for chores. Maria and Ray were scheduled to work in the Laundry Room that afternoon, so they went for a walk outside for awhile first, to collect their thoughts.

"Well, what did you think of Father's talk?" Maria wanted to know how Ray felt about Father Mulligan's thoughts and plans for the future.

"I thought it was an honest and respectful talk and I liked the fact that he was being realistic with expectations and the future. This place is great and helping many but it's not the "end all" answer and, as he mentioned, there may come a time to leave."

Maria looked sad, for she was beginning to feel safe at the Mission House and that was something she never thought she would feel, ever!

"Ray, what will we do, where will we go if we're forced out of here? I think you mentioned something about going out West and living in a cave? Do you really think we might have to do something like that? How safe would that be? I don't think I could handle that!"

"Now Maria, it's nothing to be anxious or worried about now. It might not ever happen but we have to be prepared. We still have your car and it's in pretty good shape and between us we have some money and we can barter, if need be. Let's focus on being happy here and in the meantime we can make plans, if worse comes to worse"...

For several weeks everything went fine. Maria felt herself letting go of some of her worries and phobias and made an effort when she could to get to know the families and children.

But, as everyone knows, happiness is often fleeting and so on a cool spring day when she was babysitting a boy of seven and a girl of nine, something unpredictable and strange happened. The children's parents, the Middletons, were in the dining room area enjoying a visit with friends and Maria was enjoying her babysitting chores when....

Jeremy had just finished his bath and made his way to the living room. He had a large towel wrapped around him and he seemed upset. He said that Martha wasn't in the bedroom like she always was, to help him get ready for bed.

Maria rushed to him and seconds later ran to the bathroom. The tub was overflowing with water. Martha, was nowhere to be found and that was odd because she had taken a bath before Jeremy and was supposed to be helping him with his bath. Maria checked the second bedroom and found that the girl was not there. How could she have left the apartment without Maria seeing her go? The only time Maria was not in the living room, was when she went to the kitchen for a glass of water... Surely she would have heard or seen something!

After she took care of the bathtub and made sure Jeremy was alright, she locked the door and then raced to the dining area, searching for Martha and her parents. They were not in the dining area and they were not in the backyard area. She looked everywhere but couldn't find them. She asked a few people who knew them and everyone said that they had not seen them since dinner.

Then she went to the good Father and asked if he had seen them. He said that he saw them at dinner but after that, nothing. He gave a worried look. He didn't mention anything to Maria that some of the other members who once lived there, disappeared several months ago. Two families and several children simply vanished during the dead of winter, leaving many to wonder what had happened.

What was even more fearful to the good Father was that they never returned; that nothing was found out about them... There were some awful rumors—rumors between men like himself and others in charge of Missions-- that children were turning in their parents to the government, just so they could have the Card and special privileges that came with it.. It was horrific to him to think that children—such small children—were exchanging their parents for money and material things! But the fact was, it seemed to be happening and often!..

It was sad and disturbing news that two days later it was found that Martha's parents had been abducted and that apparently their daughter, Martha was behind it all! Many speculated that she was somewhere counting her money and material things but without a clue that her demise, as well as her parents, would be violent and soon.

Poor Jeremy was now alone—with a sister or parents—a boy without a family.

For Maria who had always wanted children, Jeremy, was looked upon as the child Maria had always wanted. He was so cute, so innocent and loving; she just had to have him as a son. His black hair, ruddy cheeks and wonderful laugh, was endearing and Maria was secretly thrilled that the good Father soon complied with Maria and Ray's wishes to adopt him. She didn't have to plead with Ray to adopt him; Ray had always wanted a son.

Adopting him, Maria thought that nothing would ever happen to hurt or divide their new family. Unhappily such thoughts don't last long.

Chapter Seventeen: Just When You Thought It Was Safe...

Spring and summer went fast and it wasn't long before November gently pushed its way in. The summer had been beautiful, especially August. Not just because Jeremy was in their lives but because, in Maria's mind, August was the absolute peak of beauty and happiness.

August, in Maria's mind was not only lovely but brought with it a twinge of pain because one knew that soon it would be gone and in its place the dreariness of autumn. August was like a lovely picture that quickly changed from one beauty to another, but autumn could be cruel and when not looking, turn into the coldness of winter.

To Maria's surprise and delight she was getting used to being around people, doing chores and putting up with the hollering of children and parents and letting go of the controlling aspect of her personality. She had to admit, it felt good—strange but good. She was absolutely amazed at how well she was adapting. All those years being hostage in her home and never knowing the joy of sharing with others; it seemed a terrible waste...But those months at the church she had made friends with one of the women and found that by sharing with her, fears that once held her captive were disappearing into the light of a brand new day...

Linda was a single mother; struggling with a nine year old boy. James, as he was known, wanted to play with the other children but she was worried that he might catch some kind of disease and so always kept him close to her. She confided to Maria about her obsessive need to take care of her son and felt responsible for anything and everything that happened to him. Maria saw in Linda the beginnings of obsessive behavior and tried to help her understand that it was necessary to now and then, let the boy go. She told her that it was important for James to feel free to be with others his own age. Jeremy, along with Maria's nudging, did his part too, to help out and soon the two boys became inseparable...

After talking with her new friend on and off for several days, she noticed that Linda was allowing James to play with other children and she noticed, too, that Jeremy was happier too. She smiled when she witnessed the healing powers of friendship. Having a friend surely came from God, she thought. It brought such joy to those who shared it.

Maria felt good, too, that instead of receiving help and comfort from others, she was now giving help and that made her feel good and brand new!

Meanwhile, Ray was adapting well to the new environment and applying his maintenance skills in helping the good Father with the many projects of the Mission. The good Father appreciated his help and was beginning to lean on him a little too much; at least that's what Maria thought...

September came quickly and with it a noticeable change in the atmosphere...One could feel the change in the coolness of the autumn air and the changing behavior in people. The "Evil One" was placing even more restrictions on Halfway houses and Mission homes like Father Mulligan's and word was spreading that some of the poorer families in the Mission homes would have to leave...It was rumored that the "evil one" was getting frustrated with the lack of profit such places were bringing in and also that Christianity was still alive and growing. The Evil One wanted everyone to come to him for everything and it just wasn't happening fast enough. His desire for more power was daily changing his physical features and it was good only a few could see what he really looked like. Those close to him murmured amongst themselves that to look at him, was to feel a strange and awful terror!

About a week later, Maria and Ray noticed something odd and frightening with the arrival of two families...Each family had two children and appeared on the outside to be happy but some noticed that they made no effort getting to know anyone and they made it clear to everyone with their disruptive behavior that all they wanted to do was to "take" and give nothing! Maria also noticed that both families were disruptive during meetings and were often were hostile with Father Mulligan. It seemed that the two new families were constantly boasting about the benefits and joys of The Card—yelling at the top of their lungs that the Card wasn't bad at all; in fact, they described just how much more one could get by joining---money, homes, food, clothing and cars...

At first, many rejected their pushy ways and disruptions but as time went by, Maria began sensing a change with some of the families and there were rumors that some would soon be leaving the Mission and signing up for The Card. When Father got wind of this, his fears of dissention and division increased and what was worse, he felt immobile to do anything about it..

At the next monthly meeting, many different subjects were discussed—and leaving the Mission was high on the list for some. Father tried to address all of the needs and said that "If anyone wanted to leave and sign up for The Card, to go ahead and do so but to remember that when you do, you will forfeit your soul and will never be able to return to The Mission." That scared some into staying but with others it helped to push them quickly out the door.

Father Mulligan spoke with Maria and Ray in confidence one afternoon and told them that they could stay if they wanted to, for they had been helpful and giving. In confidence he told them who would be leaving and why..

Maria and Ray said that they would like to stay and Father Mulligan seemed happy and relaxed hearing their words.

Days later the rest of the “problem makers” left, eager to sign up for The Card.

It was not until November and the upcoming holidays that Ray, Maria and Jeremy would be forced to leave The Mission and under circumstances beyond their control.

It was the day before Thanksgiving and Maria and Ray were busy helping Father with preparations for the holiday. There was much to do and Maria and Ray were two of twenty helping with the festivities.

Father was particularly buoyant because this would be the twelfth anniversary of The Mission House and Thanksgiving was one of his favorite holidays...

There were streams of banners with “Happy Thanksgiving” hanging from the ceiling and adjacent walls. Pictures and pop-up pictures of “Tom the Turkey” were everywhere and orange and yellow dinnerware and glasses adorned the many long dining tables..

Ray and Maria were putting name tags, bowls of candy and such out and onto the large tables, when something unexpected happened....

But, stepping through the main front door, was someone Maria didn’t expect or want to see again in her life...

It was that horrible man who called and wrote that disturbing letter! He was shabbily dressed and for seemed disoriented. She looked at him for the longest time, squinting her unbelieving her eyes. He slowly walked toward the holiday tables, not seeing Maria. He looked tired, hungry and angry.

Minutes later, Father walked toward him, to see if he could help.

The man spoke first, “Father...Help me! I haven’t eaten in days and I’ve been followed. Please can I stay here, just for awhile? You’re a man of the cloth, right? Then, you must help me!”

“Yes, I am and I will do what I can to help you...” The man was acting strangely, so he continued with him, cautiously.

The two huddled together and spoke with hushed words. Maria only heard words like, "hungry, no place to go...help."

About ten minutes later, the man turned around and recognized Maria. Seconds later he began walking her way. There was anger in his eyes and Maria felt like running....

She turned toward Ray and said, “Ray, we’ve got to leave! It’s that.....He’s the one who wrote me that letter about wanting to stay with me and then came to my door, threatening me! Please, we must go!”

“Maria, calm down! You’re with me. He’s not going to do anything with me by your side....Let’s wait and see how it goes.”

The man finally approached them and said, “So, Maria, you’re here at the Mission. That means you were forced out of your precious, little house! Gee, that makes you like me—homeless and unwanted! Well, since we’ll be neighbors, I’ll have a chance to get to know you better---if you get my drift?!”

Ray barged in...”Excuse me; Maria and I are together and you need to back off, right now!”

The man took two steps back and said, “Fine! Alright. But, you haven’t seen the last of me! I will make your life here, miserable...Just like you made my life miserable when you wouldn’t allow me to stay in your home. I guess what goes around, comes around...Right Maria?!” He stomped away and walked back to Father, cussing all the way.

She said nothing, and inched closer to Ray. “Well, I’m glad that’s over with,” Ray was ticked off with the man’s behavior and was beginning to think that Maria might be right about leaving. Knowing the potential danger from mentally ill people, leaving soon might be necessary. He began to think about leaving.

The Thanksgiving meal was delicious but the joy of it was hindered by the angry stranger. Afterwards, Maria and Ray go outside and found a quiet place to talk, in a corner over by some bushes.

“Ray, I don’t like this. Maybe this is a foreboding of things to come. I don’t want to leave this place but I just know he will cause us problems if we stay.”

“Yes, after watching him in action, I think we need to talk with Father and tell him our concerns and that we need to leave. Maybe he can give us some help and advice on where to go next. Maybe out west; I hear some families are traveling that way just to get away from the confusion. I just heard on the news this morning that government officials are going door-to-door now and taking people into custody if they don’t have a Card.”

“I heard that too, when I was in the kitchen this morning, getting things ready. I suppose Father didn’t tell us because he didn’t want to alarm us.

