



CHAPTER ONE

His face is lost in shadow, dark against the backdrop of the moon-lit window. For all of that, I can see him well in the Light. After all of the eons I marvel at the miracle. When I look at him, I see George Alfred, yes, but I also see someone else. I look at him, this man, and I see him as the Father does. The face of Jesus; it can be no other, yet it is, for George is still there.

I've known this man George from the instant of his conception. There are gaps in my memory of him, but that is as it should be, for what the Father forgets I have no need to remember. Life has been hard for George in many ways. His father was an alcoholic, hell-bent and demon-led. He beat his wife and children without mercy, whether he was drunk or sober. God was merciful; the man died with a knife between his ribs after another drunken brawl. George's mother, Letitia, bore no malice against her husband, and she would tolerate none in her children. It was from her that George learned about Jesus, and her prayers sustained him through all of the years of turmoil before and after Leroy Alfred's death.

I was there when George knelt at a well-worn altar and invited the Lord in. From that day to this I've seen the image of Jesus on his face, more at some times than others but still there. My favorite times are the ones in the company of saints, with angels all around and Jesus in the center. These days there are fewer saints around, for the times are evil, but the Lord always has His people.

Right now there are lines of concern on George's weather-worn face. He looks at the figure lying silent on the bed, and from time to time the dim light catches the glimmer of a tear. The sleeping woman is his wife of fifteen years, Betsey, the love of his youth. He weeps now out of despair, his ears closed to comfort. She is close to death, more of a problem for him than for her. The disease that has consumed her is beyond repair, the doctors say, and he believes all the prayers lifted for her have been in vain. I hear the gentle voice of the Spirit whispering to him urgently, but he will not hear.

The voice is directed now to me. *He cannot hear me. You must give him comfort, but also a warning. He faces great danger, even now. He must say good-bye; she has already gone. There is no time even to bury her body. Tell him to go to my servant Marvin Reynolds. I will speak to him there.*

I step into his understanding. He has never seen me before, not as I really am. His face is transformed from concern to shock and disbelief, but that is gone almost as soon as it came. He smiles, and the Light grows brighter.

"You're an angel, aren't you, my guardian." He makes it a statement, rather than a question.

"Yes, George, I am. Sometimes you're a little hard to reach and I have to deliver a message in person. Remember that man at the hospital last week?"

"The Lord wants me to let you know that Betsey is with Him. Don't mourn for her still. A little later you'll understand why she left you; she knows." A question forms on his lips. "Yes, George – she is dead. Her work is done, but yours remains unfinished. You cannot stay here longer, even to bury her." He starts to protest, touches her face, shaking his head in denial. "That's only her shell. I know you think it's cruel, but you can't wait to do that. You're in great danger. You *must* leave now, while there's still time. Go to Marvin's house; you'll be safe there until the Lord tells you what to do."

“But why can’t I –”

“Tell her flesh good-bye, George, if you must, but please hurry. They’re coming already, and the Lord will not permit me to stop them.”

He hesitates a brief instant, then walks to the bed, stoops, and kisses the still form, once his joy of living after the Lord. I step back out of his knowing, and he leaves the room without looking back.

Outside, the demons dance on the lawn. They spit and jeer as we walk out to the dimly-lit street. Betsey’s angel left when she did, but the Lord remains with us, and the demons dare not come too close. I recognize them all; once we joined in chorus of praise before the Throne, but now they reek of filth and decay. The Lord allows their blasphemy, but it will end soon. They part like the sea to let us pass. From down the street, only a few blocks away, I hear the loud voices and ugly laughter of the ones called to do Satan’s bidding. George hears them, too, and walks more quickly away from the house he loved so well.

Seventh Street ends abruptly at a once-busy thoroughfare the local citizens proudly call *the* Boulevard, a street laid out on top of what used to be a railroad bed. George waits anxiously for a car to speed by, then runs across the street to a steep exit ramp on the other side. At the top of the ramp, three narrow streets converge. George begins to walk up the one that climbs steeply to the right. From below comes the sound of crashing glass and the first glint of light from a new-lit fire reaches our eyes. The demons are doing their work and the hosts of hell rejoice. George stops, looks, then turns his eyes quickly away and moves more rapidly up the hill. At the top, he turns left, as he so often has before.

Martha Reynolds opens the door to his urgent knock. Her smile quickly disappears when she sees the ashen look on George’s face. She ushers him quickly inside.

