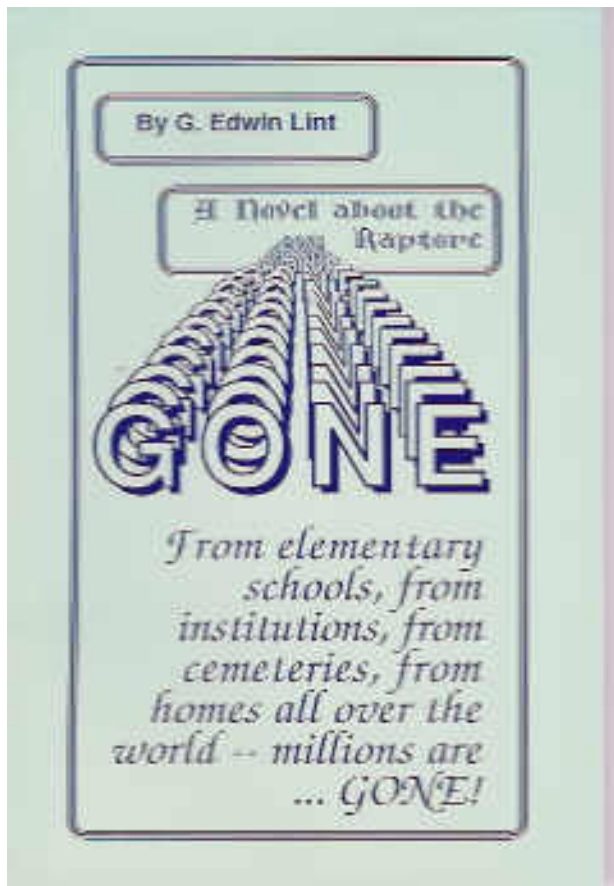


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Gone

A Novel about the Rapture

From elementary schools, from institutions, from cemeteries, from homes all over the world -- millions are ...Gone!



This is a Christian novel about the rapture, when Jesus Christ will come back and instantly remove all persons who have accepted Him as a personal savior to be with Him forever in Heaven. Also taken in the rapture will be children below the age of acceptability, and persons with mental disabilities.

[© 2008, 2004, 1987 G. Edwin Lint, BS, ThB, MA](#)

[DiskBooks Electronic Publishing](#)
PO Box 473 – Mechanicsburg, PA 17055 USA

The word *rapture* does not appear in scripture. However, there is strong evidence of its major themes throughout the New Testament:

1. The rapture is a literal future event:

Acts 1:11: Men of Galilee," they said, "why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.

2. The rapture will occur suddenly and without warning:

I Cor. 15:52 in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet.

3. The rapture will divide those who have accepted Jesus Christ as a personal Savior and those who have not

Luke 17:35: one will be taken and the other left.

4. Persons taken in the rapture will have glorified bodies

I Cor 15:51 We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed

Scriptures used from The Holy Bible: New International Version. Copyright 1973, 1978, 1984, 1987 International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Bible Publishers.

All scripture verses should be read within the context of the whole passage: who said it, to whom was it said, why was it said, what happened before and after? Therefore, the verses above should be studied from the Bible, within their context.



The author of *Gone*, G. Edwin Lint, MA has created the book's characters and action from a broad knowledge base. While not autobiographical, *GONE* profits from his extensive training and experience, including his

formal education: Bachelor of Science in Bible and Bachelor of Theology degrees from the Allentown, Pennsylvania campus of Houghton College; Master of Arts in educational supervision and administration from Rowan University in Glassboro, New Jersey.

He has 36 years of professional education experience with state certification as elementary teacher, elementary supervisor, supervisor of curriculum and instruction, elementary principal, special education teacher, and supervisor of special education.

Throughout his secular career, he has remained active in Christian service in a variety of capacities: Sunday school teacher, Sunday school superintendent, teacher trainer, director of Christian education; choir member, choir director, orchestra member (playing trumpet), member and manager of a regional Gospel singing group, owner of a Gospel music store; representative for the Pennsylvania Council on Alcohol Problems, interim and supply pastor.

For over 37 years he has worked as a part -time Gospel DJ. He earned an FCC Third Class License with Broadcast Endorsement by passing the written examination. Since 1980, he has produced and hosted Gospel music radio program: [Gospel Caravan](#).

Ed Lint claims that his most important credential is "a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. I have accepted Jesus Christ as my sin sacrifice. He is my Lamb of God. The Holy Spirit fills me. He gives me power to live a successful Christian life and protects me from Satan and his demons."

Ed Lint is the owner and primary author of [DiskBooks Electronic Publishing](#).

What Christian Publishers Say About *GONE*

Impact Books

One of the finest that has ever crossed my desk

Moody Press

Believable characters and well-paced action create an effective story

Chosen Books

An interesting and quite absorbing novel

Bridge Publishing

The characters are fully fleshed out; the action is realistic; personal interrelationships (and) confrontation scenes are handled well; the description of the rapture is done well.

Preface

In the last few years, a number of catastrophe novels have appeared in the mall bookstores. The themes are as varied as the imagination of their authors: meltdown, epidemic, tidal wave, comet fall, forest fire, dam break, earthquake, nuclear war, epidemic outbreak.

Some of these terrible things may happen. Some may never happen. Who knows?

This is what makes *Gone* different from all other disaster literature. If you read the New Testament of the Bible, you know the rapture is a literal event that is going to happen. You also know that no one is exactly sure *when* this event is going to occur.

You can know one thing, however. The first coming of Jesus Christ as a baby in Bethlehem's manger was precisely predicted by the Old Testament prophets. All of those prophecies were fulfilled, right down to the town in which He would be born. Therefore, the New Testament prophecies of His second coming will be fulfilled in equal detail. "Even so, come, Lord Jesus." Revelation 22:20.

***Gone* shows how the rapture will break into the lives of Mr. and Mrs. Average American, in this case the Marlow family. Infants, young children, and persons with mental disabilities are taken. Good, law-abiding citizens are left behind. The explanation of what happened in the rapture is provided by the wife of an evangelical minister who is left behind, also. She is analytical, rather than bitter, and helps the main characters understand what has happened and what may be in store for them in the future. The book ends on a sequel note, should the saga be continued.**

Acknowledgments

Thanks to my wife, Nancy, who provided the motivation, the inspiration, the encouragement, and the proofreading to make *Gone* a possibility.

Reference to the radio services of the Associated Press (AP) made by permission of Glenn Serafin, of the Harrisburg Office, Broadcasting Executive for Pennsylvania, Virginia, and D.C.

The location of Liverpool, Pennsylvania is real. All other references to Liverpool are fictional.

The Bethany Community Church and Parsonage are fictional. Any similarity to a real church and congregation are purely coincidental.

The location of Camp Mill, Pennsylvania is real. Radio Station WMOR is fictional. Any similarity to a real station with similar or identical call letters and format is purely coincidental.

The location of Seven Stars, Pennsylvania is real. The Seven Stars Elementary School and the River Area School District are fictional. Any similarity to real school entities or the employees of such entities is purely coincidental.

The location of Walnut Valley, New Jersey is real. The Walnut Valley Colony is a fictional composite of several such facilities with the general appearance of the campus drawn from the Laurelton State School and Hospital in Laurelton, Pa, (now closed). Any similarity to a real and specific facility for persons with mental disabilities and the residents or employees of such a facility is purely coincidental.

The Gospel music artists referenced in Chapter 8 were involved in national Christian ministry at the time of publication. The Gaither Homecoming Choir referenced in Chapter 9 and elsewhere was involved in national Christian ministry including appearances at the Giant Center in Hershey at the time of publication. Specific references to the style and content of the Gaither concert are a composite of real concerts of recent years.

All other characters not specifically mentioned above are fictional. Any similarity to real persons living or dead, or to characters in other fictional works, is purely coincidental.

Major Characters

Dan Marlow: General manager of a medium-market FM radio station ... Moral but not religious ... Good husband and father ... Bit of a short temper ... Forty-eight years old.

Karen Marlow: Dan's wife and principal of a local elementary school ... A caring mother and an exemplary educator ... Forty-six years old ... Like Dan, moral but not religious.

Kevin and Kellie Marlow: The much-loved but not spoiled twins of Dan and Karen ... Six years old and in the first grade at Karen's school ... Full of fun and energy.

Mark Marlow: The adult son of Dan and Karen ... Works as an administrator at a state residential facility for persons with severe and profound mental disabilities.

Jason Masterson: The new pastor of a local non-denominational evangelical church ... Interested in broadcasting Gospel music.

Veronica (Ronni) Masterson: Jason's wife and a thorough Bible student ... Years ago Ronni cursed God because of the tragic kidnapping and murder of her 6-month-old son.

Lacey Bowder: The bright, bouncy, all-night DJ at Dan's radio station ... Very caring about people, especially her listeners.

Time Frame

The narrative occurs between early Thursday morning, January 2, and early Monday morning, January 6, without the year being specified. There is one major flashback in the first chapter.

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Chapter 1: Black Cat

Liverpool

Friday, January 3, 6:00 P.M.

Dan and Karen Marlow sat at their kitchen table and stared unseeingly at their unwanted and cooling hamburgers. Karen had been stirring her coffee for over three minutes.

"Cut it out, Karen! Either drink that coffee or pour it out. I can't stand that constant clinking!"

Karen's mouth quivered and she rose abruptly and dumped the unwanted coffee down the sink. Mechanically she rinsed the cup and then leaned over the sink, head down and shoulders shaking slightly.

Dan watched his wife through a wash of grief and pity. Fear gripped him as he took a sip of his own tepid coffee. Carefully he wiped his mouth and stood to move toward the bowed form at the sink.

"I'm sorry, Honey. I shouldn't have been so rough on you."

At the gentle touch of the big hands on her shoulders, Karen turned and buried her face in Dan's sweater. Their arms circled each other for several minutes, the tears of both mingling on Dan's chest.

Finally Karen spoke. "Dan what are we going to do? I feel so helpless, about the twins, I mean. Do you think we should report this to anyone, or talk to anyone about it? Try to get some kind of explanation?"

As Karen was speaking, Dan realized that this was their first physical contact since his wife got home from school three hours ago. And he felt a slight lessening of anxiety for the first time since the BUST-IT bulletin came across the wire just after noon.

"Honey, I listened to network coverage all the way home from Camp Hill this afternoon and one thing is certain about this whole affair. No one really knows what happened. We know that it is world-wide and that there doesn't seem to be any evidence of an enemy out there somewhere who's doing all this to us. Beyond that there just aren't any answers that make any kind of sense. At least not to me."

"I know, Dan. From the standpoint of logic, what you say is true. But as a mother I just can't sit here and accept the disappearance of my babies without at least making some kind of effort to find them."

The big man curled his index finger and gently lifted Karen's chin till he could look into her eyes. Softly he kissed her salty mouth and then held her out at arm's length. Their eyes met again.

"Karen, I don't know what to tell you or how to console you. The twins are gone, and so are the babies and young children of parents all over the world. I guess the only thing we bereaved parents can do is trust government agencies to come up with some kind of explanation.

Dan paused to blow his nose and when he continued there was an increased measure of huskiness in his voice. "The only thing is, Karen, I can't get over the feeling that no matter what kind of explanation we eventually get, we'll never see Kevin and Kellie again. I don't know how, or why, or even where, but they are just -- gone!"

"You don't think there's a chance that some force from another planet or somewhere out in space has, like they used to say on *Star Trek*, has beamed them somewhere? You know, beamed them up to a UFO or an orbiting space ship, or even another planet somewhere." Karen immediately wished she hadn't used the *Star Trek* analogy and she saw Dan felt it, too. Yesterday, at this very moment, the twins had most likely been in front of the TV, captivated by an ancient rerun of the adventures of Captain Kirk and Mister Spock. And now? Now they were personally experiencing something which might far transcend anything a script writer could conjure with a keyboard.

After a painful moment of silence Dan spread his hands and continued. "I'm not an eye witness so I suppose I know even less than you do, Karen. But I still say that something has happened which has no precedent, not even in the minds of science fiction writers. I know it sounds simplistic, and maybe even a little calloused, but we'll just have to wait and see what the experts come up with. But that doesn't keep me from missing Kevin and Kellie, horribly." Dan dropped his head and fresh tears dripped down on his already-damp sweater.

"Maybe the President will have more information when he has that news conference tonight at nine," Karen offered without enthusiasm or even hope. She poured fresh cups of coffee for both of them and they returned to the kitchen table.

Silence ticked on for several minutes. Then, without warning, a hooded woman appeared in the kitchen doorway. Her bare hands clutched an unbuttoned monk's coat at throat and waist while her entire body shuddered with cold. Looking down Karen was amazed to see that the woman's feet were bare and snow clung to their blue-white skin in frosty clumps.

The strange woman's face was as expressionless as a death mask and neither Dan nor Karen recognized her until the hood fell back and exposed her features to the bright light of the overhead kitchen fixture.

"Mrs. Masterson!" Karen gasped. "Are you all right?!"

The marble features did not flicker a response of any kind as the visitor's body continued to shake with seizure-like intensity. Quickly Karen moved to her side. "Dan, let's get her in on the sofa and under a warm blanket. By the looks of those feet she must have been out in the snow for quite a while."

Dan took Veronica Masterson's other arm and together the Marlows led her into the living room. She was passively cooperative as Karen removed her coat and helped her to lie down on the 6-foot sofa.

"You know, Dan, I'm not certified in this kind of thing but from a layman's point of view, I'd say this woman is in a catatonic trance. Her eyes are wide open but she acts like she doesn't recognize us. And when I move an arm or leg, she doesn't resist but she doesn't help, either."

Suddenly a cat's blood-chilling ma-rawling echoed through the house and it sounded like the animal was out in the hall. Dan went to check. Two black paws were on the bottom step of the carpeted stairway leading to the second floor and the largest black cat Dan had ever seen stared straight up at the landing as though looking for something specific. At first he was speechless but Dan recovered quickly, reaching behind him to open the front door and swing it wide.

"Out, cat!" he snapped. "We have enough trouble here without listening to your big mouth." But when Dan turned back toward the stairs after opening the door, the intruder was flowing up the steps with classic feline grace.

"Get down here, you black nuisance!" Dan roared. Somehow "kitty-kitty" didn't seem to fit the occasion. Regardless of the form of address, the black cat never faltered in his upward glide and disappeared from Dan's view in the general direction of the twins' room.

Dan started to go to the kitchen for the broom and then shrugged, mouthed a few unprintables toward the top of the stairs, and returned to the living room.

Ronni was covered from chin to toes with a soft woolen blanket Dan and Karen had bought last summer in New York after seeing the Broadway presentation of the *Lion King*. Kevin and Kellie had loved that blanket, taking turns standing at the top of the stairs and pretending to be Mufasa on Pride Rock.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Masterson's vacant eyes stared straight up at the ceiling and her entire body was as motionless as death.

Silently Karen took Dan's hand and led him back to the kitchen. "What in the world was all that racket in the hall?"

"There was a monster of a black cat right there in the front hall. He must have slipped in when we opened the door for Mrs. Masterson. I tried to put him out but he ran upstairs instead. Do the Mastersons have a black cat?"

"I'm not sure. I can't remember her saying anything last night--yes, she did. Said something about needing to go out for cat food first thing this morning. Didn't say what kind of cat they had, though. Do you think that cat belongs to her?"

Before Dan could answer, a sound rolled down from the second floor which turned his blood frigid. The human intellect solves audio problems on the basis of association. Even the simple process of identifying a sound requires the retrieval of a previously-heard sound of known origin and the comparison of the former sound with the current one.

The sound now assaulting Dan's ears and flooding his consciousness was not on file among the millions of stored memories in his brain. In the absence of familiarity, his immediate reaction was fear. Fear with substance. Fear that coated the lining of his mouth with a foul scum. Fear that caused his vital rhythms to forsake their normal cadence and run amok.

One look at Karen and he knew there was no help there. At the onset of the unearthly sound, she sat down hard in her chair and blood was beginning to ooze from the corner of her mouth as the result of a bitten lip.

Dan owned a Smith and Wesson .22 automatic. Over the years it had been used exclusively for plinking tin cans out at the quarry. Just last summer the twins had started nagging Dan for a chance to do some shooting and the quarry plinking had resumed after a hiatus of several years. By mid-November both Kevin and Kellie, using a two-hand grip, had been able to knock a number 10 can off a stump at 20 yards. The gun hadn't been out of the locked gun safe in the dining room closet since Thanksgiving Day, however.

With the hellish sound still cascading down the stairs and flowing through the first-floor rooms, Dan's hand went instinctively to the key ring hanging from a belt clip at his right hip. In a fever of haste and terror he opened the gun safe and removed the gun from its case. With shaking hands he grabbed a clip and filled it with .22 long rifle cartridges. Then he slammed the clip home and took the gun off safety. He dropped an extra full clip in his sweater pocket.

During the 30 seconds or so it took to make the gun operational, the ungodly sounds from overhead continued unabated. If anything, they seemed to be showing increased volume and intensity. For an instant Dan felt slightly foolish as he moved toward the foot of the stairs, gun at the ready in his right hand. Probably just the clock radio going off at an inopportune time. Or maybe that stupid cat... No, not

even a cat the size of their unwelcome visitor could produce a sound like the one now reverberating through the Marlow home.

The armed man paused at the bottom of the stairs and thought he could detect at least an undertone of familiarity in what he was hearing. Yes, he was sure that part of the sound resembled speech. Except, it was like no human articulation he had ever heard. Instead of a single source, the sound seemed to be a composite which was coming from a myriad of sources. And the speech-like facets of the total effect were certainly not human. More like the synthesized racket attributed to the prehistoric monsters in a science fiction movie, only more complex and certainly more sinister. Regardless of how carefully Dan listened he was unable to identify a single syllable which sounded like it belonged to an earthly language.

Now he could hear a soft thumping mixed with the more frightening aspects of the noise coming from above. Dan realized he couldn't justify delaying the ascent any longer in terms of anything but sheer terror and considered retreating to the kitchen and the solace of Karen's company. But the memory of the look in her eyes when she had first heard the sound changed his mind.

Dan checked the safety with his thumb and slowly climbed the stairs, step by careful step. When he passed the midpoint of his upward journey his nose was assaulted with a gross odor fully as frightening as the sound he was hearing. The hideous smell was somewhat reminiscent of advanced putrefaction and fresh feces, with a touch of strong animal musk thrown in. As he reached the top step he could see that the door to the twins' room was open and a shaft of light from the hall ceiling fixture fell across three quarters of the bed.

What Dan saw in that lighted area of the room was more strange than frightening. After getting home from work, Karen had placed the plastic bag containing the things Kevin and Kellie had worn that morning on their bed. Now the enormous black cat was on the bed and had torn open the bag with his claws. The kids' clothes were all over the bed and the ripped bag was on the floor. The cat, with every hair on end from the bridge of his scarred nose to the tip of his luxurious tail, was savagely attacking each article of clothing in turn. Shirts, jeans, underwear, socks-- everything received the destructive treatment of fang and claw. And while Dan watched, the black monster reared up on his hind legs and sprayed musky urine over what was left of the twins' things.

The desecration was so horrifying and infuriating that Dan almost forgot the terrible sound and smell. At that instant the cat sensed an intruder and whirled, still on his hind legs, to face the armed man. His mouth was open as far as it could go and the full onslaught of the sound-and-odor montage washed over Dan like a load of sewer sludge. At close range, the multifaceted aspect of the sound was much more noticeable, almost as though a thousand unimaginable demons of hell were striving

to outdo each other in voicing the most vile imprecations. And the odor! The odor was so substantive that Dan felt the air in front of his face was actually tinted brown by its intensity.

As the cat caught a glimpse of Dan, he dropped into a pre-spring crouch, tail lashing furiously. With an inborn instinct of self preservation, Dan raised the gun and began firing. The first slug hit the cat on the bridge of the nose and literally blew his brains out his ears. But the unworldly feline had already committed his body to the spring and was airborne when the second slug ripped open his underbelly from chest to groin.

The cat's original trajectory was plotted to put his yellowed fangs and curved claws in deadly contact with Dan's throat. The two well-placed shots, however, marred the flight and the lifeless, bloody body thudded into Dan at the belt line. The furious man leaped back from the fallen cat and pumped five straight shots into the flaccid black mass where it lay. The body twitched with the impact of each slug.

Later, Dan couldn't remember exactly when the horrific sound left the house. But after the last shot, he could hear it, like a rapidly disappearing freight train, out over the Susquehanna River and heading northeast. With the noise gone and the cat dead, he became conscious of a blanket of subzero air which swirled around his body for an instant. But then both the cold and the odor left, also, as though in pursuit of the strange sound. The upstairs hall assumed some measure of normalcy, except for the bloody body on the floor.

Dan went into the bedroom and dropped into a rocker. Gradually, his vital signs returned to normal limits. As the tension ebbed out of his body, he allowed his mind to rewind the tragic activities of the last two days. Could it be just yesterday morning he had started out for the radio station in a January snow storm?

Chapter 2: Snow

Liverpool Pennsylvania

Thursday, January 2, 4:00 A.M.

A heavy curl of fresh snow flowed from the angled surface of the big blade as the yellow PennDOT Walter SnowFighter plow rumblescaped slowly down the southbound lane of U.S. 11-15. Dan Marlow jammed his hands in the pockets of his parka and stared glumly at the plow's tail lights as they disappeared into the milky gloom of the predawn night. With the temperature at no more than 10 above zero and a 20 m.p.h. westerly wind blowing steadily off the Susquehanna River, both the parka and the pockets were more than luxuries.

The wind gusted sharply and sandblasted Dan's ears with granulated snow. He flipped up the parka hood and pulled on a pair of driving gloves. Behind him a 1968 Volkswagen Bug slumbered peacefully under an eight-inch blanket of ermine. Dan considered letting her sleep on and taking the Buick but turned and delivered an affectionate, booted wakeup kick to the right rear tire. Then he shuffled into the garage to get a broom. No sense taking the Park Avenue Ultra out in all that salt-and-cinders slop.

He quickly brushed the snow away to reveal a Bug with good rubber all around. He checked the wipers to be sure they were not frozen to the windshield before unlocking the door. An odometer reading of over 250,000 didn't keep the engine from catching on the second crank and Dan smiled as the faithful mill settled into its familiar chortle with no more than a couple of forgivable snorts.

Twenty-eight snowy miles stretched between Dan and his down-river destination of Camp Hill. Therefore, a few precautions were in order. Quickly he closed the front floor-level heat vents and pushed the rear heat control to its lowest level. With the front heat control open all the way, any available warm air would be diverted to the defroster vents at the lower outside corners of the windshield. Dan was thoroughly familiar with the idiosyncratic behavior of his Bug and a distinct frugality in the production of heat was one of its more annoying characteristics. The VW did use a fan to force warm air through the heat ducts but the relatively lower highway speed of snow driving meant a parallel reduction in heat. Much as he loved to have his feet warm, Dan knew that current weather conditions mandated a higher priority for the windshield.

After disengaging the fast idle with a light tap on the accelerator, Dan stamped through the garage and crossed the breezeway to the warmth of the house. Upstairs all was quiet with the only illumination provided by an amber, flame-shaped bulb in the hall sconce.

Dan stopped in the twins' room first for a silent good-bye. The cozy light from the hall slanted across their double bed and the tall father noted with a chuckle that they were in their favorite sleeping position--nose-to-nose on the same pillow. When Mark was six, he had slept all over the bed and occasionally part of the floor. Not Kevin and Kellie. They nestled under the warmth of their Lion King blanket and, after an initial whisper-and-giggle session, dropped into an all-night sleep.

As he bent over the bed, Dan caught the innocent fragrance of clean, warm bodies and it seemed like yesterday that Karen had looked up from a hospital pillow and said, "Isn't it wonderful, Dan? We have twins. Twins! Can you imagine that at our age?" The new mother's soft green eyes had glowed with joy and pain. "It's a miracle, a miracle of youth. They'll keep us young, Dan. We can't possibly grow old now."

And they had. The twins kept them young and busy, too, with all the excitement and frustration that raising two normal live-wires can bring. Mark had already graduated from college and was starting a career in New Jersey. Suddenly the eight high-ceilinged rooms rang with a symphony of squeals, yells, and giggles. The twins definitely generated a current of fresh life that permeated every aspect of the Marlow home and marriage. Double the pleasure had been double the work but Karen never murmured as she laid aside her career as an elementary principal for five years of full-time mothering.

As Dan looked down on their snub-nosed, freckle-splashed faces with their tousled red halos almost touching, he felt a sharp constriction of love and fear bind his heart. What an awesome responsibility parents faced in preparing two mites of humanity for twenty-first century living. As he bent to lightly kiss the bridge of each nose, Dan was reminded of the great challenge that accompanied a miracle, especially when that miracle came in human form.

"Bye, you two," he whispered. "Be good today and don't give your mother too many more gray hairs. Daddy loves you." Their response consisted of a small grunt and a slight scrooch. Then Dan moved down the hall to say good-bye to Karen. As he entered the master bedroom he could hear the Bug down in the driveway, still singing her song.

The flowing curves under the electric blanket made Dan want to go back downstairs and put the old car to sleep again. But, he was too much into the work ethic to give that idea more than a passing thought. And besides, today was the first workday since the big move and he couldn't sleep it away. Karen stirred, stretched, and yawned.

"What time is it?"

"Four-twenty and I better get moving. I'm taking the Bug and you can have the Buick."

"Still snowing?"

"Supposed to taper off to flurries about dawn." Dan crossed to a front window and parted the heavy thermal draperies. "In fact, I think it's slowing down already. Doesn't seem to be snowing nearly as hard as it was twenty minutes ago. Think school will be canceled?"

"Doubt it. We lost so many days in December we may have school on the Fourth of July as it is. Have to get those 180 days in and give you redneck taxpayers your money's worth." She punctuated her last remark with a Bronx cheer.

"Yes, Madam Principal. Anything you say, Madam Principal." Suddenly the covers were well below the hem of Karen's figure-molding flannel nightgown. She started to yelp and grab for the covers but, with swift feminine insight, left things just the way they were.

"What time did you say it was, Dannyboy?" she purred, a smile of invitation curving her lips.

"You rat, you dirty rat," Dan said softly but his smile failed to reinforce his words. He replaced the blanket and tucked it around Karen carefully. "That's a rotten thing to do to a morning man and you know it." He tousled her glossy, black hair and kissed her firmly on the mouth. "The mice in the woodwork will think we're a couple of honeymooners instead of two broken-down old fogeys."

"Speak for yourself, John," Karen quipped, "but spare this old gray head."

"You may be the hotshot educator in the family but this old radio man knows you messed that one up." Suddenly both convulsed with irrational laughter, oblivious to the twins and Mark sleeping in nearby rooms. Dan often wondered what kind of marriage people had when laughing and kidding around weren't a major ingredient.

"Well, Doll," Dan said, I better get going. Lacey will be crawling the wall if I'm not there by six."

"Hey, Big Guy, you're the boss now. Who's she to be telling you what to do?"

"Karen, you know as well as I do that bossing can be harder work than working. Well, gotta run. Tell the kids I kissed them good-bye. And be careful on that road back to Seven Stars. I'm sure it will be plowed but it'll still be pretty slippery."

"I'll be careful, and you too. Call me when you get to Camp Hill, okay?"

"Will if I get a break. So long again."

Outside the snowing had tapered off to a few lazy flakes drifting in the harsh glare of the sodium-vapor streetlight. The Bug still did her thing and the windshield was warm enough to melt the snow as it fell. Dan folded his six-two frame into the bucket seat, switched on the lights, and eyed the unshoveled expanse of snow between the Bug and the curb.

"We've done it before so you ought to know the right moves, Old Lady." Dan hated shoveling with a passion, not because he was lazy but because bright sun and forty degrees usually did the job in a day or so anyway. Neighbors were used to seeing a Marlow car shoot headfirst out of the garage and go flying down the snowy drive without benefit of shovel. Usually another member of the family would be stationed across the street to give the sign that Front Street was clear of traffic. No need for that at this early hour.

"Four-thirty and we better get a move on, Old Lady. Hang on to your bonnet." Dan shifted to first and then glanced between the head rests to check the contents of the storage area created by the folded-down rear seat. Short-handled shovel, nylon tow rope, bundle of shingles for emergency traction--everything seemed to be aboard.

Then, with headlights on and wipers on fast speed, Dan sent the Bug roaring down the drive. The low ratio of the Bug's first gear provided just the right amount of momentum to enable the car to reach the street without losing forward motion.

Snow flew, tires, spun, the tail slewed first left and then right, the engine raced--but momentum was maintained. At the piled up snow along the curb, a wave of white powder crested over the Bug's sloped snout and covered the windshield. But even that two-foot obstacle was no match for Dan's snow savvy and the Bug's determination. Dan felt the ridge of snow kick the Old Lady weakly in the belly and then he was on Front, headed toward Race. He second-gearred a right at the Race Street stop sign and repeated the maneuver in 10 yards at the 11-15 stop sign.

Dan relaxed visibly when the shift lever finally dropped into fourth gear and the engine settled into its 40-m.p.h. chuckle. Dan was born and raised in the northcentral counties of Pennsylvania and snow driving was no pain. In fact, he always got a little morbid satisfaction out of reading the wire stories of Richmond or Nashville drivers who parked their cars and walked home in three inches of snow. Now he noted with satisfaction that PennDOT had been on the ball. The full width of the four-lane highway was plowed from berm to berm. The roadway was a pristine white with the snow giving the Bug an exceptionally smooth and muted ride. In less than a mile he was on automatic pilot.

Hope Karen makes out all right getting to school on time. She'll probably have a two-hour delay and that'll give the plows a little more time to get the back roads

cleared. The Buick ought to do okay with that front-wheel drive and traction control... Bet the twins will have a ball in this snow when they get home from school. Maybe if it warms up a little, the snow will pack well enough to make a snowman ... Mark shouldn't have too much trouble by the time he has to leave for New Jersey. Can't say I envy him driving in that black salt-and-cinder soup, though. Wish he could find a job a little closer to home but I guess he really enjoys working there with the retarded people and he does have a good job. Lot of college boys have been out longer than him and still don't have jobs they couldn't have had before they went to the trouble of getting a four-year education.

Kind of feels good to be going to work as the general manager. Want to do a good job and really think I can. Sure do have the experience. Sign-on man for 30 years and program director for the last ten of that 30. Major John Cogan had to make me GM after all those years. And all at good old MOR, too. Nice to have him living down in Florida now, though. Sure was a pain when he called me up a couple times a shift to complain about something he didn't like. Still wonder if I should have tried to buy him out when he retired. Don't know, though. Would have been a lot of big monthly payments for a man my age. May be able to do better on a GM's salary than I would on an owner's profit.

Dan's rambling reverie was crisply shattered by an orange triangle advancing on the Bug's windshield at the rate of 35 m.p.h. Instinctively he snapped a hard left and the tail-heavy Bug did a quick one-eighty.

As the VW careened backward down the middle of the four-lane highway, Dan saw a classic Currier and Ives print through his side window. The scene would have warmed the heart of anyone who never drives the highways and secondary roads of central Pennsylvania. A coal black carriage horse stepped smartly to the music of sleigh bells as plumes of vapor swept past his blindered head. He was hitched to an equally-black sleigh with a single seat. The occupants were dressed in the simple garb of the Plain People, complete with broad-brimmed black hat and black bonnet. The sleigh was as unadorned as the Amish couple in it, except for the mandatory orange triangle signifying a slow-moving vehicle.

Dan had the presence of mind to stay off the brakes as he checked his mirror for headlights. Mercifully nothing was in sight as the Bug continued its backward skid down the middle of U.S. Routes 11-15. Always a steady and accurate backer, Dan now made minor course corrections and was able to keep the car in fairly stable rearward motion. Apparently his speed had been closer to 50 than 40 when the tailboard of the sleigh with its distinctive triangle first popped into view. The combination of packed snow and relatively high speed provided the rather novel ride Dan was now experiencing.

He checked the dash to make sure the engine was still running and then downshifted to third. Slowly he released the clutch pedal and gently fed a little gas. As the snow tires started biting the road surface in opposition to the backward slide, the rear end fishtailed badly. Dan knew from long experience that skids were corrected by turning the steering wheel in the same direction as the tail end was skidding. Not knowing if that rule applied to his current predicament, he kept the wheel fairly stable and continued to feed gas. The fishtailing continued but the speed dropped off.

Then the highway curved to the left and the Bug slid tailfirst into the packed snow piled along the right shoulder by the plows.

The episode had seemed like an eternity but actual elapsed time was less than 10 seconds.

The rhythmic chunking of the oncoming horse's hooves caused Dan to step out in the glare of the stalled car's headlights. The Currier and Ives illusion was still intact but Dan wasn't close to being in the mood for it. That sleigh had been clip-clopping right down the middle of the southbound lane with no flashing lights, nothing but the orange triangle on the tailboard. Only a significant amount of driving skill seasoned with a hefty measure of luck had prevented a serious accident.

Dan waved to the stolid couple as the sleigh came abreast of the Bug and called above the bell-and-hoof duet.

"Hey, can you stop a minute? Hey, you! Can you give me a hand? I think I'm stuck!"

Dan would have had better luck speaking to the horse. Neither the black hat nor the black bonnet swung to right or left and the reins were as steady as guy wires. When the seat of the sleigh was even with Dan, the driver turned his head, opened his beard, and fired a jet of brown gravy into the snow between Dan's boots.

With an eruption of bile and adrenaline spurring him on, Dan took off after the sleigh. Afterward, he was glad he had nothing to throw or shoot. As it was, a 48-year-old pencil pusher in parka and laced boots was no match for a gaited carriage horse. So Dan had to content himself with a verbal barrage aimed at the departing backs of the Amish couple.

"You block-headed dumb dutchman! Who do you think you are? First you cause an accident. Then you won't even help a guy out of a snow bank! Why don't you keep your stupid horses and buggies and junk off the highway? You don't pay gasoline taxes, you don't pay for a license, you don't pay for inspections, you don't even have to worry about insurance. If you want to live in the eighteen hundreds, keep your

contraptions on the dirt roads where they belong. Leave the main highways for sensible people to drive on."

At that point, the horse added proverbial insult to injury. As if responding to some unknown cue, she lifted her tail and dropped a bushel of steaming road apples all over the snow. Dan whipped off his Cat hat, stamped on it a couple times, and then kicked it after the departing sleigh. There was nothing left to do but watch the Amish rig jingleclop out of sight around a bend in the road.

Feeling a little foolish and a whole lot worried Dan trudged back to the Bug. "Old Lady, you sure do look stupid, sitting there with your backside stuck in a snow bank." Then he realized the engine wasn't running and that could mean one of two things. Either it stalled when the car hit the bank while still in gear or snow had plugged the exhaust pipes on impact. He was sure he hadn't turned off the ignition but he had shifted to neutral. A quick look at the key verified that the ignition was indeed on and that the shift was in neutral. That meant the Old Lady was probably suffering from a bad case of tail pipe congestion.

Time for a shovel workout. Dan's digital warned 5:15 so he couldn't waste any time. He got the shovel out of the back and was staring dismally at the rear third of the Bug's length buried in the snow when a Jeep Grand Cherokee with New York plates slid to a stop ten yards down the road. The driver of the Jeep backed up to where Dan was standing and rolled down the passenger window.

"Having trouble?"

"Just a little. Some crazy Amishman was jogging his sleigh right down the middle of the road and when I pulled out to miss him, I took a skid and landed in this snow bank."

The stranger's eyes crinkled in a friendly smile. "Lucky you had something that soft to land in. Have a rope?"

"Sure do. Like to be prepared in weather like this."

"Well, we ought to have you out of there in no time. Since your nose is headed more north than south, I think I'll pull you out diagonally across the road. Let me get this thing turned around."

Dan had switched his four-ways on after the backward slide and now he turned off the car's lights. Headlights at crazy angles could be a distraction to oncoming drivers, he knew. He watched as his Good Samaritan swung the Jeep wagon around and backed it in toward the Bug's nose. Both sets of four-ways now flashed an adequate warning to southbound drivers.

"Sure glad I happened to come by at this particular time," the stranger said as he took off his glove and extended his hand. "I'm Jason Masterson."