“I’ll set up a meeting with Father tomorrow and see if we can leave early next week?”

Maria nodded her head, touched her forehead nervously and said, “Good! The sooner, the better.”

Sleeping did not come easy for Maria and Ray and the next day dawned cloudy with rain moving in the afternoon.

They spent the weekend avoiding the “angry one” and helping Father with Thanksgiving clean-up.

Monday arrived, with bright sun and a promise of new beginnings. At least, that’s how Maria felt when she looked up at the bright autumn sky.

They were getting ready with their meeting with Father and both were nervous but hoping for the best.

Ray was up and dressed first; then sat and listened to the radio while he waited for Maria.

He heard, “To our listening viewers, please be advised that there will be a “door-to-door” inspection by the city government and officials this week. Please have your account information ready and look for your time-slot, which will be stated, every hour, on the hour. If you do not have the correct information, be prepared to be taken to The People’s Camp for a period of not less than or more than six weeks, for a complete evaluation and reprogram training course. Please have your Card and number handy, ready to be inspected.”

After hearing this, Ray told Maria that it was now not only necessary to leave, but urgent. Maria gave no objections. It was time to go.

The meeting started out well with Father and he understood why they wanted to leave; he heard the same news on the radio. But he hated to see them go. He told them that the man who upset Maria probably wouldn’t be at The Mission long, for he was hearing complaints from others that he was threatening several some of the women and that that kind of behavior would not be tolerated—homeless or not.

“Father, can you give us some advice on where we can go and also, can you afford to give us any survival tools—camping tools, perhaps?”

“I can tell you that many are going to Arizona and parts of California and are camping out in some caves that have been renovated.. Some are also building underground homes and doing well. In the maintenance building behind us I can get you some survival and camp tools, too.”

“Great, that would be so helpful, Father! Maria and I can’t thank you enough for all you’ve done for us. We will miss you, greatly! Tears began to form in Ray’s eyes and Maria just looked sad.

“So, when do you plan on leaving?”

“The day after tomorrow. And, I will go with you now, if it’s alright, to check out the tools and so forth?” Ray was eager to get going on the preparations to leave and wanted to make sure they had what they surely would need.

“Sure, Come along and I’ll show you what we have. Maria, would you like to come along?”

“No, that’s alright. I’d like to back to our place and do some packing...Thank you, Father. Thank you so much!”

“Glad to help, dear. Will talk with you later..”

Maria hurried back to their little hone and began to pack. As she packed, she cried. She didn’t want to leave but she didn’t want to be around the hostility that made itself known just twenty-four hours ago. And besides, the door-to-door inspections would soon be coming to the Mission House and that could be stressful and dangerous for all. “Why wait around for trouble to come?” she thought. Better to leave now, before something bad happens.”

Jeremy peaked through the door, saw her crying and offered to help....Living with his new parents, he found deep inside of him a pain he had never felt before—caring for another. He wanted to help.

“Maria, are you alright?”

“Oh Jeremy! We must all leave this lovely place and”

It hurt him to see her cry and so he drew closer to her and hugged her. Both said nothing but even in silence, much was said and felt.

The day to leave came quickly and soon they had everything the good Father gave them in the car and in the back trunk.

Father stood in the parking lot next to their car and said, “Be safe, folks, and don’t look back. Your future is ahead of you; for everyone else here, the past is all we have...” He looked at Jeremy and then looked at Maria and Ray. He was worried for their future; for everyone at the Mission. He didn’t cry but his eyes were moist with emotion and he backed away from the car and waved as they began driving away...

“Good-bye Father.” They waved as they pulled away from the Shelter. Ray glanced at Father from this rear view mirror. The aging Father just stood there, as if in a fixed trance, watching and waving. Ray thought he never saw anyone look so sad and so alone.

“Father Mulligan looks like he misses us already. I hate to leave him standing there all alone but we have to get going.” Ray’s voice was filled with sadness but strong resolve. It was time to go.

“Yes, he did look so sad. I found it hard looking at him; he’s been so kind and helpful to us. I hope he’ll be alright. But, as you said, we must keep moving. We are doing the right thing; though I must admit I am terrified of what we might find along the way...But, as my father used to say, “Maria, whenever you’re afraid, whatever it is, think of it as an adventure...And, you will get through!”

“Hm....that’s pretty good advice and for what we’re going through, I think right on target...So, let’s go adventuring!”

Chapter Eighteen: On the Road Again

Leaving Ohio, the safety of the wonderful Father, and on the road to Arizona and California, in Maria’s mind, was like traveling to the moon! Her old anxieties and fears returned and once again she felt nervous and edgy.. She thought back to the time when she first began to drive. It was in the early 70’s and she was practice driving with her Father. “Yes, she thought out loud. ‘That’s when my agoraphobia kicked in!’” She remembered him yelling at her, with every wrong turn or “too long of a pause.”

About an hour into the drive, Maria began to relax. Ray’s calm behavior was infectious and she found herself slowly letting go of her worries and enjoying the scenery. His relaxed but “in charge” behavior was comforting and gave her a wonderful feeling of safety. As they drove, they listened to some classical music. Such music brought back old, sweet memories from her youth; memories of being in love and worry-free. Such memories were good for Maria, for they phobia-free, relaxing and just plain wonderful!

Jeremy was relaxed too but asked for another station. “Can we listen to something else? That music is so dull!”

Maria shook her head and said, “Alright. But, just for awhile—O.K.?”

He nodded in agreement.

“How far have we traveled so far, Ray?”

“Looks like about 40 miles on the travel log. We need to travel another hour or two and then see about finding something to eat. I want to put as much distance from Ohio as possible...Are you guys getting hungry yet?”

“Not me! Still full from breakfast but give me another two hours and I’ll be wanting a nice sandwich and hot cup of coffee.” Maria was often hungry but her good memories were replacing such hunger.

Jeremy chirped, “Im sure hungry! Can we get a hamburger and some fries?”

Ray smiled at Maria and replied, “Sure thing! Next drive thru we see, we’ll stop by. That is, if Maria says it’s O.K. What do you say, Maria?”

“Oh, alright!” She smiled as she looked out the window...”Pretty country isn’t it, Jeremy?”

Jeremy was thinking of the hamburgers and fries and nodded in agreement.

About ten minute later they saw a road block ahead; with several police cars huddling together, forming a long, line.

“What’s going on? Don’t like the looks of that!” Ray looked nervous and Maria absorbed his fear like a virus, seeking an opening...

Ray pulled over and two policemen walked over to their car.

“License and registration, please!” The policeman was abrupt and authoritative.

Ray pulled out his license and registration and the balding policeman practically grabbed it from him.

“Hmmm, everything looks alright; except you’re two weeks away from renewing your license. Bet you didn’t know that?”

“No, I didn’t. Sorry about that. I totally forgot. I will take care of it as soon as we reach our destination.”

“Where ya headin?” The man’s ruddy face extended to his bald head and he was hoping to catch Ray on something....Anything would do; he just wanted to cause this family some anguish. It had been a rough morning. Some idiot placed a bad report to his supervisor and he was pissed off!

“Heading to California. Have a new job there and relatives to visit.” Ray brought out some documents that Father gave him; they were old copies but they looked realistic enough and Ray was hoping like heck that the documents would get them through.

The policeman reluctantly returned the license and registration and replied, “Well, you can go but take care of that license as soon as possible. And, take care of the left brake light. It’s not working.”

“Will do and thanks a bunch!” They pulled away but not before the policeman with the bald head gave the O.K. . . .

“Boy, I’m glad that’s over! I’ve been hearing of the road blocks and checkpoints. Most likely we’ll be running into more along the way. So be prepared and let me do the talking. We don’t want to confuse or upset them....”

“Good going on keeping your composure! That could have gone much worse but you handled it well!” Maria sighed and patted Ray on the back.

“Wow, a police check! Just like on TV! That was kind of neat, Mr. Summerhill. Do you think that will happen again? Sure hope so!” Jeremy was excited. For him, it was like being in a Reality TV show; something he always enjoyed.

Jeremy looked through the back window and waved at the policeman. He thought it was great fun. He didn't see the threat; he just saw the fun and adventure.

“Jeremy, these days it's not good to be pulled over. You see, the police are tracking down people who are trying to escape the big cities and the wanting everyone to sign up for “The Card.” So, if it happens again, let me do the talking and stay as quiet and calm as possible. O.K.? You don't want us to go to jail or a detention camp, do you?”

“O.K.” Jeremy didn't understand but he wanted to do his part in making the trip enjoyable—and he certainly didn't want to end up in jail or a detention camp. He heard about such places and they were scary! Beside, he was thinking of the hamburger and fries and how good they would taste!

The next couple of hours went better and later they stopped off at an old diner—“Judy's Café”-- and had some food.

They sat down in a run-down looking, garish looking booth and were given menus. Before they could order the waitress asked, “Will you be paying by The Card today?”

Ray and Maria knew what to do, so Ray replied, “No, but we have cash. Will that do?”

She smiled, paused for a few moments and whispered, “It's O.K. this time but if you stay on for another meal, we can't do it. We're only allowed to take cash, just once.” Then she whispered, “Sorry folks but we're being pushed to accept only The Card. If we don't, we get fined and after three warnings, The Detention Camp!”

Maria and Ray knew that they wouldn't be coming back for dinner, so Ray replied, “Great, we're just passing through, anyway.”

“Listen, I don't know you guys from Adam, but let me give you a tip. You're not going to get far without The Card. Everything in these parts is now automated and monitored, so let me give you a warning. The only places that take cash have a small sign at the bottom of their door or window—The sign is green, with a small dollar bill printed on it...”

“Thank you, Miss for the info. That will help keep us out of trouble...”

“Sure thing; glad to help. But, let me tell you one more thing...The green dollar signs will not be up much longer. Already, they’re fading them out.. Heard about that just this morning from Ralph, our cook. Money will not be accepted much longer. Shoot, the only places that accept money, seem to be a few fast food joints. Too bad the food is tasteless! But, if you have a Debit Card, that will get you into some restaurants and hotels---at least for awhile. Isn’t it awful?” She looked anxious and worried. She began to leave before Ray could reply...

“For sure, Ray replied. Again, thanks for the “heads-up!”

About 10 minutes later their food was brought over and for awhile they forgot about The Card, detention camps and such and enjoyed the hamburgers, fries and chocolate milkshakes.

After eating, Ray paid the bill and later they all returned to their car.

“Boy, was that good! Thank you for the delicious meal! Sure enjoyed that hamburger and fries!”

“You’re welcome, Jeremy! Now folks, let’s get going and get back on the road.”

Several hours later, they reached St. Louis and enjoyed the sights and sounds, while passing through. It was dry country, and along the way they saw many walking along the highways; probably looking for a place to stay, a place where they could be safe...Jeremy was getting impatient and let it be known.

“Are we there yet? Getting tired sitting in the back. How much longer?”

“Got a ways to go Jeremy but we’ll pull over in a little bit and relax for awhile. Maybe get something to drink and a snack. That O.K. with you?”

“O.K. sounds good to me! Maybe we could get some pop and chips? That would sure taste good!”

“Well, we’ll see.”