“Marve, come here, quick. Something’s happened with George and Betsey.”

I always like being with Marvin Reynolds. He has more of the Lord’s joy about him than most people I’ve known this side of glory. On entering the room he immediately comes to George and embraces him. For many minutes no one says anything. Marvin finally pulls away, holding George firmly by the shoulders at arm’s length. The Spirit whispers to him, and his eyes grow troubled.

“Betsey’s dead, isn’t she?”

George nods dumbly, unable to find words. Marvin embraces him again, and the two of them cry together. The two guardians of the house, whom I know well, stand solemnly aside. We have all seen human grief many times, but it never ceases to touch us, even though we know that the object of the grief is with the Lord. Martha, too, stands aside, unwilling to interfere in so private a moment.

Later, after the tears, George relates the rest of his story, including my appearance to him and the destruction of his house. By then they are seated together in Marvin’s living room, sharing in that human ritual of talking over food and drink. I can understand that sense of communion, as the Lord does. He shared in it Himself. Finally, when the food is eaten and the dishes put away, they turn to the Lord in prayer.

Another thing that always amazes me is to hear people speaking in the languages of angels, spoken usually without their having any understanding of what is said. George received the gift many years before right in this room, in the presence of these same two people and his wife. Some of the very words of praise I myself have uttered before the throne I hear come from George’s mouth at the prompting of the Spirit within. I hear Marvin utter signs and warnings of what is to come. The Lord impresses on his mind the meaning of what he speaks in an unknown tongue. When they all stop, he interprets the message with that voice of authority that comes only from the Lord.

“The Lord says, ‘I have called you to be my voice that those who are lost may hear and turn aside from destruction. Do not fear those who stand in the way, for I have overcome them. You will carry my word to many places. You will face persecution and beatings and hunger, but in all of that I will sustain you. The world has been judged and found wanting. He who is Antichrist is now fully come. Those who are faithful will be saved.’”

There is a long silence. Each of the three sits lost in their own thoughts. I find Tamra’s eyes and we smile together. Tamra has been with Marvin for many years as humans figure time. We have worked closely together often in times past. Gabeth, Martha’s guardian, I know, but this is our first shared task outside the heavenlies. He responds with a smile of his own.

George breaks the silence finally. “When, Marve? When does all of this start, and why me?”

“Soon, I think, brother, but not for a few days anyway. Why you? Why not? The Lord has equipped you with everything you need. Your wife is gone, your house is gone, your business is bankrupt – there’s nothing to hold you here. The Lord doesn’t call someone He can’t use. Martha and I will miss you, yes, but neither of us wants to hold up the Lord’s work.”

I see the wheels of thought turning in George’s head as he nods slowly in agreement. “I’ve always believed the Lord had something for me to do out there, some time, but I just always assumed it would be with Betsey.... Sorry; it’s still too soon to accept the idea that she’s not here anymore. It’s all just too much, too soon. I need some time to think it all through, to pray it all through. Can I stay here tonight?”

“Why, George Alfred, I ought to spank you! After all the years you’ve known us and you have to ask a question like that! You know very well you can stay here with Marve and me as long as you want.”

He isn’t hard to convince and doesn’t mind the mild rebuke. Marvin takes him to an upstairs room which used to belong to one of his boys. He also finds some faded old pajamas for George, who takes them gratefully without noting their condition. Later, George kneels beside his bed and begins once more to pray. This time when the Spirit speaks to him he listens, I can tell, because his face lights up. I hear the Lord tell him to take courage and remain faithful. *If you continue to trust me, my son, I’ll be with you through the hard days ahead. You don’t have to worry about what to say or do. When the time comes, you’ll know.*

George knows peace after that. He lies down to rest and goes to sleep immediately. I stay at my post, worshipping the Lord as I wait out the hours of the night. For me there is no darkness, for the Light of the Lord is there.

The next morning, George rises early. After breakfast, he and Marve walk down the hill to where his house used to be. Marve doesn’t want George to go, but he insists. As they expected, there is nothing left but smoking ruins. George turns quickly away, tears flowing down his face once more. Silently Marve puts his arm around the other man’s shoulder and leads him away.

Hoping to do some shopping before the lines get too long, they walk back down the Boulevard to a nearby supermarket. Food is scarce, and the store manager will only admit a few people at a time. Even though it is only a little after 7:00, the lines have already formed. George and Marvin take their place at the end and wait. The line gradually gets longer. Everything is peaceful for a while, but Tamra and I suddenly sense trouble is near.