Dan returned Masterson's firm grip. "Glad to meet you, Mr. Masterson. My name's Dan Marlow. Here's the tow rope. I have my end on the Bug and I think we're ready to go here."

As Masterson turned to snub the rope on the Jeep's ball hitch, Dan took quick inventory of his benefactor. Sharp dresser, medium height, rather good looking, quick with his hands. Must be some kind of business executive. The Jeep was loaded. Worth over close to fifty thousand new.

"Ready to go here, too, Dan. I'll take up the slack and then you flash your lights when you're ready to start moving."

As soon as Dan had folded back into the Bug he felt a slight nudge and realized the slack had been taken up and Masterson was ready to pull. He checked the shift to be sure it was in neutral and the handbrake to be sure it was off. Then he flashed the go sign. The Jeep moved ahead and the tail of the Bug slid out of the snow bank easily. When Masterson saw the Bug was clear, he cut left and stopped with both cars parallel to the snow bank and headed north. The tow rope was soon unhooked and the men shook hands in the yellow-and-red glare of two sets of four-way flashers.

"Mr. Masterson, I sure can't thank you enough for your help here this morning. Without your pull, I might have been shoveling for quite a while."

"Glad to help, Dan. After all, that's what neighbors are for."

Dan wasn't real clear how a man from New York could be his neighbor. Maybe he said that because New York was the next state up.

"Well, I do appreciate it and if I can ever return the favor, you know I owe you one. Guess I better get moving. And remember, If you see any horse droppings on the road, watch out for a horse-drawn conveyance of some kind or another around the next bend."

Masterson touched his right hand to the snap brim of his checkered hat and stepped up into the Jeep.

Dan pressed the light button on his digital and saw a dim 5:30. He realized he had some moving to do if he was going to make Camp Hill by six. He hurried back to the Bug and tossed the tow rope over the seat. The tail pipes weren't clogged after all and the Old Lady started on half a crank. He did a quick U-ie to continue south on 11-15. The tail lights of the Jeep were almost out of sight down the four-lane expanse of snowy highway as Dan rowed through the gears and dropped into fourth. This

time he resolved to keep his speed down and his highway awareness up for the rest of the trip.

He checked his cell phone and saw he had four bars. He scrolled to the station's number and pressed Send.

"Hey, Lacey. Dan here. Running a little late because of the snow. Just sit tight and I'll be there in a bit."

"Don't sweat it, Big Guy. Your station is in good hands!"

Chapter 3: Lacey

Camp Hill

Thursday, January 2, 6:00 A.M.

The yellow smiley face on the side of a building at Montgomery's Ferry reminded Dan he was now in range of WMOR's 3000 watts of effective radiated power. He switched to the FM band, punched the center button and turned on the radio in time to hear Lacey drawl, "Gotcha wall tuh wall and treetop tall, Good Buddy. Thanks fer the call. What's yer ten-twenty?"

Dan couldn't resist a smile at the thought of the truckers out there in their rigs talking to a Mainline Philadelphia girl with a communications degree, and her sounding like a Nashville truckstop waitress.

The trucker came back over the snore of his diesel. "Thanks fer the break there, Laceybaby. Shore is good tuh hear yer smilin' voice agin. This here's Hog Dog comin' at yuh with a loada live hams 'n chops, straight down the Pike from Phillytown. Right now I'm in the rockin' chair and I shore could do with a lit'la Dolly Parton to help pass the time."

"Hey, you got it there, Hog Dog. You know the mot-toe here on Lacey's All Night Truckstop. 'Ask fer a top-40 and you'll git it in 40'. And that just about gives us time fer 30 secs of good words from all the friendly folks over there at Clark's Ferry Truckstop."

Dan's smile broadened as Lacey hit the cart and his own non-Nashville voice came on with an invitation for all the truckers in the area to tank up on good food and hot coffee. Even after 30 years in the business he still got a kick out of hearing his own voice on the air. The spot ended and Lacey soon had Dolly piping the classic *Coat of Many Colors*. Although he was not into CB or country music or trucking, Dan realized he had a valuable piece of property in Lacey's truckstop show. It didn't seem possible but it was almost a year old now and had been duplicated in several major markets across the country.

The show had gotten started last January when a jeans and sweater coed with the improbable name of Lavender Bowder applied for an air job. At the time, she was a senior at Shippensburg University and majoring in communications with a minor in languages. Dan probably wouldn't have bothered to interview her if the station's only female announcer hadn't dropped out a month before to be a mother. Experience had made him a little leery of college kids who tended to be long on theory and short on experience. However, he did need a female voice to soften the station's all-male sound.

During the interview Dan had learned that Lacey was a nickname for Lavender which she had picked up in junior high. During her last two years of college, she had worked summers as a dispatcher for a Camden, New Jersey trucking firm. Since she'd had some two-way radio experience with truckers on the road, Dan decided to explore the idea of an all-night show for truckers.

At first, Lacey had misunderstood Dan's thinking and assumed that he wanted her to babysit an automation system all night long. Lacey had a bout of tears before she came to understand that Dan was talking about a live DJ job that would let her express a little creativity.

After Lacey had dried her tears, Dan spent quite a bit of time explaining the way the station operated as far as music was concerned. The station had a dish and all the down-link stuff. They could have pulled anything they needed off one of the satellite syndicated services. But Dan had held out for storing all their music on-site, using a massive hard drive with enough gigs of space to take care of all the songs they cared to put on the air.

All selections were broken down into three categories and recorded on the hard drive. There was a mix of "red" -- up-tempo adult contemporary cuts off recent top-40 lists, "yellow" -- classics and golden oldies. And there was what the twins called the "elevator music". "Blue" was all instrumental and heavy on strings.

The three categories of music were rotated manually in a mix which was pretty much determined by the time of day and the DJ's frame of mind. In the morning, the mix was heavy on red and light on yellow with no blue. In the afternoon, it was heavy on yellow and light on both red and blue. After dinner, the mix was heavy on blue, light on yellow, and no red.

For times the DJ didn't care to pick the songs, there was a library of play lists in the computer, for the times of day.

Suddenly Dan realized he was looking at a yellow light about to turn red. The automatic pilot had been on again and he was in Wormleysburg, ready to turn right toward Camp Hill and the station. He stopped for the light and then made the two consecutive right turns which put him on Greenwood Circle, climbing toward the crest of Greenwood Hill and the WMOR building.

"Not the first time and it won't be the last, huh Old Lady? You and I have this automatic pilot thing down to a pure science." Dan chuckled ruefully as he thought of what Karen would say if she knew he had just driven 17 miles in the snow with no recollection of anything that had happened.

Dan couldn't suppress a surge of boyish excitement at the thought of walking through the door this morning as General Manager. Twenty years on the sign-on

shift plus 10 more as a combination program director and morning man. Dan felt he had paid his dues for the job he was stepping into.

As the Bug putted to a stop beside Lacey's Vette he heard her give a live ID and put on the AP network news. Six o'clock straight up. "Sliced that just about as thin as possible, didn't we Old Lady?" Dan grunted as he heaved out of the bucket seat and strode up the snowy walk to the stone building. The door swung wide, framing the entire night shift as a welcoming party.

"Hey, Big Guy, come on in and have a cup of All-Night Truckstop coffee, courtesy of the best waitress to ever fill a mug!" Lacey smiled as she handed Dan a steaming cup. "How are the roads? All night long, the truckers have been telling me all kinds of horror stories about jack-knifed rigs and fender-benders. Sure am glad you made it okay!"

"Thanks for the coffee, Lacey. Mmmmmmm, that sure tastes good. Actually the roads weren't too bad. Thanks to some Amish clown in the middle of the road with his sleigh, I did a little looper and put the Bug's tail in a snow bank. No damage, though. Some guy from New York state pulled me out with his Jeep Grand Cherokee. How was your shift?"

"Pretty routine, except for all the ratchet jawing about the weather. When I heard about those rigs jack-knifing, it made me feel a little down, thinking about that accident Tuesday."

Dan sensed Lacey's pain and changed the subject. "Do me a favor and take off the network when the news is over. Do a forecast and hit a morning play list. By then, I'll have my head screwed on well enough to take it from there."

"Sure, Big Guy," Lacey agreed as she gave Dan a quick, impulsive hug.

Dan pushed through the news room door and grabbed yesterday's local news folder. He hurried back to the control room for the notes on the police calls Lacey had made during the last hour of her shift. He scanned this material and noted that all reported police activities related to fender benders with no fatalities. A few resulted in treated-and-released visits to local hospitals but nothing appeared too serious. Dan decided to type up three of the most local and expensive mishaps for use on the six-thirty local news.

As Dan moved over to the console, Lacey looked up and he could see the pain had crept back into her eyes.

"Ready to take it, Big Guy?" At Dan's nod, she continued soberly. "By the way, Dan, I'm going down to Gettysburg for that funeral tomorrow morning. The service begins at ten so I should have time to finish my shift, go home and change, and still be on time." Two big tear drops spilled down her cheeks as they exchanged places at

the console. Dan watched her profile closely as she snuffled in a tissue and then he spoke softly.

"Hey, Lacey, you're not having a guilt thing over that accident, are you?"

"No, I'm not feeling guilty. I know truckers are constantly driving and talking on the CB at the same time. I do feel involved, though. I mean, after all, my voice was the last thing he heard before he died. Dan it was horrible, the most horrible thing that's ever happened to me. I can still remember every word he said. It happened about 3:20 Tuesday morning. I got a CB call from this trucker who said his handle was Hot Lava and that he had a load of steel out of Pittsburgh. He'd just left the Turnpike and was headed south on I-83 for Baltimore. He was telling me how much he liked my show and that he always listened when he was in the Harrisburg Area. He had just asked me to play something for him by the Dixie Chicks when I guess his rig hit a patch of ice caused by runoff that froze on the road during the night." Her shoulders shook with sobs before she could continue.

"And, Dan, the worst part of it was, he had his mike open the whole time the accident was happening. I found out later that he had a mike mounted above the windshield. He had it fixed so he could key his mike open with a foot switch on the floor. When his rig started to skid toward that concrete overpass, I could hear him panting as he fought the wheel to pull it out. I even heard the sound of his last scream all mixed up with this horrible crash. Then there was nothing. I don't know, Dan. It's going to be a long time before I can do my show without hearing the sound of that scream and that crash. I didn't even get to know his real name until I read it in the paper the next night."

Dan said tenderly, "You've got a lot of heart for such a little lady. Just don't go letting yourself get all messed up with guilt over this thing. If he had to get it in his rig, at least he had a friendly voice in his ear just before he went. You know, someone who cared about how guys like him make their living. Why not think about it that way?"

Lacey mopped her face and managed to brighten enough to use her WKRP nickname for Dan. "You're right, Big Guy. I'll try to think about it that way."

"Good. Now, how about cueing up that Penn State farm report CD?" He asked by way of diversion. "I have a couple fender-benders to type up before the 6:30 local news." Dan turned to the computer terminal, conveniently situated on an island to the right of the console, and began typing up the police calls for use on the air.

Dan was proud of his ability to sound good on the air under pressure, both at the mike and at the controls. Now that special skill all really good DJs have come to the fore. The hassle of getting out of the driveway, the tangle with the Amish sleigh, getting in 30 minutes later than he usually did, plus Lacey's state of mind over the

accident, to say nothing of the hard knot of excitement at the pit of his stomach at the idea of being, as Lacey put it, the "big guy" now. And yet, the most discriminating regular listener would have had no indication that this wasn't just another ho-hum hour in another routine morning shift.

Lacey said, "Your Penn State farming friends are ready to tell the world how a black cow can chew green grass and give white milk which churns yellow butter. Anything else before I take off?"

"Not a thing. Go on home and get some rest. You'll be having a pretty heavy day tomorrow. Sorry I kept you this long."

"Don't mention it, Dan. Nothing Herb Tarlick wouldn't do for his Big Guy!" She laughed almost merrily as she brushed the top of his head with a daughterly kiss and left the studio.

Dan smiled as he turned back to the console, relieved that she was over the worst of her depression. The six-figure digital clock above the console read 6:17:20 and for the next twelve minutes he settled into the routine he knew so well. Start a track. Check the log to see which spot comes up next. Get the spot from the CD rack to the left of the console. Run the spot at the next music break, along with a live ID, time check, and weather capsule. Back to the next drive-time music track . . .

The station wasn't big. The salary, even with the raise that went along with the promotion, certainly wasn't impressive. The staff was minimal. In fact, he had never done a show where he had an engineer in another studio handling all the technical things for him. But Dan was satisfied. Deep down, even when nobody else is around, satisfied. Satisfied with the job. With his marriage, with his children. Just plain satisfied.

The clock read 6:29:45 as he faded a yellow track under and opened the mike.

"More good sounds to help you start the day right coming up after Agri-Digest on WMOR-FM Camp Hill, round the clock stereo music with the latest news and weather for the greater Harrisburg area. Sixteen degrees in Camp Hill at six-thirty and this is Dan Marlow with the local news . . . "

Chapter 4: Snow Delay

Seven Stars Elementary School
Thursday, January 2, 8:45 A.M.

Karen Marlow, elementary school principal and mother of livewire twins, stepped briskly down the hall toward the multipurpose room. Kevin and Kellie hoppity-skipped at each side of their hurrying mother, breathless from the cold air they had just left behind and the excitement brought on by the current change in their daily schedule.

"Mommy, are we really going to get to be in a teachers meeting with all the teachers? Are we Mommy? Are we?" chirped Kevin.

"Will Miss Black be there, too? I've never been in a meeting with Miss Black before," Kellie added.

Kevin's bluegreen eyes suddenly sparkled with mischief. "Yeah, and if Miss Black talks too much, will you yell at her? Hey, Kellie, wouldn't it be neat if Mommy had to yell at Miss Black and we got to watch?"

Karen couldn't resist a chuckle as she remembered her first exposure to a faculty meeting while student teaching during her senior year. She had been amazed to find that thirty teachers in one room exhibited just about the same behaviors as thirty children in one room. Too much talking and not enough listening. Waiting till the last minute before taking a seat and settling down. Back-of-the-hand wisecracks with accompanying giggles. Numerous trips to the coffee urn and, consequently, the rest room. Dragging chairs to the back of the room to be with friends instead of sitting where the chairs were originally located. After 24 years as a teacher and principal, Karen knew for a fact the twins were about to be treated to a demonstration of group behavior they didn't really need to see. She looked down at her 6-year-old son with mock severity.

"Yes, Kevin, if Miss Black talks as much in my meeting this morning as you seem to talk in her first grade class, I may just have to yell at her. And both of you can watch." The twins tee-heed gleefully.

"Now that that's settled, let me go over your instructions again," Karen said as she hunkered down to their eye level and placed a gentle hand behind each curly red head. "I want you to get a drink here and use the rest room before you go into

the multipurpose room. When you do go in there, take your crayons and coloring books and sit at the low table in the back. Oh, and one more thing. After the meeting starts, I don't want to hear one peep out of either of you unless you think you're about to pass out or throw up--"

"--or both," giggled Kellie, ducking into the girls' room.

"That goes for you, too, young man," Karen warned to the back of Kevin's head as he, in turn, disappeared into the boys' room.

With things apparently under control on the domestic front, Karen turned her thoughts to the faculty meeting about to begin. Early that morning she'd received a call from Dr. Finsterbush stating that he had called a two-hour delay for all students in the district. Hazardous driving conditions for buses which had to travel some pretty narrow back roads was the obvious reason. Teachers, however, were to report to their buildings at 8:45 with all principals conducting a one-hour in-service training session beginning at nine.

The sudden prospect of keeping 20 teachers meaningfully occupied during their first hour back on the job after the Christmas break angered Karen more than a little. Easy for him to make sweeping proclamations. A lot tougher for us to carry them out. Then she had remembered a brief conversation she'd had before Christmas with Tom Jackson, the new assistant superintendent for curriculum. Tom had told her the district was planning to launch a new program for improving computer-assisted instruction in grades 4 through 6. Although this new program wouldn't be in full operation until September, the district wanted to start exposing teachers to the basic concepts as soon as possible.

Frantically she had dialed Jackson's home number, afraid one of the other principals might have the same idea she had. Tom readily agreed to Karen's request, however, and had just finished setting up his equipment when the principal stepped into the room.

"Good morning, Dr. Jackson, and am I ever glad you were able to make it. When the superintendent called this morning and said I had to do something with the teachers for an hour, you were the first person who popped into my head."

"Glad to be so close to your consciousness level," winked the curriculum specialist genially. "Seriously, though, I'm happy to talk with teachers and try to erode a little of the stock resistance I encounter when some people hear the word 'computer'-- even though we're now in the next century. Just about ready to start?"

"I think so," Karen said slowly as she scanned the activity around the large room. The teachers were scattered in clumps and clusters, chatting amiably and making frequent trips to the coffee urn and doughnut tray on the counter. She spied the twins, installed at their rear table. Someone had supplied them with doughnuts and what must be cups of milk. The canny mother accurately predicted that right then Kevin was saying to Kellie, "Looks more like a party than a meeting." Miss Black stopped at their table to say hello and Karen turned back to her guest.

"Yes, Dr. Jackson, I think we'll try to get started. Teachers are a lot like the kids, you know. Just a little hard to get them settled down on the first day after Christmas vacation."

Before Karen had arrived, Jackson had arranged 20 chairs in a double semicircle facing a large movie screen. The projector was a type Karen had never seen before and a very compact notebook computer was hooked to the projector with a slim, black cable.

As Tom moved across the room for another cup of coffee, Karen spoke above the buzz of voices. "Folks, would you mind moving over this way, please? Over this way, please. That's right, just take these seats here in front of the screen . . . Janet, I'd prefer that you didn't move the chairs around. We're going to have a little demonstration and we've tried to set things up so everyone has a chance to see. Thank you. All right, I guess everyone's ready to go now."

After a minor flurry of chair scraping and refreshment juggling, the group got seated and assumed a moderately expectant attitude. Karen felt comfortable with her teachers, in spite of the last-minute arrangements for the meeting. Her appearance was easily the equal of her younger female teachers in terms of both fashion and form. In addition, her qualifications were superior to any teachers in the room. Five years as a classroom teacher, 14 years as a full-time principal, with permanent certification as both teacher and principal. She knew that many of her teachers had opinions other than those she supported. She was fair and open in her dealings with them, however, and each person on the staff enjoyed the right of stating an opinion if not making a decision.

Today's meeting is different, Karen mused. Teachers still resist using computers in the classroom for any real instruction. Maybe they're afraid the technology revolution will replace them with beeping, blinking boxes. Whatever the reasons, several Seven Stars teachers did resent the incursion of the non-human element in the classroom and did see the computer as a threat.

Karen had purchased a desktop computer when they first came out, certain that microcomputers were here to stay and that they would become very important to the education process. As the years passed, she kept step with the latest Macintosh technology. She often played the latest *Blue's Clues* or *Little Bear* games with the twins in the evening.

Now, she was looking forward to what Jackson had to say about the district's plans to give computers a bigger role in the schools. She leaned back against a table, her hands resting on its edge. She casually crossed her fashionably-booted ankles and smiled openly at her teachers.

"To be perfectly honest with you people, this meeting is as big a surprise for me as it is for you. I am glad to see that you all got the message on your radios and I want to compliment you on being on time, in spite of the snow. And, come to think of it, maybe you'd rather face me for the first hour after Christmas vacation than 30 little angels who've been penned up at home for the last ten days." Appreciative laughter greeted this remark.

"Actually, you won't have to face me very much at all during this meeting. On very, very short notice I was able to secure the services of a guest speaker. He's fairly new to the River Area School District and I'm not sure you've all had a chance to meet him. You're heard about him, though. I'd like you to meet Dr. Tom Jackson, our new assistant superintendent for curriculum. He'll be talking with us about the district's new plan to increase computer-assisted instruction in grades four, five, and six. I know that 'computer' may not be your favorite word but I'm sure you'll give him your attention."

The administrator took Karen's place in the front of the room and she was pleased to see that he was an excellent presenter. Briefly he outlined the district computer plan as it applied to the elementary grades. Starting in September, typing would be taught in the fourth grade. The following year, word processing would be added to the fifth grade curriculum and the year after that, sixth graders would be getting database and spreadsheet utilization.

Then Jackson moved on to his demonstration. "Now, there's one thing I know for sure about computers and that's this: You can't learn how to use them without touching them. So, I need a volunteer operator. Here's one. You look like you're on the edge of your seat and about to volunteer," and Jackson pointed to a young fifth grade teacher named Bonnie Carter. Maybe there was a computer under the tree this Christmas. Now Mom will get a chance to keep up with her kids."

Karen was both amused and amazed at Jackson's insight into the structure of the group. Bonnie was definitely the unofficial leader and usually set the pace for

the manner in which the rest of the articulate teachers would react to a given situation. So far during the meeting she had been sitting sideways in her chair and gazing serenely at the flank of a snowy mountain which could be seen through the high windows at the rear of the room. Everyone was quick to catch the significance of Bonnie's so-called offer to volunteer and a few male chuckles were heard around the semicircle. The young teacher rose gracefully, though, and took a seat in front of the keyboard. Jackson noticed she immediately rested her fingers on the home keys.

"Ah hah! I can tell by where Bonnie has placed her fingers that she knows a little about touch typing. Have you had any experience with computers?" Bonnie smiled but shook her head.

"No problem. In fact, it's kind of fun to introduce someone to a computer for the first time. Since you already have some typing ability, you'll do well, I'm sure." Bonnie continued to look pleasant but noncommittal.

Then Jackson held up a thin, thin, round object about three and one half inches across. "All of you are familiar with music CDs. The CD players you probably have in your cars and homes can only play music, much like the record turn tables we used to have. Computers have disk players also; they can play both music and read data. Many computers also have CD burners. Recording data onto a CD is called burning.

"Computer memory and storage is measured in megabytes of data. A megabyte is about 10,000 typewriter characters, including letters, numerals, spaces, anything that takes up space on a line. We usually call a megabyte a *meg*. The disk you are passing around now will hold 700 megs of information. That's equal to roughly 7,000 typewritten pages, about enough space to hold the manuscript of your first seven novels." The group laughed with interest and appreciation.

Bonnie looked up from the computer keyboard which she had been studying. "I understand that secretaries and professional writers use word processors on computers to do their work. But what you said a while ago, about starting kids on word processing in the fifth grade. Hey, none of my kids are secretaries and the only novels they're writing are the messages they're texting back and forth." A few teachers chuckled supportively.

"You're right, at this point in time. But where will these same kids be say ten, twenty years from now? I'll tell you where they'll be if we don't give them functional computer skills now. They'll be lost." The issues were serious but Jackson kept his tone light and a smile on his face.

Nate Dike, one of the older teachers, spoke for the first time. "My kids can barely get their math problems right. Now you want to make computer programmers out of them. I say let's get the basics down first. Then, if we have any time, we can start thinking about messing around with computers." Henrietta Coop reached over and slapped Nate on the back.

Jackson responded in his same light tone. "I couldn't agree more about not teaching kids about computer programming in the elementary grades. But we're talking about two different things here. The elementary computer program which the district is planning will help the students develop computer *application* and not computer *programming* skills. Application skills relate to a person's ability to use such computer applications as word processing, databases, spreadsheets, telecommunications, spell checking, and mail merge. The ratio of computer users to computer programmers is about the same as the ratio of car drivers to car mechanics. Some of your kids may end up as programmers but that is a career choice we'll not ask them to make in the fifth grade. By the time they get to junior high, they can choose an introductory programming course. If they like that, they can go on to a computer programmer training program at the tech school."

Next Jackson asked Karen to have someone dim lights and pull the blackout drapes over the windows at the rear of the room. While that was being done, he turned on the strange-looking projector which was sitting atop of a conventional overhead projector.

"A microcomputer system is made up of four basic elements. The microprocessor is housed in the notebook computer where Bonnie is sitting. The hard disk drive and the disk drive are also in the same box, and they can read programs from disks and write data onto disks, and I'm talking about disks like the one we passed around earlier. The monitor is the part of the computer which looks like a TV screen. Since I wanted all of you to see what's happening on the monitor's screen, I hooked up the computer to this computer projector instead of a monitor. But I believe all of you should be able to see.

"Now, Bonnie, I'd like you press the key with the delta symbol, at the upper right corner of the keyboard. Good."

The computer responded with a pleasant chime and a red tally light winked on the front as the program began to run. "As you can see on the screen, this program is called SchoolWorks. It's really a combination of three very useful computer applications: word processing, database, and spreadsheet. Today, we'll just work with the word processor and save the others for another session. The list

of items you see on the screen now is called a menu. The select cursor is in the form of this black arrow. And the arrow is controlled by this little device called a --

"--mouse," chimed in Bonnie. "And it's the only kind of a mouse I ever want to see in this building!"

"Right, a mouse. See! You're already becoming computer literate."

To get you started, Bonnie, we'll bring a word processing file up from the hard drive that needs a little more work done on it. Just move your mouse until the arrow is pointing to Word Processing on the Menu. All right, good. There it is."

Karen watched with interest as Jackson demonstrated the various features of the word processing program including single-character and block actions. She marveled at the ease with which a computer beginner was able to edit, delete, move, and copy the text on the screen. With Jackson's prompting, Bonnie even did a find and replace action throughout the entire document.

Then Karen had a question of her own. "Dr. Jackson, have you gotten any reaction from the high school business ed teachers to having fourth graders learn to type?"

"Yes I have and their feelings are mixed. Some say, 'The younger the better.' Others say, 'They'll learn bad habits we won't be able to break.' All of which makes my job of curriculum coordinator that much more interesting. I think the answer will have to come out of the elementary and secondary teachers getting together and roughing in the outlines of a multi-grade keyboarding curriculum." Several teachers began to interact with Jackson and the discussion was self-propelled for several minutes.

Karen checked her watch and was startled to see the buses would be arriving in ten minutes. She walked over to the wall and switched on the lights as a signal it was time to close the meeting. Jackson wrapped it up. "I know the buses are due any minute but this final word. Today I'll be installing a complete microcomputer system in the faculty room complete with that fourth component, the printer, which I didn't have time to demonstrate today. This computer will have the SchoolWorks integrated software and a manual which documents how all the features work. Please use it for the next couple months. Do your lesson plans on it. Write your doctoral thesis on it. Make up a database file for your favorite recipes. Whatever. I'll be training Mrs. Marlow's secretary in how everything works and you can use her as a resource person if you get stuck."

"And one more thing. The district has a number of loaner computers we're prepared to allow parents to borrow in case their kids don't already have one at home.

"And now I'm really done. Thanks very much for inviting me to talk to your teachers, Mrs. Marlow. And I do believe the first bus is coming up the drive now."

There was a flurry of scraping chairs and retrieving belongings as the principal concluded the meeting.

Out in the hall, Kevin and Kellie bubbled and bounced with enthusiasm. Karen shooed them toward Miss Black's first grade room and then headed to her office.

As Karen stepped into the outer office she noted that Dr. Jackson was in serious conversation with Martha Metz, her secretary. So serious, in fact, that Martha's face was the color of fresh putty and a torrent of tears seemed about to cascade down her chubby cheeks. The white lace cap perched on the back of her head bobbed spasmodically as she struggled to control the sobs which shook her torso.

Karen was instantly alarmed. Martha Metz was no crybaby. The converse was true and she was considered the most unflappable person on the whole staff, including the principal. Blistering phone calls from disgruntled parents, playground accidents, kids upchucking on the floor, an overflowing commode in the girls' room, nothing seemed to rock her boat. And if the nurse or janitor or principal was a little late in arriving at the scene of the crisis, Martha was an expert at sticking her finger in the dike until help arrived.

While Karen was mentally searching for an answer, Martha turned and ran from the office in the direction of the rest room. Karen shot a quick question mark at Jackson who spread his hands defensively. "Your guess is as good as mine. I absolutely didn't do a thing to that woman. In fact, I didn't even have time. I simply walked into the office and asked her if she was ready to become a computer expert. She turned as white as a ghost." Jackson waved in the direction of some cartons of computer equipment in a corner of the office. "When she saw that stuff there she started to shake like an old Pinto's front end."

Karen followed the wave of Jackson's hand and noted for the first time that she did indeed have some cartons of new equipment in her outer office. Must be the stuff Jackson had told the teachers he would be putting in the faculty room.

Turning back to the assistant superintendent, Karen smiled and said, "I think I may have just a little insight into Martha's problem. That is, if this stuff here is what I think it is."

"You're looking at the very latest microcomputer system, complete with a laser printer," Jackson responded with more than a touch of professional pride.

Karen rested her right hand on the top carton of computer equipment and mused, "I think I know what the problem is. Back in September, when I first heard that the District might be putting more computers in the elementary schools, I mentioned the idea of breaking the teachers in gently by putting one in the faculty room. And I told Martha she might have to become the resident expert so she could help everyone out when they locked up their keyboard. She got all white and nervous then, too. Said she didn't think she'd be able to do something like that. I just passed it off as some more Pennsylvania Dutch stubbornness and dropped the subject. From the looks of Martha this morning, though, she's suffering from something more substantial than stubbornness."

Jackson shook his head as he reached for his topcoat and briefcase. "Sure seems strange to me but I'll let the intricacies of personnel management up to administrative pros. See you later."

Karen responded automatically, still staring at the somehow offensive computer equipment. Sure looks harmless enough, just like the system we have at home only newer. Wonder what Martha's problem really is? Maybe something to do with her religion. Mennonites are pretty strict about some things. Never heard of anyone having a religious conviction against a computer, though.

At that moment Martha re-entered the room silently and walked straight through to Karen's private office. The principal, eyes soft with concern, stared at the broad back of her secretary and with a puzzled shake of her head, followed her into the office, closing the door.

"Feeling a little better now, Martha"? she asked softly.

"Awk, Mrs. Marlow, I'm sorry to have to act so dumb. I chust can't stand to be in the same room with that computer sing. I haint being lazy and trying to get out of my verk, but it chust makes me feel all scairt inside, still."

Karen smiled encouragement. "Martha Metz! The last thing I'd think about you is that you're lazy so get that out of your head. I must say, though, that I am a little puzzled about why you seem so frightened by the computer equipment."

Martha kneaded her work-reddened hands in her ample lap and stared out the window at the yellow buses still disgorging noisy children. "It's ... It's my church, Mrs. Marlow." She shifted in her chair and extracted a red bandanna from a commodious pocket in her smock. After several honks and an assortment of wipes and sniffles she looked into her boss's face with eyes filled with pure terror. "Brudder Schwartz, that's ow-wur preacher, Brudder Schwartz says them computer sings is of the dewil."

Karen had no difficulty understanding Martha's heavy Pennsylvania Dutch accent. She'd had plenty of practice with that. She was at a total loss, however, when it came to comprehending what Martha had just said. "Martha, I don't know what you mean when you talk about computers and the devil. But I can see that you're very upset. Why don't you take the rest of the day off and go home. Try and get yourself straightened out. You haven't used a sick day so far this school year so you don't need to feel guilty about going home now, as upset as you are."

Martha shook her head stubbornly. "Awk, now, you don't have to treat me like a baby. If you voud chust take those sings out of my office, I sink I could still do my verk," she proposed as she heaved her large frame from the upholstered office chair.

Karen was briefly annoyed but quickly softened when she saw the look of terror in Martha's eyes. "All right, Martha, tell you what we'll do," she said briskly. "We'll just put those cartons over in the faculty room where they belong. Think that'll make you feel better?"

"Chust so I don't have to verk it, still. I don't want to be no computer expert.

Karen quickly agreed. Besides, she preferred to be the one who did any teaching about computers. She didn't want them to get the idea that word processing and other computer applications were strictly clerical tasks for secretaries.

Karen started to say the janitor could take care of moving the equipment but Martha didn't seem to want to wait. She trotted down to the supply room and came back with a light-weight hand truck. Refusing help from Karen, she stacked the cartons and trucked them easily. While Karen held the door, Martha trundled the unwanted computer equipment out of the office and down the hall towards the faculty room. Karen watched her go and, with a puzzled shake of her head, turned back to the office.

Chapter 5: Walnut Valley

*I-80 East, Approaching the Delaware River
Thursday, January 2, 12:30 P.M.*

The Chevrolet Geo Metro buzzed along at a steady 50 m.p.h., dodging potholes and slower vehicles in response to slight movements of Mark Marlow's right hand. The PennDOT plows had scraped the roadway reasonably clear of snow but what did remain had been converted to black soup by a mixture of salt and cinders. From tires to roofline, the Geo looked more black than yellow as a result of the miasma churned up by the 18-wheelers. Only those areas of the windshield touched by the wipers had any semblance of cleanliness, and at the expense of over a gallon of washer solution since leaving Liverpool.

Those who knew Mark well could have detected that he was in a foul mood. The first day back to work after the Christmas and New Year's festivities was always a real drag. And three solid hours of driving through truck muck hadn't done a whole lot to sweeten his disposition. On top of that, a two o'clock interview with a reporter from the *Atlantic City Press* would be tense at best.

But the smooth driving style and slump in the Geo's bucket gave no indication to the casual observer that Mark was anything but cool and calm. As always, his tensions and frustrations ran deep beneath a veneer of poise, professionalism, and self control. Even as a child, he could ruin a party game of Poor Pussy because no one could ever make him laugh--unless he wanted to.

As the Metro hummed across the Delaware River bridge into New Jersey, Mark turned his thoughts toward his destination. Walnut Valley was a small hamlet in the northern New Jersey hills and lakes region. It was situated directly across the Delaware from the Pocono resort community of Shawnee, Pennsylvania. Walnut Valley had only one claim to distinction. New Jersey's largest residential facility for the care and training of persons with mental disabilities was located there.

In 1880, the State of New Jersey had decided to use a large tract of land in the remote Walnut Valley area to establish a custody center for females of child bearing age with mental disabilities. The intent was to keep these girls and women locked up so they wouldn't have children. This was thought to be the best way to reduce the birth rate of persons with disabilities. However, the mental retardation specialists of that day overlooked one important fact. Dozens of causes for mental

retardation have absolutely nothing to do with persons with disabilities giving birth to persons with disabilities.

The original nucleus of the Walnut Valley Colony was an impressive mountain stone mansion built by a lumber baron during the early 1800's. After the owner lost his showplace to the state as a result of a major tax problem, it was turned over to the Department of Institutions. During the first decade of the Colony's existence, the average daily census of the one-building institution ran around thirty-five girls and women between the ages of 15 and 45. After the turn of the century, however, the State expanded the mission of the Walnut Valley Colony. It would begin admitting, in the clinical language of the time, feeble-minded idiots and imbeciles as well as morons.

With the expansion of the admission criteria, growth in population, staff, and facilities was fairly constant through the late 60's. By the time Mark first saw the Colony as a member of a student tour from East Stroudsburg State College, the institution was just short of a self-contained community nestled in the gently rolling hills.

As the Geo came off the bridge into New Jersey, Mark held to the right lane and prepared to take the State Route 94 exit. The secondary road was still slippery and snow-covered but it was a distinct relief to get away from I-80's black slurry of salt-melted snow and cinders.

The Metro plowed a little in the heavier snow on the winding, high-crowned road up to Walnut Valley. However, Mark dropped from fifth to fourth and made each correction with automatic ease. As the twin stone pillars of the main gate came into view through a screen of pines, he smoothly downshifted to third and then second, making the turn without touching the brakes.

The scene Mark saw after turning into the Colony's main drive was suitable for framing. Snow-bowed evergreens lined the broad drive which curved past the pillared portico of the stone administration building. An American flag atop the ornamental cupola snapped briskly against the brilliant blue of a January sky. Two well-muffled groundskeepers cleared snow from the broad flight of shallow steps that led up to the main entrance.

Mark eased the Geo up the drive at the posted 15 m.p.h., circling the Administration Building to a parking lot in the rear. He pulled into a stall marked DIRECTOR OF PROGRAMS and slumped back against the headrest.

The parking lot was at the base of a large quadrangle which swept upward from the back of the administration building for over 200 yards. Both long sides of the quad were lined with identical dormitory buildings constructed of the same attractive stone used by the lumber baron for the huge home which now served as the administration building. Another pillared building stood at the crest of the hill at the far end of the quad. This one housed a spacious auditorium, gymnasium, and classrooms.