Maria was busy looking out the window; traveling like this was both scary and amazing. She missed her home; and feeling safe. But, she was surprised to find that her anxiety was minimal. Oh sure, there was that empty uncomfortable feeling but the awful fear that once occupied her brain, was diminishing and that felt wonderful! They were all three becoming a family and that was such a blessing!

Ray was getting tired of driving but didn’t want to complain. He wasn’t sure Maria could take over and drive; her illness made that idea almost impossible. Everyone seemed to be going alright so far, so he decided to keep quiet.

About an hour later, they saw another old diner up the road, pulled over and stopped. They were just about ready to get out of the car and go in, when Ray spotted something and said, “No way! We’re not going in here!”

“Why?” Jeremy was hungry and not bashful in relaying his needs.

Maria knew what the problem was but said nothing.

“Jeremy, there are policeman there; see them?”

“Yes, I see them but they’re just talking to some people; that’s all.”

“Jeremy, listen to me! You’re too young to understand. It used to be that policemen and policewomen were doing their job to protect and serve people like you, me and your “mother.” But, these days they are doing their job for the sole purpose of promoting and protecting The Card, and that means they are friends and protectors of protecting the Evil One.

“I don’t understand; they look alright and besides I’m hungry!”

“I know you’re hungry and your mother and I are, too.” He enjoyed using the words, “mother and I.” Those words sounded good and true. What to say to a boy of nine who doesn’t know what is going on? He stumbled for words.

“Let’s go find another place to eat and along the way, I’ll try to explain what is going on; alright?”

“O.K.” Jeremy’s put his head down and sulked. He just didn’t understand adults. They could be so “weird” sometimes. Shoot they were weird almost all the time! But, he did think it was nice that Ray said, “Your mother and I.” In his own way, he was beginning to think of them, too, as “family.”

Ray pulled away from the diner and continued to drive. He began his explanation.

“Jeremy, Son, we are living in the Final Days on this planet. We are in Judgment Times, and that is why everyone who wants to eat, buy or sell, have to use The Card or The Number.”

“Yes, I know. I had some friends and they wore the number on their foreheads and they had anything they wanted—DVDs, bikes, cell phones, TVs—anything! My mom and dad tried it for awhile but they didn’t like how it made them feel.”

“I’m glad you know about the “Card” and that the “Evil One” is behind it all. You see, that’s why we had to leave the Mission House, to see if we could find a safe place to live—a place where we don’t need The Card. A place where we can feel safe; a place we can call “home.”

Jeremy became excited and said, “Do you think we can find such a place? It sounds a lot like Star Wars, where the Jedi was always fighting with Darth Vader and the Dark Side. Is it like that?”

Ray smiled and replied, “Yes, it’s a lot like that. You see, like most Christians, we’re being persecuted—chased and hunted-- because we believe in God and His son, Jesus Christ. We are a lot like the Jedi—fighting and hiding from Darth Vader and his evil ways and searching for a better and safer way to live.....”

Jeremy scooted back a bit, found a comfortable spot, smiled and a look of understanding moved over his face. Now, he understood what was going on. Now he knew about the police, why Ray and Maria were doing what they were doing. Ray could tell, too, that the talk seemed to help Maria, too. She seemed much more relaxed and calm. Ray thought to himself, “Communication! That’s the key for everyone, isn’t it?”

As they traveled on, they enjoyed the sights and scenery of the Old West and later found an older looking motel and pulled in for the night. It looked like a place where The Card wouldn’t be needed. A bit run down but it looked safe and out of harm’s way.

Pulling in they saw the sign that read, “Sleepy Inn.”

“This might work; let me go in and check it out.” Maria and Jeremy didn’t hear him—they had dozed off, so he went inside and rang the old bell. The place reminded him a bit of the motel in “Psycho.” It was furnished in “50s” fashion--worn out looking wallpaper on the walls, a big old clock behind the desk, ticking loudly the time and an old chair that looked like it had seen finer days...

Ray rang the small bell that lay on the desk. About two minutes later an older gentleman appeared and said, “May I help you? Do you need a room?”

“Yes. My family and I are traveling west and would like a room for the night. Do you require the Card?”

“Oh my, no! The Card hasn’t come to my establishment and I hope it won’t for a very long time! You see, I didn’t apply for one when they came around last year. They said, though, that if I didn’t sign up this year, that they would have to shut me down. But, I don’t think they will. I pay my taxes and I wouldn’t bring much revenue in for them. They’re looking for high profit, ya know...At least, that’s what I’ve been told. So, you need a room for your family?”

“Yes. What do you have?”

“Well, all I have is a one bed; one bath and a small frig, room. All of my other two bedroom rooms, with kitchens, have been taken. Would you like the room?”

“Yes, that would be fine. Is there a cot available in that room for my son?”

“No. Don’t have a cot but I do have a reclining chair that I can bring in...Would that do?”

“Yes, I believe that might work. How much is the room?”

“That would be \$120.00 a night. And, that would be in cash, or Debit card, of course.”

Ray nodded his head and said. “Yes, I know what you mean and yes, that’s fine.” He couldn’t believe the price; especially for such a rinky-dink place as this one but they were all tired and needed a place to rest and relax.

“Here’s the key to Room #2 and if you need anything, just dial 1 on the phone and I’ll get you what you need. There’s a small grocery store about two miles away, should you need any food. And, there’s a candy machine at the end of the lot, next to Room #10.”

“Thank you, that will do fine.”

Ray went outside and gently tugged on Maria’s shoulder. “Wake up Maria. I found us a place to rest.”

“Um....Thanks, Ray.” She was groggy from the sleep but seconds later grabbed her purse and then turned around to wake up Jeremy.

“Wake up, Jeremy. Ray has found us a place to stay.”

At first Jeremy just laid there, dead to the world. Finally after several nudgings, he opened his eyes.

“Where are we at? Did we finally arrive?”

“We’re at Sleepy Inn. But, we have not arrived at our final destination yet. It will take a little more time...So, why don’t you help me with the suitcases and later we’ll go down the road and get something good to eat?”

“Great! I am so hungry!”

So, Ray and Jeremy unloaded the car, while Maria began setting up some things in the room. She brought out everyone’s nightwear and set up the bathroom and fixed up the daybed for Jeremy. Later, the older gentleman brought in the daybed.

“This is where you will sleep tonight, Jeremy. They didn’t have a two-bedroom but Maria has set up a nice place for you on a nice recliner chair.”

Jeremy immediately went and sat down on it and checked out the chair’s settings. “Feels pretty good. I think I can sleep on it, alright.”

That being said, and after checking things in the room to make sure everyone would be comfortable, they got into the car and left, seeking a place to eat.

About ten minutes later they saw a sign up that said, “Joe’s Eats.”

It was an old diner and in front of the diner were many trucks and cars. Ray saw no sign of police and it didn’t have a modern look—one where the Card might be used. He noticed, too, the green dollar sign and remembered what the other waitress said about it, that it was a safe place to eat...

They walked in and the first thing they heard was music from the 50s coming from an old jukebox. Elvis was singing and there was the aroma of hamburgers, fries and homemade pies.

“Something smells great!” Jeremy was excited with the jukebox and the delicious aroma of greasy food.

They sat down in a red booth and soon a waitress came over. She was tall, with long brown hair and she was chewing gum. She looked like a nice person but a woman you wouldn’t want to make angry.

She asked, “May I have your order?”

Ray motioned to Maria, to go first.

“I’d like a hamburger well done, some fries and a chocolate milkshake.”

“Junior, what about you?”

“My name is Jeremy and I would like the same!”

“Sir, what will you have?”

“Would like the same! But also give me a nice slice of cherry pie!”

The waitress asked, “Would you two also like a piece of cherry pie?”

In unison, they both cried, “Yes!”

For about an hour they sat and ate their hamburger, fries, milkshake and pie and washed it all down with decaf coffee and pop for Jeremy.

“Folks, we’ve had enough calories and fat to last for a very, very long time. When we arrive in California, we are going to need to walk off some of this fat!” Ray spoke in wry humor and smiled as he talked.

Maria replied, “Speak for yourself, Bub. I’ll worry about that, once we get there but for right now, I’m just going to be happy and enjoy this “greasy” but very tasty food!”

“Me, too.” Jeremy was still working on his milkshake. It was delicious and he wanted to get every last drop.

Later, they went back to the motel and began preparing for bed.

Jeremy went fell asleep almost instantly; while Maria and Ray lay in bed talking about the day’s events.

“Been an interesting day, eh Maria?”

“Yes it has. Even though it was scary along the way, it’s been a blessing just being together. Don’t know what lies ahead but our faith in God will see us through. What’s your feeling?”

“Yes, God will see us through. Been reading the Bible and throughout it all in the past and now, if we want to be blest and helped by Him, we must love and trust in Him; he will show us the way...God loves a righteous person.”

“I didn’t know that you were reading the Bible, Ray. That is something I need to do more of. I put a small Bible in one of the boxes we brought along. This would be a good time to read it. Will check it out tomorrow.”

Ray reached into the end table on his side and brought out a very old Bible. “Why wait? Let’s read a little bit now?”

Ray went to the New Testament and began reading out loud from the book of Matthew. He read the part about how Jesus helped the blind man and that helped them both.....

And, as he read, Maria felt a calmness that began in her brain and then moved slowly to the rest of her body...It was a good feeling—one that she felt comfortable with—one that was always a blessing.

All three rested peacefully that night and it wasn’t until eight in the morning when Ray woke up with a jolt!

Chapter Nineteen: Waking to a Surprise..

There was a knock on their door around eight the next morning. It jolted Ray and he looked at the small alarm near the bed and it confirmed the time. Maria awoke groggy and asked, “Someone at our door? Who could it be at this time of morning and at this motel?”

“Don’t know but I’ll see who it is.” Ray put on his robe and slippers and cautiously walked to the door.

He could see through the peep hole that it was a man. The man looked around 40 and with him was a woman about his age and a little girl. The man looked afraid and appeared to be shaking.

Ray slowly opened the door, only so he could see the man.

“Yes, can I help you?”

“I sure hope so! My wife, and I and my daughter I are heading toward California but have little money, no Card and no place to stay. The manager let us stay in the lobby last night but said that we would have to leave today. He mentioned that he thought you and your family were on your way to California. Is there any way we could go with you? Our car broke down 10 miles from here and we are desperate to get there! We were told it is a safe place for Christians.”

Ray gave a puzzled look, looked back at Maria who was listening and gave a questioning look. “Let me talk with my wife and I’ll get back with you, later...”

“Great! Thank you....”

Ray closed the door and walked over to a very sleep and anxious Maria.

“Well, you heard. What do you think? That would be three more people in the car and three more people to feed. We have money but it is dwindling, isn’t it?”

“Yes, the money is going but I think we could do it, if we’re very careful. And, the Debit Card I have might come in handy, once we get there... What was your impression of him? Did he seem a decent man? What about the woman a little girl?”

“He seemed to be alright; didn’t look much at the wife and girl but they all seemed to be alright; just tired and scared. They look a lot like us...looking for help and a safe place to stay.. We need to leave at least two hours from now and we’ll have to make some arrangements for their luggage and seating in the car. It will be tight but I think we can do it.”

“You seem alright with it, so go ahead and tell him it’s alright and that we’ll meet them in the lobby around 10.”

“Will do. I think we’re doing the right thing. If it were you and me and Jeremy needing help, I would hope someone would help us, too. After all, look how Father helped us with our needs for this trip. He went out of his way and probably gave us more than he should...”