Two burly, dirty men with mean faces enter the parking area near the store. Each of them has a cloud of buzzing imps about him. A demonic presence so totally consumes one of them that we cannot tell what the man himself really looks like. The demon who possesses the man has all the appearance of a toad, covered with green slime. The demon squirms restlessly when he sees us, then jeers. When the man’s mouth opens, it is the demon who speaks.

“Hey, niggers, get out of the way. Let some real men in there!”

I position myself between the demon and George. Although he weighs perhaps fifty pounds less than the bully, George shows no sign of fear. I see the Lord in him now even more clearly than usual. “Excuse me, sir, but I think your place is at the end of the line. Some of us have been waiting here a long time.”

The man’s face, or the demon’s, contorts with rage. He steps up to George and grabs him by the collar. The stench of whiskey is so strong that George draws his head back involuntarily. “Look here, nigger, I don’t put up with that from anyone, and *especially* not from a rotten *nigger*.”

“Let him be, Jake,” someone says quietly from behind. Jake whirls around, ready to strike out, then stops when he sees who’s talking. Sheriff Max Trundle is a big man, weighing at least 250 pounds. More than that, though, he carries with him an air of confident authority and restrained power. To back up all of this, he wears a big gun on his hip, and his hand rests on the holster. Jake is not afraid of the sheriff, but he has great respect for the gun. He begins to move his hand surreptitiously toward the inside of his jacket.

“Don’t try it, Jake. You, Junior, get over here with your boss. Now, both of you, over to the building, face the wall, put both hands on the wall above your heads and spread your legs. *Move!*”

Both of the men sullenly do as they are told. Max efficiently frisks them both, removing an assortment of knives and pistols. “All right, both of you, especially Jake. You’ve been causing problems in this town long enough. If I so much as *see you* in the city limits I’ll lock you up for ten years. Now *get*, both of you!”

They do as they’re told, but Jake mutters as he passes George, “I’ll get you for this, nigger, and that pig of a sheriff, too.” He leaves in a stream of obscenities. The people in the line applaud.

“Thanks, Max,” George says, stepping forward to take the sheriff’s hand.

“It’s the least I can do, George. Sorry about your house. By the time someone bothered calling me it was already gone. How’s Betsey?”

It’s not necessary for George to even answer; his face tells the story. Max grips his hand hard.

“I’m real sorry, George, but I know she suffered a lot these last few years. She’s better off now, but I know it hurts. I still remember what it was like when I lost Louise.”

For all the noisy approval from the people, I can see what they really respect is the use of force and the efficiency with which it is applied. The place is full of demons, and there is no sympathy there for either George or his race. No one would have complained or cared if George and Marve both had been beaten to a pulp or killed.

A short time later the doors of the store open and the line begins to creep forward. Those waiting talk much of high prices and scarcity. With so much drought and turmoil in the food-producing places, the days of plenty have passed. These people are fortunate; in many places there is no food to be had at any price. The Black Horseman is loose in the land.

Marvin makes his meager purchases and returns home with George. The rest of the day slips by peacefully.

The following days flow like water. The church where Marve preached for many years is burned to the ground, as so many others have been. Christians continue to disappear and turn up dead. Sheriff Trundle attempts to stop the killings, but he is forced from office by others content with things as they are. Jake Stein and his gang return again and again, terrorizing anyone they happen not to like. They search unsuccessfully

for George. The Lord has placed a hedge of protection around the houses on the hill and Jake's thugs are strangely afraid to go there. I often look up and down the street to see the double line of warrior angels the Lord placed about his people.

The church meets in Marve's living room. Many familiar faces are missing and those left are increasingly the old who stay close to their homes. Simple tasks like going to buy food have become very dangerous and complicated. The Lord is faithful; He multiplies the food supplies. Though there is never an abundance, there is always enough.

This morning begins like so many others. Marvin conducted a church service the night before, and everyone is cheerful this morning. George sits in the kitchen with Marvin and Martha, sharing the morning meal. As no one has a job to go to, no tasks to do, they linger into the mid morning. The sun shines brightly; no one can remember when it last rained.