Mark squinted his eyes against the glare of the sun coming off the snow-covered mall in front of him and wondered absently what percentage of New Jersey's population had the slightest notion of what went on in the 26 residence cottages of the Walnut Valley Colony. Not that what went on in those cottages wasn't typical of the nation's residential facilities for persons with mental disabilities. Definitely typical and probably superior, Mark decided with no sense of elation. But who cares? Who really cares?

Who cares that at least 95 percent of the thousand or so human beings who live in these attractive stone buildings have severe and profound mental disabilities with measured or estimated IQs of less than 35. Who has the slightest notion that many of the Walnut Valley residents require total personal care including feeding, dressing, bathing, and diapering. And not just children and adolescents but adults of all ages as well. Who could even guess that many in this population are given to the self-destructive practices of headbanging and biting, along with fecal smearing and fecal ingestion. Who can possibly visualize the contorted and contractured arms and legs belonging to individuals who are old enough to vote but have neither the physical nor mental ability to raise a head and make eye contact with a parent standing beside the crib.

Who really cares?

Sure, the scores of human services aides, cottage training technicians, LPNs, and RNs care. And the dozens of teachers, social workers, psychologists, recreators, office workers, and support staff who keep the institution operational day after day. They care. And, to varying degrees, a double handful of bureaucrats and legislators in Trenton care.

Many parents care. They visit, have their family members home for short vacations, send cards or packages.

But aside from the people whose lives are directly touched by the residents of Walnut Valley, who really cares what happens inside these beautiful buildings?

Does God care?

Mark Marlow fell far short of being a religious person. But he listened respectfully as the Walnut Valley chaplain and various visiting clergymen discoursed somberly on the infinite wisdom of God in giving us these poor unfortunate creatures so we can grow, spiritually and personally, from the rewarding experience of caring for them from the cradle to the grave.

A comforting line of counseling to be fed parents who are still in the first stages of trauma at the realization that God has visited such a blessing on them. But does that really prove God cares?

If there really is a God, and if this God is really a God of love, how could he possibly allow such unfortunate blobs of humanity to come into existence at all? Couldn't this omniscient and omnipotent God find a more efficient and humane way to expand the spiritual and personal capacities of mortals?

The tall figure slumping in the front seat of the Metro shuddered visibly as the winter chill finally reached him, having dissipated the stored heat in the small car's interior. With a slight shake of his head as if to clear away the morose thoughts of the last few moments, Mark retrieved his brief case from the back seat and strode toward the rear entrance of the Administration Building.

Inside, the blue-eyed blonde at the switchboard smiled a welcome. "Well, hello there, stranger. Enjoy your vacation?"

Mark had used the short walk from the parking lot to clear his head of all melancholy musings. Wouldn't pay to start off the first work day of the new year slumped in the slough of despondency. And besides, he had to be up for his interview with the reporter from the *Atlantic City Press*. No telling what one of those birds could make of a careless comment or a perceived attitude.

He returned the smile. "Enjoyed every bit of it except the coming-back part, Brenda. Your bright and shining face does a lot to ease the pain, though."

"C'mon, Mr. Marlow. I bet you say that to all the operators," Brenda bantered easily. "Not that I'm complaining or anything.

Actually none of the younger unattached female members of the Walnut Valley staff ever complained about a chance to talk with the handsome but enigmatic Mark Marlow. In a shameful breach of confidentiality, the girls in the personnel office had surreptitiously circulated the high points gleaned from his resume only 24 hours after he started work. They knew the salient points by heart:

28 years old, six-two, 180 pounds, B.S. in Phys Ed from East Stroudsburg, Master's in Special Ed from Penn State. The grapevine had added another important fact: widowed by a tragic car accident after less than a year of marriage. And now Mark had been Director of Programs at WVC for five years.

Of greatest interest and frustration was the fact that Mark had not dated one WVC employee in the last five years. No amount of milking the grapevine or tittering around the soda machine could negate that fact. Of course, Brenda Dockerty and a whole bevy of others kept trying and even hoping. But it always ended in open friendliness and nothing more.

"By the way, Mr. Marlow, I'll be talking to you tonight on the beeper."

Mark had started down the hall to his office but turned and came back to the switchboard counter. "Oh, really. "Thought you were one of the big shots now, working straight days," he joked.

"Yeah, well, you know Mrs. Brumley and her stomach problems. Called up a while ago and said she couldn't make it tonight so I volunteered to work a double. Don't mind, do you?"

"Brenda, you're doing it again. Tempting me to make an unprofessional comment about one of your fellow workers. Naughty, naughty!" They shared a conspiratorial chuckle. Everyone who carried a beeper was fully aware of Alice Brumley's chronic absenteeism. Brenda was always an improvement over Alice and her physical complaints.

Heading back down the hall, Mark was puzzled to see a fog of cigarette smoke drifting out of his open office door. The prim and proper Mrs. Evelyn Wintergreen never smoked and could usually stare down anyone who dared to try it in her office. Folks on the staff knew about and respected the Wintergreen ban on smoking, so who could be raising such a stink?

One Styrofoam cup was being used as an ashtray and the other delivered black coffee to a lined and leathery face which must belong to the guy from the *Press*. He was slumped in a side chair, an ash-tipped cigarette drooping from his mouth as he jabbed the air with his free hand to punctuate some pronouncement he was making. From the look on Evelyn's face, she considered the story being told to be as dirty as the air.

"Good afternoon, sir," Mark extended his right hand toward the tale-teller. "I'm Mark Marlow."

The visitor half rose and offered a veined and bony hand. "Tom Creedy, *Atlantic City Press*. Got here early for our appointment but your secretary was kind enough to give me some coffee and a place to sit. Even listened to a couple of my corny jokes, didn't you Evie?" he winked. Mrs. Wintergreen didn't blink.

"Glad you're on time, Mr. Creedy. I have a firm appointment at three so what you get done will have to happen between now and then. Why don't you step into my office and I'll be with you in just a moment."

Mark closed the door behind the newspaperman and turned back to his secretary. He smiled as Evelyn threw up the window as far as it would go and reached into her drawer for the Lysol spray. "Take it easy with that stuff, Evelyn, or you'll have this place smelling like a public restroom," he kidded.

The plump and fortyish secretary turned with eyes blazing. "Did you ever see such a boor?" she hissed. "He's been sitting here for the last forty-five minutes chain smoking those filthy weeds and telling stories that are even filthier. If he hadn't been from the *Press*, I'd have thrown him out on his butt. And pun intended!"

Mark laughed out loud and moved to close the window against the frigid draft. "You may not die of lung cancer but you'll die of pneumonia if you aren't careful. Seriously, though, I do appreciate your putting up with that clown until I got here. Just proves what I always say. You're the best that ever banged a typewriter."

"Never mind the soft soap, Mr. Marlow," Evelyn cautioned while looking pleased. "You can save that for those young ladies down the hall."

Mark laughed again. "Well, I guess I'll put on my oxygen mask and see what this rascal's up to. Hold all calls except Dr. Kimberly or an outside toll call, okay?"

Inside his office, a fog to rival the earlier one was already building. Like Mrs. Wintergreen, Mark never permitted smoking in his office and saw no reason to change his policy just for a reporter. Before he could begin to speak, Creedy's cigarette foaled a long ash on the carpet. A carpet, incidentally, which didn't cost the taxpayers a cent because it had been paid for from Mark's own pocket.

"Before we get started, Mr. Creedy, I wonder if you'd mind observing that *Thank You for Not Smoking* sign?"

Creedy looked up at the tall administrator from beneath the snap brim of his battered checked hat. Without removing the cigarette from the corner of his mouth he set his coffee cup on the corner of Mark's desk and crossed his arms.

"What are you? A health nut or a holy roller, or both?" he sneered in his sandpaper voice. "What's it to you if I die of lung cancer or heart disease? That's my business, not yours. You anti-smokers give me a--"

"Just a minute, sir," Mark cut in smoothly. "I only asked that you not smoke here in my office. It is my business when you smoke in my presence, here in my office. You see, I'm not opposed to smoking although I don't smoke myself. I am opposed, strongly opposed, to smoking inside, however. Smoking is an outdoor activity, along with burning leaves or charcoaling a steak. That's why places of human habitation since the dawn of history have always had a provision for letting smoke escape from cooking and heating fires. A hole in a cave roof, a flap at the top of a teepee, and, of course, the chimney. Humans have always abhorred smoke inside their dwellings. With the notable exception of tobacco smoke in recent centuries, that is."

Mark hated to expound on his no-smoking philosophy at the beginning of an interview. The little newsman's attitude softened, though, and he spoke with no trace of his earlier rancor. "It's crazy for us to be wasting time talking about smoking when I came here to get a story. I do respect your ideas, though. I hear you saying that you're opposed to smoking because of what it does to you, not what it does to me. Right?"

Mark nodded. "I guess you could put it that way."

"One thing a newsman has to do is stay logical and deal with facts. What you say is logical and I appreciate that. So, I'll bite the bullet and not smoke another cigarette until I'm out of your office. But you have to keep my cup full of hot black coffee. Deal?"

"Sure is. I'll ask Evelyn to bring in a pot and then we can get down to work. And here, use this mug. Coffee never tastes as good out of one those throwaways."

Creedy grinned amicably and extracted a legal pad and a supply of pencils from his battered brief case. Mark produced the promised coffee and both men got comfortable.

Mark wished Dr. Kimberly would have done the interview but she had very little rapport with the press and always leaned on Mark as the official spokesman

for the institution. She claimed his earlier part-time job in radio and his unflappable personality made him the ideal PR man.

The clock said 1:40 and Mark decided to let the interview run no longer than 70 minutes. That would give him ten minutes to get down to the time office before change of shift.

"Mr. Creedy, before we get started, I'm a little curious about why the *Atlantic City Press* is coming way up here to North Jersey to do a story on Walnut Valley. What about the Vineland State School or the one in Woodbine State Colony? Aren't they a lot closer to your primary market?"

"True, Mark. As you say, they are close so we've already covered them. I've been working on a four-part series for our Sunday supplement which tells about the various residential programs for the persons with disabilities in this state. Institutions like this have gotten a lot of bad press lately, like that Pennhurst thing down near Philly several years ago. What I'm trying to do is show that some of these places do provide a good service, especially for families who can't afford to send their kids to one of those fancy private schools or can't find one they like in the community. You see, I'm not convinced that it's time to close down all institutions and put everyone out in some foster home or group home."

"You sound like you know a little more than the average man about this field. Always been a reporter?"

Creedy took a double slurp of hot coffee. "No. Matter of fact, you and I used to be on the same team. Years ago I worked for the old Department of Institutions and Agencies as a PR man. Used to tag along with the Commissioner and the Governor when they visited the different institutions. Got a job change when we got a governor change, though. Anyway, my old job is why I'm doing this piece."

Mark studied a wire sculpture which used to be a paper clip. "Any particular angle you plan to use here?"

"Well, when I talked to the superintendent on the phone, she said she was going to turn me over to the Director of Programs. Since I've already hit the program angle pretty hard in the other places, though, I thought I'd like to key on the employees this time. You know, what kind of people work in a place like this? What are their working conditions? How do you handle round-the-clock coverage, that sort of thing. Are you prepared for questions along those lines?"

Mark shifted mental gears and elevated his feet to the feet-on-drawer posture he'd inherited from his father. "I think so. My main job is to administer the training and activity programs for the residents. But I'm also closely involved in the day-to-day operations of the total institution, including what goes on in the cottages."

Mark took another cup from his credenza and poured himself some coffee. He swirled in two spoonfuls of creamer before continuing. "The most important job in an institution is that of the attendant, the person who gives the direct care and supervision. All the fancy programs won't amount to a hill of beans if we don't have a strong staff of trained and dedicated para-professionals in the cottages."

Creedy started to fish a Camel out of a crumpled pack and then checked himself with a grin. "My addiction's creeping up on me again," he said dryly and dropped the pack in his brief case. "Gotta keep those things out of reach, it's so automatic."

Mark smiled and sipped his coffee.

Then Tom Creedy launched a series of questions about staffing the Colony with aides, LPNs and RNs which kept Mark talking for the better part of an hour. He kept an eye on the clock, however, and at 2:50, he told Creedy it was time to break it off. Creedy agreed readily and thanked Mark for the wealth of information.

Mark opened Evelyn's office door. "Well, Mr. Creedy, I enjoyed this chance to tell you and your readers a little bit about how we run things here at Walnut Valley. Hope you can put all that rambling into something that's fit to print. You do know, don't you, that Dr. Kimberly has to see a draft before you go to press? I believe that's an understanding she had with your editor."

"No sweat on that, Mark. This series doesn't have a tight schedule so it'll be no problem to send her a copy of the draft. And hey, I gotta run, too." The bony hand came out in farewell. "Enjoyed talking to you and I'm sure our readers will find what you've said here this afternoon as interesting as I did."

Creedy jammed his omnipresent hat a little farther down on his head and pulled on his top coat. Before closing his case, he retrieved the pack of Camels with a broad wink. Mark laughed good-naturedly.

Chapter 6: Jackie

Walnut State Colony

Thursday, January 2, 3:00 P.M.

Dr. Grace Kimberly, the superintendent of Walnut State Colony, had some very firm ideas about how such an institution should be run. Having at least one upper-echelon administrator on duty for all three shifts every day of the year was one of her stronger tenets. And the policy included all major holidays. This sometimes-dubious honor was rotated among about a dozen experienced department heads with program responsibility and carried the title of Administrator-on-Duty. AOD for short.

Fortunately three senior nurses were assigned this duty for the night shift, 11:15 to 7:15. Mark's share of the week-day P.M. shifts and weekends amounted to every other Thursday from 3:00 to 11:30 and every sixth weekend from 7:00 A.M. to 3:30 P.M.

On his way past the switchboard Mark waved to Brenda and then jogged down the center stairway to the florescent glare of the time office. Brenda watched his descent with a rueful smile.

The morning AOD handed Mark the PM coverage sheet and he scanned it for plus and minus situations in the 26 cottages. Ten had one extra employee on duty and only four were one short. Quickly Mark jotted down the names of the aides he wanted pulled to the short cottages and handed the list to Maggie Runston, the time clerk on duty for his shift. Her finger pecked the phone buttons as she quietly and efficiently made the necessary pulling calls.

While the pulling was being done, Mark fastened the leather radio holster to his belt and checked out his frequency with Brenda at the switchboard. Each nurse on grounds for the shift would be carrying a one-way voice pager in addition to the two-ways carried by the AOD, two security men, and two food trucks.

Maggie handed him the coverage sheet. "Here's the way we look for tonight, in case you want to check before the AM shift goes off duty."

Mark reviewed the coverage pattern to be sure all cottages were covered after the pulling. Each one was at least at minimum and there were six extras scattered around the grounds. Good to know in case someone went home sick in the middle of the shift or if he needed an extra aide to go one-to-one with a problem resident.

The RN and LPN coverage had seemed okay the first time he looked at the sheet and Maggie hadn't needed to make any changes. RNs were assigned to cover three cottages on a circulating basis and there was at least one LPN in each cottage. The LPNs would be responsible for pouring and administering medication and would take care of simple first aid as well as ordered treatments. The RNs, in turn, would generally supervise the LPNs and handle more serious medical problems. They would also be responsible for deciding when the on-duty physician needed to be aware of a particular issue or see a resident.

Mark relaxed with the knowledge he was adequately covered for the shift. He rose, stretched, and went up to his office. After closing the inner door, he tackled that bloated in-basket.

At 5:45, the beeper roused Mark from the tedious chore of reading the monthly reports of his program supervisors. "Four-oh-eight base to the AOD. Please call the operator Code 1. Please call the operator Code 1. Base out."

Mark started to reach for the phone but decided to stretch his legs and walk down to the switchboard. "Got your call, Brenda. What's up?"

"Just got a call from Cottage 21. Jackie Dark is missing."

Mark felt a constriction of fear in his chest. Twelve inches of snow on the ground, temperature of 10 degrees with an overnight forecast of close to zero, and Jackie Dark was AWOL. Of course he might be hiding or out romping in the snow without a coat. Or, he might be visiting in a nearby cottage, mooching food because of his weight-reduction diet.

"Brenda, call security and all the food trucks and tell them to cruise the area around Cottage 21. Then call Cottages 20 and 22 and tell them to do a room-by-room search for Jackie. I'll call 21 myself."

The phone in Cottage 21 was answered on the fourteenth ring by a breathless Cottage Training Supervisor named Jenny Farthing. Mark knew Mrs. Farthing only slightly but he was aware of her reputation as a very reliable worker. And it was widely known that Jackie Dark was Jenny's pet. Jackie's parents took no interest in him, never writing or visiting. At birth, the doctor had told them they had a child with Down's syndrome who would be helpless the rest of his life. At that point he had been abandoned to the care of the taxpayers and admitted to Walnut Valley at the age of 11 days.

On at least three occasions in the last ten years, Walnut Valley caseworkers had placed Jackie in the community, twice in foster homes and most recently in a group home. The first placement had occurred when he was 21 years old. But Jackie was so acclimated to the routines of institutional living he couldn't tolerate the community living arrangements provided for him. Each time he cried and bellowed and carried on so that a caseworker had to take him back to Walnut Valley.

Jackie, with his very limited expressive vocabulary, called all female employees "mom". But when he looked at Jenny Farthing, he said it with a capital "M". And the feeling was definitely mutual. Jenny's silver hair was often bowed close to his blond butcherboy in a moment of shared closeness. A squared, stubby-fingered hand would steal up to pat her lined cheek and his broad face would split in a smile of pure and simple contentment. What administrator would have the heart to tell Jenny Farthing she couldn't play favorites with one of the residents?

Without a doubt Jackie Dark was Jenny Farthing's boy. But now he was missing.

"Cottage 21, Jenny Farthing," she wheezed.

"Mrs. Farthing, this is Mark Marlow, the AOD. Understand that Jackie has been reported as missing."

Now Mark could detect the sound of tears underlying the breathlessness. "Oh, Mr. Marlow, I'm so worried. We've searched this cottage from top to bottom three different times and I'm sure he's not hiding somewhere. And I know he was at supper because I handed him his tray myself and he ate a good supper. But then he said he, well, you know. He didn't say it but he showed me that he wanted to go to the bathroom so I let him go upstairs before the rest of the boys were dismissed from the dining room. And . . . and, Mr. Marlow . . . that's the last I saw of Jackie. I don't know where he went or where he is."

"Do you think he has his coat on?"

The sobbing subsided a little as Jenny began to regain control. "We can't find his coat so I guess he has it on. But there's something else that's worrying us and that you need to know about. He refused his four o'clock meds and that means that he didn't take his anticonvulsant. And if he goes too long without that, he's liable to have a grand mal seizure, right out there in the snow. And the way it's snowing now, it would be awful hard to see him if he's lying down in the snow and all."

Mark's own alarm suddenly heightened. "Mrs. Farthing, what's this about snowing?" he demanded but Jenny's control had slipped again and Mark had to hang up.

Turning to the operator, he saw she was crying, too. Brenda had been monitoring Mark's conversation after making her own calls and she pointed wordlessly toward the glare of the sodium vapor light in the rear parking lot. In long strides Mark was at the back door and leaning out into the night. The unmistakable evidence of at least an hour's snowfall was on the AOD's State car in its spot beside the door.

Back at the switchboard, Brenda was drying her tears and was ready for further instructions. "I didn't realize it was snowing again. Whoever's on call tonight as search coordinator, call him in." Brenda checked a list and dialed a number. As soon as Mark was sure the coordinator was on the line, Mark raced down the steps to the time office.

"Maggie, we have an emergency. Jackie Dark up in 21 is missing and the cottage is sure he's not hiding inside somewhere. That means he's probably out in the snow."

Maggie had been taking her lunch break with an orange and a paperback. With Mark's announcement, however, she had grabbed the coverage notebook and was running up the stairs toward the switchboard. Just to be safe, Mark snapped a freshly-charged battery on the base of his two-way. Then he raced up the steps on Maggie's heels.

Upstairs, Brenda reported that Hank Grant, the farm manager, was on call as search coordinator and was already on his way. "Good. No one knows these grounds like Hank. Now, give me all stations."

Brenda nodded and placed the mike up on the counter where Mark could speak into it easily and then began flipping toggles and turning dials. In less than ten seconds, she nodded to Mark and he was in contact with most of the employees on duty, either through the PA system or the radios and pagers.

"This is the AOD with a Red One emergency message for all stations and all employees. Repeating, this is an emergency message for all stations and all employees. Jackie Dark is missing from Cottage 21. He was last seen about 5:30 in the dining room and the cottage thinks he has his parka on." Mark's knuckles were white as he gripped the mike stand. A lot of people were on supper break now but

this was no time to think of such niceties. He breathed deeply and leaned back to the mike and his audience of Walnut Valley employees.

"We are now going to emergency status. If possible, the people who aren't warmly dressed should provide the cottage coverage. Everyone above your cottage's emergency coverage level should report to 21's parking lot. Take along all the flashlights you can find. And, if you have a four-wheel drive vehicle on campus, I'd really appreciate your driving your rig over to the 21 area. Nurses, you are responsible for making sure this message is received and understood in the cottages you're covering. Hank Grant is the search coordinator tonight and he's on his way to 21 right now. Good luck to all of you. And good luck to Jackie. Base out."

All Walnut Valley employees were responsible for knowing the meaning of "emergency status" as specified in the institution's disaster plan. All non-essential activities were immediately terminated and all available employees were released to help in coping with the emergency. This meant cancellation of lunch and coffee breaks with only a skeleton staff left in the cottage to provide safety-level supervision. Mark estimated that no less than 50 on-duty employees would soon converge on Cottage 21. This group would include food service workers as well as direct-care staff from the cottages.

Maggie had the State Police on the line and Mark turned to take the phone. Quickly he filled them in on the details of the situation with Jackie and the possibility of needing outside help. In the meantime, Brenda was dialing a Michigan number in an attempt to locate Jackie's mother at her last known address. Although she had not been in contact with Jackie in recent years, it was standard procedure to notify the parents of all unusual events in the lives of their children.

The big question was whether to escalate the search another level or wait and see if the on-duty staff would be successful in finding Jackie. With the cold and the dark, and especially the falling snow, Mark decided to take no chances. He turned to Brenda and Maggie.

"Girls, I think we're going to off-duty employees." Both nodded in silent agreement. "Split up the direct-care staff and order them to report for work dressed for an outdoor search. Tell them it's emergency mandatory overtime and all refusals will require a doctor's excuse. I'm going up to 21 and get the search started. Give me a beep if you hear anything."

Mark fervently wished the superintendent was not in Florida. Even the Director of Cottage Life was out of circulation with walking pneumonia. In the past five years Mark had dealt with budget cuts, recalcitrant employees, and an

occasional aggressive resident, but never a life-or-death search in a January snow storm. Kind of scary business, making decisions that could effect the survival chances of another human being.

Mark ran down the hall to his office and jerked open a file drawer. He pulled out the bulky institutional disaster manual. With fierce intensity he checked and rechecked the Missing Resident Procedure. Finally he leaned back in his chair, satisfied that all stipulated steps had been followed precisely.

The beeper squealed and Brenda's tense but smooth voice spoke from Mark's two-way. "Four-oh-eight base to the AOD. I have Dr. King on an outside line. Where can I reach you?"

Mark pressed the talk button. "Ten-four, Brenda. Hit me on 224."

The phone buzzed and Mark quickly briefed the cabinet-level administrator in Trenton on the situation. Dr. King responded calmly but with concern and approved everything Mark had done so far.

After the Trenton call, Mark switched his beeper to receive all calls and hurried up to Cottage 21 to join the search party.

When he reached his car in the parking lot, Mark remembered his own snowmobile suit was still in the hatch of the Geo. Shivering with cold and concern, he hurried back inside the building to don the snow gear. No good chance of doing that in 14 inches of snow or the Metro's miniscule rear seat.

Up at the 21 parking lot, Hank stood alone and hunched against the driving snow as a long, ragged line of dark shapes punctuated with pinpoints of lights struggled across the broad face of a slope behind the program building. Mark pulled the State car in beside the farm manager's red CJ-7 and joined him in the knee deep snow beyond the plowed area of the parking lot.

"What do you think, Hank? Do we have a chance?"

The stocky farmer responded with uncharacteristic tenderness. "Dunno, Mark. It's really looking bad for Jackie. If it hadn't started to snow, I'd say our chances would be a lot better. Way it is now, if he falls down with a seizure, he'll probably be pretty well dusted with snow before he comes out of it. That way, a searcher could come within a yard of where he is without seeing him, in the dark and all."

Mark nodded at Hank's assessment of the situation and then briefed him on the current efforts to get in more help. "Think we ought to ask for help from the Guard or the Scouts or some outfit like that?"

"Not really," the search coordinator replied after a moment of thought. "With the snow as deep as it is, Jackie couldn't have gone more'n half a mile in the hour it took to get those people up there on the scene. What we're doing now is swinging a line of searchers walking close enough to reach out and touch each other's hands. First they went in a circle around Cottage 21 here. Then they moved out and right now they're making another swing around the bigger circle."

"I see what you're doing. Each time around, the circle gets bigger until ... until we find him. But what happens if we don't?"

Hank shot a brown jet of tobacco juice into a tire track and wiped his mouth on the back of his glove. "We'll keep making the circle wider and wider until the radius is at least half a mile. If we haven't found him by then, we move back in to the center of the circle and do the same thing over again, this time walking shoulder to shoulder.

"Hank, do you know if Jennie Farthing is in the cottage?"

The farmer managed a dry laugh. "She was out here in all this snow in a skirt and stockings, with no boots. Thought she was going to do what those folks up there are doing. I gave her a direct order to hold the fort in there and let folks with warmer clothes tramp through the snow. She got awful mad but she went back in. Someone said she's been doing nothing but crying and praying for the last hour. Not sure about the crying, but we sure can use a heap of praying about now."

"Think I'll go in and talk to her. Let me know if I can do anything. In fact, Hank, I bet some of those girls up there aren't dressed all that well for this kind of thing, either. After I talk to Jenny, I'll join the search line and let someone take a break in the cottage for a while."

"Lots of 'em could probably use a break by now. But, I think I'd rather have you stay down here with me and help get the new searchers organized as they come in. Once the fresh people are on the line, we can start relieving some of the others who aren't dressed so warm."

Mark saw the wisdom of Hank's posture but it was hard to just stand around when a human being might be freezing to death in a post-seizure stupor, right within earshot.

Inside Cottage 21, the remaining 37 male residents were in bed for the night and the overhead dorm lights had been turned out. The sound of tearful prayer came from the visitors' room just off the foyer. Mark rapped on the door and then waited.

Jenny's face was mottled and swollen from crying and she stood with bowed head, in the open doorway, unable to control her sobs. Mark put his arm around her shoulders and led her across the hall to the employee break room.

"Mrs. Farthing, why don't you try to settle down just a little bit and take a break in here where it's quiet. Put your feet up and have a cup of coffee."

The sobbing had eased but her voice was strained with tearful anguish. "How can I sit in here in the warm and take it easy when Jackie's out there in the snow somewhere, dying? It's all my fault, too. I never should have left him out of my sight when he asked to leave the dining room. You may as well take my resignation right now, Mr. Marlow. I ain't fit to work here, a person like me."

The sobbing resumed and Mark considered asking the LPN to slip her an Ativan. "Stop the foolish talk, Jenny," Mark said with gentleness. "I can't think of another person who has more right to work here than you do. By the way, is your LPN in the nurse's station? I need to talk with her a minute."

The young practical nurse's face was also wet with tears but her voice was steady as she related what Jenny thought had happened. Apparently Jackie had just been reprimanded for trying to snatch extra food from his neighbor's tray. Jenny hadn't seen that particular incident and so she didn't realize he might be upset when he asked to leave the dining room early. The best guess anyone had was that he didn't go to the bathroom at all but got his boots and parka instead. Probably tried to walk up to Cottage 26 to mooch food. He must have gotten disoriented in the dark, along with the falling snow, and wandered off the path that cuts across to Cottage 26 on the outer drive.

The LPN freely admitted her error in not making sure Jackie had received his four o'clock Tegretol. She also agreed that the combination of physical exertion, fear, and the missed dose of anticonvulsant might bring on one of Jackie's infrequent but violent seizures. Not a pleasant thought.

Mark felt like crying, too, as he left the cottage and walked over to where a cluster of new searchers had gathered around Hank.

Chapter 7: Gospel Music

Radio Station WMOR

Thursday, January 2, 1:30 P.M.

For the second time in the same day, the ancient Bug chugged up the winding Greenwood Circle to the crest location of WMOR. Dan wasn't even sure why he'd gone out to lunch. He was tired enough to go straight home to Liverpool and be in bed when Karen got home from school. Still, it just didn't seem right for the brand new general manager to knock off at 12:30, even if he did start at six. So, he ran out to the Red Barn for an everything -on-it hamburger and a 32-ounce container of ice-cold Coke.

A Jeep Grand Cherokee with New York plates looked familiar as the Bug chuffed to a stop in the parking space next to it. As Dan strode up the shoveled walk he thought he remembered where he'd seen it before. He was right. When Dan opened the front door and stepped into the reception room, there sat the Good Samaritan of his early-morning snafu with the snow bank. He still looked sharp, sitting there scanning the headlines of the *Harrisburg Patriot-News*.

Betty had risen from her desk and Dan was spared the struggle of coming up with a name. "Dan, there's a gentleman waiting to see you. This is Rev. Jason Masterson of Liverpool. Rev. Masterson, our general manager, Dan Marlow."

Both men laughed as they shook hands and Dan waved his visitor into his office. "I thought I knew that car out there."

Masterson took the offered chair and Dan pulled up another side chair to face the minister. "You know, Dan, when you said this morning that you owed me a favor, I had no idea I'd be trying to collect it the same day. We often say the world keeps getting smaller and the time keeps going faster. I guess it's true."

Dan popped a mint in his mouth and offered one to his visitor. "I'm sure you didn't come here to philosophize but I have a theory about this concept of time going faster as you get older that I'd like to try on someone. By the way, did I hear Betty introduce you as a preacher. Is it Reverend Masterson?"

"Guilty as charged," Masterson said amicably. "I've taken over as pastor of the Bethany Community Church just south of Liverpool, right there on 11 and 15."

"Know the church," Dan acknowledged. "Never been in it but I know where it is. Beautiful church from the outside."

"Well, I'd like you to get to know the inside even better than the outside." Dan nodded noncommittally as the pastor continued. "As you know, we're fairly new at Bethany. The family just moved down this week. I commuted between Liverpool and our former pastorate in Corning for a while. But now we're full-fledged residents of Pennsylvania. Think we're going to like it, too."

"Can't speak for your parishioners, but from our family to yours, welcome to Liverpool."

"Why thanks, Dan. Betty was telling me you're a native of that pretty little borough. Just might be that our families can get together and do something sometime. I think Ronni would really like that. But say, weren't you going to lay some heavy philosophy on me a moment ago.?"

Dan laughed a little self-consciously. "Nothing all that profound. More math than philosophy, really. Well, anyway, one day I got to thinking that when I was 10 years old, one year of my life represented 10 percent of my total experiences. But now, at almost 50, one year is only 2 percent of all that I have experienced in life. I just think that this simple math concept is the basic reason why folks feel time flies faster as they get older. May be nothing to it. Just my idea."

Masterson reached to accept the cup of coffee Betty had just brought in and watched the dollop of real cream soften its darkness. "I'm not sure I ever thought of life in quite those terms, but you know, I think you're right. In fact, this sounds like the making of a good Sunday morning sermon sometime."

Both men chuckled at. "Well, Pastor, I'm sure you didn't drive all the way down here to Camp Hill to pick my brain for sermon ideas. What can I really do for you?"

"To get right to the point, Dan, I'm interested in radio. I had a weekly Gospel music DJ-style show on a local station up in Corning. It was on Sunday afternoons from two until six. Mostly music with just a little commentary now and then. Very light, not much talking."

"I see. Are you thinking about doing something like that down here in this area?"

"I'm hoping to. Picked your station because it's FM stereo in the Harrisburg market and not so big that you folks can't think new thoughts. I would like to get on Saturday afternoon instead of Sunday, though. We evangelicals seem to spend a lot of our time evangelizing the evangelized. I'd like to have maximum exposure to a secular audience."

Dan slowly lowered his heels from the desk drawer to the floor. "Sir, I'm not sure this market or this management is ready for a Saturday afternoon of organ and chimes. And I guess that would go for Sundays, too. An hour or so, maybe, Sunday morning early, or something like that. But Saturday afternoon? That's one of our prime sales times." Dan had spoken calmly but with the conviction that this preacher had a poor concept of what commercial radio was all about.

Jason Masterson had been called to a lifetime of persuading people to do what was good for them. Therefore, Dan's early negativism was far from discouraging. He was even a little encouraged by the relatively mild manner in which the opposition had been phrased.

"Dan, I think we're talking about baseballs and marbles. Tell you what I'd like to do, if you have a little time. Can you give me half an hour?"

Dan was still thinking of getting home with his family but he did owe Masterson a big favor. Might as well hear him out. "I think I can manage a half hour," Dan replied pleasantly but with a paucity of enthusiasm. "What's on your mind?"

Masterson had enough enthusiasm for both. "I know you're a busy man so I'll try to keep this as short as possible. First, you have a production studio, right?"

"Of course."

"And where do you keep your Gospel promo CDs? The ones the various Gospel music companies send to radio stations?"

Dan thought he could see what was coming and wasn't sure if he wanted in or not. However, he had already made a commitment for half an hour so he led the way back to what used to be the record library; no records now but a couple thousand CDs. About 200 religious CDs [still sealed] were stacked on a lower shelf at the back of the room. The pastor seemed impressed and began flipping through them.

"Dan, you have a gold mine here. An absolute gold mine! The best groups in the business, the latest releases, and all brand new. Most have never been opened."

Dan couldn't help smiling at Masterson's boyish enthusiasm. "Well, I guess beauty really is in the eye of the beholder. What good are they to a station like this which doesn't do Gospel music?"

"That's just the point, Dan. You should be doing some Gospel music. Do you realize that the Harrisburg market has millions of avid Gospel music fans who would flock to your dial setting if you ran a block of Gospel music?"

"Yes, but what would the sound be like. A lot of the secular music on the market today is extremely popular but we'll never use it on this station. Our music format is designed to create a particular type of sound and I don't want to contaminate that."

Masterson rose from his kneeling position beside the shelf of Gospel CDs, still exuding an excitement which Dan couldn't fully appreciate. "Dan, we could stand here all day and debate what kind of Gospel sound I could create on your station with these CDs right here. Why don't you let me show you instead?"

Dan had the feeling things were going just a little too fast and it showed in his eyes.

Masterson was perceptive. "Hey, take it easy. I'm not going to barge into the control room and start doing a live show. Here's what I'd like to propose. I'll pick out about an hour's worth of music from this shelf and make a demo CD in your production room. If that's all right with you, of course."

Dan agreed and said, "We have a TDK digital audio CD recorder back there. Hasn't been used in over two years but Tim'll have it ready for you in a jiffy."

Jason's eyes sparkled. "Hey, just sold a TDK on eBay before we moved down here.

Dan still wasn't sure he wanted to get involved but curiosity got the best of him and he told Masterson to go ahead and make his demo. What the preacher wouldn't know was that Dan could monitor the production room in his office while the CD was being made. If the sound was really bad, as Dan was pretty sure would be the case, the plug could be pulled long before the hour was up.

"You got a deal. Use the production room for an hour or whatever you need and then I'll see if your music is compatible with our sound."

The men shook hands and Dan left to ask Tim to set up the production studio so Masterson could make his demo.

As soon as the library door swished shut, Jason was back down on his knees, pulling CDs for his demo. "Let's start with the Gaither Homecoming Choir doing *Turn Your Radio On . . .*," he mused.

In the front office, Dan leaned back in his swivel chair and stared speculatively at the monitor speaker on the wall. No telling what that crazy preacher is up to in there. Probably doesn't even know how to cue a CD. Hope he doesn't wreck the equipment. I might have been better off shoveling the Bug out of that snow bank myself this morning.