So, Maria and Ray got their things ready and Jeremy did what he could to help, too. They met with the other family in the lobby around ten and took time first to get to know each other..

They were the Cramer Family and they were from Ohio. John, Alicia and little Susan. John worked with a telephone company, Alicia was a homemaker and Susan was a student at Fairmont Elementary...

After talking for awhile, Ray asked them all to get into the car. The men and Jeremy sat in the front, while the women and the girl sat in the back. Conversation was strained for awhile but soon, they began opening up to each other...Most of the talking was about the Card and families on the run and how corrupt everything had become--with greed and selfishness, everywhere.

It seemed that The Card was demoralizing and destroying everyone who came in contact with it. To Ray, it seemed a lot like a deadly virus—at first attacking and leaving one feeling nauseous and sick and then settling inside the body and brain and turning ordinary, decent people into zombies, who do anything and everything to hold on to The Card.

“We didn’t see it coming, did you?” Alicia seemed to be the talker of the family and she was nervous about what was going on in the world.

Maria replied, “Do you mean the Card or the changing of our government?”

“Both! I guess like some, we had become so used to cash and debit cards that we weren’t prepared for the Card and the government changing and expecting so much!”

Maria decided to open up...“Well, I’ve been housebound for a long time but I know what’s been going on and for awhile it seemed like the Card would be alright—that it would help so many—especially the poor—but then the government took over and got greedy and well, you know the rest of the story...”

John added, “Yes, we’re all examples of how it is affecting our lives and families. No one should lose a home, one’s livelihood, and running for their lives! Why, everywhere you go, there are police squads, inspections....It has gone beyond ridiculous....! It seems that there is no place safe to go...No place to hide!”

Alicia saw that John was getting emotional and jumped in, “John, these kind people know what we’re talking about. We’re all in the same boat but maybe in California we can find some peace...We’ve been hearing some good things about The Caves and Christians being safe...”

John backed off and said, “I’m sorry. Didn’t mean to talk so much. Just worried about my family and what will become of us. We are all in the same predicament and my family is

grateful for your help. No one else would help us; so we thank you so much for allowing us to come along.....”

“Not to worry.” Ray tried to do what he could to calm him down. “We, too, are hoping that California will provide a place of safety and refuge.”

Four hours later, they pulled into a small restaurant, looking for some food and rest from driving... They all got out and stretched their legs and then walked toward the restaurant door. Before walking in, they read a large sign in the front window which said, “NO CASH ALLOWED! ONLY THE CARD!”

“Well, that takes care of that! Let’s go back to the car and find another!”

Ray was ticked off and the others were just plain tired, depressed and just wanted a place to relax and feel calm..

Ray sensed their down feelings and said, “Come on folks! This is not the only diner in town!”

So, back to the car they all went.

About 10 miles down the road they saw a bunch of people on motorcycles and they were all attired in leather outfits and looked like they just stepped out of “Mad Max.” They were off on the side of the road and seemed to be in a heated discussion with one another.

As Ray, Maria and their passengers passed them by, the leader of the motorcycle gang gave a signal with his hand to follow their car.

As the gang sped closer to them, they began screaming at them...”Get off the road and get out of our way!”

Just when it looked like trouble was here to stay, something wonderful happened....

Chapter 20—Sometimes There’s God—So Quickly!

The motorcycle gang quickly surrounded the car with their bikes—some in front, some behind and a few on Ray’s driver side. They were making obscene gestures and some had guns and began flaying them about, as if they were lassos, ready to reach out and pull down... To anyone watching, it must have looked like a scene from Mad Max.

Ray was feeling boxed in and anxiety leapt from his heart to his throat. He never liked being boxed in, especially when driving. He began to perspire and was anxiously thinking of what to do next.

He slowed down, hoping to gain some control of the situation but it didn't seem to do any good. The bikers on all sides were closing in on him and the situation was looking bad. The children in the car were screaming with excitement that was quickly turning to fear. The motorcycle gang began aiming their guns at the tires. One shot was fired but luckily it hit the pavement.

But, just when it looked like the bikers were going to win, something miraculous happened.

Up ahead, about mile down the road, sat four police patrol cars, with about twenty policemen waiting outside of their cars, with guns in their hands, ready and prepared for "trouble."

As soon as the bikers saw the blockade, they slowed down, pulled away from the car and eased their bikes to the side of the road. Once there, they began a U-turn, and then retreating in the opposite direction. But not leaving without a display of loud and profane words and gestures.

Once Ray saw the police blockade he drew a sigh of relief and anticipation. As he looked in his rear view mirror, he saw that the bikers were now driving in the opposite direction and he felt a joy he had not felt since that Christmas in 1984 when he and his then wife celebrated their first year of marriage....It was a feeling of happiness and complete joy!

Ray pulled over to the side of the blockade and got out to speak with one of the police officers. He brought out his license and one of the police officers wrote down the number. He noticed this time, that the officer was more adamant about everyone in the car getting a Card or newly implemented, implant. The policeman's words were direct and bold, "Mr., be sure to have your entire family implanted with the Chip or have a Card by the end of this month! I have your license number and I will be checking on you...Fines, jail time and jail time will be given to anyone not having one! Do I make myself clear?!" He spoke with animosity and malice and Ray knew that if he ever ran across this police officer again and didn't have The Card, his life and those around him, would be over.

"Yes, officer! We have plans on taking care of this as soon as we reach our destination—which should be in a day or two. Thank you for your help!"

As soon as the policeman gave the "High Sign" to leave, Ray pulled away from the blockade and steadily but with resolve, left the area. "We must reach California by tomorrow," he thought. The police were becoming more adamant about the darn Chip! And the policeman who talked with him just then, was someone he didn't want to meet again, ever! He saw the Snake and Skull tattoos on his neck and hands and that made his skin crawl!...And, he could tell by the man's eyes that he wanted to cause him and his family, harm! Yes, they had to reach California, tomorrow!

Lions and Tigers and Bears, Oh My!

Ray decided to drive through the night; hoping against all hope that they would be in California by daybreak, no later than noon. Around two in the morning they stopped at an old run down motel and wearily crept into a one-bedroom unit. There were two large sofas and a large queen-size bed, so there was just enough room for everyone. The women took the bed and the men and children slept on the sofas. It was uncomfortable for the men and children but because of the stress and long hours of driving, everyone feel asleep within minutes..

Daylight dawned around seven in the morning and Maria was the first to awake. She carefully and quietly went to the small coffee maker in the corner of the small living room and made some coffee. Minutes later Ray yawned, walked over and asked, "Enough coffee for me, too?"

"Have enough here for you and me and after we're done, will make another pot for the rest. Poor dear, you look tired. All that driving. Why don't you let me drive for awhile? We're almost there; I looked at the map. Just 60 more miles to go. What do you think? And, my nerves have been much better these last couple of days. In fact, I'm surprise at how calm I've been under such awful circumstances."

"Maria, I appreciate the offer and I know you would do well, but there could be some rough driving ahead, with more police and I want to make sure we get past them, so we can reach our destination...And, I don't want you getting nervous; you've been doing so well these past few days....You understand, don't you?"

"Alright. I guess you're right. My driving skills are rusty and it's probably better and safer if you drive....Do you think we'll be at the Cave location by noon?"

"Yes, if all goes well we should be there no later than one or two. Then, we need to find out if there is room for all of us--especially with the extra family we're bringing...Why don't you get dressed and I'll make more coffee for the rest."

"Thanks, Ray. That will help a lot."

Ray opened the small coffee packet and then filled the carafe with water...Within minutes another small pitcher of coffee was made. The aroma of the coffee soon had everyone else up and moving...There was scrambling and rushing toward the bathroom, with the women winning over the men and children...

Around nine everyone returned to the car, got in and began what they hoped would be the last trek of their journey.

Driving through California was interesting. They saw cactus, beautiful flowers and buildings of all shapes and sizes. They also saw many underground homes—with just a small part of the house peaking from the top of the ground. Maria had heard of such dwellings, but it was eerie to see them up close. It was dry and hot, like most California days, so the car air-conditioning in the car helped with its quiet coolness.

Around 11, they approached what looked like a large cave gateway and beyond that, what looked like a passage way that lead to small cave-like dwellings.

There were no police but there were teenagers dressed in uniforms that proudly displayed the words—“New Breed” on bright red badges.

What happened next came straight out of George Orwell’s, “1984.”

Chapter 23: Welcome to New Breed!

Ray pulled up to the old but ornate gateway and pushed the lever to lower his window.

“Good morning! I’m Ray Summerhill and this is my family and friends, we’re from Ohio and we would like to settle in to our Cave quarters. Father Mulligan, from Ohio said that there might be some room for us? Could you check to see?”

As if not hearing what Ray said, the teenage boy replied, “Welcome to New Breeds! We are happy that you are here! Please take these cards and fill them out at our Welcome Center. It is on the left, just a mile down the road. You can’t miss it and it will not miss you!”

He laughed and smiled as he talked but he looked and acted like a robot—with glassy eyes and jerky movements. But, he was friendly and that meant something to Ray and everyone in the car. They had seen so much negativity and darkness; so this jerky person, was a change for the better. Ray noticed that the boy’s name was Stan Waters. A name to remember, he thought.

“Thanks. We’ll drive on down and register in.”

“Well, even though he acted like something out of “I Robot,” at least we’re making progress” Ray smirked and looked back at Maria. She smiled and said, “Here we go!”

They pulled up to the Welcome Center, walked in and were greeted by a young woman named Tonya who immediately told them all to go to Conference Room #10 and fill out some paper work.

It took a good hour to fill out the many forms given to them and by that time, everyone was tired and hungry. As if sensing the tiredness and hunger, Tonya came back in and collected the paperwork and announced:

“There is a cafeteria on the bottom floor of this building and the food is cheap but good, if you’re looking for something tasty to eat, they’ve got it!”

Ray replied, “Yes!” As if in agreement with Ray, they all nodded their heads in acceptance and down to the cafeteria they went..

As they walked down to the cafeteria, Maria said, “Glad we got that done; and I hope they have plenty of food. We are all hungry!”

There were already 20 people in line, so they had to wait patiently behind others who were just as hungry.

About ten minutes later they began picking up the silverware and looking over the food selections. Ray got some ham, potatoes and a desert, while Maria got a chef salad and baked potato. The rest got hamburgers, fries, several cakes and pies. Ray paid for everything; for he knew his new passengers were low on cash.

While the others finished their eating, Ray went back upstairs to see if anything else needed to be done and to ask “good old” Stan if any progress had been made on finding them a place to live....

Stan was at his station, talking with another young man. They were having a lively discussion about time off and Ray didn’t want to interrupt...But, he decided to jump in....

“Stan, sorry to bother you but were you able to find out anything sent from Father Mulligan?” Stan appeared to be happy to help but there was one stipulation...

“Yes, I just finished talking with Father Mulligan and yes, we do have a cave for you and your friends....However, space is limited and I’m afraid, the family that came with you will have to live with you. This will be cramped but at least you all will be safe and together...”

Ray was disappointed. He wanted some privacy with Maria and Jeremy. But, they had come all this way; and there was no going back, no looking for another place to stay. It would just have to do!

“No problem. Father Mulligan told us that it might be hard to find large living quarters. So, when can we see our cave dwelling?”

“You can see it probably tomorrow. But first, everyone will have to go to the medical center and get a complete physical check-up. Just a preliminary precaution. We’ve had some serious health concerns with some of the people living here and we have to do what we can to make sure that disease does not spread. You understand? And, living in caves is not the healthiest; so inoculations will also be necessary for everyone. The medical center is just two miles down the road on the left. You can’t miss it and they will have your names and tell you exactly what to do, and what is necessary. Do you understand?”

Ray was tired and getting “ticked off” but he knew that there would be some health matters to be taken care of, so they might as well get going, he thought.

The young man continued, “And, after your check-ups, there will be someone who will take you to the New Breed Store and help you with items you will need for cave dwellings.....kerosene lamps, blankets, some basic furniture, sleeping cots, food and maybe some clothing...I assume you brought some things with you from The Mission?”

“Yes my wife and I and our son have what we need but our other family may need a few things more. They left their home in a hurry and have very few necessities with them.”

“Not to worry. There is plenty for everyone.” His smile was getting on Ray’s nerves. Maybe it was the heat, maybe he was just tired but maybe there was something “goofy” going on behind that smile...

“Thank you again for your help. Will round everyone up and then head to the medical center. Much appreciated!”

Ray went downstairs to the lunch room and announced to everyone what needed to be done.

“Heads up everyone! Just found out from Friendly Stan upstairs that we all have to go to the medical center—just down the road and have some check-ups. Everyone!”

Everyone groaned but Ray continued...

“Then, after that is done, we need to stop off at the New Breed Store and get a few things for the cave. Folks, you need to make a list of some things you will need; especially since you didn’t bring much with you....Also, there is not space enough for your family to have a separate place of your own, so you will need to live with us...”

John and Alicia looked at each other, smiled and then John replied, “No problem; we are easy people to get along with. We will just keep to ourselves and give you as much privacy as you want...”

“Thank you for understanding and we, too, will also respect your privacy and do what we can to make it nice for your family. I’m sure, if we all cooperate, it will go well. And, this will hopefully be a temporary situation. Little Susan looked perturbed but in her eyes one could see that she was looking forward to the “adventure.”

So, off they trekked to the medical center. It took awhile to get there; for there were several inspection spots along the way. It seemed that the entire center and those working there were scrupulous in checking and rechecking everyone and every thing that traveled in and out of the center. The women were ushered into their special area, while the men were taken to their special section. Everyone was given shots, some medication, and were examined from top to bottom. They were also instructed on how to care for themselves while living in the caves.

What everyone in the group found odd was the inspection and care of the feet. The toes were carefully checked and a quick, sharp prick of a needle was administered on the side of everyone’s left foot. When Ray asked why that was necessary he was simply told that it was just part of the health exam....It didn’t hurt much and it was free, like everything else, so it didn’t seem to matter....

Bottled water and vitamins were also distributed. After the examinations were completed, they had to admit that they felt a lot like cattle, cattle that had been poked and prodded. But, they noticed that they did feel better prepared for the cave dwelling experience, an experience that would be coming the following day.

Outside, before getting back into the car, Ray remarked, “Glad that’s over and I suppose everyone else is, too!”

“Wow, that was something!” Everyone was glad the process was over.. John continued, ‘Haven’t gone through anything like that since my military days!’”

After piling into the car once again, they drove down to the maintenance store. There was no one inside, so it looked as if it would be easy getting what they needed.

Some of the items were free while the larger items like cots and such, were not.

Ray asked the clerk about the items that were not free. “Say, it’s great that most of the items here are free but what about those that are not? We don’t have enough money for the rest; how shall we pay?”

“Not to worry. If you own a People’s Charge Card you can just charge it. If not, we’ll draw you up a new account.”

That sounded too easy but at the moment, there was nothing else to do and they needed some extra supplies. So, new accounts were created...It was good they didn’t know what was coming.

Cave Dwelling Doesn't Come Cheap

After enjoying a restful night's sleep at The New Breed Sleeping Center, Ray got up early and went to the New Breed Administration Building, with the hope that all of paper work would be ready, that everyone in his small group would be able to see their new home...That is, their new "cave dwelling."..

Ray arrived at the Administration Building a little after eight, and found to his surprise, a long line of people desiring to do the same thing.

It looked like about 25 people—mostly men—were waiting for the doors to open. Most looked happy and eager to find and obtain their new habitats. Ray was eager, too, to see the caves—what they looked like and how living in them would be.

"Imagine! Living in a cave. Just like prehistoric man!" He thought to himself. In his wildest dreams he never thought that he or anyone he knew would ever stoop so low or be so desperate, as to live in a cave. But, what choice did he or anyone these days have, but to live in such a place?

Around 8:15 the doors opened and everyone moved inside. The rooms were painted a sterile white, with red and blue banners –"New Breed: The Afterlife"—covering the borders of all the inside walls. It struck Ray as Orwellian and a bit scary but this was the only choice they had; so he waited not-so patiently for his turn.

A young woman by the name of Antoinette Beal offered him a seat and began to take information. As she talked, he was stunned with her antiseptic appearance—long brown hair, tied up in a bun with no bangs, a boring navy suit with low heels, no jewelry, except the New Breed logo pin on the left side of her sleeve. Everything was orderly and severe—much like the young woman wearing it.

"Your name and social security number?"

"Ray Summerhill and my social security number is.....404-48-0557."

"And when did you make reservations for your cave?"

"Reservations were made days ago by Father Mulligan, back in Ohio."

"One moment please."

As she checked the files, he turned his head to see how the others were doing. There was hushed chatter and most looked stressed but happy, giving out information.

“Yes, I have your file and you have been designated Cave #402. It is on the East side of New Breed and we’ll have Employee Ben Halter take you there later this morning. Please bring yourself and family members to Building #202 at one this afternoon and he will take you to your new home...Thank you for being so cooperative and Welcome to New Breed Caves!”

She seemed almost buoyant with her welcome and Ray left thinking that maybe now they would all be safe and free.

Ray went back and found Maria up and fixing coffee. The rest were still sleeping but Jeremy had just got out of bed and Maria asked if he would like something to eat.

“Naw, I’m O.K. Maybe later. Will we be going back to the restaurant for breakfast? I sure loved that burger and fries yesterday!”

“We’ll see. Right now, I’m fixing some coffee. Would you like some? How about you, Ray?”

Both replied with a resounding, “Yes!”

Ray began sharing the news about New Breed and caves...

“Thank you, dear for taking care of that! From what you’ve said, the dwellings sound good. But, like you, I’m wondering and I’m a bit fearful about the inside of them. But, I remember Father Mulligan saying that the caves have been inspected and cleared of anything harmful; so they should be alright. And, we have plenty of equipment and food to see us through. I’m just so glad that they gave us that Virtual Tour of the caves yesterday. That took away some of the anxiety about them...It was so interesting to know how caves were formed—just by soluble rock and rain! Absolutely amazing...And, how much time it takes to form a cave.....”

“It is fascinating...Been reading some pamphlets on them and it is fascinating how long it took to create them and how functional they can be...Well, when the rest get up, we need to all be at the main office by one o’clock and then we’ll see what this place is really like...Until then, I think I will check out the car and see if we need anything else before leaving.” Ray was impressed with the caves, but doubts remained in his brain. He had always been the kind of person who thought, “what can go wrong, will go wrong!”

“Thanks Ray...I’ll finish getting ready and if the rest aren’t up in about a half hour; will get them moving, too.”

Chapter 24: Cave Dwelling: What A Way to Live!

Ben Halter showed up about an hour later; eager and ready to take the new family to their cave dwelling. Ben was twenty-five going on forty and had been working at New Breed for almost five years. It made him feel good to help families in need of a place to stay.

His six foot two frame, brown hair and eyes and tanned skin made him an attractive man; a man many women found irresistible. But, Ben was the kind of man who didn't focus on his good looks but focused on helping others with their new home.

Ben knocked on their door and seconds later Maria came to the door. She was completely in love with Ray but when she saw those beautiful brown eyes, her heart skipped a beat and she blushed like a teenager.

“Hi. I'm Ben Halter, and I'm here to take your family and friends to your new home.”

“Thank you being so punctual. Let me just check and see how it's going. She closed the door and scanned the room. She saw that everyone was finishing up and would be ready soon. She yelled, “Everyone about ready?”

After a few seconds of silence she heard a resounding “Yes!” from everyone and then reopened the door bit and said, “Yes, we're almost there...”

About ten minutes they all filed out and took their seats in the small bus. The bus looked old and worn but after sitting down, they found that it was roomy and comfortable. The kids piled into the back, while the adults sat in the front and middle of the bus.

“Welcome everyone! My name is Ben Halter and I've been assigned to take you all to Cave #402. It is on the East side of the complex and it is, in my opinion, one of our nicer areas. The staff have done some cleaning and preparing for you and I've been told that you have plenty of supplies—food and such. Make sure that your lighting and food needs are ample—especially your lighting needs. Inside your cave are also some weapons, in case you need them.”

Ray spoke up, “Ben, we appreciate your help. I think we have pretty much what we need but what do you men by needing weapons? I thought that there would be no need for weapons—that it would be safe—that the caves have been inspected, checked and cleared from anything harmful?”

“Sorry, didn't mean to alarm you... Your area, as well as the other areas, have been checked and cleared for anything harmful. It's just that.....” He hesitated to go on. He acted like there was something wrong; something he was afraid to divulge.

“Ben, if there’s something we need to know, please tell us. My wife, Maria, has anxiety problems and our friends, too, have been through a lot these past few days with this “Card deal.” If there’s anything we need to know, anything at all, please tell us.”

Ben frowned, paused for a few moments, leaned forward and replied, “Well, if you promise not to tell anyone.”

“We promise. Please, what is it?”

Ben turned off a switch at the top of the bus—most likely a listening device and said, “It’s nothing to worry about but there’s been a rumor floating around—for about a week--that some of the caves are being monitored. The thing is....we—the employees—are not sure why this is going on but what’s even stranger is that some of the staff, myself included, are being monitored and some have been fired. Don’t get me wrong, this is a wonderful place to live and work but I thought you should know...Could be just extra protection for everyone here. So much going on these days, ya know?”

“Thanks Ben for sharing this with us. We don’t want to get you in trouble but we also don’t want to be surprised or do something and get ourselves or others into trouble..”

“No problem. Like I said, it’s a great place to live and work, just be aware that there might be times when you or your family might be monitored. I’m sure it’s just to help maintain good quality here. So, I wouldn’t worry too much...Besides, the plus factors here outweigh anything negative...”

It was the way Ben spoke that gave Ray pause. He just didn’t sound sure of himself but at least he was being honest and that’s what they needed now, honesty.

About a half hour later they arrived at Cave #402. The numbers were painted in red at the top of the cave and it looked strange but homey. They all got out of the bus and stood in front of their new home and just looked.

Ben was the first to speak, “I know it’s not like home, but I think you will come to like it. Come on in and take a look.”

Ben carried with him a kerosene lamp and some tools of protection.

They began to file in—first Ray, then Maria, their son and thenand his family.