At that moment the office came alive with music and Dan gave full attention to the monitor speaker. The track had started cold without announcement and was building nicely. Sounded like a choir, but like no choir he had even heard. Sounded like a good opening track. Wonder if he can announce.

As the music did a fadeout at the end of the track, a very pleasant but unfamiliar voice came on. "From the Ryman Auditorium in Nashville, that was the Gaither Homecoming Choir advising you to turn your radio on and listen to the gospel. And this is Jason Masterson along with you, sharing some good sounds in Gospel music as we do every Saturday afternoon between one and five. Hope you can stay tuned. We'll be hearing from Janet Pascal right after this good word from Corning Lumber and Hardware."

Dan half rose from his chair, a look of anger on his face. Then he realized he was not listening to a live broadcast. Masterson must have had a commercial spot in his brief case that he used on his old show in New York. Dan listened carefully as Masterson came out of the hardware spot and slid into a track by somebody named Janet Pascal. The guy was good. Even with such a small sample, Dan's trained ear could easily identify the sound of a professional radio announcer in the way Masterson spoke. Good modulation, good timbre and inflection, accurate articulation without sounding pedantic or BBC-ish. No doubt about it, Jason Masterson was a radio announcer, in spite of being a preacher. Nice touch on the controls, too.

For the next 55 minutes Dan limited himself to activities within earshot of the monitor speaker on the wall. By the time the demo tape was half made, Dan told Betty to go back to the library and remove the plastic films from all the Gospel CDs. Gospel music, Jason Masterson style, would be the Saturday afternoon format and Dan was sure of that without knowing exactly why. He wasn't really a religious

man and as a broadcaster, didn't even know that Gospel music existed before meeting Jason Masterson. At least not as he heard it being done on the demo tape.

When Masterson returned to the office Dan told him that the Masterson brand of Gospel music would be the Saturday afternoon format as soon as Jason was ready to produce it. For the next 20 minutes or so, the men discussed the various ramifications of broadcasting Gospel music on WMOR. It was decided that current Saturday afternoon sponsors would be notified of the proposed format change with an option to run their spots elsewhere on the log if they didn't care to be connected with Gospel music.

"Judging from my experience up in New York, most sponsors will accept the Gospel format with no problem. And for those who do drop out, you'll be able to recruit Christian businessmen who see both the market and the mission of this kind of programming."

Dan was beginning to like the idea more all the time. Not that money is everything, but a drop in sponsors as a result of a rather drastic format change wouldn't look so hot in his first monthly report as the new general manager.

Masterson noticed with a start that the studio clock read 3:30. "Man, I didn't realize how late it is. I have to get up to Liverpool, get dinner, and get back down to Hershey by eight. Say, I think I just had one of my better thoughts of this particular day. You and your wife doing anything tonight?"

Dan had returned to his desk and was reaching for some papers but looked up with a puzzled expression at the question. "Well, no, I guess not. Haven't talked to Karen since early this morning, of course. No telling that a wife can cook up in a day's time."

"How about the husbands cooking something up this time. Ronni and I have four fantastic tickets for a Gaither Homecoming Concert tonight over at the Giant Center in Hershey. These tickets are on the floor and not up in the nosebleed section! We were planning to take a couple from the church but their little boy came down with a bad case of the flu and they hate to leave him with a baby-sitter. It would be great if you and your wife could come along with us as our guests. What do you say?"

Dan had seen the name Gaither on several of the Gospel CDs back in the record library and was sure he didn't feel like sitting through a church service after the day he'd had. However, Jason was persuasive and finally Dan agreed to call Karen and see how she felt about it.

Both men called their wives. Arrangements were made for the women to drive down together in the Buick, bringing appropriate clothes for their husbands. At first Karen had been just a little skeptical about going out with a parsonage couple but the lure of dinner and a show had overcome her misgivings. For his part, Dan hated to miss seeing the twins before they were tucked in bed by some baby-sitter. But, he had arranged for Tim to take the morning shift tomorrow and that would give him a chance to see them before they left for school. Also give him a chance to sleep in to a luxuriously-late seven o'clock tomorrow morning.

The way things were shaping up, it should be a pleasant evening.

Both men shaved in the station's men's room, using the communal electric shaver. Then they stretched out on the carpet in Dan's office for a catnap.

Chapter 8: Gaither Homecoming

Giant Center

Thursday, January 2, 8:00 P.M.

It seemed like no time at all until the wives arrived at the station, ready for dinner and the concert. Everyone seemed to be talking at once as the round of introductions was made. As they were leaving, Masterson said, "Listen, folks, I don't want to hear any more of this 'Rev. and Mrs. Masterson' stuff. We are Jason and Ronni. You're Dan and Karen. Agreed?" The Marlows agreed with a smile and everyone climbed into the Jeep Grand Cherokee for the short drive over to the Outback Steakhouse across the Susquehanna River in Harrisburg.

When the server asked if anyone wanted something from the bar, Jason looked at Dan and Karen but they both shook their heads. After the man left, Dan said, "Don't feel we're in bondage tonight because you're a preacher. We just don't drink at all, ever."

"There's quite a story behind what Dan just said," Karen continued soberly. "You may not realize it but we have a grown son, Mark. He lives over in New Jersey and works at an institution for persons with mental disabilities. Well, Mark was married seven years ago this past Thanksgiving Day." Karen's eyes glistened and Dan had to shift his gaze to the far side of the crowded dining room. "On Christmas eve of that same year they were coming over to our place to exchange gifts. But they never made it. A drunk who had just left a bar came around a curve on their side of the road and hit them head on. Cristy, Mark's wife, died before the ambulance arrived. When they went to tow their car away, Cristy's blood was all over the presents in the back seat. Since then, we've never touched a drop, whether we're driving or not."

Dan wished Karen hadn't told that story. Kind of put a damper on the party. At least she didn't tell how Mark almost lost his mind after the accident. How he'd gone to that bar and smashed the place up, almost killing the bartender. How he'd mounted a frenetic one-man campaign to keep drinking drivers off the road, even to the extent of circulating a petition stating that all bars with parking lots should lose their liquor licenses. Mark had refused to get involved with MADD or any other organized effort against drunk driving. Just a bitter, lonely man, striking out in anger against a social and legal problem that his society all but ignored.

As Dan tuned back in to the party, he realized that Jason had smoothly changed the subject and was telling Ronni about the plans being made for a Gospel radio program on WMOR.

Karen was quick to match his tone. "You certainly must be a busy man, Jason. Ronni was telling me on the way down this afternoon how much is involved in pastoring a church like Bethany Community. How do you find time to be a DJ, too?"

"Gospel radio is my hobby and my only hobby," Jason explained as he accepted a 16 ounce cut of prime rib from the server. "I don't hunt or fish or play tennis or race around on a snowmobile, or even play golf. I give all my free time to Gospel music."

"I don't know anything about this Gospel music but if my husband is willing to put you on the air, you must have something on the ball. He's pretty choosy about who and what he lets go out over his station."

"You're telling me," Jason responded with a grin. "Wouldn't even consider my proposal until I did a demo, right on the spot."

The arrival of the rest of the platters halted conversation. After Jason offered a brief prayer of thanks, primary attention was given to the delicious meals each had ordered.

By 5:45 the group was back in the Grand Cherokee, heading toward Hershey and the seven o'clock concert with the Gaither Homecoming Choir. As the couples chatted comfortably, Dan kept one ear tuned to WMOR which was playing softly over the rear stereo speakers. At seven, he dropped out of the conversation to listen closely to the AP network news. Suddenly he leaned forward and tapped Jason on the shoulder.

"Listen! Turn that up, please!"

Jason responded instantly and the network announcer's voice was heard clearly by all four of the car's occupants.

" . . . resident has been reported missing by institutional administrator Mark Marlow. The severely disabled young man apparently wandered off a familiar path in a heavy snowstorm and is now thought to be lost in several acres of undeveloped land on the campus. Dozens of the institution's employees are combing the area surrounding the spot where Jackie Dark was

last seen and Administrator Marlow is asking for community volunteers to aid in the search . . . "

As the newscast moved on to another story, Dan spoke to no one in particular, "What a rotten thing to happen to one of those poor people."

"Mark must be under an awful lot of pressure, too. He's AOD at Walnut Valley tonight, Dan," Karen said softly with a mother's true concern for her own offspring.

Jason spoke quietly from the driver's seat. "I believe God cares just as much about the little people as he does anyone else. Would you folks mind if we had a mini prayer meeting right here as we drive along? I'd like to pray for Jackie Dark and all the folks who are helping to find him." The Marlows murmured their consent but were secretly glad that Jason would be doing the praying. Neither of them had ever prayed out loud in public and the number of their silent prayers were countable.

For the next three or four minutes Jason voiced a simple prayer that was relaxed and conversational in nature but still appeared to be sincere. Dan had never heard anyone pray quite like that and speculated that he might be able to manage that kind of praying with a little private practice.

The rest of the trip was made in silence and in a matter of minutes the two couples were walking across the freshly-plowed parking lot toward the Giant Center. Neither Karen nor Dan were sure what to expect. Both had watched the Hershey Bears play hockey in this building and had seen numerous ice shows here over the years. But a Gospel concert?

Inside, Jason led the way to what proved to be excellent seats in the upholstered lower level. While they were waiting for the music to begin, he explained the Homecoming Choir was a group of up to 200 Gospel music recording and concert artists organized and directed by Bill Gaither. "In addition to ticket revenue, most of the Homecoming concerts are videotaped and then those tapes are sold around the world." As he spoke, video cameras and sound equipment were being adjusted in preparation for recording tonight's concert.

"We've already found a place to hear the Homecoming Choir right in this area, on cable. Try Channel 56 most Saturday nights at 10:00 P.M. Sometimes TNN carries them also. "Hey, Ronni. Maybe we'll see ourselves on TV in a couple of months."

The Choir would be performing in the round and their seats were at center ice and quite close to the circular stage. As eight o'clock approached, the Marlows were impressed with the size of the crowd which was rapidly pouring into the arena. Dan was already beginning to feel good about his decision to run Gospel music on Saturday afternoons. If this Bill Gaither, a guy he had never heard of before today, could fill the Giant Center, there just might be something more to Gospel music than most secular radio people realized. Dan was amazed when Jason told them how Bill Gaither had written many of the songs they would hear tonight and had even toured with his wife, Gloria, as part of the Bill Gaither Trio.

When the music began, Dan definitely was impressed by the Choir's solid SATB harmony. Jason had told them that collectively the Choir had recorded several thousand albums over the past 40 years or so. They ought to sound good. The songs were extremely singable, judging from audience participation, but neither Dan nor Karen had heard most songs before. As the tempo increased, many in the audience were clapping hands and tapping feet in time with the music.

Dan made his living with music and it was quite a while before he could stop auditioning and start enjoying. It was a song about how God had created singing in the lives and hearts of humans that arrested his attention and got him to really listen. Karen was especially impressed by Gloria's narration about the role that different churches had played in her life. The church where she first dated Bill...the church where they were married...the church where they had their first child dedicated...the churches where her parents were laid to rest. Then Bill Gaither segued the Choir into a song about how Jesus was going to come back down to earth and take all the born-again Christians into heaven, the dead ones and the living ones as well. The Marlows exchanged puzzled glances at this particular concept. Dan made a mental note to ask Jason for more information about this phenomenon which the Choir had referred to as the Rapture.

During the intermission the Mastersons made a beeline for the music display on the main concourse, Dan and Karen trailing in their wake. The Marlows were astounded at the large selection of Gaither Homecoming DVDs, CDs, and sheet music that the crowd was snapping up as though they were collector's items.

After returning to their seats, Jason leaned over and asked the Marlows how they were enjoying the concert. As they responded in the affirmative, the lights lowered and both couples leaned back in their seats for the resumption of the program.

The second half seemed to be built around the concept of the family with the songs reflecting that theme. Another Gloria narration was followed by a moving

song called *I Am Loved*. By the final chorus, the vast audience was on its feet, swaying rhythmically and singing along with the Choir. Then slowly, the house lights were lowered and tiny lights appeared as audience members waved miniature flashlights. Now Karen realized why these lights were on sale at all the booths during intermission.

It was a moving experience as thousands of people sang and waved their lights in the darkened building. Karen, for one, was impressed.

At the end of the beautiful song, Bill Gaither rose from the piano bench and a single spot followed him to the near edge of the circular stage. In a very simple manner, not at all pedantic or ecclesiastical, the singer and songwriter explained how human beings need to experience the love of God through a personal relationship with His Son, Jesus Christ. At the conclusion of his devotional, Bill invited people who had never personally accepted Jesus as God's love gift to the human race to move down to an open space in front of the stage for a special prayer.

Without warning, Dan felt a strange series of sensations flow over his body. His palms were damp with sweat, his knees sagged with uncharacteristic weakness, and his vision blurred with unshed tears. He stole a sidelong glance at Karen. She was standing with bowed head and closed eyes, apparently waiting patiently for the audience to be dismissed. Convinced he was suffering from a touch of superficial emotionalism, Dan forced a yawn and his feelings slowly returned to normal.

Then the lights were up and the crowd was streaming toward the exits. Behind him, Dan could hear the Choir and band swing into a tune he remembered from the first part of the concert, something about the king coming. The audience knew the song well and everyone sang along as they shuffled slowly down the steps and along the walkways. Kind of a nice tune, Dan thought as he found himself humming along.

No one said much on the ride back to Camp Hill and soon mutual expressions of "thanks for a nice evening" were being exchanged in the WMOR parking lot. Karen was quite excited by the fact that the Gaithers had written so many of the songs on the program and mentioned that fact a couple times as they got into their separate cars.

In a matter of minutes a three-car motorcade was wending its way north along the Susquehanna River, following U.S. 11-15 home to Liverpool. Jason and Ronni led in the Jeep Grand Cherokee, Karen followed in the Buick Park Avenue Ultra, and Dan brought up the rear in the Bug.

The occupants of all three cars were listening to WMOR and when the AP network news came on at midnight, they learned that Jackie Dark was still missing somewhere on a snowy North Jersey hillside. Jason and Ronni repeated their earlier prayer. Behind them, Karen and Dan could only bite their lips and wish both Jackie and Mark good luck.

Chapter 9: Good-Bye, Twins

Liverpool

Friday, January 3, 5:10 A.M.

The alarm clock was set for 6:30 but no veteran morning man can ever really sleep in. The internal clock always overrides the alarm setting.

Dan came awake lying on his left side with Karen sleeping soundly in the curve of his body. Up on one elbow, he stared at the clock, confirming that the glowing numerals did indeed say five-ten. He knew he was awake for the day so he slipped out of bed and padded into the bathroom. Twenty minutes later the screech of Dan's underwear drawer caused Karen to stir, yawn, and murmur something incoherent. Dan moved back to the bed.

"Hey, pretty baby," he whispered in her ear, "this is the ghost of Christmas past, come to repay you for your wickedness of yesterday morning."

"Will you act your age?" Karen muttered and then her green eyes flew open very close to his and she smiled sleepily. "I take that back, you crazy nut. Don't you dare ever act your age! Right now, though, I want to brush my teeth. But don't go away."

Ten minutes later, Karen was back at the bedside and Dan had never seen her look more beautiful. Her glossy black hair had been brushed and was curling softly around her face. She had touched her lips lightly with a hint of rose. Her only attire was a fine silver chain around her neck. Forty-five years old, mother of three, career woman--and Dan couldn't conceive of anyone looking lovelier. Years ago he had taken a night-school course in ancient literature. Now the beautiful words from the Bible's Song of Solomon came floating back . . .

*"This thy stature is like to a palm tree, and thy breasts to clusters of grapes;
Thy neck is a tower of ivory;
Thy navel is like a round goblet, which wanteth not liquor;
Thy belly is like an heap of wheat set about with lilies;
The joints of thy thighs are like jewels, the work of the hands of a cunning
workman."*

Without turning out the light, Karen glided to her husband's side of the bed and joined him under the covers. And then, the years melted away and they were young lovers once again, gilding each second of the next hour with a patina of bliss.

A bliss that had been burnished rather than eroded by the frictions of 29 years of conjugal living.

Dan had never been happier. He had no way of knowing he never would be this happy again.

At breakfast that morning, the twins were mildly reproachful with Dan.

"Boy, Daddy, you didn't come home at all yesterday," complained Kevin around a man-sized chunk of egg-dipped toast.

"Yeah, and you promised you'd play school with me, too," added Kellie. "That dumb old Mrs. Johnson just sat in the rocker and knitted all night. Me and Kevin didn't have nothing to do."

"Kevin and I didn't have anything to do," Karen corrected from the stove. The twins nodded vigorously, mistaking the correction for an endorsement.

Dan felt bad. "Hey, kids, you're right and I'm sorry. I really wanted to get home in time to see you two before you went to bed. But then something came up and my plans got changed. Tell you what, though. After supper tonight, we'll all get bundled up, you two, Mommy, and me, and we'll go sled riding. How does that sound?"

"Yeaaaaaaa!" they chorused in approval. Then they hopped down from their chairs to join hands and dance around the kitchen, chanting, "We're goin' sled ridin', we're goin' sled ridin'!"

Karen smiled indulgently and gave them a unison smack on the buns. "Okay, you dancing clowns. Dance right into the bathroom and brush your teeth. It's quarter to eight and we have to get going."

After Kevin and Kellie had disappeared in the direction of the powder room under the stairs, Dan smiled warmly at Karen. "Kind of nice, going to work at ten instead of six. Think I'll just give up the morning-man shift and let Tim take the board six till ten every morning. That way, I can see the twins at breakfast."

"I'm sure the twins and I will vote for that."

"You know, Karen, time goes by so fast and the kids grow up so quickly, it actually scares me sometimes. Look at Mark. Seems like yesterday he was spilling milk in this very kitchen, hoping he'd miss the bus so he could ride in with you. And

now, well, now he has a man's job and a man's responsibilities. I guess it sounds crazy to someone else but I just wish there was some way we could slow life down just a little, so we could enjoy it more. Or don't you ever feel that way?"

"I certainly do, and I think it may be even worse for a woman since we tend to be a little more conscious of our age. Hey! Speaking of time flying, I better get moving or the principal and her two star pupils will be marked down tardy."

They shared a laugh and then the twins were back in the kitchen, scrambling for boots, coats, and mittens. Karen got her own coat from the hall closet but left it unbuttoned as she stopped beside Dan's chair. He sipped the last of his coffee, wiped his mouth, and rose to face his wife. His arms circled her waist beneath her coat, pressing her soft body close to his. The good-bye kiss was much more fervent than usual.

"Cut out the mushing around," scolded Kevin as he headed for the breezeway door. "You're gonna make us late for school!"

"Huh! Look who's worried about being late for school, all of a sudden. Ready Kellie?"

"Just about. Can you help me zip this boot, Mommy?"

Karen took care of the stubborn boot and the three school-bound members of the Marlow household hurried out through the breezeway toward the garage. Dan followed in their noisy wake, intending to get the Bug started and let it warm up while he rinsed egg off the breakfast dishes.

Dan hugged and kissed each twin in turn and then the Buick was backing out of the garage. Karen gave him a little wave as she swung around in the driveway before pulling out on Front Street. The kids were both buckled in the right-hand bucket.

Just as the Buick was leaving the driveway, Dan reacted to a sudden impulse. "Wait, Karen! Wait!"

Karen braked sharply and Dan ran down the drive to open the right front door. He grabbed Kellie and lifted her up in his arms. "Just wanted one more hug and kiss." The little girl responded willingly.

Kevin was a little more reluctant. "Daddy, what if Ernie sees me out here in broad daylight getting hugged and kissed?"

"Then Ernie will know you're a much-loved little boy." Kevin accepted the hug and kiss but quickly squirmed down and hopped in the car.

When both kids were situated again, Dan leaned down and blew Karen a kiss across the car. He returned her quizzical look with a wink and then he closed the door.

Then they were gone.

And Dan Marlow would remember those quick hugs and tooth-pasty kisses for as long as he remembered anything.

Chapter 10: Gettysburg

**U.S. 15 South towards Gettysburg
Friday, January 3, 9:00 A.M.**

Lacey held the Vette in the outside lane and cruised at a steady 60 m.p.h. as the commuter traffic jockeyed for position in the inside lane of 15 South. In just a few minutes she was clear of the metropolitan Harrisburg area and headed for Gettysburg some 30 miles away.

A call to the State Police regarding Tuesday morning's fatal trucking accident just south of Harrisburg had pinpointed Gettysburg on the map for her. The trooper on the desk told her the trucker's name was Ben Haydad and that his license listed him as a resident of Gettysburg, the site of the famous three-day Civil War battle of July, 1863.

Since she'd never met Ben Haydad she felt a little awkward about calling the family for information on the funeral. However, a 90-second call to a newspaper obituary desk had given her all the information she needed. Mr. Haydad was survived by his mother and older sister and would be laid to rest Friday morning at ten o'clock from the Mt. Bethel United Methodist Church.

The Vette purred effortlessly over the miles and Lacey swung onto Business 15 just outside Gettysburg around 9:30. At a stop light she looked down at her outfit and imagined the guys at the station would drop over at the sight of her in a skirt. She couldn't remember the last time she'd worn one to work.

She stopped at an Exxon station and asked for directions to the church. The station attendant told her it was out in the country, about a mile off the Baltimore Pike. The drive to the church took ten minutes and she was standing in the vestibule about 15 minutes before the funeral was scheduled to begin. She signed the register as "Lacey Bowder, Friend" and then joined the short line of mourners who were filing past the open casket. It had been placed just in front of the plain wooden altar. Lacey judged the capacity of the little church at about 130 and half the pews were filled.

An elderly man who must be the minister was standing at the head of the casket and shook hands with each mourner who passed by. He was dressed in a dark gray business suit with a U.S. flag pin in one lapel and small gold cross in the other.

Sudden tears moistened Lacey's eyes at the minister's firm handshake and whispered "God bless you, sister". She nodded wordlessly and moved on to look into the casket at the man she had only talked to in life and now saw for the first time in death. He seemed to be in his middle 30s and possessed the down-home visage she had seen on so many truckers. His work-rough hands were crossed on an open Bible and at the top of the page she could see II Corin-something.

The service lasted about an hour and was devoid of liturgical ornamentation. It began with the congregation singing "Nearer My God to Thee" to the accompaniment of an out-of-tune piano played by an elderly lady who ker-plunked her chords by managing to hit each key at a slightly different time.

The solo that followed was called *When I Wake Up to Sleep No More*. It was rendered by a well-upholstered woman who looked like a farmer's wife but sounded like Nashville. Pretty good. The audience indicated their approval by several muted but fervent *amens* and a couple *praise-the-Lords*.

The rest of the service consisted of a simply-worded sermon by the pastor which dwelt heavily on resurrection and some kind of rapture. When he had announced the location of his scripture, Lacey borrowed a well-worn Bible from the hymnal rack in front of her and tried to find First Corinthians. Finally, by looking at the minister's open Bible and estimating the relative location on the basis of the number of pages on each side of his ribbon marker, she was able to find the 51st verse of the 15th chapter of First Corinthians.

Twice during the sermon Lacey read the specified passage and then went back and read the first 50 verses of chapter 15, also. But she was specifically intrigued with the reference in verse 52 to a trumpet sound that would raise the dead in the twinkling of an eye. Harry James, maybe, in his heyday, she thought irreverently.

Still not sure of exactly what was being said from the pulpit or in the open Bible on her lap, she slowly closed the book and returned it to the hymnal rack. An aura of drowsiness began to seep into her consciousness and she realized it was more than two hours past her normal bedtime. So, as the minister droned on about the difference between corruptible and incorruptible, she kept awake by scrutinizing the mourners seated in front of her and estimating their age, weight, and occupation.

When everyone stood for the final hymn, Lacey felt a little guilty at not having been significantly moved by the service. Maybe she'd feel differently at the cemetery.

Outside, the January day was crisp and cold without a cloud in the sky. Lacey breathed deeply to cleanse her lungs of the cloying odors of cut flowers and cheap perfume, intensified by an overheated building. She didn't feel like getting involved with the grieving family and had started toward the Vette when a hand touched her elbow.

"Excuse me, Miss, but is your name Lacey Bowder?" The questioner was dressed in a black suit with a gray striped vest and a white carnation in his lapel. Must be the funeral director.

"Yes sir, I am."

"I'm Herman Walker. Pleased to meet ya. I guess you can tell I work for the funeral parlor. Drive the flower car and help out with odd jobs, kinda. That's when I'm not on the road with my rig."

"Nice to meet you, Mr. Walker," Lacey said. She smiled brightly but groaned inwardly at this unwanted involvement. "You say you're a trucker. Were you a friend of Mr. Haydad's?"

"Sure was, ma'am. Before he moved out to Pittsburgh, me and Ben rode many a mile together in the cab of the same rig. Our regular run was down 81 to Staunton. Caught your Truckstop show lots of times around the Harrisburg area."

Lacey decided Walker must have picked up her name from the guest register. Should have signed it Lavender, she thought with mild irritation.

"If you don't mind, Miss Lacey, I was wondering how you came to be at Ben's funeral. I know he was a fan of yours but far's I know, he never met you personal."

Lacey felt slightly ashamed of her earlier irritation and quietly told Ben's friend of how she came to be at the funeral. Walker nodded soberly.

"Ben would be right proud to know you come down from Camp Hill for his funeral, him liking your show so much an' all."

Lacey smiled and placed a gloved hand on the trucker's muscular arm. "I'm really glad I could be here, Mr. Walker. Since I don't know the Haydad family at all, I don't want to intrude at a time like this. So would you do me the favor of expressing my sympathy to Mrs. Haydad and Ben's sister?"

Walker nodded and then offered to give Lacey a lift to the cemetery in the flower car. She wasn't sure if good funeral protocol permitted a non-relative to accept such an offer but she did so anyway, not wanting to drive the throaty Vette in the procession. The Vette's twin glass-packs were so prone to rumble and back off. A loud exhaust crack would not fit the situation.

Lacey had to wait in the front seat of the flower car for 20 minutes until the procession was ready to move. Walker must have spread the word that a minor celebrity was in town because a number of trucker types stopped beside the car and shook hands with Lacey through her lowered window, quietly expressing their appreciation of her attendance at their friend's funeral.

She watched as Walker helped escort the family members to the limousine parked just ahead and then they were rolling slowly back to town and the Gettysburg Military Cemetery. On the way, Walker explained that Ben Haydad had been in Viet Nam and would be buried in a special section of the cemetery reserved for veterans of relatively recent wars.

Not wanting to be any more conspicuous than she already was, Lacey walked across the drive and examined some of the Civil War markers while the funeral director and his assistants arranged things for the interment. Many of the men who fell in battle July first, second, and third, 1863, were buried shoulder to shoulder in long curving rows. In addition, large groups were placed in common graves under a single marker. Lacey stood for a long time and stared at one such marker that represented 538 unknown Pennsylvania soldiers in a single grave. She couldn't avoid a horribly morbid thought. What does it look like down in there with all those bones and tattered blue uniforms all mixed together?

To clear her mind, Lacey returned to the sidewalk and strolled up to the peace memorial which stood on the spot where Lincoln delivered his famous Gettysburg address. You were wrong about one thing, Honest Abe. The world will always note and forever remember what you said here.

Lacey heard car doors closing and realized everything was in readiness for the graveside service. It began with the soloist of the day prevailing a capella through an unknown song called "Going Home". The words were beautiful but the arrangement did need accompaniment.

After three verses and choruses the minister stepped to the head of the casket which had been lowered until the four-foot arrangement of white carnations which topped its lid was even with the snow. He opened his large Bible and announced that his only remarks at the grave would be taken from the first letter the Apostle

Paul wrote to his fellow Christians at Thessalonika. He specified that he would be reading from chapter 4, beginning with verse 13, and continuing to the end of the chapter.

As the clergyman began to read in a somber but well-projected voice, Lacey checked her digital watch. Eleven fifty-nine. Just for something to do she held the button down and watched the LCD numerals switch to seconds. The bits of time blipped away to high noon. Fifty-six, fifty-seven, fifty-eight, fifty-nine ...

Chapter 11: Searching

Walnut Valley Colony

Friday, January 3, 7:00 A.M.

Mark Marlow slumped behind a littered desk in the time office, completely drained physically as well as mentally. An up-all-night sourness fouled his mouth, his stomach churned with countless cups of black coffee on top of hastily-chomped sandwiches, and a high anxiety level made his blood pressure sing in his ears. He rubbed the black stubble along his jaw line and stared bleakly at the search coordinator seated on the other side of the desk.

Hank Grant had worked at Walnut Valley Colony for 25 years and for the past 15 had served as farm manager, back when the residents had been capable of milking cows and doing other light farm chores. In this capacity he supervised the overall farming operation as well as general maintenance of the grounds. No one knew the topographical features of Walnut Valley's rolling back campus better than Hank. On those few occasions when a resident of Walnut Valley was unaccounted for, Hank had been directly instrumental in finding the missing lamb and returning him or her to the fold in less than an hour.

But not this time. Not Jackie Dark.

In all his experience in coordinating searches he had never had to cope with the deadly combination of driving snow, sub-zero temperatures, and winter darkness. He had never failed before. Now he had.

The snow had stopped about ten last night and the wind dropped off to minor gusts. The temperature, however, had taken over where the snow and wind left off as Old Man Winter continued his January assault on the hill country of North Jersey. By midnight, most mercury watchers were reporting minus figures of up to ten.

The lower 30 acres of Walnut Valley's sprawling holdings were completely enclosed in a well-maintained chain-link fence. Dr. Kimberly had long ago confessed to a nagging fear that some day a resident might wander far enough into the hills to be lost permanently. So, at significant taxpayer expense, and in spite of considerable foot-dragging in Trenton, the fence had been erected. The area inside the 30-acre compound, however, was left in a relatively natural state with only a few hiking trails and picnic areas developed for use by groups of closely-supervised residents.

During the night, the scope of the search had been extended to include every square foot of campus inside the perimeter of the fence. Hour after hour the exhausted searchers had waded through deep snow. Every nook, every cranny, every bit of shelter was carefully scrutinized. And by seven in the morning, the snowmobiles, four-wheel drives, and trampling feet had not left a sliver of unblemished snow.

Although the search had proven fruitless, the searchers deserved high marks for effort and attitude. By midnight, the original group had grown to a small army almost 1000 strong. While a skeleton night shift was maintained in the cottages and heat plant, employees from all classifications and all three shifts had turned out to help find Jackie Dark. Many employees brought along family members, friends, and neighbors. In addition, a large contingent of volunteers from the surrounding communities had offered to lend a hand.

Harold Carson, the food service supervisor, made a major contribution to the search effort without ever leaving his kitchens. All night long he and the cooks maintained a steady flow of coffee, soup, and sandwiches as the weary and numb searchers took short breaks in the staff cafeteria.

And as the outdoor search continued hour after hour, small teams headed by security men with grand-master keys checked every inch of interior space at the Walnut Valley Colony. Starting with the 26 cottages, they eventually fanned out to check everything from the pharmacy to the hog parlor.

Now it was seven in the morning, over thirteen hours after Jackie Dark was first reported missing. The total result of all search efforts was zero.

Hank Grant raised his head and said tonelessly, "I think we're licked, Mark. I really do. I never thought I'd say what I'm gonna say, but truth is, I don't think we're gonna find him alive. No sense going on with it. Least not the way we have been doing. What do you think?"

Mark had already arrived at the same conclusion. "Think you're right, Hank, and I don't like it any better than you do. I just can't see how it happened. Dead or alive, we should have found him by now." He had choked on the "dead or alive" phrase and now rose and crossed to the coffee urn for an unwanted umpteenth cup of coffee.

Back in his chair again, Mark stared at the steam rising from the untouched coffee before continuing. "I talked to Dr. Kimberly on the phone about 45 minutes

ago. She suggested we switch from emergency to normal operations with the beginning of the 7:00 A.M. shift. She did ask that I confirm that decision with Dr. King in Trenton so I called him right after I got finished with the Florida call. King agreed that we should return to normal operations but suggested that we keep a skeleton search crew on the job through the daylight hours today."

The taciturn farm manager fished in a large parka pocket for a fresh package of Red Man. "That idea of keeping a small search party on duty today sounds good to me. Last night I counted ten snowmobiles that belong to guys working for me on the farm and grounds crew. Why don't we keep those 10 sleds moving all day, two men to a sled?"

Both men nurtured a silent hope that the brilliant winter sun might disclose something missed during the night search. Not likely, though, Mark thought. After it stopped snowing, the moon had shone brightly on the white landscape. In addition there had been dozens of headlights, spot lights, and flashlights playing over every inch the searchers covered. No, not likely that anything or anyone would be seen today which was missed last night.

With both the superintendent and the director of cottage life unavailable for easy consultation, Mark wasn't sure what the chain of command should be. Technically his Administrator-on-Duty shift had ended at 11:30 last night. During the search he had continued to work closely with Hank while a senior nurse who normally worked third shift had kept tabs on the in-cottage routines.

Now, though, it was time for the AM AOD to take over and Mark was more than ready to let someone else have the wheel. "Hank, have you seen Riley around lately? He's AOD today and really should be involved in making some of these decisions. As Mark finished speaking a tall, stooped figure entered the room, a meerschaum drooping from his mouth.

"Morning, Dr. Riley. You look like I feel."

"Wouldn't be surprised if we all look and feel just about the same," the genial director of psychology remarked dryly. "What's the situation now?"

Quickly Mark and Hank briefed Dr. Bartholomew Riley on the plan to return to normal operations and maintain a skeleton search party during the daylight hours. The psychologist listened carefully, nodding and puffing. At the moment, Mark couldn't think of anyone on staff he'd rather have relieve him, especially with a press conference coming up at ten. "I don't know if you've heard, Dr. Riley, but Trenton has authorized us to make a statement to the press this morning. I told Dr.

King you'd be the AOD and he said he felt comfortable with you handling it. Might say I do, too."

Press conference, huh? Too bad Walnut Valley had to get on the map at the expense of poor Jackie. Who's coming, Mark? Do you know?"

"Understand it will be some regional AP and UPI people and a few local papers. Nothing that big."

"Fine. Shouldn't be any problem. Now why don't you two gentlemen get some rest.? Riley suggested with a touch of fatherliness. "I've already had my nap so now it's your turn."

Hank grunted, zipped up his parka, and said he'd be sacked out in one of the guest rooms up on third floor as soon as he'd organized the daytime search party.

"I'll be doing something similar on my office settee soon as I take care of a couple items. Call me if you need me." Slung his snowmobile suit over his shoulder, Mark left the time office and trudged up the stairs to the main floor. He took his snowmobile suit out to the parking lot and stowed the bulky outfit in the Geo's hatch. Then he retrieved his suitcase from the back seat.

Back inside, he stepped into the men's room for a much-needed session with his razor and toothbrush. Then he headed for his office. It smelled like stale smoke, thanks to yesterday's session with the guy from the *Atlantic City Press*. A note beside Evelyn's typewriter stated she was exhausted from an all-night shift in the staff cafeteria and had gone home for some rest. Mark dropped the note in the waste basket, closed the hall door, turned out the light, and stepped into his own office. As he dropped onto the office settee, he saw it was 7:50 A.M. He didn't have another conscious thought until the phone rang three hours later.

Chapter 12: Good-Bye, Jackie

Walnut Valley Colony
Friday, January 3, 10:50 A.M.

Mark wasn't sure how many times the phone buzzed before his mind was sufficiently alert to permit the simple tasks of walking and talking. At least ten. Finally he was able to stagger to his feet and walk over to his desk. "Hullo. Yes, Dr. Riley. They did! That's wonderf-- . . . Oh, no! No! What a rotten way to-- . . . Yes sir, I'll be right there."

A wave of horror sluiced through Mark's mind as he pulled on his parka and trotted down the hall. Cottage 4 was just a short distance up the mall so he left the Geo Metro in the parking lot. As he strode up the snow-covered drive his mind whirled with a montage of unanswered questions. How did it happen? Why did it happen? Could we have found him in time?

The news that Jackie Dark had been found frozen to death in the trunk of Jenny Farthing's big Olds 98 spread quickly among the on-duty employees. In the next hour, Mark's questions were asked and re-asked hundreds of times. There were no answers.