Ben’s kerosene lamp gave light and direction inside the cool and dark cave. It was damp, with markings and mineral deposits everywhere. The water formations and foundations were incredibly beautiful but at the same time, ominous and foreboding. Mineral deposits marked the way and Ray could tell from pathways in the cave that more than one person had done some heavy-duty cleaning and clearing of the way. There was plenty of space for everyone but it was definitely going to take time, getting used to the structure and formation....Oh yes, a lot of time!

As the children walked through the cave, they found it to be a wonderful adventure. They were not concerned about privacy, structure or coping. They were only thinking of all the neat things they could do such as play hide and seek, seeking and finding their own special areas where they could talk and play...Yes, it would be a wonderful adventure for them!

Maria took Ray aside and said, "Ray, I don't like this. I knew it would be different and spooky but I just didn't think it would be this dark and creepy. The glow sticks and portable lanterns help but it's just too dark! I can't stand the darkness! Please, is there anything we can do about this?"

"Honey, I know this is weird. I don't particularly like it either but we just don't have any other options right now. We have plenty of kerosene lamps, flashlights and heating utensils and they've done a pretty good job of preparing it for us....And, they do have toilet and bathing facilities at the end of the cave units –just thirty feet away...So, it won't be too primitive...We'll just have to learn to share with others...And, that will be difficult for awhile...And remember, if things get better, if this Card deal dissolves like so many are hoping and planning for, then we can go back to Ohio and get your home back. This is just temporary."

Maria seemed calmed by his words but she just wasn't sure about her agoraphobia and adjusting to such a strange and awkward environment. Her old fears and anxieties were creeping back into her brain and that was making her very nervous.

Alicia heard them talking and whispered, "Maria, I agree with you! I can't see myself living here but there's just no other choice. If we go back, then we go to jail or worse. We've got to find a way to make this work. We just have to! And if we stay close to each other, we'll be alright." Maria noticed that she was shaking as she spoke. All of a sudden her fears left and she wanted to help this poor woman, a woman she knew so little of.

After the tour, they went back outside and began talking....

Ben spoke first, "Folks, I know that this is new and strange to you all but trust me, after a few days, you will find that it's not so bad and with the toilet and bath facilities at the end of the Cave Unit, you will be in good shape. And, don't forget, if there's an emergency, phone in your request at the Bath House and someone will give you immediate help. And, just to be on the safe side, keep in mind what I said earlier..."

Then Ben and the others walked back to the bus and began taking their possessions, food and such from it. It took about 20 minutes to get everything off the bus and then it was time for Ben to go...

"Take care, everyone and enjoy your stay. Remember, you're not alone! Call me anytime if you need anything!"

After Ben left, everyone began taking in their clothes, food, lights and such. The children played outside the cave and began to explore their surroundings...

“Children, stay close to our cave, at least until we find out more about it and who is around us, O.K.?”

“Sure thing! Jeremy was eager to do more—check out the areas-- but he didn’t want to upset his new mother, Maria. So, he sat down on a large rock began to san his new surroundings...

After flipping on several portable lights, the women began sorting and putting things away...The portable plastic containers they bought at the hardware store were coming in handy. Stocking food and water away was first and then unloading folding clothes in containers that were left, helped to organize and make the area look homier. They simply followed their feminine instincts on how to live and survive and soon they were feelings better about living in a cave....Giving the cave some organization and form not only made the dwelling look better but made the women feel stronger and more capable....While the women put things away, the men walked through the cave—making sure it was as safe as possible. Later, after everything was set up, the women prepared some sandwiches. Everything seemed to be falling into place—everyone, including the children, appeared to be coping well, except Maria was overwhelmed with a gut feeling that something was terribly wrong.....

Chapter 25: We’re Not In Kansas Anymore!

Later, Maria’s anxiety returned and with a vengeance! Those old feelings of fear and being closed in were back and suffocating her from top to bottom. She knew that those old feelings of fear might return but she had no idea that they would come back so strong! She didn’t want to bother Ray; he was working so hard to make it work for her, Jeremy and the other family. No, she just couldn’t bother him with her emotions right now but what to do?

She felt that if she could just make it through the next couple of days, she would be alright.

Evening was just hours away and Maria was fearful of the darkness and what might happen. Ray sensed her anxiety and after dinner took her to their private area in the cave and in hushed tones, talked with her.

“Maria, I know you’re hurting; and that’s normal. Everyone here is struggling, including me. This is all new and frightening. What can I do to help? This is not going to be easy

for any of us but I want you to know that you're not alone. I'm here and everyone else here is feeling a lot like you and me. If there were somewhere else to go, I would leave in a heartbeat. But, for right now, this is the best we can do. Tell me, dear, what can I do to help you?"

Maria didn't respond right away; she was choked up with emotion. She never had anyone love her like Ray. He was always putting her first above everyone, including himself..

"Ray, I didn't want to bother you but yes, I am frightened out of my mind! I just don't want to be here! I don't think I can handle this! The darkness of this place is just too much! Can you just hold me for awhile? Maybe that will help."

Without answering, he pulled her close, hugged her and then kissed her gently on her neck.

"Maria, until I die—and way beyond that—I will always love you and do what I can to make you happy. In fact, neither one of us will die, unless we die together. And, believe me, with God's help we won't be dying for a long time...Does that sound alright with you?"

"Yes, oh yes, that would be perfect...We don't go, unless we go together...Just keep holding me for awhile and I know I'll feel better."

Minutes later, they parted a bit, looked at each other and smiled. From that moment on, Maria knew that she wouldn't enjoy her stay here but she would adjust and do what she could to help out...God and Ray would see her through...

Later, while Maria and the other woman were talking, they both broke down and began crying. Minutes later, Maria cried out, "Time for you children to go to bed—time to get all cuddly and warm in your cots. And, not to worry, we'll keep on one of the lanterns most of the night, so it won't be completely dark in here."

There was some resistance, but the children soon gave in, sensing that they would not get their way... They were tired from the day's events and slowly but surely make their way to their cots. After getting inside their cots, they played with their small flashlights, making all kinds of strange light patterns against the cave. Feeling more comfortable and happy in the cave, they soon fell asleep.

Ray, Maria, John and Alicia talked for awhile and then quietly went to their own area and eventually to their cots. The other family was habitating about thirty feet from Maria and Ray's area and soon they were in their cots and comfortable.

Maria felt happy and relieved that they had such nice people with them, and so close at hand. Knowing that they were decent and helpful, took away some of the fear and anxiety.

No, she would stay with Ray, Jeremy and this nice family and be as happy as one could be in such a place... Yes, it would have to do for now and maybe later, once this fascination and devotion to the “Card” was over, go back to a better life, to the home she loved so much with freedoms she once had, but never enjoyed... If they ever went back home, she resolved that she would never take freedom of any sort for granted again!

Several hours later, Ray and Maria prepared for sleep. Maria pulled out some nightwear for them both, put on her night clothes and then checked on the children. They were fast asleep and she smiled when she saw their innocent and happy faces. Life was so different now, except for the children, living in a cave was proving to be a wonderful adventure for them....

After crawling inside their small cots, Maria and Ray talked about the day’s events and what they might do tomorrow and then fell asleep. The small lantern sat upright by Maria and stayed on all night, giving comfort and warmth to them both..

Morning light crept unnoticed inside the cave; like a creature looking for protection and comfort, its illumination was quiet and lovely. Everyone was sleeping soundly until.....

Chapter Twenty-Seven: I Thought We Were Alone...

An unexpected and uninvited guest crept slowly and cautiously inside their cave. This guest was not interested in hurting anyone; but looking only for food and a place to hide out..

Ed Morrow was twenty years old and was living in an older section of New Breed; about half a mile away from Maria and Ray’s cave. He had been staying with his family but couldn’t get along with them, so he was searching for shelter and food. He had no money, no clothes except for what was on his back and a pair of worn out shoes that had seen better days. He didn’t want to admit to it but he looked and felt like a bum from the old but not forgotten, 20th century.

Food was his top priority; for he had not eaten in three days. He had been to ten caves and everyone had turned him away or threatened to call the authorities. He literally had no place to go; no one to turn to. His Christian beliefs annihilated him from his family and friends and because of his negative and strange behavior, everyone who came in contact with him, developed a jaundiced and fearful view of him.

But, Ed possessed two secrets—and those secrets would keep him alive and safe and maybe help a few others along the way.... Yes, those secrets would keep him going; at least for awhile..

He found out from a buddy not long ago that New Breed and everyone in it were being monitored and were being monitored with microchips that were being inserted into the left leg of everyone entering the camp. If anyone attempted to leave the camp, he or she would find it to be impossible; for the chip had inside of it--private and personal information about the one wearing it...The numbers were exclusive for each member because the camp had special plans for each member and some of those plans were deadly and dark. Anyone fleeing the camp would be given away by the microchip. It would make a loud noise and soon that person or persons would be brought back and chastised.

Ed also found out from another friend about a secret place in the California Mountains where Christians were hiding out and living without the need or want of the Microchip. But, that information he would not divulge to just anyone! At least, not until he felt he could trust someone.....After all, who could you trust on this complex?

He quietly made his way through Maria and Ray's cave and quickly came across a large package, filled with snacks, bread and pop. Carefully he opened the package, so as not to waken anyone and began taking out some chips, pop, peanut butter and bread. He put those treasured items inside his jacket and began to leave.

"Not so fast!" Ray stood tall and foreboding just 8 feet away, had heard him rummaging through the food and was not about to let him off the hook.

Ed said nothing, but began running...

Groggy with sleep, Ray began to chase Ed. In seconds he caught up with him, shoved the packages to the ground and pulled Ed's hands behind him, as if to cuff him. With all the noise and confusion, soon everyone was wide-eyed and wanting to know what was going on.

"Please, let me go! I am starving! I have had nothing to eat for days and I didn't take that much! Please, I just want some food!"

"First of all, if you're going to take our food, give us your name!"

Embarrassed by being caught and needing help he replied, "My name is Ed, just Ed....I used to live in my parents cave, about a mile from here, but they kicked me out...They didn't want to hear about my Christian beliefs; they think I've become a fanatic. They're just like everyone else here—they'll say or do anything to get what they want here. Maybe you're like that, too."

"Not so fast, friend! You shouldn't make judgments about others...Remember Christ warned us not to do that. All of us here—the six of us—believe in Christ. If someone needs something, as a Christian, we are to share. You want food. That's fine...Let us all get dressed first and then we will all have some breakfast together. Maybe then you can tell us more about yourself and we can tell you who we are!"

Ed smiled sheepishly and replied, “That’s more than fair and I’m sorry that I disturbed all of you.”

By now, everyone in was up and listening intently to the conversation.. And, they were afraid. After all, who was this person coming into their new home and stealing?

“Now, go outside for awhile and let us get dressed and then we’ll all have some breakfast. O.K.?”

Ed didn’t reply but went outside, head bowed and totally embarrassed..

About a half hour later, he peaked in and noticed that everyone was dressed and the women were preparing breakfast. He noticed that they were laying out some muffins, some slices of bread and bringing out some jam and peanut butter to go with it. Coffee was brewing on a small heating device and paper cups were being filled with the hot fluid.

When everything was ready, Maria said, “Come everyone, let’s sit in a circle here and have something to eat.”

The women passed around paper plates of the prepared food and then served the coffee..

Ed ate voraciously and without asking, was given more. Maria saw how hungry he was and gave him an extra portion of everything. He drank the coffee as if it were the first cup of coffee he ever had..