The 30 inhabitants of Cottage 4 were profoundly disabled and totally nonambulatory, both male and female. They were at the very bottom of the developmental scale in comparison to the overall institutional population. Not one could talk. Not one could walk or even maintain a sitting posture. Not one could raise his or her head from the mattress. Very few could establish eye contact with a person speaking, or visually track a moving object. Many had visual disabilities and hearing impairments to varying degrees. Quite a few lacked the elemental rooting and sucking reflexes. A gastrostomy had been performed on some which permitted a special nutritive formula to be introduced directly into the stomach. Two or three could grasp with their fingers. All wore diapers. No one ever laughed. Several cried on occasion. A few cried most of the time.

This group of totally helpless bits of humanity lived according to a very rigid schedule. It probably helped to keep them alive. Each meal consisted of a carefully balanced diet. Temperature and humidity were closely monitored and maintained within specified parameters.

Cottage 4 was staffed with 13 employees on the first and second shifts, 365 days a year. A registered nurse was in charge of each shift, assisted by 4 LPNs and

8 aides and technicians. The staff was distributed between two large open rooms with each room containing 15 steel cribs. The cribs were arranged around the perimeter of the room with open space in the center. Portable oxygen and suction equipment was available in each dormitory. Each dorm was fitted with a shallow tub mounted 30 inches above the floor where the residents got their daily baths.

The activities of daily living consisted of up to 5 meals per day, diapering as needed, and one hour out of the crib on a mat table for physical therapy. Working under the general supervision of a Registered Physical Therapist, four PT aides gently lifted each resident to a waist-high mat table which was topped with four inches of vinyl-covered foam. While out on the mat each resident was carefully manipulated through a series of simple range-of-motion exercises under the watchful eye of the PT. Everyone knew that such ministrations would not lead to independent walking but there was a need to help each one maintain the degree of passive mobility which he or she already possessed.

When Mark arrived at Cottage 4, two burly State Police officers assisted by Hank Grant and one of his workers were carrying Jackie Dark's stiff body into the East dorm where they placed it on a foam-topped mat table. Jenny Farthing walked at the head of the procession of mourners which followed the body and every face was wet with tears.

As Mark stepped back and surveyed the scene he couldn't help think that perhaps poor Jackie was better off than the pitiful inhabitants of the cribs which surrounded the impromptu catafalque. Their existence was only a few shades brighter than the nothingness which now engulfed him.

Mark watched with compassion as poor Jenny walked to the far side of the mat table and looked down at her Jackie's body. Someone had covered him with a gray woolen blanket stenciled STATE OF NEW JERSEY. That simple phrase served as a silent but eloquent epitaph. Jackie Dark always had belonged to the State of New Jersey. He still did.

Mark suddenly needed a breath of fresh air and he silently left the circle of sobbing mourners around the mat table and went back outside. Two State Police detectives were carefully examining the trunk of Jenny's car, inside and out. He walked over to the one with the clipboard.

"Good morning. My name is Mark Marlow and I was pretty heavily involved in the search last night. You fellows have any ideas how this happened?"

The men shook hands. "Detective Craig. Pleased to meet you, Mr. Marlow. In answer to your question, I think we can rule out foul play, largely on the grounds of what Mrs. Farthing told us a few minutes ago about the deceased's behavior. Sounds a little far fetched, I'll admit, but I guess some of these people up here do some pretty strange things."

Mark started to say that plenty of people walking the streets did strange things, too, but decided to listen instead. Both detectives turned their attention to Jenny's ancient Oldsmobile as Craig continued.

"It seems that the lock mechanism on this trunk lid is defective and if you hit the lid with your fist, right above the keyhole, it opens without the key."

Craig's partner had just finished dusting the lid and surrounding paint surfaces for prints and the lid was now closed and latched. "It works like this," and Craig struck the trunk lid with the heel of his fist." Sure enough, the lid popped up. "See that? Apparently what's-his-name--"

"Jackie. Jackie Dark."

"--this Jackie Dark found out about this and used to get a kick out of opening the trunk by himself. Mrs. Farthing says that a couple times she found him playing in the open trunk. One time he even pulled the lid down and hid in there while the staff went crazy looking for him all over the place. Never latched the lid with him in it, though. Just pulled it down and held it closed with his hand. Last night, the weight of that snow piled on the lid might have made the difference this time. Don't know for sure, yet."

"Mark had the picture without further explanation. Last night at supper Jackie had gotten peeved because he couldn't have seconds due to his weight reduction diet. He acted like he was going to the toilet but instead, he went outside and hid in Jenny's trunk. Only this time, when Jackie pulled the lid down to hide, it latched and there he was. Apparently Jackie wasn't as adept at opening the Olds trunk from the inside as he was from the outside. Trapped in a frigid prison belonging to the one human being who cared more about him than anyone else in the world. The pitiful irony of it brought fresh tears to Mark's eyes. He blew his nose and then turned back to the detective.

"How did he come to be found?"

"That part of this case is a real bummer," and even the gruff detective seemed moved. "This Mrs. Farthing was getting ready to go home and catch a little nap.

Been up all night helping with the search, as you know. Well, her sister, a Mrs. Campbell, works here in Cottage 4, first trick. On the way out the gate, Mrs. Farthing stopped here to get some steaks out of her trunk to put in her sister's car. When she opens the trunk, there is Jackie's body, frozen stiff. Right where it had been all last night. I guess she passed out right there in the snow.'

Again Mark had to cope with tears as he turned wordlessly and walked back into Cottage 4. Inside, the scene was relatively unchanged. Jenny still stood beside the stiff body, great sobs racking her stolid frame. Then, as everyone watched, she slowly leaned over and rested her tear-stained cheek on Jackie's blanket-covered chest.

At that gesture, a flood of bitterness soured Mark's soul. Why, God, why? Why did it have to happen to Jackie? What did he ever do to deserve to die such a horrible death? And Jenny, what about her, God? All she ever did was love Jackie to the point of indiscretion. Now she has a horrible burden of guilt to carry to her own grave. God, if you're there, and if you care, just tell me why!

At the conclusion of his unvoiced soliloquy Mark Marlow glanced up at the clock that was visible above the pitiful tableau in the center of the east dorm. It was 11:59 and the red second hand was climbing the final 30 seconds to the top of the hour and high noon.

Suddenly Jenny stood bolt upright from her position of leaning over the corpse. Her mouth opened wide and her eyes were round with an emotion that Mark couldn't fathom. Her bosom heaved spasmodically and her eyes locked with Mark's across Jackie's body.

Without knowing why, Mark wrenched his gaze from Jenny's face and watched the red second hand crawl past the eleven and touch twelve.

And then the clock stopped.

In the first millisecond after the clock stopped Mark thought the power had failed. But in that same miniscule speck of time, he was conscious of a strange light that filled the room--in addition to, or perhaps in spite of, the twin rows of fluorescents that ran the length of the ceiling. In some inexplicable way the strange light seemed to have substance, almost as though some sort of other-world fluid filled the room. Whites seemed whiter, colors seemed brighter, and everything was totally and evenly illuminated. No shadows, no shades, nothing but pure unadulterated light.

At the same time Mark became aware of the strange light he was conscious of a strange sound filling the room, also. Not sound in the conventional sense of the word, but something more than sound. Again the analogy of fluid filling all air space raced through Mark's mind as he struggled to associate what his ears were hearing with some previous experience.

In that first fragment of a second when the sound began, Mark had thought it sounded very much like a single trumpet blowing a sustained tone. But not like the earthly sound produced by the best trumpeter. This was a clarion call so pure, so sweet, so flawless in execution that its sheer beauty generated a persuasiveness beyond anything Mark had experienced.

And then the trumpet note began to swell. As the swell intensified, it took on exciting overtones of brilliance, with this newly-added brilliance blending subtly but beautifully with the earlier characteristics of purity and clarity. Under normal circumstances this sound would be well beyond the threshold of pain. But there was no pain, no discomfort of any kind. Only that strange and persuasive exhilaration that grew in measure with the intensity of the sound.

During the second millisecond--or so it seemed--after the clock had stopped, Mark had tried to look around the room and locate the source of the strangely compelling sound. He was astounded to find he was totally immobile. His eyes could track perfectly, from the left extremity of his peripheral vision to the right. But every other part of his body was frozen in some mysterious state of non-animation.

Frantically he swung his gaze back to the center of the room and looked again into Jenny Farthing's eyes. The earlier blend of confusion, terror and incredulity was still there. And she, too, seemed to be locked in the same state of immobility, with her mouth still forming a capital "O".

Quickly Mark tracked his vision up and down the length of the dormitory that had become filled in the last five minutes or so with the curious as well as the mourning employees of Walnut Valley Colony. Every single person in Mark's field of vision appeared to be held in an identical vice of motionlessness.

Once again Mark returned his gaze to the midpoint of the portion of the room which he could see and looked at Jenny and the still form lying between them.

And then, if Mark had been permitted to do so, he would have fallen forward on his face in a dead faint.

Something was happening to Jackie Dark's body! First he was aware of a halo of softly shimmering light which was slowly lowering down over the frozen corpse until it completely circumscribed it. Then a new form began to rise up inside the perimeter of the halo, passing through the gray State blanket. Gradually it assumed substance and attained a standing posture on the mat table. The form, without a doubt, had human characteristics and as the evolution continued it was possible to discern that a human was taking shape before the widened eyes of the onlookers.

Mark's frenzied mind had thought "human male" but he realized that the term human might be inappropriate. The form standing on the mat table and facing east did have the general configuration of a man. And yet, he was like no man anyone in the room had ever seen.

He was dressed in a lustrous robe of royal blue that swirled softly in an unfelt breeze. His facial features were molded in a beauteous perfection never known to earthly painters and sculptors. The line, symmetry, and proportion of his body were beyond compare.

And then he moved. Slowly he raised both hands toward the eastern sky above and beyond Cottage 4 and stepped lightly to the floor. The rigid form beneath the gray state blanket was gone!

Although his body was being held immobile, Mark's mind was fully alert and racing at the speed of light. If there was no corpse of Jackie Dark under the blanket, the creature who had just stepped to the floor must be some sort of reincarnation. What kind of other-world metamorphosis had accomplished the astounding change? Mark couldn't begin to guess. But without a doubt the magnificent personage who now stood looking down at Jenny's immobile form was a reborn Jackie Dark. Talk about being born again. This was the ultimate!

Gone were the Mongolian features so characteristic of a person afflicted with Down's Syndrome. Gone was the protruding tongue. Gone were the squared, stubby hands. And as Mark caught a fleeting glance from the crystal blue eyes of the new Jackie Dark, he also knew that the severe mental retardation of the old Jackie Dark had been replaced with a mentality as flawless as the beautiful body which now held everyone's attention.

In the next instant the reincarnation was confirmed. Slowly the creature reached out a robe-draped arm and touched Jenny on the shoulder. At once she was released from her trance and was able to turn and look into the face of the

creature standing before her. Swiftly Jenny's pudgy arms encircled the new Jackie's waist and she buried her tear-wet face in the soft folds of his lustrous gown.

His arms responded in kind and they stood thus for a long moment of quiet bliss. Then ever so slowly the beautiful creature gently removed Jenny's arms from his waist. He placed his hands on her rounded shoulders and looked into her face with a look of such infinite sadness that Mark felt his own heart rend from the intensity. Then with a smile of more sorrow than joy, he leaned down and softly kissed each lined cheek and then repeated the gesture with each work-reddened hand. With another sad smile, the new Jackie Dark stepped back a pace and the instant his touch was removed, Jenny returned to her earlier immobile state.

Throughout the exchange in the center of the Cottage 4 dormitory the trumpet note had been growing in brilliance and intensity. Its message of "come" was so overwhelmingly persuasive that Mark longed to violate his own rigid state and soar to where it beckoned.

The new Jackie Dark knew no such limitation, however. At the increased intensity of the trumpet note he turned back toward the east in a movement of fluid grace and again lifted his arms toward the eastern sky.

With a mind already strained to the breaking point with a succession of the unimaginable, Mark noticed that the perfectly-molded feet of the splendid creature had left the utilitarian carpet covering the dormitory floor. In fact the new Jackie's entire body was slowly lifting up through the beautiful light of the room in the graceful angle of ascent known only to birds and aircraft.

With a sudden burst of acceleration, the creature atomized through the vaulted ceiling of Cottage 4's east dormitory and was ...

... gone!

Chapter 13: The Dead in Christ

Gettysburg Military Cemetery
Friday, January 3, 11:59:30 A.M.

The LCD numerals blipped away the remaining seconds to noon. While idly noting the passing seconds Lacey was aware of the country preacher's strong voice rolling through the old cemetery. What did he say he was going to read? First Thessa-something. "For the Lord Himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first . . . "

Lacey continued to look at her digital . . . 58 . . . 59 . . . 00. And then, no 01 to start the next minute! Her watch had stopped at exactly twelve noon. Angrily she tried to tap the watch's buttons and get it going again but her finger wouldn't move. In fact, her entire body was held in a total state of instant paralysis. Except her eyes. She could move her eyes and she did so frantically, scanning the little knot of people attending the graveside service. Everyone else seemed to be in the same fix she was in. Absolutely no one was moving at all.

Then the trumpet note began and for a while, Lacey was aware of nothing else. Maybe she made her living with an all-night country show for truckers but her first love was trumpet music. And the shelf below her stereo system contained some of the best. Her collection ranged through Harry James to Al Hirt. She even had a gospel brass album of the Ohman Brothers that had some pretty sharp triple-tonguing.

But this horn man, whoever he was, had all the pros beat. And as the sustained tone began to swell, the sharp January air gave the sound an added measure of brilliance and resonance which sent shivers of appreciation up and down her spine.

Suddenly the focus of her senses shifted from what she was hearing to what she was seeing. A wraith-like vapor was swirling up from the carnations topping Ben Haydad's casket and swiftly began to assume the appearance of a human form. And then her eyes widened as similar vapors appeared above several of the graves within her field of vision. She turned her gaze across the drive and saw that the grave of the 538 Civil War soldiers from Pennsylvania was almost obscured by the vapors.

Amazement, terror, and an unknown sense of reverence strove for supremacy in her consciousness as she tried to make some kind of sense out of what she was seeing and hearing. The preacher had been standing directly across the grave from Lacey when the phenomenon began and she searched his face for some clue to what was happening.

His big Bible was still open in his hands and his head was bowed toward it in the posture of reading. But his eyes were as mobile as Lacey's and his glance touched hers. However, she saw no fear or even awe, only a curious kind of triumph. Whatever was happening, it apparently met with his full approval.

And then Lacey noted with increasing incredulity that a total environmental change had occurred without her being aware of it. Snow no longer covered the ground and the subfreezing bite was gone from the January air. Instead, green grass and flowers carpeted the cemetery and a gentle summer breeze stirred living leaves on the trees. A scarlet-vested robin flitted down to perch on a handle of Ben Haydad's casket and a heavily-laden bumblebee flew laboriously across Lacey's range of vision.

Impossible? Yes! But, in fact, it was summer within the wrought-iron fence of Gettysburg Military Cemetery and for at least a hundred yards beyond. Outside that perimeter, however, 14 inches of snow still glistened in the clear light of a January noon.

Again Lacey turned her full attention to the vaporous entities eddying above certain graves. What had started out as vapors were now clearly seen as human forms. Well, perhaps not "human" forms but living forms, nevertheless. Forms with faces of sublime beauty and bodies of flawless physique!

The former soldiers were dressed in soft robes of lustrous blue. There were one or two women in the group and they were similarly garbed in pink. All were unshod. Although there were distinct differences in minor facial characteristics and hair color, all the men were about the same height--six even-- and the women were all about five-five. Even more astonishing was their apparent age. Each person, male and female alike, seemed to be about the same age, probably 21.

Once more Lacey looked toward the mass Pennsylvania grave. No tattered blue uniforms with bodies broken by minie balls or grape shot now. About 100 strong, young men were materializing from the eddying vapors.

Throughout the cemetery, the vapors which first heralded the appearance of the apparently-resurrected forms quickly dissipated and the creatures began to move. And with their movement they were given voice. Instantly the cemetery rang

with shouts of "Hallelujah!" and "Praise the Lord!" as the creatures ran to and fro, greeting one another with joyous embraces. Lacey could only imagine she was witnessing the reunion of comrades in arms. Persons long dead and of various shapes, sizes, and ages were now somehow miraculously resurrected. Resurrected to a state of beauty and perfection that transcended anything Lacey had ever seen or heard about. It was absolutely beyond belief!

After at least three rounds of greetings had been exchanged by the newly-resurrected creatures, they began to join hands and form a large circle which circumscribed the halted graveside service of Ben Hayhad. Lacey had lost track of which of the glorified persons had been the dead trucker but she knew he was in the circle somewhere.

When the circle was intact, the resurrected ones began moving in a clockwise direction around the open grave, dancing lightly on bare feet across the verdant summer carpet. And as they circled, they sang a song with a tune that was unknown to Lacey. The words sounded like . . . "All hail the power of Jesus' name, Let angels prostrate fall. Bring forth the royal diadem, and crown Him Lord of all!"

Lacey had a keen ear for music and appreciated all kinds when done well. Even country. What she heard now was the most perfect male harmony imaginable. The first tenors were as clear as a silver bell with the flutelike tones of the second tenors blending in perfectly. The baritones and basses provided a solid anchor to the total effect. The few ladies who had been buried in the military cemetery shared their soprano and alto voices to provide perfect harmony!

As the singers entered the second verse the speed of their circling motion began to increase. Faster and faster they moved until their unshod feet scarcely touched the grass. As she watched, Lacey noted that now and then their feet didn't touch the grass at all. First one and then another would take several strides a few inches above the soft, green grass.

And then before Lacey's widened eyes the exception became touching the grass rather than gliding above it until the entire circling assembly of resurrected forms was completely airborne and rising slowly.

Throughout the singing and circling, the trumpet note had continued to swell in volume and intensity. And as the swell increased, the circle of beautiful creatures rose with increasing swiftness until it was nothing but a rapidly-diminishing speck in the eastern sky.

When there was nothing more to see, Lacey glanced down at her wrist where her index finger was still pressed to the button of her digital watch.

It was still 12:00:00 noon!

Chapter 14: Bethany

**Bethany Parsonage, Liverpool
Friday, January 3, 11:00 A.M.**

Ronni Masterson stretched and kicked off the covers. Jason will have to talk to the church board about the valves on these radiators, she thought dispiritedly. Here it is in the dead of winter and I wake up in a sweat, even with a shortie on. Slowly she rolled over on her tummy and checked the alarm clock. The fact that it was eleven in the morning brought no discernible reaction.

Over on her back again, she stared at the water-spotted ceiling and reflected on how lucky she was to be capable of sleeping in. Many of her friends told her they couldn't stay in bed past seven without getting a headache. And why not sleep late? Who's to say that sleeping is less virtuous than racing around the kitchen and baking up a lot of high cholesterol pastries that will hasten our trip to the grave. Or maybe pastries aren't high in cholesterol. Who cares? They're fattening, that's for sure.

Thinking of getting fat caused Ronni to caress her flat tummy with the palms of both hands. I wonder if I'm pregnant again. In the confusion of the move, she had mislaid her pills and last night she was unprotected.

Ronni stretched drowsily and patted her tummy again. So what if I am pregnant again. Jason Junior is due for a little sister to brighten his adolescent years. Little Sister ought to hold off at least a year, though. Got to get this place fixed up a little bit first. Her gaze shifted to the spotted ceiling again and she wondered idly if the rusted pans in the attic were properly positioned to catch the drips from the leaky roof. Have to check that the next time it rains.

The sound of a flushing commode caused her to reach down and pull the sheet up to her shoulders. Her husband had gone up to the Susquehanna Valley Mall in Selinsgrove to get some things for the house but Jason Junior was home from school with an upper respiratory infection.

"Mom, when we gonna eat?"

Ronni smiled with warm affection at the 11-year-old boy standing in the bedroom doorway. The top and bottom of his pajamas did not match in color, pattern, or fabric. And his sleep-messed hair stuck out from his head in a way that gave him a somewhat justified Dennis the Menace aura.

"Morning, Tiger. How're you feeling this morning? Come here and let me feel your head."

Jason Junior padded over and sat on the edge of the bed beside his mother, smelling very much like a boy. "You seem cool enough. Tell you what. Get a quick shower and brush your teeth and then we'll talk about lunch."

"Aw, Mom, do I hafta? I'm not going to school today."

Ronni smiled in spite of herself. "Yes, you hafta. I'm people, too, you know. I have a nose. Now scoot! Toasted ham and cheese be okay?"

"Can I have Coke?"

"Yes, you can have Coke. Now go, and close the door, please."

After Jason had closed the door, Ronni hopped out of bed and dressed quickly. She brushed her teeth and washed the sleep out of her eyes at an old-fashioned lavatory sink mounted on the bedroom wall. Its basin was rust-stained and its unmatched faucets didn't mix, but it added a small measure of convenience to the one-bath parsonage.

Later, downstairs in the kitchen, Ronni heard a well-worn episode of *Happy Days* moving toward a conclusion and checked the sandwiches. Just right, and she smiled. Her finicky son hated crunchy toasted ham and cheese sandwiches. They had to be gooey on the inside and greasy on the outside.

In a moment Jason appeared at the table. "Man, that sure smells good. I must be getting better, hungry as I am."

"It's all ready, Tiger, except pouring your Coke. You can do that after you pray."

Jason Masterson, Junior bowed his freshly-combed head. Ronni believed it was perfectly all right to watch and pray so she glanced at the teapot clock above the kitchen table as her son began his prayer. The sweep second hand had just passed the 3 on its way to high noon. She turned her attention back to the prayer.

"... for this food and ask You to bless it to our bodies. And help me to get better so I can go outside and play in the snow. Protect Dad on his trip up to Selinsgrove and bring him back to us safe again. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen."

As Jason Junior prayed, his mother watched him fondly and marveled at how rapidly he had grown in the last year. He had lost his little-boy chubbiness and was fast developing into quite a young man. A small tuft of hair had escaped the lick-and-a-promise ministrations of his comb and Ronni had a motherly urge to reach across the table and smooth it down.

Instead, she closed her eyes for the final seconds of his prayer and then opened them on the "Amen".

It was too late to fix his hair. Her body was already frozen in a state of instant granite. With the first sound of the trumpet she knew it was the Rapture.

She also knew she was not going.

As the mother stared at the still-bowed head of her 11-year-old, she screamed an anguished prayer to the God she had known about and read about and talked about most of her life. But her screams were silent and her prayer echoed hollowly in the dark and empty chambers of her own soul.

God! God! Please, God, don't take him. Please don't take him! Don't take my only son. Please leave him here. Please, God, I can't bear to lose him. Not forever! Not for eternity! Please leave him here! Please don't take him!

The only part of her body which could move were her eyes, which were dry in spite of the anguish in her heart. She stared at the bowed head of her son and the same "don't take him" prayer rolled endlessly through her mind.

But there would be no stopping the inevitable and she knew she would be forced to watch it happen. He would have to take on a new body, an incorruptible body, specifically fitted for the joys and glories of eternal bliss.

And it did happen, just as she knew it would. As she watched with mingled joy and sorrow, a shimmering vapor flowed down over Jason's body. Where she had seen a typical sixth grader, there sat a creature of total perfection with just a hint of Jason Junior around the eyes and at the corners of the mouth.

But wait! Something else was happening. She became acutely aware of a tingling sensation low in her abdomen. It felt like a slender probe had been inserted far into her body and was delivering a series of mild electric shocks. Dropping her gaze to her lap, she saw a wisp of vapor permeate the fabric of her slacks just below the navel and float out toward the center of the room.

Instantly she knew what was happening. Little Sister did exist, after all, and was being raptured, too! But not as a zygote, or an embryo, or a fetus, or even a tiny baby. Now we know, she thought incongruously, that life really does begin at the point of conception.

Rapidly the tenuous vapor swirled away from her body and, in the middle of the kitchen, took on the form of a beautiful woman of about 21. Of course, she realized with a flash of insight. They will all be 21. Perfection times the trinity.

And there her new-born baby girl stood, dressed in a soft gown of gentle pink, smiling sweetly at her brother. Suddenly Ronni realized she didn't have a name! But how could she have a name? She was conceived less than 12 hours ago. Quick! What can her name be? She has to have a name. Then a calendar on the wall within her range of peripheral vision caught her attention. She was able to read *BETHANY COMMUNITY CHURCH*. Of course. Bethany is a Bible name, too, a perfect name for a young lady in a state of rapture.

Frantically she sought Jason Junior's gaze. Her name's Bethany, she called silently. Tell her that I named her Bethany, after the last church her Dad pastored. Tell her, Jason Junior. Please tell her.

But the two splendid siblings were totally oblivious to the soul cries of their immobilized mother. They stood smiling sweetly into each other's eyes and then the girl spoke.

"Hello, Jason," she said in a voice sweeter than a carefully tuned harp. "My name is Bethany and I'm your sister in Christ."

"I know, Bethany," Jason replied in a voice equally melodious but richer in timbre. "Isn't it wonderful?"

To Ronni, each syllable was like struck crystal and her heart broke into a thousand shards of misery. The pair turned, still holding hands, and faced toward the east. She knew they were about to leave Planet Earth for the jubilation of the Rapture, and she couldn't bear to see them go.

Especially Bethany. She'd always wanted a girl, had hoped that Jason Junior would be a girl. But now her unborn but transformed baby girl was about to cross the line of worlds and she hadn't even been able to touch her. Or hold her, or bathe or change or feed or rock her.

God, just one request before she goes. Please, God? I know you have to take her, and my husband and son, too. But let me touch my new baby girl just once. Let me hug and kiss her just once. Just once, God? Just once?

As Ronni watched with desperate hope, Bethany dropped Jason's hand and lifted both arms toward the eastern sky above the shabby parsonage. But then she turned gracefully and glided to her mother's side. Slowly she reached down and cupped the marble face in the softness of her palms.

At once Ronni was released from her trance and rose to her feet, her arms embracing the beautiful creature in pink. Their cheeks touched and Ronni turned her head to press her dry lips to Bethany's face. Nothing had ever felt smoother or softer.

"I'm so sorry, Mother," and now the notes of the harp were muted and somber with sadness. "He's calling and I must go. Good-bye."

And with that simple farewell, Bethany slipped from her mother's arms and turned to take her brother's hand again. Before another thought could cross Ronni's mind, they rose and passed right through the kitchen wall, between the corner cupboard and the refrigerator.

At that moment the trumpet music, which had gone unnoticed by Ronni earlier, crescendoed and died.

Ronni glanced up at the clock again. Through a haze of tears she saw the red second hand begin moving and it was five seconds past twelve noon. She was able to move again, too.

Crying hideously she stumbled through the swinging door into the dining room and fell face down on the threadbare carpet.

Jason's mantel clock, always a little slow, began striking twelve.

Chapter 15: Where Are The Twins?

**The Road to Seven Stars School
Friday, January 3, 7:50 A.M.**

"Mommy, I have to go to the bathroom."

"You're kidding me! We just left the house five minutes ago. Are you sick?" Karen Marlow pressed her lips together in exasperation and waited for an answer from her young daughter.

"No, I'm not sick. But I have to do number one real bad and this cold seat makes it worser, too."

Aint no such word as worser, Kellie," her twin brother offered. "Miss Black said so. Boy, what a baby. Can't even take a little trip to school without stopping to do her wee-wee!"

"You shut up, big mouth! Mommy, tell Kevin to shut up." Tears had started to roll down Kellie's freckled cheeks and Karen did hate to see the twins start their school day on such a note of controversy.

"Kellie, didn't you go before you left the house?"

"I couldn't, Mommy. When I first got up, Daddy was in the upstairs bathroom. And after breakfast, Kevin was hogging up the one downstairs. And then I guess I forgot. Please stop, Mommy. I don't think I can wait till we get to school."

Up ahead Karen saw a cleared area beside the road where the PennDOT trucks got their loads of cinders. There was no one around at the time and she pulled off there.

"Listen, Kellie, I'm going to pull up beside that cinder pile. When I stop, open your door and open the back door, too. then you can squat down between the two doors and have some privacy."

The little girl did as she was told, taking off her coat first so it wouldn't get wet. When she dropped her diminutive Lee jeans and exposed her tiny buns, Karen winced sympathetically at the thought of the frigid January wind which was whistling around the car.

Kevin may have opposed the unscheduled pit stop initially but he had no reservations about watching the entire operation with mischievous interest.

"Ha, ha Kellie! I see the moo-oon," he chanted.

"Mom-eee!" Kellie wailed.

"Stop it, Kevin!" Karen snapped and turned his head toward her. Crazy kids, she thought with an inward smile. They've taken a bath together every day for six years and now it's suddenly modesty time.

When Kellie was finished, she hopped in the car and quickly pulled on her coat. During the mercy mission, Karen had turned the Buick's heater up full blast and she watched her daughter hold out red hands toward the dash vent. "Feel better now, Doll?"

"Lots. Thanks for stopping, Mommy." Kellie looked at her mother with such a sweet smile of relief and gratitude that Karen instantly forgave the minor inconvenience.

"Okay, we're on our way then," said Karen cheerfully as she dropped the can into DRIVE and pulled back on the road. "Have you to school in no time."

Kellie smiled again but Kevin, miffed by his earlier rebuke, started stonily out the window and pushed his lower lip into a typical 6-year-old pout.

Karen parked the Buick behind the school and unlocked the playground entrance with her master key. Once inside, she hurried to her office and picked up the hex key to tie down the panic bars on the front doors and thereby unlock them. She knew some principals forced early arrivers to wait out in the cold until the warning bell rang. However, Karen realized that not all the children dressed as warmly as hers did and the first bus arrived before eight, more than 20 minutes before the warning bell rang.

When she got back to the office, Martha Metz was placing a cup of fresh coffee on her desk.

"Good morning, Martha, and thanks for the coffee. Cold mornings like this make me feel like a second cup by the time I get to school."

"Goot morning, Mrs. Marlow. You're velcome for the coffee. it does taste goot on a cold morning, still. Anysing you vant me to do before the kits come in?"

"Just one thing. Run down to the first grade room and make sure Miss Black's in. I don't want the twins messing around in her room before she gets there."

"She's already here. Came in chust ven I dit."

"Oh, good. Well, I guess I won't see you till lunch time, then. I have three classroom observations to do and that'll pretty much shoot the morning. The teachers' names and the times are on your desk. Page me if you need me."

"I vill, Mrs. Marlow. Have a nize morning."

Karen's morning was more necessary than nice as she did formal observations on three of her newer teachers who hadn't achieved tenure yet. She spent at least forty minutes in each room evaluating instructional technique, examining teacher-made materials, reviewing homework assignments, and checking lesson plans. All three teachers were doing reasonably adequate jobs and showed promise of developing into excellent teachers.

In the third room, Karen was startled by the 11:50 bell in her perusal of a lesson plan book. Quickly she gathered up her things and headed for the door, stopping a moment to leave a smiling word of encouragement with the young and nervous teacher.

Karen liked to stand in the cafeteria line with the children and chat about things of interest to them. Her students were perfectly at ease with their principal, sharing trivial incidents of their school day which were often amusing and sometimes revealing. Just another fringe benefit generated by working in a relatively small country school.

While in light conversation with a pig-tailed fifth grader in front of her, Karen heard a duet of "Hello, Mrs. Marlow" coming from her left. Turning, she saw Kevin and Kellie smiling and waving from one of the lower tables reserved for the primary children. Karen made a practice of treating her twins as regular students in front of the other children. Now, she smiled and waved back with their

secret fingers-crossed signal which meant, "I love you!" Satisfied, they resumed their giggling with the rest of the first graders at the table.

"Care if I sneak in here, Mrs. Marlow? I hate to vayst so much time standing in line, still."

The principal smiled again as her secretary eased her bulk into the line in front of her. "Anyone who works as hard as you do deserves a chance to do a little line leeching. Everything all right in the office?"

"Everysing's chust fine," said Martha, her little white bonnet bobbing in affirmation. "Nossing but the regular bunch of exchoose slips and stuff like that."

The cafeteria line seemed to be moving exceptionally slowly and Karen looked at the white-faced clock on the west wall. Almost noon. At that moment, An itch developed on her left shoulder blade and Karen reached back to scratch it. Without warning, her entire body became locked in a vise of marble.

Hours later while discussing the scene with Dan and Mark, Karen would be unable to remember anything about a strange light or heavenly music. She was acutely aware, however, of what was happening in the primary section of the cafeteria.

A strange shimmering effect was flowing down over each child, almost as though her vision was being distorted by heat waves. Kevin and Kellie were right in the center of the portion of the room she was able to see and their images were also distorted by the shimmering.

As she looked beyond the low tables to where the other children were eating, Karen noticed that several older students scattered here and there around the cafeteria were shimmering, also.

What in the world is happening? her mind demanded.

Quickly she looked back to the twins' table but they were gone! In fact, all the smaller children were gone. In their places there appeared to be full-grown creatures of unworldly beauty and grace, each wearing a soft robe of blue or pink.

Am I losing my mind? Is this some sort of monstrous mass hypnosis? Are we being attacked by an interplanetary foe of enormous power and inventiveness? Karen's frenzied mind rasped the questions but there were no answers.

A slight movement at her right caused her to turn her eyes in that direction. One of the pink-robed creatures was moving from her side and gliding gracefully toward where Kevin and Kellie had been sitting at their lunch table. Karen remembered that Martha Metz, her Dutchified Mennonite secretary, had been standing to her right when she first reached back to scratch her shoulder. Looking down at the spot where Martha had been standing, she was astounded to see nothing but a pile of clothing, the things Martha had worn to work that day. The pile included a heavily boned and laced corset as well as a little white bonnet so Karen knew the things had to be Martha's.

The creature who had just left her side was now embracing two of the others--one male and one female--near where the twins had been sitting. Can those two over there be Kevin and Kellie and what-used-to-be-Martha is hugging them? But that's impossible! those three people--if they are people--are all the same age and look enough alike to be cousins. Things like that just don't happen! At least not outside Steven Spielberg movies.

But where are the twins? Kevin! Kellie! Where are you? I want my babies! I want my babies! Please, someone, give me back my babies! The mother's anguished screams of appeal reverberated down through the corridors of time but there was no one to listen. No one to help. No compassionate ear to heed her plea.

Then there was a flurry of activity in the center of the room as the robed personages converged in a melee of high-fiving, backslapping, and clapping. The scene was not unlike the infield of Yankee Stadium after the seventh game of the World Series. In what seemed like a moment, though, they all came to attention and faced the east wall as if in response to some silent signal.

Karen strained her eyes in an effort to identify the two creatures with newly-glorified bodies who might have been her Kevin and Kellie. With their similar garb and physique, it was so hard to tell. There . . . that must be them, the two in the front, on this side. Kevin! Kellie! Over here. I'm over here!

The sense of expectancy among the members of the glorious group conveyed eminent departure and Karen's mind called again, even more frantically. Kellie! Kevin! Over here, I'm over here in the cafeteria line. Can't you hear me? At that instant, the two heavenly personages she thought might have been her children turned their heads and looked in her direction. Then, the entire group started to move upward in the angle of flight.

Just before the former Kevin and Kellie Marlow passed from sight through the painted concrete blocks of the east wall of the cafeteria, Karen thought she saw them flash a finger-crossed wave.

But she wasn't sure.

Suddenly her knees buckled and she sank sobbing to the tile floor. She never flinched when a full tray of coffee mugs crashed to the floor on the other side of the counter.

Through a red haze Karen Marlow saw that the wall clock's sweep second hand was on the downslope and moving at its customary leisurely but constant pace.

It was ten seconds after twelve.

Chapter 16: The Big Show

Walnut Valley Colony, New Jersey
Friday, January 3, Noon

When the resurrected and glorified body of Jackie Dark passed from view through the vaulted ceiling of Cottage 4's east dormitory, Mark Marlow firmly believed he had just seen a unique miracle.

He had often heard people refer to persons with mental disabilities as God's special children and apparently there was real substance to that platitude. Evidently God did have a special place in his consciousness for people like Jackie and that's why he was not required to endure the ravages of decomposition and eventual nothingness as was the destiny of everyone else who dies.

Chalk one up for God.