Little was said during the meal and after eating, Ed followed the men outside, while the women did some clean up and preparing for the day...

Outside the cave, the men talked...

Jeremy had something on his mind and so he summoned the courage to talk with ED. “Ed, you are a lot like me. My family was greedy and left me all alone. If it weren’t for Maria and Ray, here, I don’t know what would have happened to me. But, they took me in and here I am! What happened with you?”

At first Ed didn’t want to say anything to anyone, much less this Jeremy person. He never felt comfortable talking with anyone. “Why start now,” he thought? and, “What business was it of this punk kid to ask such a question of him?”

After thinking it over he replied, “My so-called Christian Mom and Dad when they first arrived here said all the right things—just to get in and as soon as they were allowed in, it was like a switch in their heads went on and they began acting like jerks—real jerks! They stopped praying and reading the Bible and thought it was funny that I wanted

to...They wouldn't let me do anything Christian—not even pray...They are, as Jesus said, hypocrites! So, I left! And, here I am..."

"Wow, that is bad news! Sounds a lot like me...Took me awhile to trust anyone but once I got to know Maria and Ray, I knew that I had found two that believed in Jesus and cared about me!"

"Yes, I can see that you and everyone in your cave are the genuine article. It must be nice to be around 'real Christians!'"

"Yes, it is. Maybe you could stay with us?" Jeremy was beginning to understand Ed and liking his honesty.

Ed didn't answer but the thought of staying with these people was going through his mind. But, these people were struggling, too. Just trying to make it.. Surely they wouldn't have room for him.

Ray walked over to Ed and Jeremy and spoke to Ed, "Ed, I don't know you; no one here knows you and because of that, we have to be careful about letting you into our lives. It's no secret that everything around us is changing, untrustworthy, unholy, selfish and ungodly. But, there are times, such as this, where a Christian has to make a decision—to trust and help or move on..."

With his head down, Ed was feeling down. Once again, he may be rejected; it had happened many times before... So, with his head down he turned away from Ray and the others and began to walk away...

Ray looked back at Maria and the others and at first, received doubtful looks from everyone. Then, Ray gave a more questioning look to those behind him and everyone smiled back, as if to say..."Go ahead, tell him he can stay."

Ray yelled out, "Ed, if you want to stay with us, you are welcome to do so. We're a goofy kind of group but we are supportive and we care about those in need."

Ed slowly turned around and faced them all. He was speechless for a few minutes and then with tears in his eyes replied, "Thank you! Thank you, all! You won't be sorry. I will pull my fair share of work—and I won't be any bother...No Siree....I won't be any bother!"

After speaking, everyone knew from that moment on, things would work out. They didn't know how, but they just knew it would work.

Space was made for Ed about 30 feet beyond the new people. Everyone pitched in and cleaned the area and shared what they had; and soon his space in the cave was ready for him. The new people gave him an extra cot and everyone shared what they had of food, clothing and lights.

Chapter Twenty-Eight: Seven is One Big Happy Family!

Ed was true to his word and kept his part of the bargain. He did more than his fair share. In fact, he helped with morning chores, making the breakfast, cleaning up in the morning and making sure that the children were watched and taken care of. Maria confided in Ray one morning on how helpful Ed was with the children.

“Ray, Ed is such a blessing! He has been helping me the laundry and making breakfast and I can’t believe how helpful he’s been with the children. Why, he’s always making sure that they don’t go far away and he’s calling them in for lunch and dinner and watchful of who they play with.....He’s just a joy and a blessing!”

“Yes, I’ve noticed his behavior, too. In fact, I think maybe he’s doing too much. He’s always around you, Maria and that bothers me a bit. I think maybe he’s becoming too attached to you. Has he in anyway made any advances toward you? I’ve seen how he looks at you, so long and hard.”

“Why Ray.....you’re jealous! I’ve never seen that trait in you!”

“No, I’m not jealous but I am concerned. He probably misses having his own family and that might make him think and act differently from the rest of us. But, as long as you feel comfortable and safe around him, he can stay....”

“Ray, he’s fine...I haven’t felt anything threatening or odd with him....If there were anything strange or goofy going on with him, I would know it. Remember, that is why I became housebound—fearful of people and situations. Back then, in the beginning, my fears would immediately kick in if anything or anyone threatened me. .No, it’s alright. But, like you, I think he just misses his family and being loved.....”

Something else was bothering Maria and she was hesitant to bring it up. After all they had only been at the Camp for only a month but something was pricking her conscience....So, she decided to share her thoughts with Ray...

“Ray, I need to talk with you about something....Maybe you’ve noticed it, maybe not. Alicia said that she’s noticed something very strange...and I’ve noticed it, too several times....that before I enter or leave a store, the clerks seem to know it in advance and seconds later, call out my Code Number. I don’t know how they would know this. We have an I.D card but I and others only show it at the hospital and laundry room. They said when we first got here that the I.D. card wasn’t needed in the store or anywhere else on

this base—because most everything is free. Seems odd doesn't it? And much of the time I feel that we're being watched. Maybe I'm being paranoid and just remembering what Ben said at the beginning about people being monitored. With hundreds of people living here, how could these people remember names and numbers so quickly and in advance? Do you suppose that Ben may have been right about the monitoring?"

"I don't know what's going on. I didn't feel that way when we first arrived but I've been feeling it more and more and yes it is beginning to be a concern."

Maria looked relieved. "You've been feeling this, too! The people running this camp are probably just being cautious. But, as you just mentioned, it's beginning to feel more like....like a jail!"

Chapter Twenty-Nine: Ed and Secrets

Maria and Ray set aside their fears; hoping that in the end, their anxieties would prove wrong. And besides, they did feel safe at the complex. So, the days went by and it seemed like the whole "spy" thing was just a figment of their imagination. In fact, those young people running the complex seemed more affable and less hyper about their comings and goings. In fact, many were acting like they didn't have a clue as to "who was who?"

That is until two months later, around Halloween, when Maria, Ray and some of the others in their family group noticed something out of kilter; something slightly ajar..

It all started when Maria was shopping at the Food Pantry and she noticed that the man in the Produce Section said something that only a doctor would know about her. Very odd, indeed, she thought. As she was picking out and scanning in some potatoes for the evening meal he faced her and said, "Good choice! That should help bring up your potassium level and help with your upcoming Dr appointment."

"How could he possibly know about my potassium needs and my Dr. appointment?" His words and demeanor totally caught her off guard and brought chills to her body—beginning at her neck and then traveling all the way down to her spine. "This was just too strange," she thought. She would have to mention this to Ray.

As soon as Ray got back from his daily group chores with some of the men on the complex and had time to rest a bit, Maria brought up the subject.

She whispered, "Ray, we've got to leave here! The oddest thing happened in the store today..."

After she told him of the event, he reluctantly agreed that they should form a plan to leave. He then mentioned a disturbing talk he had with Ed. Ed, in secrecy, told him that he had heard of microchips being placed in the heels of newcomers and the sick plans the Drs and staff had in store for those living on the base. Ed also said that he heard from a reliable source that some of the Drs were using torture, experiments and sometimes murder, and the scary thing about it all was no one knew why or how they were getting by with it!

As Ray continued talking, Maria noticed that he was becoming agitated and somewhat paranoid. Ray had always been in control but this was totally out of character for him. He was showing great fear.

Ray continued, “Maria, don’t discuss this with anyone except maybe, Alicia. I’m going to see if we can leave here a.s.a.p. Ed is working on a plan to get us all out of here. He is going to fake a mental illness at the hospital late on Friday and will ask for his family---us---to come to the hospital.”

“Ed has done some acting and said that he can fake any kind of mental illness and that his fake acting will help us get a van....Once we are in the van, we’ll be able to leave and with God on our side and some luck, will get past the two guard posts leading out of here. Then, it’s only 30 miles to the Safe Haven—one of the few places left for Christians. Ed knows all about it. Found out about it at the cafeteria two weeks ago. He overheard some guards talking about it. They were making fun of this place --saying it was for ‘wimps’—Christian wimps—who can’t handle the real world and needing to be coddled.”

“Maria, this may be the only safe way out of here because they would have to transport Ed to a mental facility and we would have to go with him. I’ve noticed, too, that this place doesn’t like dealing with anyone who is mentally off. They act as if they don’t know how to handle anyone who is different, who has problems, who don’t act like them..”

“Yes, I’ve noticed that, too! Whenever I go to the hospital for medication for my anxiety, they always look at my chart and see that I’m agoraphobic and almost everyone laughs when they read that word!”

“Sounds good, Ray and I think we can trust Ed. He’s been so helpful—even from Day One. Just let me know what you want me and Alicia to do. I’ll try to keep it low key with her. Her anxiety level is quite high and we don’t need her to go ballistic on us, now!”

“Good! Right now we must be careful what we say and do. We don’t want to say or do anything that might tip off anyone to our activities. At this point, do not trust anyone! What you can do, is start packing up a few things we will need for the trip—extra food, some blankets, items for protection and the other card we have from Ohio that our good buddy, Father Mulligan gave us. That may come in handy.....”

“Yes, I will do that; in fact, weeks ago I packed up some things in case an emergency came up...Guess I was ahead on that one...”

“I knew I can count on you, Maria. I knew that the first time I laid eyes on you.... Let’s stay close to God and each other and we’ll make it out of here alive and well!”

Chapter Thirty: Time to Go!

Several days went by and it seemed to Ray that time had slowed down to a ‘snail’s pace.’ As each hour went by, Ray felt the urgency to leave..

It was on a Wednesday, three days later, when Ray knew that it was time to go. He talked with Ed and John later in the morning and they came to the conclusion that D-Day would be the following day, around midnight.

That same morning he talked with Maria. “Maria, finish packing what we need to take. We’re leaving tomorrow night. Ed thinks Thursday evening will be a good time to leave because the guard he knows best—Frank Westerville—will be on post and is the one most easily intimidated. He is single and Ed is going to promise to bring him a woman from the base. We are going to have to knock him out with some sedatives later during the t rip. You still have some sleeping pills, don’t you from Ohio?”

“Yes, I’ve got about 10 of them left. Actually, two sedatives with alcohol will put him out...I don’t like doing that Ray to anyone but if that’s what it takes to get out of here, then so be it!”

“Good! Then, I will tell Ed to continue with the plan and come early Thursday evening, he will begin acting crazy at the hospital—screaming that he wants someone to help him with his problems....He will then demand one of the nurses to bring us to the hospital and from there we will be taken to the guard post and proceed on the psychiatric unit—30 miles away....Of course, we won’t be going in that direction and that is where we will need to drug the driver and then take over....So, we will need the medication and some booze.”

Maria chimed, “The booze I’ll leave up to you—the medication, I will have ready...Let’s do it!”

Chapter Thirty-One: Psychiatric Ward....Here We Come!

The hours ticked by slowly early Thursday and it felt like the end of the day would never come...It was almost like being in elementary school again and watching the big clock on the wall slowly tick-tock time away.....

But, Thursday evening came and with it, plans for leaving...Failure were not an option but the outcome, no one knew..

It was late in the afternoon and Ed was eating in the Main Cafeteria. It was time for the plan to begin...He began complaining about the food and shouting that everyone was staring at him and wanted him dead. His shouting became louder and soon his behavior couldn't be ignored. Two hefty maintenance men came, lifted him from his chair and escorted him to the hospital...

"Leave me alone! There's nothing wrong with me! Leave me be!" He kept shouting all the way to the hospital; the guards were getting tired of the yelling and one of them hit him square in the face.

"This is not part of the plan," Ed groaned inside...By the time they arrived at the hospital, Ed was bruised and frightened.

"My family! Call my family! I want to see them..I want them here! Call Maria and Ray Summerhill and tell them I want out of this place!"

The burly men shoved him into a lonely corner of the hospital hallway and it was a half hour before anyone came to help.

Finally, a nurse came over and asked, "What is your name, sir and why are you here? The men who brought you over said that you were causing a disturbance in the cafeteria."

My name is Ed and I want to see my family! They are the only ones who care about me. Please! Let them know I need help!"

"Now, Ed...No one wants to hurt you...and no one wants you dead...I'm going to give you a sedative and then I'll see about calling your family...It may take awhile before they're here, so try and relax..."

Ed didn't answer and a few minutes later the nurse gave him an injection in his arm and went to see if she could find some additional help. She was tired of such individuals. It seemed these emotional types were showing up way too often....What a pain they were!

The shot put him out and in seconds he was asleep.

When he woke up an hour later, Maria and everyone...was there at his side....The nurse took them aside and whispered, "He needs professional help and I'm afraid he will have

to be taken to our other clinic. The guard at Post #21 will take Ed and anyone else who wants to go with him.....He may have to stay there for a couple of days for observation and evaluation. Do you all want to go?"

Ray answered for all of them, "Yes, we do because Ed is a part of our family and we want to help him, if we can..."

"Good. I will call and have a driver take you to Post #21. He will then drive everyone there. There will be provisions for food, staying overnight and there are several nice guest rooms where you all can stay until Ed is feeling better. You must know, though, that if his condition is critical, he may have to stay there permanently." Nurse Wilma Goodwill was competent but without much compassion. She had been around too many demanding patients and she just wanted someone like Ed out of the way...

"I hope his condition will not be critical but we'll cross that bridge when we come to it." Ray's anxiety was rising. He just wanted to get on with it and get the "heck out of Dodge!"

"When do you think we can get Ed moved? We're all concerned but we're also getting very tired."

"I'll call now and it shouldn't take long to get things going..."

"Great! Thank you again....Nurse?....."

"I'm sorry. My name is Wilma.....Goodwill and I'll keep in touch with you on how it goes."

About 40 minutes later Wilma returned and said that Steve, the driver, was ready to take them to their destination.

She brought out Ed, who was still groggy, slow and staggering in his walk and moaning softly under his breath...."Need Maria, need Ray....Need my family! Want out of here!" He didn't appear to be acting and seemed totally lost...

Nurse Wilma gently transferred him into a wheelchair and walking together, they all took the elevator down to the main entrance, where Ed was carefully put into the front seat of a hospital van. Everyone else piled into the back seats. .

They were now ready for the next step...the Guard at Post #21..

It would take 20 long minutes before arriving at Post #21. Little was said during the drive; everyone just wanted it to be over. Anxiety was high. Maria's old fears had returned and she felt hopeless and helpless. Sitting in the middle of the farthest back seat, brought back vivid memories of feeling "closed in" and frightened.. It was one of the

hardest things she ever did and it would feel heavenly, once they were all out of the van and on free ground.

Post #21 loomed directly ahead. The night was jet black and the only light available was the small light on top of the post. Its dim yellow light signaled for drivers to slow down and then pull to a stop at the front gate.

The guard stepped out from the small building and asked for names.

“Destination and names, please?”

Steve, the driver replied, “I have Ed and his temporary family here and we need an available guard to take us all to the mental health clinic. Ed is sitting in the front seat with me and drugged and out of it and needs to be seen by a psychiatrist at Safe Haven to be evaluated. The nurse in charge said that he needs to be returned in two days, unless his condition is critical. In which case, plans and forms will have to be made up for a longer stay..”

“It is very late; we don’t often make such runs at night but I think I’ll see who’s available....Let me go and check.”

“Great! Appreciate your help.”

Minutes later he was back, looking nervous but very much in control.

“Just got word that Jeff, our night shift guard, will be ready in about ten minutes. He has to make a short run and then he will help you all out. The drive shouldn’t take too long but there is dense fog along the way...So, be prepared for some delays...”

Ray spoke for them all, “No problem. Just want to get some help for our friend.”

Minutes later Jeff appeared and said, “O.K. folks. Got my run finished. So hop into Van and we’ll get going. The patient who is ill must sit with me in the front....If he gets out of control, I can get to him first.”

“No problem.” Ray was highly nervous. This wasn’t the man who was supposed to drive them. At least that’s what Ed told them days ago. They would have to approach this guy differently. He was all business and didn’t seem the type for drinking on the job....How would they get the booze or sedatives in him, so they could take over? Ray would have to come up with another plan, and fast!

Everyone got inside the van; with Ed in front, in between Ray and the guard--and everyone else in the back seats. Ray turned and gave Maria the “high sign” that plans had changed. She knew that danger was ahead and wasn’t sure if she was prepared. She looked at Alicia but found no comfort there....She just stared into the cold dark night...not knowing what was going to happen....

About ten minutes into the drive Ray made his move. “Sir, I’m going to be sick. Could you pull over for a few minutes?”

“Say, I don’t have time for his! This road is winding and it’s not safe to pull over now. Can’t you wait until we reach I-209? It’s only five minutes from here.”

“Not unless you want a terrible mess in this van! Pull over now!”

The brakes screeched in answer to Ray’s question and even with seat belts on, everyone felt as though they would soon be flying out of their seats and on the ceiling of the van.

“Alright. Are you happy?! I almost put us all into a ditch and that means we might be stuck here all night...Just look at the mud.! Go ahead, out with ya...And, make it snappy!”

Ray got up from his seat, while the driver pushed his control switch and opened the side door. Ray got out and walked over to the driver’s side and pretended to be vomiting.

The driver pulled out a cigarette and began to light up. But before he could put the lighter to his cigarette, Ray quickly reached through the driver side window, grabbed the man’s neck and began pulling with all his might. He was able to get the driver’s side door opened and then dragged the main straight out. All the while, the man was screaming and kicking—filling the damp, dark night with noise that could have stirred the dead.

Ray shouted, “Maria, the champagne bottle...quick!”

Maria scrambled for the champagne bottle, quickly pulled it from one of the large sacks, rolled down her window and shoved the bottle through. Ray let go of the man for just a few seconds, grabbed the bottle and aimed the bottle at the man. The man began running but Ray soon caught up with him and with the force of someone who is mad, scared and just down right “pissed off,” hit him hard on top of his head.

The man fell straight and hard to the cold ground; out like a light. Then, he thought, “Got to get his pass and registration. Going to need it, in case someone pulls us over...” He rummaged through the man’s pockets and finally found what he was looking for.

Ray ran back to the van, got into the driver’s seat and turned on the ignition. The engine turned over several times, but did not kick in....

“Not now! We don’t need this now, Lord! Please help us...Help us now!”

Just at that moment, the man on the ground and obviously in pain, struggled to get up. Slowly he rose from the ground, shook his head and began walking toward the van...He wanted revenge...Oh, he wanted want revenge!

“Come on you piece of crap! Kick in!”

Still, nothing...

He turned the key again....

Groggy but mad as hell, the man began moving quickly toward the van...He was just ten feet away; there was not much time. Action had to be taken, now!

Ray turned the key one more time.....As if knowing that help was needed immediately, the engine clicked in...

“Thank you, God! Thank you, Jesus!”

The van sped off, like a bat out of hell, spewing mud everywhere; with a large portion of it landing on a very disgruntled man... Ray couldn't believe how fast the van went from zero to 50 mph. Absolutely amazing, he thought. When the Lord wants something done, he thought, it get's done!...

“Ed, where do we go from here? I hope you know. Are you awake?.....Are you awake?....”

Still feeling the affects of the sedatives Ed squinted his eyes, looked through the car window and cried out.... “Just stay on this road until you hit I-212. That's about 10 minutes from now. Then, you'll see a roadside restaurant...”Suzie's Diner.” Then, make a left turn and then it's straight on for another 10 miles...”

Meanwhile back at New Breed, a call came in and news of what happened to the van was received and an APB was put in motion!

The van was running good but ten minutes later began slowing down and soon came to a slow stop..

“Now what?” cried Ray. He looked at the gas gauge and saw that it was totally and out of gas!

Just miles away from their destination, they all got out of the van and with Ed's guidance and a trusty map and an old compass, began walking northeast. It began raining along the way and it wasn't long before they all were wet, depressed and scared....

Chapter 32: We've Arrived!

Just as they were about to give up, they saw in the distance a large building on the left side of the road. As they inched closer they saw a small sign on top of a post that read, “Safe Haven.”

It was two in the morning and they felt reluctant to knock on the door. Surely they would be turned away at such an hour. But, Ray took charge and nudged everyone closer to the large, ornate door. Ray knocked on the old door, making a loud and ominous noise. Ray saw a small dim light go on inside. It looked like it was coming from a dining room.

Several minutes went by and no one came to the door. Just when they thought no one was coming, a kindly older looking woman around sixty opened the door and said, “Well, early morning visitors! Do come in...I’ll bet you’re from New Breed.”

Inside, Ray noticed that it looked a lot like a 19th century mansion he had seen a long time ago in a movie. It was filled with beautiful paintings, ornate furniture and high ceilings, with lovely and expensive chandeliers.

The older woman escorted them to several rooms on the second floor, where they were given towels, sheets, other toiletries.

After they received their complimentary gifts, the older lady told them that before they retired to bed they would have to take community showers in an older building, next door. She said that this was required of everyone who sought refuge at Safe Haven. The other outside building was divided into two main sections—one for men and the other for women...At the entrance of each section was an area where they could place their clothes and possessions and then pick them up later, after the showers.

“Just a preliminary precaution, folks; helps our little place to remain healthy and good for all our kind visitors! Frank here will show you the way...” Sounded a bit strange to everyone, but they were tired and the older lady was kind, with a trustworthy smile and appearance. Kind of reminded Ray of Aunt Bea, from the Andy Griffith show; just a friendly old woman.

As Ray, Maria, Jeremy and the others approached and entered the shower stalls; a large electronic screen inside of Safe Haven began to tabulate the names and numbers of those entering it. Quietly but methodically, the numbers and names flicked across a large green screen. Unbeknownst to Ray, Maria, Jeremy, John, Alicia and Susan, the microchips inside their legs began spilling out everything about them.....

The names and numbers began appearing as the gas chamber did its thing...

Maria Campbell.....Case number 412.....

Ray Summerhill.....Case number 602.....

Jeremy.... Case number 712.....

John Cramer...Case number....640.....

Alicia Cramer...Case number 402

Susan Cramer...Case number 403

And so eerily their names and numbers continued to light up the big screen....

As clouds of gas billowed from the old chimney, someone inside Safe Haven shouted, "Isn't it wonderful how some of the old methods are still the best?!" No one but the creatures of the night and a tired guard by the name of Frank Van Gerhard, standing by the automated locked stalls, could hear the screams of fear and terror within the old well-used, gas chamber. Sadly, the weary group had reached their destination and all of them, including Maria, had reached their final days...