Suddenly Mark, whose body was still locked in a timeless state of motionlessness, was roused from his philosophical musings. A covey of robed creatures vaulted out of the metal cribs lining the far wall and landed lightly on the carpet. The stance of their landing was identical to the manner in which a troupe of high wire artists would take the center ring before beginning a Madison Square Garden performance.

With fluidity of movement, a pink-garbed creature directly across from Mark reached down, grasped the rear hem of her robe, and pulled it up between perfectly-molded thighs to tuck it into her sash in the front. Soon the rest of the group was similarly-attired, with all of them dancing lightly on the balls of their feet like boxers waiting for the bell to start the first round.

Mark guessed there must be at least 30 of the beautiful personages moving gaily around the room and he realized with a start that there was more to this phenomenon than the isolated resurrection of poor Jackie Dark. Could it be that every resident in Cottage 4 had been touched by Jackie's miracle? But that's impossible! One case of resurrection under special circumstances? Perhaps. But a mass metamorphosis of profoundly disabled persons not even dead? Out of the question!

And yet, where did these people--if they could be called people--come from? More important, where did the previous occupants of Cottage 4's thirty cribs go?

As Mark scanned the portion of the dormitory he could see, there was no denying that each crib was empty.

But wait, the cribs weren't completely empty. Without exception, each crib contained a pinned diaper and a State-issue nightgown. In addition, a crib here and there possessed a discarded body brace or some other prosthetic device.

No doubt about it. The previous occupants of the cribs, 30 persons with profound mental and physical disabilities and with an average IQ of near zero, were--gone!

But Mark's trained mind rebelled against the evidence. It just can't be. There's absolutely no way 30 seriously disabled residents of a State institution can instantly disappear or turn into supernormal individuals. It's impossible; educationally, psychologically, clinically impossible!

While Mark argued the lack of the logic of it all with himself, the creatures quickly cleared the central part of the room of all obstructions. The mat table was placed on its side and carried into the hall. A steam food truck filled with nutritious gruel and a laundry hamper loaded with soiled diapers received similar treatment. The cribs were pushed back into the four corners of the spacious room and piled two high. Male and female creatures worked shoulder to shoulder and the clearing operation took no more than 30 seconds.

After the flurry of activity, Mark realized the single trumpet he had heard earlier was being multiplied a hundred fold and the air now rang with the liquid brass of a magnificent trumpet choir. The basic melody was vaguely familiar but he couldn't remember the name of the tune. Something he'd heard Sunday mornings on TV perhaps. The phrase "all hail" kept coming to mind.

Although the tune was unknown, there was no mistaking the mastery of its presentation. A solid three-part harmony was embellished by variations and improvisations which would have taken his breath away--if he had been breathing. Some of the trumpets chose the winey resonance of the lowest register. Others flowed through and around the basic harmony in the middle registers. Still others soared far about the staff with eagle flights of faultless artistry. The supreme execution of each tone was literally out of this world.

As soon as the center of the room was cleared of furniture, a splendid creature approached each of the onlookers who had come originally to pay their respects to the frozen corpse of the former resident of Walnut Valley Colony, Jackie Dark.

Now, these paralyzed mortals were lifted like so many feathers and deposited carefully around the extreme perimeter of the cleared area.

Mark's transporter was robed in soft pink and her exquisite facial features bore a vestigial resemblance to Sally Carter. Sally was--or had been--an 18-year-old young woman with hydrocephaly. She had never been fitted with a shunt to drain excess cranial fluid and thereby control the unusual growth of her head. Her arms and legs had been the diameter of broom handles, and almost as inflexible. She was just about as low-functioning as a human being could be and still be classified as alive. Blind, deaf, no rooting reflex, no startle reflex, no gag reflex, no head control--nothing. Her food consisted of a fortified gruel which entered her stomach via a tube passed through a stoma in her abdomen created by a gastrostomy. Aside from cardio-pulmonary action, her only physical capabilities were digestion and excretion.

Now, the somehow-glorified Sally Carter of the overlarge head and tube-fed mush-meals placed her soft hands under Mark's armpits and carried his 180-pound six-two frame as easily as he would have carried Kevin's inflated Bozo the Clown.

As soon as the audience was positioned to their satisfaction, the beautiful residents of Cottage 4 moved back to the center of the dormitory and smoothly formed a double pyramid, one facing north and one facing south. Several years earlier the exterior walls of the east wing were thought to be splaying slightly at the top. In an effort to pull the walls in a little, long metal rods had been run through the building above the window line. The pyramids formed under these metal rods and the top three from each group climbed up on the two-inch shafts and stood erect. The remaining 24 other-world beings dropped softly to the floor and stood at attention.

The signal for the show to begin came from Sally Carter as she raised her hands above her head and clapped three times. And what a show it was!

The effect was so awesome and beautiful, Mark didn't know where to look first. The six up on the metal rods were doing a combination balance beam and highwire act which would have given P. T. Barnum cardiac arrest or earned them all top marks in Olympic competition. Below, on the carpeted floor, the rest of the performers ran through such an intricate series of floor exercises the scene became a colorful montage of grace.

About every 30 seconds the pyramids would reform and a new group of six would be up on the overhead rods. When the fifth group was in the air, Mark noticed that the former Sally Carter was part of it. Her act was best of show.

Not content to stay on her assigned rod, she leaped over to the other one, a distance of at least 20 feet, and continued her magnificent performance there. With Sally's gliding leap to the other rod, the century trumpet choir picked up the tempo significantly. She responded by urging three of her fellow performers into a high-wire pyramid and then nimbly vaulted to the head of the third creature.

With a triumphant smile, she released the tail of her robe from where it had been tucked in her sash and rose on her toes to the pirouette position. Slowly she began to turn and then faster and faster. At the point her image became a pink and ivory blur, Sally lifted from the head below her and passed out of sight through the varnished surface of the vaulted ceiling. Instantly the remaining 29 glorious creatures followed in her wake and they were *gone*!

Mark Marlow looked at the clock across the room and saw it was running again. He slumped back against the wall and slowly slid to a sitting position.

The woman who had been standing next to him began to cry quietly.

Chapter 17: The Cemetery

Gettysburg Military Cemetery
Friday, January 3, 12:00:05 P.M.

It was all over and Lacey Bowder, for one, was sorry to see it end. It had been the most fascinating experience in her whole life and she'd remember it forever.

The resurrection of the recent and long dead. The beautiful song they sang. What was it? *All Hail the Power of Jesus' Name*? And then that fantastic trumpet choir while the old country preacher and quite a few of the people gathered for the grave-side service were changed into the same glorious creatures she'd seen come from the moldy graves. And finally, the soaring ascent of the second group until they, too, disappeared from view in the blue of the January sky.

Wow! Something to remember. Something to tell about and write about and store as a treasured memory forever.

With a start Lacey remembered her finger was still pressed to the button of her digital watch and she checked the time before lifting her finger. The seconds display was still on and it was 30 seconds after noon.

A gust of cold wind moaned through the trees and she realized with a shiver that a Pennsylvania winter still gripped the cemetery. The warm breezes and soft green grass had gone the way of the trumpet choir and robed singers, she guessed.

The wind spoke again and Lacey felt a sudden urge to leave the place. The remaining mourners walked dazedly about the cemetery, looking at the old graves and crouching near the fresh one. Her friend of the flower car was absent when she scanned the small crowd and Lacey asked the funeral director about him. His vacant stare reminded her of some people she'd seen while visiting the Harrisburg State Hospital. No help there.

On impulse, she walked back to the driveway and checked the dash of the black Buick station wagon. Sure enough, the key was in the ignition with a rabbit's foot dangling from a beaded chain. A few minutes later, she parked the Buick at the church and dropped into the Vette's left bucket, grateful to be back in contact with reality. The car rumbled its usual greeting and she backed swiftly out of her slot in the church parking lot.

By 1:30 Lacey was being pelted by a full-force shower in her Mechanicsburg apartment. Twenty minutes later she was sound asleep in her own bed, her body drawn up into the fetal position.

She dreamed of hell.

Back at WMOR Dan Marlow waited for the Ford spot to end and then tapped the start button for a red track. The next track up was a golden oldie by Herb Alpert and he hummed along with the lively soft-brass tune as he logged the commercial he had just run.

Been a good morning, Dan mused as he pulled CDs for the next 30 minutes or so and stacked them on the shelf beside the CD players. Have to do this more often. Sleeping in ... breakfast with the kids ... a leisurely drive down the river in the daylight. Yes, 10-till-2 shifts have a lot of fringe benefits.

The Brass was starting to do a fadeout and Dan checked his three CD machines to make sure they were loaded with the proper spots. Then he opened the mike.

"Herb Alpert, taking you for a little ride in his somewhat elderly Tijuana Taxi. Eighteen degrees in Camp Hill under clear skies at 11:45 on a sunny Friday morning. Dan Marlow here with the good stuff on WMOR, where you get round-the-clock stereo music plus a real live announcer to talk with you. What's that? Somebody ask for network news? Have that, too, coming your way at the top of the hour, courtesy of Associated Press. Right now, though, you need to hear this word and then it'll be music time again with Carly Simon."

Dan hit the CD with a commercial spot and leaned back in his chair with his hands clasped behind his head. Maybe WMOR isn't a 100,000 watter in a top-10 market but it sure feels good to me. Like Dad used to say, "Better to be a big duck in a little puddle than a little duck in a big puddle."

The spot ended and he hit the start button for a yellow track, setting Carly to warbling. Tim stuck his head in the door.

"Well, Dan, how do you like the middle shift for a change?"

The big man swiveled in his chair and smiled at his newly-appointed program director. "Might like it well enough to make it permanent. No sense in an old man like me getting up with the chickens each morning."

Tim rubbed his jaw. "Guess that makes me the number one prospect for the new morning man, then." Dan smiled but didn't answer and then Tim snapped his fingers. "Just remembered. Betty said to tell you she's not feeling well and probably won't be back after lunch. If I go out now, too, think you can fly her all by yourself till I get back?"

"Man, I was running a six-hour air shift all by myself before I was out of high school. Used to sign on at six in the morning and not see another living soul until noon. Did that every Saturday and Sunday for months and months. Just lock the front door when you go out."

"Okay, Dan, I'm on my way, then. See you in about an hour."

"Enjoy your lunch, Tim."

The studio door hissed shut and Dan started another yellow track. Do I think I can handle it by myself for an hour? What a clown!

The clock showed less than two minutes to noon and Dan got ready to put the AP radio network news on from the satellite. The news logo was already in CD player 3 and he pulled the satellite pot down on cue and waited for the 60-second alert tone. It came at 11:59:04. Not bad. The AP's only running 4 seconds slow today, or we're 4 seconds fast.

At 11:59:45 Dan faded the yellow music. "Stereo music will continue here on WMOR-FM Camp Hill right after network news from the Associated Press. Twenty degrees in Camp Hill at twelve noon."

By now the alert tone on the network had dropped out and Dan had the pot up to broadcast level as he hit the news logo cart. At precisely 12:00:03 he faded the logo sharply and the network announcer came on strong and clean.

At that same instant, Dan thought he heard a strange brassy tone of about a half-second duration. Probably garbage brought down by the satellite from somewhere out in cyberspace.

Chapter 18: Bulletin

Radio Station WMOR

Friday, January 3, 12:06 P.M.

As the AP announcer swung into his lead story, Dan took off his headphones and stood up for a good stretch. A dull pain in his lower back reminded him he'd been in the saddle for two solid hours without standing up. He'd spent the eleven o'clock newscast on the phone with an advertising client.

With a good three minutes of network left, Dan decided to make a quick trip to the men's room across the hall from the control room. When he ducked back into the studio 90 seconds later, the wire service alert light was flashing a blue signal from above the board. Ten-bell bulletin, Dan counted. Wonder what that's all about?

On impulse, he decided to change the basic format of taking off the network news with a local forecast and live ID. Instead, he brought up the pot on the master music hard drive and punched the random play option. He would start the music cold after the network news dropped out. The hard drive would play songs randomly until the cows came home, or however long it took.

With the random music on the air, Dan brought up the AP on the 20-inch computer monitor and clicked his mouse on DISPLAY BULLETIN.

Bulletin

(New York) an unconfirmed report indicates that a hospital on Long Island is missing all eight infant patients from its second floor nursery. Hospital officials are speculating that a black market baby ring may have executed a mass kidnapping.

-- MORE --

Dan clicked *Save Bulletin* and suddenly the green network alert light was flashing and he pulled the network pot down on cue to check it out. The whing-wang tone instantly verified that the network was getting ready to feed an audio bulletin. A voice verification followed.

"Please stand by, station. Here in Washington we have unconfirmed reports that hundreds of school children are missing from schools in the District as well as in surrounding counties of Virginia and Maryland. Stations, we suggest that you give this top priority. We repeat: Please give this bulletin top priority. The bulletin will move sixty seconds from . . . mark."

While the announcer in Washington had been setting up the audio bulletin, Dan set the news hard drive to record the incoming bulletin. He always put a priority bulletin on the air live but he liked to record everything the AP sent, as a backup and also for future reference. Just in case a major story of national or even international impact might be breaking.

With everything ready, he checked the clock. Fifteen seconds till bulletin air time. He faded a yellow track with the AP satellite on cue. Long years of experience kept his voice cool and there was no hint of breathlessness despite his recent rushing around.

"You're listening to WMOR-FM Stereo Camp Hill. We now interrupt this program for a live bulletin from the Associated Press in Washington."

A network staff announcer's voice followed Dan's by exactly two seconds but it was apparent that he was under considerable emotional stress. His voice quavered, his throat filled, and he did not have a prepared script. With a stab of bitter memory, Dan was reminded of the coverage style that Friday afternoon in November 1963 after President Kennedy had been shot. He continued listening while checking that the AP feed was being recorded properly on the news hard drive. That drive had 100 gigs of space. That should be enough for whatever was coming in from the AP

" . . . still scant but we do know that a large number of people in the metropolitan Washington area are mysteriously missing. At first we thought that only children were among the missing but now it looks like the situation is much more widespread. We repeat, however, that we're working here with a relatively small amount of information so please, folks, don't panic. And this very urgent request on behalf of the phone companies as well as news gathering agencies and emergency services: Please do not use your telephone to get information. Stay tuned to this station and we'll provide you with every bit of information the Associated Press can obtain, just as soon as it's

available to us. But please stay off the phone unless you have an emergency or have important information to contribute.

"I repeat. We don't have complete information on this situation yet but I'll try to outline for you what we do have so far."

The network announcer paused and off-mike voices could be heard faintly in the background. When he came back, his voice was so distorted with emotion that he was difficult to understand. "Ladies and gentlemen, I . . . I, hrummy, I seem to be having a little trouble with my throat right now and I'll surrender this microphone to one of my colleagues."

There was another long pause and Dan felt an alien fear knot his stomach and moisten his brow. As a professional broadcaster, he realized with sickening clarity that the sloppy job the AP was doing on a national audio bulletin meant that the event being reported was of unprecedented significance.

The long pauses in the AP's bulletin caused the dead air alarm to flash an amber warning from above the control panel. Dan disabled the alarm.

A rustling of paper indicated that something might be happening at AP radio down in Washington. Dan turned up the volume on the studio monitor speakers. A female voice came on, cool and precise. The delivery was extemporaneous but smooth.

"Ladies and gentlemen, as you already know, the general Washington area has suffered the unusual disappearance of a fairly large number of people. We have just received word that this phenomenon is not only nationwide but global in scope. The president has declared a general state of national emergency and martial law is in effect in all 50 states. By order of the president of the United States all citizens are ordered to stay indoors unless you are providing an essential service or you yourself are in a state of emergency. In addition, all operators of motor vehicles are reminded to immediately pull to the extreme right side of the road as soon as an emergency vehicle needs the right of way. As we've already noted, don't use your telephone unless you are in a

state of personal emergency. The president feels that more information can be conveyed to more people by using regular broadcast stations. So please stay tuned to this station for the latest information from the Associated Press. This is Betty Grayson, reporting from Washington."

Dan started to open his mike and then changed his mind. Instead, he hit an ID and went back to music. As he listened to the music he had just put on the air, he decided the bright, lilting sound didn't fit the mood created by the AP's bulletin. Quickly he punched the ALL BLUE button. Elevator music seemed to be more suitable right now.

The enormity of what Grayson had just reported regarding the president's orders suddenly hit Dan. His intention was to dub the president's orders onto a CD and run it between music tracks. Before he could access the news hard drive, however, the AP's alert tone warbled from the cue speaker.

In 15 seconds a male voice came on with a station advisory. "Stations, we have just gotten word that the President is getting ready to make a statement from the East Room of the White House. Coverage from the East Room will be fed to you 60 seconds from ... mark."

At that moment, Dan decided to go on the air himself, reasoning that at a time like this, his listeners might gain some assurance from a local voice. He faded the music in the middle of a track and opened the mike. Precisely he summarized what had been reported by the AP so far. His voice was resonant and calm and he spoke with a surety born of countless hours before a microphone.

"... stay tuned to WMOR-FM Camp Hill for live coverage by the Associated Press of the President's statement from the White House." Dan had paced his lead-in to conclude just two seconds before the point marked earlier for network coverage to begin.

This time the network came on with a male announcer speaking smoothly and reading from a script. He concluded with, "Ladies and gentlemen, the President of the United States."

The next speaker's distinctive regional twang left no doubt it was indeed the President. "My fellow Americans. Within the last hour, the entire world has suffered a calamity that exceeds in magnitude anything known to man since the

great flood of Noah's time. At this point we still don't know the exact dimensions of this event but I do want to share with you what we do know."

A difference in inflection indicated the President's next words were not from his script. "Before reading this list, I want to personally urge all of you to remain calm. Except in case of a real emergency, limit travel and phone use. I've already stated that something extremely serious has happened and I'm not trying to take anything away from that fact. However, I do believe panic, great or small, will do nothing to help our situation."

"Now let me share with you what we believe has happened as we understand it so far . . . "

Again there was a pause and a considerable amount of dead air, broken only by off-mike whispering and the rustle of papers. Those persons watching television coverage could see that an aide in military uniform had just hurried to the President's side and was conferring with him just beyond mike range. The aide then produced a sheet of light blue paper from a brief case chained to his wrist. The President stepped back to the podium.

During the dead-air interlude, the radio and television commentators had maintained an almost ominous silence in distinct contrast to their usual prattle during any break in activity.

Now the President spoke again. "I must repeat that the total scope and characteristics of what has happened to this country, to the world, in fact, is still not known to us. However, I firmly believe that you, the American people, have a right to know as much as we know so far.

"First, I want to emphasize that there is absolutely no evidence of any hostile action on the part of any nation in the world. All of our radar stations and satellite monitoring installations world-wide have been reporting consistently nominal conditions in all sectors of the globe. As you might expect, I have already been in touch with major world capitals. They aren't saying too much about the situation in their own countries but they do admit they have experienced some disappearances as well. And they confirm that they have not detected any hostile activity against themselves and do not have hostile intentions toward this or any country."

Up to this point the President's voice had been reassuring and almost mellow. But when he began to run down a list of currently-available facts, Dan's professional ear could detect a strong undercurrent of anxiety.

"Now let me share with you some specific facts which appear to be quite firm. The phenomenon occurred at precisely Noon Eastern Standard Time. In terms of clock time, the incident consumed no more than one-tenth of a second. Persons not in the presence of anyone who disappeared apparently were not aware that anything unusual had taken place."

Dan remembered the strange blip he'd heard in his earphones just as he put the AP network news on at Noon. The churning in his stomach moved higher and his palms were clammy.

The President had to clear his throat twice and sip from a glass of water before he could speak again.

"All babies and children, birth through about six years of age, have disappeared from all countries in the world."

Pandemonium broke out in the East Room and Dan's chest constricted in the vicegrip of unvarnished fear. If every child is missing up through age six, does that mean Kevin and Kellie, too? No! That can't be true. This is crazy! Some kind of hoax, another *War of the Worlds* hoax. Any minute now a current-generation Orson Wells is going to break in and tell us this whole Presidential press conference is a new version of the 1938 farce.

With the President's last statement, Dan had leaped from his chair and was now pacing furiously in the small confines of the studio. Out of habit he stopped beside the news hard drive, which was still recording the AP feed, and checked the VU meter. The racket being broadcast from the White House was peaking at +3. Automatically he backed off the record level to zero.

It was maddening to hear and not see and then Dan remembered the 13" color portable Blake Jenks, the chief engineer, kept on his work bench for special occasions. In 20 seconds a sharp picture was glowing on the screen from Fox News, the 24-hour cable news service.

A marine in dress uniform was at the podium trying to get the reporters quiet enough for the president to continue. And as the camera panned across the unruly crowd, Dan could see that some were standing up and shouting for the President's attention, others were shouting at each other across the room, and a few sat with heads down, apparently weeping.

Tears had been trickling down Dan's face since the announcement of the missing children and his body convulsed with unuttered agony. "It's a hoax! Why

don't you guys get on the street and get the facts?" After this irrational outburst, he slumped in his chair and stared stonily at the screen.

The President returned to the podium. "I'm fully aware of the agony that announcement represents. I can only confirm that we are sparing no effort to find out what has happened to these children so we can restore each one to his or her family."

The haggard President went on to discuss other categories of missing persons including a smattering of people of all nationalities and walks of life. They ranged in age from 7-year-olds through senior adults. Dan didn't hear a word of it. His mind and soul and spirit had been transported to a small country elementary school 30 miles away and to a pair of the cutest, smartest, sweetest twins a father could ever love.

Kevin and Kellie, please be all right. Please be safe. Karen, Honey, please, please take care of our babies. Don't let anything hurt our babies.

The broken man was staring at the TV with unseeing eyes when Tim returned from lunch. He correctly assessed the situation in an instant. "Dan, old man, why don't you knock off and go home?" he asked softly. "Ole Bachelor Tim will hold the fort till one of the part-timers or Lacey comes in. The President now says it's okay to drive as long as your destination is either home or work. What do you say."

Without a word Dan rose from his seat in front of the TV screen and walked down the hall to his office. Woodenly he slipped his arms into his parka sleeves and walked out.

Tim stood in the doorway and watched his boss get into the elderly Bug and back out of the parking area. Tim had a worried frown on his face. Dan seemed to be driving rather fast down the still-snowy Greenwood Circle hill.

Chapter 19: The Absentees

Seven Stars Elementary School
Friday, January 3, 12:00:30 P.M.

Karen Marlow stared dully at the globules of milk dropping from the edge of the table, the table where just seconds ago Kevin and Kellie had been eating lunch. Or was it eons ago? With a low moan, she rose from the hard terrazzo floor and approached the table.

It looked just like a place where a group of 6-year-olds had been eating. Bits of food, Crusts of bread with the white centers eaten out, and small puddles of milk decorated its surface in a style familiar to any mother. A full container of milk had just been spilled near the center of the table and several sopping-wet napkins bore mute testimony that some effort had been made to control the small disaster. Most of it was dripping on the floor, however.

And then Karen looked down at the chairs. "Oh no . . . no . . ." She stood for several minutes, hugging her bosom and rocking slightly in cadence with her moans.

It had been the chairs that caused Karen to really break down. On each seat was a small mound of rumped clothes, clothes no longer needed. Clothes no longer appropriate. Clothes several sizes-- many sizes too small. Slowly she knelt before the twins' chairs and buried her face in first one clothing pile and then the other. A distinctive active-child musk was all that was left of Kevin and Kellie.

Karen had no idea how long she had been kneeling there when she became aware of a person standing at her side with a gentle hand of comfort resting on her shoulder. She looked up into the tear-wet face of Miss Black, the twins' former teacher.

"Marcie, they're gone, just gone," she said catatonically. "I can't understand it but they're gone. What happened to my Kevin and my Kellie? What happened to all these other children? What happened to Martha Metz? It's all so, so unworldly . . ."

"I know, Mrs. Marlow," the young teacher replied brokenly, "and not only Kevin and Kellie but every other child in my room is gone, all 31 of them."

The women stood with arms around each other and wept silently for several minutes. But then, Karen became aware that other people in the cafeteria had needs besides her. She wiped her eyes for a final time and looked out over the group

in the large room. It seemed that most of the older students had somehow escaped the phenomenon that had snatched away her Kevin and Kellie. The staff, seated in an alcove on the far side of the cafeteria, seemed to be fairly intact, also. And every face was looking directly into hers. You're the principal, Mrs. Marlow. You're in charge here, they said mutely. Tell us what to do.

As she looked more closely, Karen could see that many of the remaining children were crying softly and quite a few teachers were coping with tears, too. But no one had left his seat and those who had been standing when it happened had quickly found chairs as soon as their bodies were released.

Karen wasn't sure she could speak but she cleared her throat and made an attempt. "Children . . . and teachers, I don't know any more about what happened here than you do but I'm sure we'll be finding out about it later. Right now, though, I think we need to know just exactly who is left here in the school. I want to compliment you on your excellent behavior so far and we still need everyone's cooperation in that way."

As Karen spoke the murmur of crying diminished as the children instinctively accepted their principal as the person most likely to bring some kind of sense and order to what had happened.

"I'm asking you to go back to your homerooms now. As I call your teacher's name, line up behind your teacher over here by the door and then walk quietly to your room. And teachers, when you get to your rooms, make a list of each student who reported for school this morning but is not here now. Any minute the phone is going to start ringing and cars will be roaring up the front drive, and I have no idea what I'm going to say to all those frantic parents.

"Oh, and don't worry about your trays. Just leave them on the table and they'll be taken care of later."

Anne Rafferty, the other first grade teacher, had moved to the front of the room to stand beside Karen. "Marcie and I seem to have l-l-lost all of our students, Mrs. Marlow. What do you want us to do?"

"I'm not sure, Anne, but I think a couple of the classroom teachers are missing, also. Why don't you and Marcie just stay close and I may need you to do some substituting."

Karen turned back to the group. "All right, children, we'll start with the second grade. Miss Johnson's class."

A gasp flowed across the room as 12 of Dorothy Johnson's 28 second-graders rose from their seats and lined up behind their teacher. At a nod from the principal, they filed out of the cafeteria like zombies and moved down the hall. The other second grade class was similarly stricken. But as the cafeteria exodus moved up through the grades, more and more children rose to line up behind the teacher whose name had been called. Whoever or whatever had taken a fancy to the students of Seven Stars Elementary had a strong preference for the younger ones.

Finally the cafeteria was empty and Karen turned to the food service workers still standing behind the service line. "When you clear off the tables, be very careful not to disturb the personal belongings you'll see on some of the chairs, especially the ones here in the front. As the parents come in, I want them to come down here and personally pick out their child's things." The solemn-faced workers nodded in agreement and Karen turned and walked over to the closet.

As she removed a plastic trash bag from the closet, Karen had a horrible thought. There aren't bodies that can be given a decent burial! Nothing but clothes. Swiftly but gently she gathered her children's things and placed them in the plastic bag, including the shoes and socks that were on the floor. With a final anguished sob, she looked around the room one more time and then left. The bag was slung over her shoulder like some irreverent Santa Claus.

The phone was ringing when she got to her office. For a split second she wondered why Martha wasn't on the job. Then, with a sad shake of her head the principal answered it herself.

"Seven Stars School. Mrs. Marlow speaking."

Chapter 20: The Layoffs

Walnut Valley Colony

Friday, January 3, 2:00 P.M.

Fourteen department heads occupied the old-fashioned ladderback chairs around the polished mahogany conference table. Under normal circumstances this group would be relaxed, jovial, and engrossed in an exchange of badinage while waiting for the superintendent to start her meeting. But today's meeting had not been called under conditions that could be considered usual. In truth, no one could remember anything more unusual. So the normally-gregarious group sat in total silence without even exchanging a glance. Each person seemed to have found an inanimate focal point somewhere in the room and was staring at it with fixed intensity.

Mark Marlow's gaze had settled on the door that led into the superintendent's office. He wondered what she must be thinking right now. Early that morning, while Jackie Dark was still missing, she had called him from Florida. At that time he was aware of her deep concern for the missing resident but hadn't realized she was considering the early termination of her vacation. As it turned out, her taxi had arrived on campus just after noon. Mark guessed that Dr. Harriet Kimberly, with a Master's in special education and a Ph.D. in clinical psychology, was deliberately delaying the start of the department head meeting because she literally didn't know what to say.

When the door finally opened, Mark instantly empathized with her situation. They had always been close, personally and professionally, in spite of the 35 years that separated them in age. Now he could see the heavy burden she carried beneath the faultless administrative aura that always surrounded her. When she took her seat, Dr. Kimberly's back was straight and her appearance impeccable. Her gaze was clear and level but Mark could sense the turmoil within.

When she spoke, her voice was pitched a shade lower than usual. "The Walnut Valley Colony has been completely evacuated in a way which I can neither understand nor explain."

Her statement was not news. Every on-duty and off-duty employee was already aware of that fact. But now that Dr. Kimberly had announced it in a special meeting of department heads, it somehow achieved substance and permanence that had been lacking earlier.

She drew an audible breath and continued. "Unfortunately, I was not privileged to observe any of the attributes of this phenomenon. At the time it occurred, I was still in the taxi, and I was dozing. As far as I can tell, only those persons who were in the presence of one of our residents actually saw or heard anything to speak of. However, I can say for an absolute fact that all residents are now missing. Missing right out of their clothes., Missing right out of any prosthetic devices they may have been wearing. Even the fillings in their teeth have been left behind!"

"I've been on the phone with Dr. King in Trenton during the last half hour. He tells me that every State residential facility for persons with mental disabilities in New Jersey is in the identical situation. Vineland, Woodbridge, Woodbine, New Lisbon, Totowa, Hunterdon--they all have empty facilities. The only exceptions are a very few residents with mental ages significantly above six. We had none of those here.

"If you don't already know, you should be aware that several of our employees have been involved in the phenomenon, also. This fact seems to indicate that the force behind this act did not single out persons with disabilities as I had originally surmised."

The human services director raised his hand.

"Mr. Bannerman, I know your question before you ask it. And the plight of our employees, including all of us in this room, does represent a major problem. One would like to assume that this situation is temporary and that the actions we are taking today can be reversed in the near future. Something tells me that will not be the case, however. So I think it is very appropriate that we focus our energies on what we are going to do with our employees. At least every indication leads me to believe that the force which has removed our residents is benign and that they are in a better state now than they were before."

Dr. Kimberly tilted her locket watch. "I see it is almost 2:30. I've called a general employees' meeting for three o'clock up in the auditorium but there are some things I want to mention before we all go up there. And I welcome any suggestions you may have."

The superintendent lifted a typed sheet from the table. "Here's what I'll be announcing at the general meeting. Those employees who have been personally stricken by the phenomenon in the loss of family members will be granted bereavement leave in the customary manner. At the end of such leave, however, they will fall under the policies and procedures listed below.

"First, all cottage aides reporting for work at three will work a full shift in their respective cottages. The personal belongings of each resident must be assembled, inventoried, and placed in a secure place. Clean state clothes should be sent back to the general clothing room and soiled things should be sent to the laundry in the usual manner.

"Second, I want all cottages scrubbed and disinfected from ceiling to floor, room by room. At this time we have no idea how this facility will be used in the future, if it ever is used again. Regardless, when we move out, it will be spotless.

"Third, I am asking the nurses and LPNs to give me a final count on controlled drugs and a total inventory of all medications and medical supplies, cottage by cottage. When all drugs have been inventoried, I want them sent to the pharmacy. All pharmacy keys will then be turned in to me.

"Fourth, I request that departments which have not been involved with direct care conduct thorough housekeeping and inventory operations as well.

"Fifth, the sheltered workshop on campus will be staffed with employees until the floor is cleared of all current subcontracts. Materials not already involved in a floor operation will be returned to the businesses with whom we have been subcontracting.

Dr. Kimberly lowered her paper and looked slowly around the room. "This next item will be of greatest interest to rank and file employees and the union reps. It's also the item which gives me the most personal pain.

"Sixth, each employee will be continued in full payroll status as long as his or her department is still meaningfully occupied in completing the tasks which I have already enumerated. However, when there is no more work in a given department, those employees will no longer report for work and will begin to draw on earned vacation and personal leave. When all earned leave has been expended, and if the State has not been able to arrange a transfer to another facility, that employee will be furloughed without pay until further notice." Dr. Kimberly paused a moment after her last statement and studied the faces of the department heads. The expressions ranged from grave to grim but no one spoke.

"Seventh, effective with the end of the PM shift, employees in all classifications and working for all departments will work a six-hour day, 9:00 A.M. till 4:00 P.M. with one hour for lunch. There will be no downward adjustment in pay."

Dr. Kimberly again placed her paper on the table, this time as a signal that her basic deactivation plan for the Walnut Valley Colony was before the administrators for their reaction.

Mark nodded his head in silent approval. No one but Dr. Harriet Kimberly could have gotten a handle on the current situation in less than two hours, probably because she did it herself and didn't create a committee. The other department heads, with nods and murmurs of assent, indicated their agreement as well.

"All right. Since we appear to have consensus on this basic plan, shall we go up to the auditorium? I think we'll find quite a few rather anxious people up there waiting to hear from us." Dr. Kimberly rose and the meeting was over.

The auditorium was fuller than Mark could remember seeing it during his years at Walnut Valley. The interior was bright and cheery with the afternoon sun streaming through the tall multi-paned windows. But the crowd was subdued and pensive. A few talked in whispers or muted voices with the majority staring at the stage where some tables and chairs had been arranged in a semicircle. Mark had often thought it was a waste for such a spacious and well-equipped auditorium to stand virtually unused month after month. This might be the last time it would be used ever.

Quietly the department heads occupied the folding chairs on stage and Dr. Kimberly stepped to a floor mike in the center. The assembled employees fell into silence. First, the superintendent explained the wide-spread nature of the phenomenal disappearance of the institution's residents and then went on to explain that a representative from each cottage and program area would present a brief eye-witness report of what had been observed at twelve noon. On the way up to the auditorium, Dr. Kimberly had asked Mark to go first and describe the combination resurrection of Jackie Dark and metamorphosis of the Cottage 4 residents.

Mark told his story in simple terms and quiet tones and then sat back to listen to the observations of others. It was soon apparent that the phenomenon had followed a similar course in each instance where an employee had been in the presence of a resident at noon. The clock had stopped. All employees were frozen in a state of total immobility. And all residents were changed into glorious creatures of apparent physical and mental perfection. In every case there had been a brief display of this new-found perfection in the form of some kind of physical or mental performance. Singing, dancing oratory, acrobatics--it seemed the residents in each area had put on a different show. Without exception, the performances had been spectacularly flawless.

The most important commonality of each account was obvious to all. At the end of the special performance, the beautiful creatures had risen in the air and flown right through the ceiling, always in an easterly direction. Then, as soon as the glorified bodies were out of sight the clocks started to run again and the observers were released from their paralysis.

The reports ran on for over 90 minutes but no one left the auditorium. Then Dr. Kimberly rose and presented her deactivation plan. The enormity of the personal impact on lives and livelihoods was evident on most faces but there were no outbursts and no heckling. A few quiet questions were asked to enlighten rather than badger.

All union representatives were attentive but silent.

As Mark looked down at the faces of his fellow workers he realized he was saying good-bye to many of them for the last time. He would be submitting his leave request before the end of the day and didn't plan to come back again, ever.

An hour later Mark Marlow and his Geo Metro were westbound on I-80, headed for Liverpool and home.

He hadn't had a conscious thought of Kevin or Kellie since leaving home yesterday morning.

Chapter 21: Sunny

Liverpool

Friday, January 3, 7:30 P.M.

Ronni spoke from the bottom of the stairs. "That's all right, Mr. Marlow. I'll take care of him now."

Dan dropped the garbage bag and straightened up fast to stare down the stairs at Veronica Masterson. Her face had resumed its natural color and her voice was perfectly normal in pitch and modulation.

"I know you had to do it, Mr. Marlow. Now, please, let me take care of Midnight and clean up the mess."

Ronni was padding up the carpeted stairs in her bare feet and Dan watched her come with more than a little fear. He finally regained his voice. "Are you feeling better now, Mrs. Masterson? You gave us quite a scare a while ago when you walked in out of the snow, half frozen to death."

Ronni smiled weakly and Dan felt his irrational fear of her dissipate a little. She motioned toward the bottom of the stairs. "Go ahead, Mr. Marlow. Go on down with your wife and I'll take care of this mess. I've been cleaning up after this black cat for the last 11 years so it's only right that I do it one last time."

The false brightness in the woman's voice worried Dan a little but he was more than willing to let someone else gather up the shredded cat and dispose of it. Although the nightmare was over, the sound and smell still lingered in his mind and he was anxious to get back downstairs and hold Karen tightly in his arms.

His wife was still in her kitchen chair, again staring unseeingly at nothing in particular. She looked up with a startle as Dan walked in.

"What was that? What was going on up there? It sounded terrible!"

Calmly Dan recounted the frightening incident at the top of the stairs, dreading the moment when he must tell Karen about what had happened to the twins' things. When he got to that part, her eyes opened wide in disbelief and then slitted in anger.

"What next? First the twins are ... are taken away somewhere and now, this diabolical cat walks in off the street and ruins the things they were wearing when they-- when they left us. How much more am I supposed to bear!"

Dan stood close to the grieving woman's chair and gently stroked her face and hair. Gradually the rigidity of her anger drained from her body and she leaned softly against him, tears falling freely. Dan and Karen remained that way for several minutes as little by little Karen's sobs diminished and her tears dried. She was giving her nose a final blow and wipe when the breezeway door burst open without a knock.

Dan and Karen looked up to see the ravaged face of their eldest son, Mark. Dark circles sagged beneath his eyes and his hair looked like he had been venting his anxiety by running his fingers through it.

"Kevin and Kellie," he croaked. "Are they all right?" The expressions on his parents' faces answered the question before he had finished asking it.

"I knew it! They're gone, too, aren't they? What's this world coming to?" He slumped into a kitchen chair and ignored the cup of coffee his mother handed him. Then he looked at it quizzically as though he had never encountered a custom like drinking coffee before.

"I tried to call you, son," Karen said quietly, "but they said you'd already left for Liverpool. How-- how did you find out about it?"

"I was in the middle of it over in Jersey. Then I left to come and that's all there's been on the radio, all the way over here. Millions and millions of babies and young children from all over the world, just missing. I must have listened to a hundred radio network actualities in the last four hours. Mothers with babies in their arms. Teachers seeing a whole kindergarten disappear before their eyes. A nurse in a hospital delivery room seeing a newborn change into one of those creatures just seconds after birth. And on and on."

Mark never cried. Even when Cristy died, he had faced the loss with stony silence. But now the tears came. Scalding tears, stinging tears, long, long overdue tears. Finally he rose and walked into the powder room. When he came out 20 minutes later, he was in control again.

"Mother, if what I'm going to ask is more than you can give, please say so. But do you know how it happened for Kevin and Kellie? Would you mind telling me what you know?"

"No, Mark, you certainly have a right to know as much as we do. And I don't mind telling it again, especially for you." Very simply his mother reviewed what had happened in the school cafeteria and Mark related his experience in Cottage 4 at the institution.

At that moment Veronica Masterson walked into the kitchen. She held the upstairs bathroom waste can in front of her, a knotted plastic bag sticking out of the top. There was a moment of awkward silence as the elder Marlows groped for a smooth way to handle the situation.

The visitor took care of it herself, smiling and saying casually, "Hello, I'm Ronni Masterson and you must be Mark. I can see the resemblance. I was visiting with your parents a while ago and my crazy cat went berserk and had to be shot." She turned to Dan. "Everything's pretty well taken care of upstairs, except the bedroom. Do you think it'll be all right to put this out back in one of your garbage cans? I think they pick up Monday morning and this'll be frozen solid in a couple hours, anyway."

Dan still found Ronni's manner disturbing. One minute she was flat on her back in some kind of trance. Now she had cleaned up her cat's torn remains and was discussing the disposal procedure as though she were dealing with a pan of potato peelings. On the other hand, a day like today was enough to make anybody strange.

"I'm sure that will be fine for now, Mrs. Masterson. Here, let me take that out for you, though. You're still in your bare feet."

Ronni glanced down and then laughed a little thinly. "Well, so I am! So much happening today with ... with the cat and everything, I guess I'm not exactly sure what I'm doing any more."

Mark changed the subject. "You folks planning to watch the President's news conference tonight? Supposed to come on at nine."

Dan paused before opening the door. "I just wish we could get some answers, from the President, the FBI, the CIA, or whoever. Sooner or later this beating around the bush has got to stop!" His declaration was punctuated by the slamming back door.

"We'll have it on, Mark," Karen said quietly. "Your Dad is just a little extra tense because of not knowing just exactly what has happened. You know how lost he is without hard facts to deal with."

Ronni had watched with clouded eyes as the Marlows talked. When Dan returned from his trip to the alley, she rose and stood in the doorway to the hall. When she spoke, Dan noted instantly that her voice had lost its falseness.

"Could we all go into the living room? You may find it hard to cope with but I think I can give you most of the answers to the questions you have about what happened to your twins." After her mysterious offer, Ronni walked down the hall to the living room door and the three Marlows were left staring at each other in bewildered silence.

"You know, Karen," Dan whispered, "I wouldn't rule out her being crazy or bewitched or both. That thing upstairs with the cat was not of this world or I miss my guess!"

"Crazy or not, let's listen to what she has to say," Karen said as she gently pushed her resisting husband toward the living room. Dan mumbled something about insane females and demonic cats but he allowed himself to be nudged down the hall.

Ronni had positioned herself in a corner chair with her feet tucked under her. She pushed the fine blonde hair back from her Breck-girl face and her blue eyes were bright with an unidentifiable emotion. She spoke softly but firmly.

"I know the full story behind the strange disappearances which happened today and you'll just have to have faith that what I'm saying is the absolute truth. And I'll tell you what I--"

"How can you know any more than the networks, the FBI, the CIA, and the President himself!" Dan exploded. "Just who do you think you are, coming in here and putting on like you know everything?"

"Dan, please," Karen said with pleading in her eyes. "If there's only a one-in-a-million chance that Mrs. Masterson knows something about Kevin and Kellie, I want to hear what she has to say."

Dan leaned back against the couch and nodded sullenly for Ronni to continue.

She smiled at Dan in spite of his outburst. "Believe me, Mr. Marlow, I can understand how you feel. And I'd feel exactly the same way, if I wasn't in a position to know the truth."

"Before you go on," Mark interjected, "could we dispense with all this Mister and Missus thing? This place sounds more like a court room than my home."

"Fine with me, Mark. In fact, my husband ... my husband and I were out with your parents just last evening and we were on a first-name basis then." Karen nodded in agreement and Dan didn't say anything so Ronni continued.

"I have one request before we start. No matter how unbelievable or bizarre you find what I say, please let me finish before you ask questions or contradict. My story will be fairly long and it will be harder to tell than you'll ever know. I'm afraid if I get stopped or sidetracked before I'm finished, I'll never be able to get started again. Can we agree on this one ground rule?"

Karen and Mark answered in the affirmative. Again Dan remained silent.

"The total foundation to understanding what happened today is wrapped up in this one fact: It was an act of God."

Dan opened his mouth for an angry remark but Karen squelched it with a look comprised of tenderness and pleading. Mark's eyes narrowed in speculation but he said nothing.

"And so that you can see that we're really in this thing together, I will start by saying that my husband Jason, my oldest child Jason Junior, and my youngest child Bethany, were all taken away at the same time you lost Kevin and Kellie."

Karen thought Ronni had just one child, a boy, but she didn't ask questions and waited for Ronni to begin her story.

Ronni's face was chalk white and her eyes were glazed with pain or fear or both. Her voice faltered two or three times before she was able to continue. When she did speak, all three Marlows had to lean forward to catch the words.

"You need to hear my story because it will help you to understand what has happened to Kevin and Kellie." Ronni paused to fight for breath and Karen wasn't sure the young minister's wife would be able to go on. After several dry sobs, and with a badly quivering lip, Ronni continued.

"The story you need to hear goes back 10 years to when Jason and I had our first child, a baby boy named Samuel. Everybody called him Sunny, though, because of his disposition. He was the cutest little baby I've ever seen. Everybody just adored him. The day he was six months old, I took him to Olan Mills to get his

picture taken. I still have that picture, upstairs in my trunk. He had chubby cheeks, blonde hair with a butcher-boy cut, and a dimple right here at the point of his chin. He was just starting to cut his front teeth and in the picture you can see two little pearls showing under his upper lip. He was so soft and cuddly, when I took him to church everybody fought to hold him."

Dan stirred and yawned so obviously that Karen looked at him sharply. Ronni realized she had to pick up the pace of her story a little.

"On the way home from the photographer, I stopped at the drug store to get Sunny some Liquiprin because he was a little fussy with his teeth. He was asleep in his car seat in the back so I locked the car and just left him there. I wasn't gone more than three minutes but when I came out of the drug store, Sunny was gone. The rear vent window had been smashed and my baby was gone." Ronni paused to struggle for breath and tears poured silently over both cheeks. Karen handed her a tissue and the Marlows waited silently until the grieving mother could compose herself.

"They found Sunny's dead body in a dumpster three days later. Turned out he had been kidnapped by a convicted child molester who was released from prison because the prison psychiatrist felt he was cured. Some cure. The autopsy showed he had been sodomized both ways over and over again, even after he was dead." Ronni rose and bolted for the powder room, slamming the door behind her. Even over the sound of the flush Karen could hear her vomiting violently.

Ronni returned to the living room fifteen minutes later, still white and trembling. "There's no need for you to go on with this," Karen said kindly. "You can tell us another time, when you're feeling a little better."

In spite of her distraught state, Ronni was resolute. "No, no, Karen. I must go on. Actually, I'm almost finished. It's just that thinking about how Sunny died--" After a long pause she continued.

"Anyway, they caught the man who did it and he was tried again. Only this time, the judge ruled a mistrial because of some legal technicality that I still don't fully understand. As far as I know, he's still walking the streets today. Sure didn't go anywhere today at noon, that's for sure." Karen was puzzled by her last statement and the fact it seemed to give Ronni some small comfort.

Ronni spoke again. "Up until the time Sunny died, I was a good Christian woman and, I believe I was a good preacher's wife, too. But when that demon-possessed monster got off Scot free, something snapped inside my soul. I did what

Job's wife told him to do. I cursed God and died--spiritually. I told God that if He couldn't have protected Sunny from that monster and if he could let him go free without punishment, I was through with God forever. To this day, I haven't prayed a real prayer. My worship has been an empty ritual. In church I've opened my Bible while Jason was preaching, just for the sake of appearance, but I haven't read a word of Scripture in almost ten years. Now, it's too late. It's forever too late ... "

Ronni spoke the last words with her head bowed and her eyes closed but there were no more tears. Only her chalky complexion and compressed lips betrayed the torment inside. After several minutes of clock-ticking silence, Ronni raised her head and looked in the face of first Dan and then Karen. She spoke through lips anesthetized by supreme self control.

"I can see by the looks on your faces that you can't make the connection between my sad story and the disappearance of your twins. If you want, I can give you a brief outline of that connection now, before the President's speech. Then we can discuss it in greater detail later." The Marlows nodded.

"For two thousand years the Bible has taught Jesus would come again. And his return, in what evangelicals have referred to as the rapture, would be characterized by the instant removal of all persons, living and dead, who had accepted Him as their personal Sin Sacrifice and were living according to His teachings. So, in a nutshell, that's what happened today at noon. Jesus Christ came back to earth and removed in a miraculous rapture all persons in the whole world who were looking for His coming and were ready to meet Him."

Dan could wait no longer. "But why Kevin and Kellie? They weren't connected with your church, or any other church for that matter. Why, they never harmed anyone in their lives! Why did they have to go to this-- to this rapture or whatever you call it?"

"That's just the point, Dan," Ronni said with compassion in her voice. "Kevin and Kellie were six, right? Okay, that means that in God's eyes they were too young to make a binding decision on what their relationship with Christ should be. An evangelical minister such as my husband would have said they were below the age of accountability."

Mark sat up straight and stared hard at Ronni's face. "Now I get it. If the twins at six were included in this rapture on a de facto basis, so to speak, then the residents of Walnut Valley, who all had mental ages of much less than six, were given the same special treatment. Right?"

"Hold on just one minute!" Dan barked harshly as he jumped to his feet. "You people are making this sudden disappearance sound like it is some kind of special honor to be conferred on God's pets. How can that be? Kevin and Kellie were wrenched from their mother's arms and are who knows where. You call that special treatment? I don't! I call it kidnapping, whether God did it or the little green men from Mars did it. My children are gone and I am out-of-my-mind mad about it and don't care who knows it!"

By the end of Dan's outburst, flecks of foam were flying from his mouth and his voice was a rasping roar. Ronni never blinked or flinched.

"Believe me, Dan, I know where you're coming from," she injected smoothly when the big man stopped for breath. "And what you say makes sense if we're talking about life as you and I know it. Life in the three-score-and-ten sense of the word. But that's not what we're talking about at all, Dan. We're talking about eternity and eternal life. I know you can't deal with that concept at the intellectual level but it is true, nevertheless. God has just granted Kevin and Kellie eternal life. They will never die. They will exist forever in the presence of God, Jesus Christ, the Holy Angels, and all the righteous of all the ages!"

Dan shook his head like a winded bull and slumped back in his chair.

Karen was afraid of another outburst from Dan and steered the conversation in another direction. "Ronni, I'm not sure I understand why you didn't get to go, along with Jason, I mean. Don't answer if you don't want to but does it have something to do with the way you felt about God after Sunny died?"

"You're precisely right. It has everything to do with how I felt about God. You see, I had voluntarily severed my relationship with God and that's why I was rejected when all true believers were raptured. In the classic sense of the word, I was an atheist."

The clock ticked through more silent moments with the Marlows not knowing quite what to say. At last Karen broke the silence. "You know, Ronni, I almost feel like we owe you an apology. You've gone to all this trouble and personal pain to help us understand what's happened. But really, you're in just about the same boat, aren't you?"

"Not quite. The instant it began to happen, I knew what it was. I wasn't even surprised when God took my unborn child."

"I didn't know you were pregnant. How far along were you?" There was just a hint of normal enthusiasm in Karen's voice.

"Less than twelve hours."

"You mean--"

"That's right. I became pregnant last night after we got home from the concert. Today at noon, when Christ called up His church to be with Him at the marriage supper of the Lamb, my Bethany went along, too."

Dan rose and jammed his hands in his pockets. "Mrs. Masterson, there's something about this whole rapture thing which really bothers me. Here you are, raised in the church and a preacher's wife, and you've lost your husband and two children. But--and this is what bothers me--but you seem as calm and cool as a cucumber. You'll have to forgive my bluntness but it just doesn't seem natural somehow. I know how I feel about losing Kevin and Kellie and my guts are all busted up inside. How can you be so calm?"

"Well Dan, I've already done my share of screaming and carrying on over in the parsonage right after it happened. I spent several hours flat on my face on the dining room floor. I didn't need to check around and see what had taken place. I knew the whole story without even turning on the radio or TV. You see, the New Testament of the Bible lays out the whole picture of the rapture, step by step. All there was left for me to do was pound the floor with my fists, and I did that until I passed out. To tell you the truth, I don't remember a thing of what happened from the time I passed out on my dining room floor until I heard a racket at the top of the stairs here in your house.

"And there I was, lying on your sofa."

Chapter 22: Demons?

Liverpool

Friday, January 3, 8:30 P.M.

Dan had been rummaging in the Governor Winthrop desk for a fresh roll of Lifesavers. "That reminds me, Ronni. What was going on with that cat upstairs? I've seen cats act spooky and I've seen them do some pretty destructive things but I've never seen or heard anything like that before."

Ronni turned pale and rose from her chair to stare out the window at the frozen, snow-covered Susquehanna River. "You're right about the cat, Dan. What you saw and heard was not ordinary and you folks have a right to know the truth about that, too. There's no telling what's ahead for all of us and the more information we all have, the better off we'll be. Remember that movie, the *Exorcist*?"

The Marlows had read the book and seen the movie.

"Well, my cat was demon-possessed tonight when he was shot."

Dan looked surprised but Karen laughed harshly. "All right, Ronni! You've reached *my* breaking point now. My twins are gone, your husband and two children are missing. Mark tells us the entire population of his institution is wiped out. And maybe, just maybe I can accept this business of what you call a rapture with a God of judgment and Jesus Christ with his marriage feast or whatever. But no demon possession!. No way demon possession. That's nothing but the invention of primitive and superstitious minds in an incorrect diagnosis of a seizure disorder or insanity or both. But definitely not demon possession. The only thing evil in that cat was a can of spoiled cat food!"

Dan saw naked fear rather than anger in Ronni's face as she started to lose her color again. "Slow down a little, Karen. I was there and what I heard and smelled and felt was more than that cat could generate on his own." Dan sat down beside his wife and put his arm around her shoulders, nodding for Ronni to continue.

Ronni shivered visibly and hugged her forearms to her chest. "There's absolutely no doubt in my mind that demons do exist and that they do have the power to inhabit humans and even animals. The New Testament stories of the

ministry of Jesus Christ contain several references to human possession and at least one instance of animal possession."

Dan popped a Lifesaver in his mouth. "Just exactly what or who are demons, anyway? Where do they come from?"

"One theory is that demons are the fallen angels who, along with Satan, were thrown out of heaven as a result of an unsuccessful insurrection. These lesser angels then began to serve Satan as his demons. Part of the punishment God imposed on them was the loss of their bodies and now they are constantly looking for another body to inhabit."

"I've never heard of such a thing," Karen muttered.

"There's much more of it than anyone dreams of," Ronni replied soberly. "Before the rapture, most demons were very slick and sophisticated. They caused their victims to do horrible things but they always made it look like crime and perversion rather than demon possession. Demons key on two major themes: lust and death. For some reason, they crave human sexuality and cause their victims to get involved with rape, molestation, and adultery. And where there is senseless killing, like with a serial murderer, you can bet that demon possession is involved. Suicide goes with the package. Ted Bundy and Jeffrey Dahmer are classic examples of a demonic fascination with death and sex together."

"Do you believe things will get worse now as far as demons are concerned?" Dan asked.

"I'm not sure. Before the rapture, there were enough born-again Christians who were filled with the power of the Holy Spirit to help keep the power of Satan and his demons at bay. What frightens me now is that with all the true believers removed from the world, Satan may decide to exercise more authority than he has been able to do so far, at least in the Christian countries of the world." Again Ronni shivered and Karen, still skeptical, rose and got her a sweater.

"But I still don't understand what happened upstairs with the cat," Dan said from the depths of his favorite chair.

"I guess that explanation is a lot easier to express than comprehend," said Ronni with a faint smile. "Satan and his demons have to be extremely frustrated by what happened in the rapture today. You see, all those people--children as well as adults-- who went to be with Jesus and are now lost to Satan forever. There's no way he can keep them from inheriting eternal life. While they were on earth, he could tempt them to sin and in that way break their relationship with God. But

now, they're home free. So, my theory is that several demons entered the body of Midnight, my cat, and then indulged in a rage reaction because Kevin and Kellie could never fall into their clutches. That's why they caused Middy to ruin their clothes and contaminate their bed. Then, when you shot the cat, the demons left to look for another warm body in which to live."

"But what about that strange sound and the horrible smell, and even a blast of cold air which I felt upstairs?"

"Those things often seem to be associated with the presence of demons, at least the part observers are able to sense. And if the demons had inhabited a human body, you probably would have heard something closer to speech sounds instead of what you did hear."

Karen had left to make fresh coffee and she returned now with four steaming cups on a tray. She had been following the conversation from out in the kitchen and when she spoke, the note of scorn was missing. "Do you think the ... the demons are gone, permanently, now that the cat is dead?"

"I only know they're gone for now. I hope it's permanent but there is no way to destroy a demon. Eviction, or what you may know as *exorcism*, is the only possibility."

"I hope their eviction is permanent. The idea of demons right here in this house is just a little more than I care to think about," Karen said shakily as she resumed her seat. "Oh, one more thing, Ronni, and then I'll stop pestering you with so many questions. Why were you, Mark, and I able to observe so much at the actual moment of ... of departure while Dan saw absolutely nothing?"

"That aspect of the rapture was a revelation to me because the Bible doesn't actually discuss the fine points in such detail. The Bible does say, though, that the rapture was to occur in the twinkling of an eye. It also says the dead in Christ will rise first and then those that remain will be caught up to meet them in the air. Oh, and the Bible also predicted the part about the glorified bodies, too. As you know, all of those things did come true today at noon."

Mark leaned forward in his chair. "Yes, but where did all the extra time come from? The acrobatics display I saw went on for several minutes. But on the clock, it took no time at all."

"The concept of time exists for the convenience of man but it has absolutely no significance for God. God lives in the eternal present where there is no past or

future. I guess you could say we were treated to an expanded segment of heavenly time so that we might experience the rapture in something other than a little blip, like Dan heard in his earphones."

Mark walked over to a side window and looked at a thermometer fastened to the outside window ledge. "Man, it's getting cold again. It's down close to zero already." On his way back to his chair, he flipped on the TV. No one realized it was after nine and the President was on camera.

"... happy to report that our statement this afternoon regarding hostile action from a foreign country or planet is still valid. In fact, since noon today, absolutely nothing unusual has occurred in this country or any other country. The disappearances are apparently without relationship to any force or power which is detectable with known information-gathering devices and techniques."

Dan snorted and turned to Ronni. "You know a whole lot more about this business than those clowns in Washington. Why haven't they been talking to people like you since noon instead of horsing around with their information-gathering nonsense?"

"For a very simple reason, Dan. There are very few people like me left on this planet. The ones who knew about the rapture and were ready to go, are gone. Of course, there are plenty of high-priced theologians left, I'm sure, but my guess would be that they will be making themselves pretty scarce right now. Especially if they have any inkling of what really happened. And I guess most of the little people like me, who missed the rapture and know why, will be keeping a pretty low profile, too."

The President was winding down his speech and they all turned back to the screen. Dan, however, felt a small stir of professional excitement at what Ronni had just said.

"... with pleasure that I commend my fellow Americans on your excellent spirit in accepting this tragedy which has befallen all of us. Shortly after noon today I imposed a national state of martial law. Now it seems unnecessary to continue that status and effective 9:30 P.M. Eastern Standard Time, martial law will be lifted. We should be able to regain a measure of normalcy in national life."

"Sure, he can say that. All his children are grown and not one of them is missing," Karen said bitterly.

Mark had been lying flat on his back with a pillow propped under his head. Now he leaned over on an elbow and joined the conversation. "The government's position does seem to be rather superficial on this thing. But maybe that's just as well, in terms of keeping the panic down."

Ronni looked at Mark. "I don't think there'll be any panic. I think most people will just grieve quietly and accept the finality of the disappearances as one more thing in this complex age which is beyond the power of comprehension."

"I think you're both wrong," Dan said firmly. "I think the people who have lost children and other family members deserve to know exactly what happened today at noon. And they deserve to know who's at fault, too!"

The President's image on the screen was replaced by a panel of talking heads - national network-news types, all looking at their respective cameras and discussing the speech. Karen grabbed the remote control and turned the set off.

"And whose fault do you think it is, Dan?"

"The fancy, big-city churches with their honey-tongued ministers and hoity-toity choirs, that's who!"

"Dan! How can you blame the churches when you never even went?"

"I rarely went because there wasn't anything there when I did go. I got more out of staying home and watching John Hagee from down in San Antonio!"

Karen started to shush Dan but had second thoughts and decided it might be better to let him blow off some excess steam.

"There's a lot about this whole God-and-rapture thing that doesn't make a bit of sense to me," Dan said. "Look at Karen. A man never had a better wife and kids never had a better mom than Karen Marlow. And yet, she doesn't get to go along on the rapture with her own kids. Not only is she a great wife and mother, she's a fantastic educator, too. Karen, tell Ronni about that specimen you tangled with before Christmas. The old soak who hit that little girl with a board. People like that creep deserve to miss the rapture and stay here on the earth while Karen goes up with her kids. But no, that's not what happened at all. This all-wise and all-powerful God of yours lumps Nate Dike and my Karen all in the same lot. Now, if that's justice, then I spit in God's eye! So there!"

Karen looked embarrassed and Ronni's face was white and drawn as she attempted to respond rationally to Dan's anger. "I know you're upset. We're all upset by everything's that's happened today. And you do have a right to hear the answers to your questions, even though you may not like what you hear. What I'm about to say is based on my understanding of what the Bible teaches, as I learned it at my mother's knee, in Sunday school classes, and later in courses at Bible college.

In a few short sentences Ronni explained the plan of salvation and how Jesus Christ took on his own head the death penalty for the sins of all mankind. "Most people had it all wrong. They thought they were saved and in God's good graces until they did something bad enough to incur God's wrath. But it was just the opposite. Every son of Adam's race was damned and on his way to eternal punishment in hell until he did something right. And that something right was to accept the blood of Jesus Christ as his or her personal and supreme sacrifice for sin."

Throughout Ronni's comments Dan sat on the raised hearth and leaned forward, chin in hands, with his elbows propped on his knees. As she made each point, he shook his head and mumbled sourly.

Mark had been listening quietly for some time and finally he spoke from his spot on the floor. "You know, Ronni, it seems that you have a legitimate gripe yourself. Here you are, a minister's wife, trained in the teachings of the Bible, and you get left behind for something that happened years ago. That's over and done. In my mind, the number of times you must have attended church in your lifetime should cancel out a little thing like your cursing God for your own son's death.

"I appreciate your vote of confidence, Mark," Ronni said dryly, "but you're wrong on two counts. In the first place, church membership and faithful attendance alone were not enough in God's eyes, without the born-again experience through the power of Jesus Christ. And second, the church hierarchy doesn't decide what is right and what is wrong. God alone makes that decision. And the Bible happens to take a very strong stand on forgiveness. If I couldn't forgive God for Sunny's death, he couldn't forgive me for cursing Him."

Dan was on his feet again, hands jammed in his trouser pockets. "Come off that born-again stuff! Reporters picked that term up during the Carter years and made a political football out of it. Now I hear you saying that a person had to be born again to be included in the rapture. I suppose he had to be a Republican, too?"

Ronni's white face showed the turmoil within but her voice remained calm and controlled. "Neither Chuck Colson nor Jimmy Carter invented the concept of being born again. Jesus Christ did, two thousand years ago. That's documented in the third chapter of the Gospel of John. A man named Nicodemus had an interview with Jesus and asked what he had to do to have eternal life. This man was one of the church leaders of his day and had the equivalent of an earned doctorate in theology. But Jesus said to him, 'Nicodemus, you must be born again.' If a man like Nicodemus had to have the born-again experience to get to heaven, there's not much chance that one of us, including myself, has a legitimate gripe because we missed the rapture."

Karen's brows were knitted in concentration and her voice was quiet but tense. "I have a lot of friends who seem very involved in their churches but I guess those churches don't teach about being born again. Have all of them missed the rapture, even when it was the church's fault for not emphasizing it more?"

"As we find out more about who went and who didn't, I'm sure we'll discover that the only criterion that counted was the born-again experience. Not good works. Not church attendance. Not ignorance. Only one thing mattered in God's eyes. Have you personally accepted the sacrifice of the Lamb of God on the cross for your sins. Nothing else."

No one spoke and Ronni continued, quietly and almost reflectively. "During my lifetime I have visited the White House at least six times. But I never met a President. I could have visited the White House every Sunday of my life and still never had the privilege of meeting a President personally. I guess that's the way it'll be now. We'll see a lot of folks who were in church every Sunday but who never met Jesus Christ personally. They had a historic relationship with Him. They even had a religious relationship in terms of liturgy and customs. But they never had a personal relationship with Jesus. It's sad. Just so terribly, terribly sad."

"I'll tell you what's sad," Dan said sourly. "Why didn't someone tell us about this rapture and the fact that this business of being born again was so all-fired important? Where were the ministers and church members who did know about this thing? Why weren't they going door to door and making sure that everyone was ready for this rapture, or at least knew about it? If I'd known yesterday what I know now, I wouldn't have let Jason Masterson out of my sight until he'd explained exactly what I had to do to be born again. How could these holy-roller evangelicals have been so complacent when they knew the truth and we didn't? How could--"

"Dan, please--" Ronni broke in. "Please forgive Jason and me for not making sure last night that you both understood the full significance of what was being said

and sung about at the Gaither concert. You better believe if Jason knew then that the rapture would take place in a little over twelve hours, he would have had you by the lapels, preaching straight down your throat. But, we were all complacent, I guess. We verbalized the certainty and imminence of the rapture but never really acted like--"Her voice broke and she covered her face with her hands, sobbing quietly."

Dan watched Ronni silently as the young woman sought release in more tears. He was torn by unbearable anguish for his own circumstance and an empathy for the obvious agony being experienced by her. However, a powerful need to grasp the total picture of the situation in which the world had been placed prompted him to ask another question, even before she had finished crying.

"No one has really said this out loud but I hear us heading in this direction anyway. We're going to hell, aren't we? I guess I never thought of hell as a real place but if these people who were raptured today are with God and Jesus Christ in heaven, then it seems logical that those who aren't with God are headed for the other place. Is that so?"

"Dad, maybe we should let Ronni take a break from all these questions and get a little rest."

"No, Mark. I said earlier that I feel you people deserve to know the truth as I understand it and I plan to follow through with my pledge." Ronni dried her face and then continued to talk quietly, hands clenched tightly in her lap.

"I wish I could soften my answer to your question about hell, Dan, but as I know the Bible, we are all going to spend eternity there. We may live long enough to die natural deaths. But when we do die, it will be to go to a literal hell."

Again a long silence filled the comfortable living room and everyone avoided eye contact. At last Dan broke the silence by switching on the FM tuner of his sound system. An easy-listening music track was just ending and a recorded public service announcement filled the room.

"Families and friends of missing children in the Harrisburg area are invited to attend memorial services Sunday afternoon at 2:30 in the Forum, the Farm Show Arena, the Zembo Mosque, and the Giant Center. Each family is encouraged to take one wallet-sized picture of each missing child to the service of your choice. At the conclusion of the service, these pictures will be placed in small caskets and then buried on the mall behind the Capitol Building. A monument will be placed at this

spot in memory of the young citizens of Pennsylvania who will not be served by the Commonwealth's public schools and institutions of higher education."

"Let's do it, Dan please? As a special favor to me?"

The elder Marlow looked in his wife's tear-bright eyes and gently shook his head. "Karen, honey, you know what Ronni said. Nowhere on this entire planet is there even one person who can claim a personal relationship with God. So what good will it do for us to go to a memorial service with some hypocrite up front, reading from a book he doesn't understand and talking about a God he doesn't know?"

"Please, Dan. We can't have a funeral and I'd feel better somehow if we revered Kevin and Kellie's memory in some special way."

Karen rose and crossed to where Dan was still standing beside the sound system. She slid her arms around his waist and laid her shining head on his shoulder. Gradually his body relaxed and moved against hers. When he buried his face in her hair she knew the answer was affirmative.

"All right, Karen, we'll do it. For them and you, we'll do it."

She lifted her face and softly kissed his firm mouth.

Chapter 23: Big News

**U.S. 11-15 South of Liverpool
Saturday, January 4, 5:15 A.M.**

Dan glanced in the rear view mirror of the Geo Metro to be sure Mark was still behind him in the Bug. In the seat beside him, Veronica Masterson slept soundly, her blonde head pillowed on one of Mark's old sweaters which was jammed between the headrest and the window. Mark was making the trip to WMOR in Camp Hill so he could provide some much-needed relief for Lacey Bowder and Tim McCarthy. Between them they had kept the station on the air since Dan had left early Friday afternoon.

Dan had to brake sharply for a milk tanker which pulled out in front of him at a time there was no passing. He looked anxiously at his passenger but the seat belt had held Ronni in position and her eyes remained closed. Probably exhausted from all she's been through in the last 24 hours.

Radio probably won't bother you either, Dan thought, and switched on WMOR. Lacey was just setting up a network bulletin and He turned the volume up a little. Lacey filled time with a weather forecast, time check, live ID and then gave it to AP radio. Dan was expecting another actuality featuring a distraught mother who had lost her child but the bulletin was fresh news indeed.

"The Associated Press has just learned that many nationally-known religious leaders in the evangelical movement are among the missing, apparently in connection with the mass disappearances of yesterday noon. Those who have not been seen or heard from since before noon yesterday include several well-known persons in the field of television evangelism. This fact was brought to light by a reporter on the *Charlotte Observer* when he was unable to contact prominent members of the evangelical establishment.

"At this time, no one is willing to attach any special significance to these disappearances but the Associated Press is pursuing the story and we'll have more information as soon as it's available to us here in Washington ... "

Lacey returned the station to regular programming but Dan's mind had switched back to the conversation he'd had with Ronni last night in the Marlow living room. He had encouraged her to tell her story to the public because it seemed she knew a lot more about this rapture business than anyone else knew, or at least was willing to tell.

Ronni had been understandably reluctant at first but Dan assured her that the very personal part about Sunny's death did not need to be part of the story. At last she had agreed to drive down to the station in the morning and record an interview. Thinking about it now, Dan was sure his bulletin and audio feed would fill in nicely for the gaps left in the Charlotte story. Thanks to Ronni's lucid perception of what had really happened.

At 5:30 the Geo Metro and the faithful Bug bracketed Lacey's grimy Corvette in the parking spaces in front of the WMOR studio building. Inside, the girl was bleary-eyed but efficient as she wrapped up her show and got ready to turn things over to someone else.

Mark and Lacey hadn't seen each other for quite a while and they embraced and kissed lightly.

"Mark Marlow, you hunk! It's about time you got yourself down here and made a contribution to the family business. How've you been?" Mark returned the banter and then Lacey began to explain the program log covering the next several hours. Since Mark had worked summers at WMOR while he was in college, the board wouldn't give him any real trouble. He'd just have to get up to speed on some of the new stuff, like getting the news off a satellite feed, and recording to a computer hard drive.

Dan introduced Ronni and then led her back to the production studio. Quickly he set up an extra mike for his guest. Within an hour Dan had a 90-second bulletin and a 10-minute interview feature on the hard drive and ready to feed to the AP.

In spite of the early hour, Ronni had been poised, articulate, and very informative. Even hearing it for the second time, Dan felt his spine tingle as Ronni explained the Biblical rationale for why all young children and certain adults were now missing on a world-wide scale.

There was, and always would be, a frigid vault of emptiness in his heart as a result of the twins' being among the missing. But as far as Dan was concerned, the finality of their absence was beyond questioning now. Life and work had to go on. He had often contemplated the amazing resiliency of the human spirit and now he could sense that his urge to wrest and quest was still present.

But Kevin and Kellie were never out of his thoughts.

Dan called the AP in Washington and when they had their hard drive ready to record, the interview and bulletin were played.

"Now, my dear Mrs. Masterson, let's sit back and see if the AP bigwigs think they have a story. Shouldn't be too long."

The AP bulletin alert light began to flash in the production studio at exactly 7:07 A.M., less than 20 minutes after the story had been fed. Dan and Ronni turned to a computer monitor and watched a BUST-IT BULLETIN come on the screen.

BULLETIN

(HARRISBURG, PA) -- THE WIFE OF A CENTRAL PENNSYLVANIA EVANGELICAL MINISTER CLAIMS THAT YESTERDAY'S STRANGE DISAPPEARANCE of millions of persons around the world is the result of divine intervention in the affairs of humans.

Mrs. Veronica Masterson of Liverpool, Pennsylvania, is saying that this incident was predicted in the New Testament of the Bible two thousand years ago and is known in evangelical circles as "the rapture". According to Masterson, the persons of all ages and races who left the earth yesterday at noon have found special favor with God and are now with Him and Jesus Christ somewhere in heaven
...

The story continued to scroll but now Mark was calling down the hall. "Dad, we just got a network advisory that they're going to run your feed in 60 seconds."

"Ronni, you keep watching the monitor and click Print when it's finished. I want to hear the audio bulletin come through."

In the control room, father and son watched the wall clock count down the seconds as a yellow track played on the air. With 15 seconds to go, Mark faded the music, ran an ID off a CD, and put the network line on the air right on cue.

After an introduction by a network announcer, Dan's voice filled the studio as AP radio ran the interview exactly as it had been fed to them less than 30 minutes earlier. Ronni walked into the studio with the wire bulletin in her hand just as her interview began.

"Well, Ronni," Dan smiled, "we've done our part in giving the people in this country access to the real truth. It's up to the big boys now." Just then the phone

light flashed and Mark took the call while Dan read the rest of the bulletin Ronni had brought in.

Mark turned to Ronni. "CBS radio in New York for you."

She started to take the phone but Dan punched the HOLD button. "Listen, don't let them badger you into saying anything you really don't want to say. And remember, they'll want to record your comments so they can be used on the air. Understand?"

Ronni nodded soberly and looked more than a little scared. Dan punched the flashing hold button so she could talk.

By nine o'clock, Ronni had given telephone interviews to ABC, NBC, MS-NBC and Fox News, in addition to the first one for CBS. And then the President's press secretary was on the line. Ronni took that call in Dan's office.

With the White House on hold, Ronni walked into the control room looking shaky and ashen. "The White House wants me to go straight down to Washington and do a pool news conference from the East Room today at one. Oh Dan, I'm so scared. I'm not sure I can go through with all this."

Dan took the young woman's cold hands in his big warm ones. "Maybe I should have been a little more explicit in describing the probable results of going public with your story. Have they been after you about why you weren't raptured, too, if you know so much about it?"

Ronni nodded. "I think everyone who has called asked that question in one way or another. I've just been saying that for personal reasons I was not spiritually ready to meet God and therefore was ineligible to participate in the rapture. They don't seem to understand what I'm saying but no one has really pursued the issue so far."

"Well, Ronni, the White House thing is your decision. But in my opinion, you've started this and you ought to see it through."

Ronni looked doubtful but managed a half smile. "I guess you're right, Dan. I'll tell them I'll do it." Without further hesitation she picked up the phone and pushed the flashing button. As she talked, Ronni motioned for Dan to pick up the extension in the control room and he did so. Arrangements were made for Ronni to be picked up by Marine One helicopter at the New Cumberland Army Depot, less than 30 minutes from the station. Takeoff was in one hour. Clothes and makeup

would be taken care of when she arrived at the White House. She would be returned to the Harrisburg International Airport where Dan and Karen would meet her helicopter at 8:00 P.M.

Dan got Ronni's coat and waited in the hall while she used the ladies' room. Mark joined him.

"Dad, I brought a suitcase along with me and I think I'll just stay right here through the weekend. I'll sleep upstairs while that part-timer does the night shift and then I'll go back on tomorrow morning at six. Tim left a note saying he'll be ready to go again tomorrow evening at six and take it till six Monday morning. That way, Lacey can visit with you and Mom and you won't have to worry about what's going on down here. Right now I think Mom needs you at home more than the station needs you here."

Ronni appeared looking fresh and Dan smiled encouragingly. "Well, looks like our traveler is ready for her flying trip down to Washington. See you later, Mark, and thanks for all you're doing to help. Your mother and I really appreciate it."

The father and son embraced and Dan found it unusually hard to pull away. Mark started to follow them out to the porch for one more good-bye but the phone rang again and he went back to answer it.

Forty-five minutes later Dan watched with misty eyes as Marine One lifted a very brave lady from the pad at New Cumberland. He swallowed hard as Ronni and her valuable cargo of information about the rapture became a diminishing speck in the southern sky.

On a whim, Dan drove down along the Susquehanna River and parked across from the nationally-known Three-Mile Island nuclear power plant. Back in the spring of 1979 the possibility of a meltdown or a hydrogen explosion had been the national lead story for days. In the light of the last 24 hours, however, the threat originally posed by the now-benign complex of cooling towers and buildings was small potatoes.

"I wish we were dealing with something as logical and rational and substantive as a nuclear accident," Dan mumbled to a mongrel dog trotting by in the snow. "But now we're talking about forces far more powerful and sinister than anything we dreamed of back in 79."

"No doubt about it," Dan said as the dog stopped and sat down in the snow, cocking his head inquiringly. "I'll take a meltdown over a rapture any day."

He got back in the Geo Metro.

Chapter 24: The Forum

Harrisburg

Sunday, January 5, 1:30 P.M.

At Karen's insistence the Marlows had planned to arrive in Harrisburg a full 90 minutes before the memorial service was scheduled to begin in the Forum. Dan had grumbled at the prospect of wasting over an hour sitting in an auditorium seat, waiting for the service to start. Now he was glad that Karen had prevailed.

Parking had been an unbelievable problem. With all the State workers off duty, Dan had assumed there would be plenty of space. As it turned out, all the government lots around the Capitol complex were filled and they had managed to find a roof-top space in the Chestnut Street parking garage next to 333 Market Street, the Education Building. With an hour till the service started, Dan and Karen were lucky to find a pair of empty seats on the main floor. The balcony was filling fast, too.

Under other circumstances, Karen would have ridden Dan a little in the face of her being right about how early they should be. But the mood of the crowd was far from jovial as people quietly took the remaining seats and either stared straight ahead or read the printed program.

After claiming their seats, the Marlows took turns going to the rest rooms and then sat quietly along with the rest of the crowd, waiting for the program to get under way.

During the wait, Dan's mind drifted back over the last few days and he had difficulty comprehending all that had taken place. Just Thursday morning, his biggest problem was an Amish sleigh and a bushel of road apples. But now, the whole world was turned upside down, for him and for a lot of other people, too.

Since Ronni's one o'clock news conference with congressional leaders at the White House yesterday, the nation's perception of what had happened Friday at noon was changed. Earlier, Dan had been worried that Ronni's posture would be derided by tough-minded news people with their probing questions. People on the White House beat knew how to go for the throat after long practice on the President. However, they were courteous, sympathetic, and even believing. It almost seemed that the nation was starved for an explanation, any explanation that makes some kind of sense. Of course Ronni wasn't the only person in the United

States who knew the true story behind the disappearances. But she was the first person to tell the story on world-wide television.

The man on the street may have accepted Ronni's explanation at face value but the church community was outraged. The Vatican roared a strong denunciation and all major religious entities in the Judeo-Christian connection followed suit. The networks dutifully gave equal time to the church people but it seemed that the cynicism Dan feared would be directed toward Ronni fell instead on the church leaders who had been left behind.

As Dan looked over the program for the memorial service, he noted that several prominent clergymen from the Harrisburg area were listed as participants. WHP, however, was saying in local newscasts that all members of the clergy had withdrawn from all four memorial services and everything would be completely secular. Just as well, Dan thought. Anyone who didn't go in the rapture has no more to say to me about God than I have to say to myself.

The eerie stillness of the crowd did not change, even when the Forum became filled to capacity. Dan decided to take advantage of the quiet and slid down in his seat for a quick catnap.

Karen was aware that Dan was dozing and considered nudging him into a more respectful frame of mind and body. Instead, she got the pictures out of her purse and stared at them with moist eyes.

Kevin and Kellie. So young and sweet and naughty and bright. How much fun it had been to have twins in the home. How much brighter and richer the days had been since their arrival on the scene in consecutive sessions of painful ecstasy. How much promise their young lives had represented. And now they were gone. Not because of a comet blazing out of the sky. Not because of a nuclear accident or a plague or a tidal wave or an earthquake or a mudslide or a hurricane. Even the feared Y2K turn-of-the-century computer crisis had come and gone without so much as a blip on anyone's screen.

No. Her darlings were eternally gone because God had taken them from her in a direct act, rather than an indirect act. Even with Ronni's careful and repeated explanation, Karen still couldn't comprehend the logic of it all. If there was any logic.

Why didn't God and His Son, Jesus Christ, just allow them all to live their lives in peace. Why was Divine intervention even necessary? We were living a full life, Dan and Kevin and Kellie and I. We had enough money, enough food, decent

shelter. We weren't especially God-conscious but then we weren't sinful or uncivilized, either. We were just normal citizens living normal lives. And then God had to break in and destroy our lives with His cruel rapture.

Cruel? No better word than cruel! What right did God have to take my Kevin and Kellie unless it was to prove that He is cruel? Karen cried silently for several minutes and was very angry with Dan for sleeping while she suffered.

At exactly 2:30 the organ burst into the *Star Spangled Banner* and everyone rose, Dan coming up about a beat behind the rest. The organist then slid into *America* and down the center aisle marched a squad of six State Police troopers in the scarlet tunic colonial guard uniforms they at one time wore in their famous horse-mounted Musical Ride. The troopers carried a flag-draped casket shoulder high and were followed by a short line of robed dignitaries. Karen thought they must be educators because most were wearing academic gowns. Some graduation, she thought sourly.

The casket was placed on a low catafalque in the center of the stage. Someone stepped to the microphone and asked the audience to join in the Pledge of Allegiance and then the Lord's Prayer.

The memorial service lasted about 45 minutes and consisted entirely of speeches by the dignitaries. Since the ministers had refused to participate, the printed programs were no longer accurate and Karen had no idea who was doing what.

And then it was time to take up the pictures and place them in the crimson-lined casket. Dan held Kevin's first grade school picture in the palm of his hand and Karen held Kellie's.

The long lines of grieving family members inched down the aisles to the front of the auditorium. At the steps leading up to the stage, a small parchment envelope was provided for each child being memorialized. Before placing the twins' pictures in the envelopes, Dan and Karen gazed lovingly at the colored images which were all they had left. Then they kissed the pictures with salty lips and each was put in a separate envelope.

When it was the Marlows' turn to mount the stage steps and walk across the polished wood floor to the mahogany casket, Karen held back.

"Come on, Honey, you're holding up the proceedings," Dan whispered gently.

"I'm sorry if this sounds silly, Dan, but we're making a mistake. Kevin and Kellie were always together in life and they should be together now." Carefully she opened her envelope containing Kellie's picture and then took Kevin's envelope from Dan. After opening it, she placed both pictures in the same envelope, face to face, and sealed the flap.

"I'm ready now," she whispered, taking Dan's hand. Together they moved on to the casket and placed the likenesses of their beloved twins with the hundreds of other white envelopes. The Marlows paused a moment over the open casket and their scalding tears dropped on Kevin and Kellie's envelope. And then it was time to move on as another family came up behind them.

The trip home to Liverpool was silent and sorrowful as each grieving parent nurtured private and precious memories of what had been and could never be again.

Chapter 25: Demons!

Liverpool

Sunday, January 5, 11:00 P.M.

Dan leaned back in his favorite chair, relaxed if not contented. The cherry embers of a dying fire provided the only illumination in the shadowy living room and an occasional popping coal sent a few sparks up the fireplace chimney.

The muted voices of Karen, Ronni and Lacey drifted down from the master bedroom where the three women were discussing the possibility of swapping some clothes. Both visitors were planning to stay overnight.

After a quarter hour of spark watching, Dan began to feel drowsy. With a grunt he tilted the recliner all the way back and was sound asleep in less than two minutes. The grandfather clock in the corner chimed his Westminster melodies at 11:15, 11:30, and 11:45 but the slumbering man never stirred.

Then it began.

At first Dan thought he was having some kind of hellish nightmare as a lingering aftermath of his experience Friday night with Ronni's black cat. He shook his head furiously to make sure he was fully awake. But instead of diminishing with the return of full consciousness, the sound grew in intensity. His heart palpitating with terror, Dan struggled to get his chair into its upright position and finally managed to stagger to his feet. His entire body was bathed in frightsweat as he tiptoed across the carpet to stand at the bottom of the stairs.

As before, the sound was coming from above but in just a few seconds he was able to discern a distinct difference in its characteristics. Instead of overtones of anger as on Friday night, this sound conveyed a feeling of mirth. Not mirth in the sense of joy and happiness. Mirth in the sense of a spider racing across her web to reach an enmeshed fly. Dan had no intention of climbing the stairs and searching for the source of the hideous sound. And yet, Karen and her guests were up there. He must go. Slowly his right foot moved up on the first step. And then, step by step, he moved carefully up the staircase, treading as though it might collapse under his weight at any second.

As he got near the top, various aspects of the sound became identifiable. In contrast to Friday night's experience, tonight's sound seemed more human than animal. And there was also a hint of the female gender. Female without femininity.

At the top, the odor hit him in the face like a vomit-soaked towel. An odor so indescribably foul that its presence in the air lined his nasal passages with a furry blanket of revulsion so substantive it impeded his breathing.

And the cold was there, too. Not the draft from an open window on a January night. The cold of an absolute state of nothingness. Not anything from this world, at least. Dan could see that the master bedroom door was closed. The sound seemed to be emanating from beyond its white-enameled surface and his wooden legs carried him in that direction. The gleaming brass knob, when he touched it, burned with the fire of dry ice.

With a convulsive twist of his wrist he turned the knob and thrust the door open wide. Instantly Dan experienced a savage bout of projectile vomiting. Again and again his stomach convulsed as geysers of acidic fluid spewed from his sagging mouth.

In thinking about it later, Dan realized that he would never be able to adequately describe to another human being what he saw and experienced during the next few minutes. The horror, the terror, the otherworldliness, the revulsion . . . they were all beyond the descriptive powers of his logical mind and superlative vocabulary.

As the bout of vomiting eased and Dan's vision cleared, his mind nearly rejected what he was able to sense. Only a steel will and an ardent love for Karen kept him from fleeing such evil which exceeded human comprehension in its degree of vile intensity.

An abominably obnoxious and repulsive liquefied substance eddied and swirled across the polished oak surface of the bedroom floor. Its basic colors were brown, green, and black with occasional overtones of red and gray. Although the consistency was like slurry, some objects of substance were visible, flowing by in a swift current from nowhere to nowhere across the floor. The open sewers of hell were flowing at Dan's feet!

The slurry itself appeared to consist of a satanic mixture of every substance excreted, secreted, or suppurated by the human body. Although Dan's brain was not consciously making visual identifications at the time, he would remember later that the objects of substance were parts of human bodies in various stages of decomposition. A hand here, an eyeball over there, an intact skull with ears attached bobbing by in the current . . .

Although the noxious flood appeared to be several inches deep, it did not flow out into the hall when Dan opened the door. Nor did it flow into the open closet or bathroom doors that led off the bedroom. And as Dan's mind began to adjust slightly to the horrific visual onslaught, he became aware again of the equally hellish sounds and odors that had confronted him earlier.

His renewed awareness of sound drew his attention to the opposite side of the room where a massive triple dresser stood between two windows. Standing on its top, backs pressed to the mirror and wall, were Karen, Ronni, and Lacey in varying states of hysteria. Karen was looking straight at Dan across the bilious flood, her fright-stretched mouth forming his name over and over again. The demonic cacophony that engulfed the room all but obliterated the sound of her voice as she screamed his name. Ronni was totally catatonic. She stood in the middle of the trio, feet together, back straight, hands clenched at her sides. Lacey's face was buried in her hands and her convulsing torso indicated she was crying wildly.

Then Dan's gaze dropped below the dresser top and great waves of blackness washed over his mind. His terror-fogged vision was able to make out three diminutive forms cavorting in the putrid slurry. His mind immediately rejected the concept of cavorting as incongruous but a second glance confirmed the word as the only one that fit. The three forms danced and skipped and splashed through the unmentionable substance like Kevin and Kellie had done at Myrtle Beach last summer, just where surf and sand meet.

Sometimes they splashed each other. Sometimes they splashed themselves. And every once in a while one would scoop up a dripping and unthinkable something to fling at the trio on the dresser. Karen ducked and weaved, avoiding most of the badly-aimed slimy projectiles. Ronni never flinched as again and again her clothes and skin were splattered and befouled. After a near miss by a partially-decomposed eyeball, Lacey turned toward the mirror, her shoulders hunched against the continued barrage from below.

The poor aim of the hurlers caused Dan to flick another glance their way. He was both amazed and repulsed to discover that the three small forms were actually in the configuration of 6-month-old babies. They appeared to be identical and their normally-cherubic features were contorted with demonic and manic glee. For a milisecond, Dan wondered about babies being able to walk and play and throw at such a young age. But nothing else he could hear or see or smell made any sense, either.

Suddenly Karen was hit full in the face with a slime-soaked quarter-section of a human brain. Dan turned, slammed the door, and ran for the stairs. Later he

would estimate he had stood in the bedroom doorway no more than 20 seconds but it seemed like an eternity at the time. In his helter-skelter dash down the hall, he tripped on the top step and cartwheeled all the way down, slamming against the baseboard at the bottom. He didn't even notice a bleeding wound in his right forearm until he tried to open the locked gun safe.

The Smith and Wesson .22 automatic nestled benignly in its crimson-lined rosewood case. Dan removed the gun with his left hand and tucked it in his right armpit. With his left hand, he slammed in a full clip and thumbed off the safety.. The severe pain in his right forearm indicated sprain in addition to laceration but he didn't give it a second thought.

He moved back down the hall to the foot of the stairs through a haze of pain and horror. Above his head the hideous sound continued unabated and without hesitation, Dan began to climb the carpeted steps. Once again he approached the pristine surface of his bedroom door and turned the icy knob.

The cauldron of evil inside the once-serene bedroom was unchanged. At the sight of Dan, Karen resumed mouthing his name in shrieks that were largely lost in the satanic noise. When she realized Dan had the gun, her eyes got ever wider and she paused in her calling for a moment. Ronni was still locked in the immobility of total catatonia and Lacey still huddled against the mirror with her forehead pressing against the wall above the glass. Her face was buried in her hands. On the floor, the sludge of the damned still flowed endlessly and the three baby-shaped creatures with the fires of hell glowing behind their eyes still gamboled in the unspeakable filth.

After checking to see that the women were as he had left them, Dan turned his attention to the creatures on the floor. He raised the gun and leveled it at the head of the middle one of the trio. At the moment, they were again dancing in front of the dresser on which the women stood. Suddenly they stopped their frenetic movements and stood with hands on diminutive hips, their heads thrown back in what appeared to be crescendos of ribald laughter.

Dan faced the dresser from his position in the doorway and he had a perfect shot at the back of a down-covered baby-shaped head. His finger tensed on the trigger and then he paused. It isn't easy to shoot the image of a 6-month-old baby, even when the target is most likely not a baby at all but some sort of demonic entity. The action of the creature on the left in scooping up a globule of congealed bilge and flinging it at Karen's face erased his hesitation, however. He fired directly into the back of the small head, square between the ears. The crack of the gun was lost in the continuous roar but Dan felt the revolver twitch and knew his aim at that

distance was sure. A chip flew away from a carved molding on the dresser but the targeted head was unmarked. If he didn't know better, Dan would have been tempted to think the bullet had passed clean through the head without leaving a blemish. He fired again with further damage to the dresser but the head was still unmarked.

Up to this point, the ghoulish trio had acted as though Dan didn't exist during both his visits to the bedroom. After the second shot, however, they whirled as a unit and brimstone shot from their nonhuman eyes directly into Dan's brain. All vestiges of frolic were gone and their howls were now of rage and not glee. For an instant their gaze left Dan's face and they seemed to be searching in the satanic sea for some specific article of abomination. They stooped as a unit and suddenly each right hand was holding aloft a fleshless skull, chubby fingers inserted in the eye and nose holes like bowlers grasping their balls.

The arm of the creature on the left blurred and a skull hit Dan between the eyes, snapping his head back against the door jamb with a force which drew blood. His vision turned rosy but before the second tiny arm started its arc, he fired three more times, directly into the creature's face. The result was the same as before and this time the skull hit him full in the stomach, causing him to bend forward with the impact. In desperation he willed his vision to clear so he could fire accurately without endangering the women on the dresser. Before he could aim, the third skull caromed off the crown of his head and he pitched face downward into the turgid foulness. The last thing he remembered before dark silence was shrill, maniacal laughter rising above the sense-shredding sounds and smells of the pit.

When Karen saw Dan fall face-down in the filth, she almost lost her perch. Her knees buckled and the straight lines of the door frame across the room wavered in shimmers of vertigo. She realized the creatures would be impervious to gunfire after the first shot had tunked into the dresser without causing so much as a bob of the demon's head. However, long years of love and dependence had given Karen an innate faith in Dan's ability to always do what needed to be done at the peak of any crisis. Now he was face down, perhaps seriously injured, probably drowning in a substance which only hell could produce. At that moment Ronni fainted and slumped against Karen's arm. She came very close to falling off the dresser.

Karen grabbed frantically for the neck of her sweater and just managed to yank Ronni back to an inert and precarious position on the dresser's edge. Her fainting served a purpose, however, triggering Karen to remember some of the things Ronni had said Friday night about demons and Satan. Without a doubt what was happening in their bedroom was of the devil and his minions. Without hesitation she sprang out over the heads of the demonic trio and landed with a

flounce on the foot of the bed. Quickly she scrambled to the head and reached out toward a bedside table.

With her leap, the trio had turned toward the bed and were splish-splashing in her direction, their treble sound of glee continuing to shred the fetid air. When they sensed the object of her grasp, however, they stopped short and then began backpedaling toward the far wall. When Kevin and Kellie were born, a local church--maybe the one Jason had pastored--had given them a large, white family Bible. Her perusal of its contents had never gone beyond the ornately embellished family record pages in the front where she had dutifully recorded the twins' birth and the rest of the significant family data.

The Bible was large and heavy. In its ornamental position on the table beside the bed, it was almost beyond her one-handed grasp. By putting her left hand down on the bed rail for support and by stretching and reaching as far as she could with her right arm, she was just able to touch the wide scarlet ribbon which protruded about six inches from the gilt-edged pages. Frantically she wrapped the surplus bookmark ribbon around the fingers of her right hand and braced for a jerk. She could take a little more time now because the creatures were cowering silently in the far corner of the room, watching her intently.

Karen took a deep breath, held it for a second or two, and then jerked as hard as she could. Fortunately the Bible had been lying on a small lace doily and it snapped off the polished tabletop and landed neatly on the edge of the bed. The ribbon marker had been inserted between pages near the back of the book. Blindly she opened the Bible to that point and held it aloft in the direction of the now-docile threesome.

Immediately the air was punctured with howls of fear instead of glee. No longer cavorting and gamboling, the three were down in the slime, curled into fetal positions. Their faces were covered with baby fingers as they peeped furtively at the book Karen was thrusting toward them. Karen's hands were shaking so badly she had trouble holding up the heavy Bible. But she clenched her teeth and forced herself to keep the book opened to the ribbon marker and aimed in the direction of the shrinking trio in the corner. Her fingers and wrists started to grow numb but she kept the big, white Bible in position, hoping desperately that some power in it that was beyond her understanding would produce a miracle.

Chapter 26: The Lamb

Liverpool

Monday, January 6, 2:00 A.M.

Karen, Dan, Ronni, and Lacey sat around the Marlow's kitchen table, somberly sipping cups of hot chocolate. The big, white Bible from the bedroom was lying in front of Ronni, opened to the page marked by the scarlet ribbon. Ronni stared intently at a full-page colored illustration, one of many found throughout the ornate book. With a forefinger she gently traced the outline of the figure that was prominently portrayed in the picture. She closed her eyes for a few seconds and then looked at Dan and Karen.

"That's the answer," she said slowly but with conviction. "That has to be the answer."

The other women were puzzled but Dan was irritated. "I know, I know. When Karen showed the Bible to those creeps up there, they just turned tail and ran like scared rabbits. The real question is why. What made them run?"

Ronni compressed her lips and Karen's eyes followed Dan as he left the room. "Go as easy as you can, Ronni," she said softly. "Dan's having a hard time with this God and Bible business, and I think that sprain is hurting more than he wants us to know. Maybe we ought to wait--"

"Sorry ladies," Dan said gruffly. "The last couple days have worn my nerves down to bloody stumps. But I do want to talk this thing out tonight, late as it is. I'm not going to close my eyes again until I know all there is to know about what we four just went through up there. Go ahead, Ronni. We may not understand it or even believe it but we will listen to what you have to say."

Ronni nodded and began talking again, in a soft but firm voice. "I'm convinced that a lot of the answers to our questions from here on in are going to be found in the last book of the Bible, the book of Revelation. This book was given to St. John in his later years through a vision from God. It's full of symbolism about what things will be like when we get down to the end of this age. Many Bible scholars have found all those symbols and visions very difficult to understand. Jason always said, though, that you can understand Revelation a lot easier if you can learn what the symbols represent.

"The most important symbol in the whole book is the 'Lamb of God'. John used that term in the first chapter of his Gospel when he was describing the baptism

of Jesus by another John, John the Baptist. In verse 29, he quotes John the Baptist as saying, 'Look, the **Lamb of God**, who takes away the sin of the world!' So, all through the book of Revelation, when Jesus is described in His place in heaven, he is referred to as the Lamb. In fact, the term Lamb, with a capital "L", is used in this way twenty-seven times. The Greek word actually means 'little lamb.'"

"Now look at this picture. the one Karen showed upstairs." Ronni pushed the open Bible to the middle of the table and everyone moved in for a closer view.

"That's strange, almost repulsive," Dan started to say, but Karen silenced him visually before he could say more.

"This particular artist chose to portray the Lamb in the literal symbolism of chapter five of Revelation." Ronni explained carefully. "Look at verse 6. 'And I beheld, and lo, in the midst of the throne and of the four beasts, and in the midst of the elders, stood a Lamb as it had been slain, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven Spirits of God sent forth into all the earth.'"

"I'll say one thing for whoever the artist is," Dan said in slightly better humor. "He got it all in." They all gazed intently at the four-color lithograph that had been rendered in a very representational style. A white lamb was shown standing on a marble dais in a shaft of bright light. Although the background was in shadow, the characteristics of the animal were very distinct. A crimson slash as though from a knife wound traversed his throat and blood flowed freely from the cut, dripping from his woolly white coat to the marble slab on which he stood. His head bore the general outline of a lamb's head but the features were beyond anything the people around the table had ever seen. Seven sharp and shining horns rose from the softness of his head, starting on the bridge of his nose and continuing up between his ears to the nape of his neck. Between each horn was an eye with the seventh eye looking directly backward.

"Are creatures like this actually up in heaven?" Lacey asked a little tentatively after they had all stared at the painting for several moments.

"The book of Revelation describes several different creatures and beasts but it's best to think of them as symbols instead of actual animals. And sometimes, the symbols are presented as a composite, as I read there in verse 6.

"In this picture, the Lamb represents Jesus Christ. The wound on his neck is the same kind of wound the priests in the Old Testament days gave the lambs that were to die on the altar of God as the sin sacrifice for the people. The number seven

is significant because that number represents Divine perfection. Seven horns and seven eyes." Ronni paused a few seconds for questions and as usual, Dan had one.

"What gets me is the fact a lamb, a little woolly, white lamb is equipped with a set of seven horns. Those things look lethal. They don't seem to fit the personality of your basic lamb."

Sarcasm had crept back into Dan's voice but Ronni ignored it. "Unless I miss my guess," she responded a little briskly, "those lethal, incongruous horns are exactly what frightened the three demons upstairs a while ago. To God's children, Jesus Christ is a woolly lamb. But to Satan and his demons, Jesus is a set of seven sharp horns."

Karen's mind returned to the scene in the bedroom and she was again thrusting the bulky Bible in the direction of the demon trio on the floor. They whined, and whimpered. They curled into such tight fetal balls all individual characteristics were lost. Then, they disappeared. Right through the white baseboard and flowered wallpaper.

When they went, all the foulness went with them. The vile bilge on the floor flowed right into the wall at the same point the demons had disappeared, almost the way a television picture fades into a bright dot when the set is turned off. Karen sniffed tentatively, afraid to inhale more of that fetid stench than was necessary to provide enough oxygen to sustain life. However, her nose detected nothing but the familiar montage of cedar, furniture polish, Dan's Old Spice, and her Charlie.

Then she heard a movement on the floor behind her and she whirled quickly on the bed. Dan was on his hands and knees, shaking his head groggily. He sat up on his hunkers and gingerly explored a goose egg on the back of his head, his fingers coming away with a little blood.

In the end, Dan's injuries and the five bullet holes in the dresser were the only detectable evidences of what the four had experienced during the last several minutes. The demons were gone, the slime was gone, the stench was gone, even the abysmal roaring was gone.

On the edge of the long dresser, Ronni had sat up and rubbed her eyes sleepily, as though waking from a nap. Lacey had already hopped down to the floor and was getting ready to help Ronni get down, too.

Karen hadn't been able to believe it! She leaned over the edge of the bed and stared at the floor. Seconds ago that floor had been covered with several inches of a

ghoulish slurry, the memory of which caused her stomach to churn. Now, all she saw was a few specks of lint on the braided accent rugs and a stray sock over by Dan's chest of drawers. Otherwise, the floor was spotless.

She couldn't understand it then and she couldn't understand it now, seven horns or no seven horns. Her act of grabbing the Bible and holding it up had been born of desperation rather than faith. How could a picture in a book, even if that book was the Bible, have that kind of power over that much evil?

"Karen, what did it feel like when you held up the Bible and the demons started to retreat?" Ronni asked earnestly. "Did it feel like power was flowing through you or anything like that?"

Karen's mind snapped back to live action. "Not really. I was so scared, bombed out of my mind with fear ... I guess the only thing I can remember is that my wrists started to tingle. Weight of that big Bible, probably," and she looked at the large book ruefully.

Ronni thought for a moment and turned back to Dan. "Let me explain a bit about the symbolism of those seven horns. You're right. Lethal horns and a woolly white lamb don't go together in the natural sense. But you have to remember that the description of the Lamb with a capital "L" that we just read here in chapter five is written in the language of Biblical symbolism. If the Lamb is Jesus Christ and the wound is a symbol of His sacrificial death, then we have to think about why He died.

Quickly Ronni reviewed Friday night's discussion about God's plan for the salvation of sinners through the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ.

"I get it!" exclaimed Lacey with animation. Her grasp of the metaphysical was superior to either of the Marlows and now her eyes were shining with comprehension. She was really something of a closet Bible reader and much of what she had read over the years but not absorbed had suddenly fallen into place. "Jesus Christ came to earth to die as the once-and-for-all sin sacrifice. And when He did that, it fouled up Satan's plan to destroy the human race that he had been working on since Adam and Eve. And I bet the seven horns on the Lamb show that He, the Lamb of God, is able to fight against Satan and win. Is that right?"

"Spoken like a true evangelical," Ronni said to Lacey with a mixture of amusement at her enthusiasm and relief that someone was getting the message.

Karen looked intrigued. "If this Lamb of God can use His horns to fight against Satan, was that a temporary or a permanent victory we just scored upstairs?"

"My guess is neither," Ronni responded wearily. "I think what we saw upstairs was a tactical error on the part of the demons. For the next seven years or so, Satan and his demons are going to have a pretty free rein on the earth. They'll have nothing to fear from either the real Lamb or a picture of Him, by God's own choice, of course. Based on the contents of Revelation, it seems like this planet and its inhabitants will go through a living hell before we get to the bottom line, as it were. Normally when I read a book I don't like to turn to the back and see how it ends before I've read the whole thing. We need an exception to that rule now. I want to show you what St. John wrote about Satan at the end of all time as we know it." Ronni flipped back several pages and then pointed to a passage.

"This is chapter 20. The first part talks about how God will lock Satan in the bottomless pit and give the earth a thousand years of peace. After this Millennium, as the evangelicals called it, Satan will be released and will go right back to doing what he has always tried to do, overthrow God and His followers.

"The final confrontation between God and Satan is known as the Battle of Gog and Magog. Here's the way it is described in verse 9 of chapter of 20. 'And they went up on the breadth of the earth and compassed the camp of the saints about, and the beloved city: and fire came down from God out of heaven, and devoured them.' Now, that bottom line, in verse 10.

'And the devil that deceived them was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and false prophet are, and shall be tormented day and night for ever and ever.'"

"I'm half ashamed to admit it," Dan said gruffly, "but that makes the chills run up and down my back." Karen and Lacey agreed wordlessly.

Dan rose and paced back and forth in front of the sink, hands jammed in his hip pockets and chin down on his chest. "I have a lot of questions which still haven't been answered but there are two which I have to ask before I go to bed tonight, or this morning, rather. First, are demons or Satan or whatever, are they keying on us, or is that just my imagination? And second, how come there's no evidence of those demons having been upstairs tonight? The stench is completely gone. You'd think something like that would last in the house for days, especially in winter. And then that slop. When I came to, the floor was completely clean and dry.

Weren't those things happening up there except in our minds? Were we in some kind of a spiritual twilight zone?"

Lacey perked up. "The same kind of thing happened to me at Gettysburg Friday. One second it was January and there was snow on the ground. The next second, it was like June with green grass and warm breezes. Then it was January again. Was that the same kind of thing?"

Ronni was feeling the effects of their ordeal and the late hour but she answered quickly, before Karen could intervene on her behalf. "I have no more idea of how some of this is happening than any of you do. We're coming in contact with powers and forces which none of us has ever experienced before, or even read about, for that matter. Let me try to answer your first question though, Dan.

"Satan has countless demons at his command and he could be doing this kind of thing all over the world, at the same time, if he chose to do so. But did you notice the forms of those demons up there? Up until the time I passed out I was completely aware of what was going on. I tell you, each of those demons was a carbon copy of what Sunny looked like the day he had his picture taken, the day he died."

"But how could that be," Dan said. You told us all babies went in the rapture, just like ... just like Kevin and Kellie." He turned hastily in the pretense of blowing his nose.

"I said copies, Dan exact copies. Not the real Sunny. Satan always has been an impersonator. How do you think those séances used to work? When people supposedly came back from the dead? That was Satan, sending his demons to appear with the voice or appearance of someone's dead loved one. Anyway, I'm convinced that whole operation up there was to harass me because of my news conference at the White House. You all were involved because you were in the same general area. And it probably isn't over yet, not by a long shot."

"It's over for tonight," Karen said with a yawn. "I've had it. Dan?"

"Me too, I guess," Dan said with some reluctance. "Do you think we'll be safe?" he asked Ronni.

"I don't know. But I really think I should go home to my own bed. And if I'm out of this house, I'm pretty sure--"

"No way!" Karen responded without hesitation. "You're staying here with us, just like we planned earlier this evening."

"I agree," said Dan as he moved to Karen's side and put his left arm around her waist. "We've been in this thing together since Friday evening and from what I've been hearing tonight, we may all need each other more than any of us realize."

Ronni sighed. "I guess I'm too exhausted to argue. Let me make a rather strange suggestion, though. I think we ought to all sleep in the same room, with the light on, and with this Bible in a prominent spot, opened to the picture of the Lamb. If it fooled them before, it may fool them again."

"I'm in!" said the effervescent Lacey. "Be my first pajama party in over ten years."

The Marlows nodded in agreement and Karen began making plans to pull the twins' mattresses across the hall and put them in a vacant corner of the master bedroom.

Karen rinsed the cups, Dan checked the back door, and they followed Ronni and Lacey down the hall toward the stairway.

Dan broke a habit of thirty years and left all the downstairs lights burning brightly, including both porch lights.

Chapter 27: The Beginning of The End

Liverpool

Monday, January 6, 3:00 A.M.

Both Ronni and Lacey had been sleeping for over thirty minutes but the Marlows were still awake. Karen murmured from her position in the crook of Dan's arm. "What do you think. Is there a future for us in this world, or what's left of it?"

"There's a lot left of it, but I don't know what to think or even where to start thinking when it comes to the future. I know one thing, though. Kevin and Kellie will never be out of my thoughts."

"Agreed." Even in the middle of all that hell we had in here tonight, the thought flashed through my mind of how it was back when the twins were toddlers and playing on the floor in this very room. Life has to go on, I guess. I still can't believe we'll never see them again, though. In this life or some other life somewhere. What do you think?"

"Mmmmm ... Say, with all the confusion, I forgot to ask if you have to go to work tomorrow."

"No school Monday or Tuesday. The superintendent will put an announcement on the radio sometime Tuesday about what we'll be doing the rest of the week. It's hard to even think about school when the twins aren't a part of it. School has to go on for the rest of the kids, I guess. Did you hear Ronni say anything about whether children will be born, now that this rapture has taken place?"

"Not really. Let's ask her tomorrow."

"If people do keep having children, I guess I'll still have a career. Old Finsterbush will be ready to retire in about five years. Maybe I'll take some courses toward my superintendent's letter of eligibility. How does that sound? Karen Marlow, Superintendent of Schools?"

"Hey, Dan, if people can still have children, what about us. Do you want to try again?"

Dan was sound asleep.

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