Suddenly, the day loses some of its brilliance; the sun's glow changes from yellow to red. Darkness falls at ten in the morning. Curious and a bit fearful, all three rise from the table and move quickly to the front porch. The sun has turned blood red and grows darker by the second. I know what is about to happen. The Spirit whispers urgently to each of them. *Stay inside! You're safe here.*

Marvin hears the voice clearly. "We'll stay where we are. There's going to be a bad earthquake, but the Lord says we're safe here."

From deep inside the bowels of the earth comes a rumble like thunder. As blackness covers the face of the sun, the sound grows and grows. They cover their ears in the roaring, but nothing comes to them but the sound.

Through the eyes of the Lord I catch a vision of what happens in the rest of the town. People run from houses and shops in terror, trampling each other in their mad clamor to escape. Like waves crashing over a rock-ribbed beach, the shock of the earth's convulsions reaches the surface. Buildings crumble like sand castles in some places, while others sit undisturbed. Two of the three tall bank buildings in the town shudder violently, sway, and come toppling down in a cascade of steel, glass and concrete. Inside the jail, built on a river fill, the new sheriff cowers at his desk, screaming in terror, unable to move. A giant chasm opens beneath the building and it falls inside. The man's scream rises in pitch until it can no longer be heard. His attending demons scramble away as the earth closes in on the building. It crumples like paper in a giant hand.

At the south end of town a huge concrete retaining wall holds the river back from its natural course. Giant cracks travel up the wall as it shakes with the same violence as the earth beneath. Fissures appear and water siphons through from the river. The wall suddenly crumbles into dust. The water level is low, but what remains of the river's stream gushes over once-familiar paths. Much of it is lost in chasms which open and close along its path, but some rushes down to surround and overflow the remains of the buildings which stood on the fill only moments before.

Over half the buildings in the town lie in ruins. Great mounds of rock cover what has always been called the bypass. The pavement has dropped in places and in others the asphalt has buckled up into fantastic contorted shapes. Some sections of pavement and some buildings, like the jail, have been swallowed up altogether.

After five terrifying minutes, the earth shudders and grows still.

Many of the buildings that remain are badly damaged and will topple with the first after shock. Falling rubble kills hundreds of people, both inside and out. The survivors have injuries ranging from minor cuts to broken bones and severed limbs. I see one man sitting in the rubble of his house staring stupidly at the stump of what was once his arm. Beside him, her head bent at an impossible angle, lies a woman who must have been his wife.

As the dust settles a chorus of cursing rises from the town. Mercifully, the veil is drawn, and I hear and see no more. In the midst of so much death and destruction they remain unrepentant. Prophecy is once more fulfilled.

When the last rumble fades away, the three people leave the house and walk down the hill toward town. They don't go far. As soon as they can see the extent of the destruction they stop, shock written on each face. From this vantage it seems even worse than what the Lord showed me before. A pall of dust still hangs over the ruined buildings and crumpled streets. The sound of moans, screams and curses can be heard clearly from here. Marvin has an impulse to go down and help, but the Spirit restrains him. This is an act of judgment, not an accident of nature.

Unable to bear the sights and sounds, they turn to leave. Others are coming down as they return, and Marvin stops long enough to warn them not to go into town. The three walk silently home. Once more inside, they sit without speaking. No one wants to voice the thoughts that so trouble each of them.

None of the houses in Marvin's neighborhood sustained damage. The people returning from their walk down the hill file one by one and two by two into Marvin's living room. When they are all assembled, they kneel with one accord to pray. After praying with their inner voices for a while they begin one by one to lift thanks and praise to God for His mercy. Angels stand shoulder to shoulder around the house, but there in the midst of the flock is Jesus. One woman opens her eyes and sees him. She cries out in exultant joy, and the others look to see. They fall together in worship and exaltation at the Master's feet.

My little flock, don't be afraid. The world is being judged, not you. You are the Redeemed; I have already paid the price for you. I have chosen one of you to carry the message of repentance and salvation to the lost. A few days from now you must send him out into the world, but wait for the fires to pass. All of you will suffer for my sake, but all who endure will wear a victor's crown. Abide in me.

He remains in my sight, but steps out of theirs. The rejoicing begins anew. Martha begins singing in an angelic tongue and soon a chorus heard at times around the throne of Heaven fills the room. We join the singing as well, and the Lord allows them to hear all the blended voices. None of them has ever shared in such an experience of total adoration and praise before, and they will not again until they share in the wedding feast of the Lamb.

No one asks who they will send out, because they all know. George rejoices with the rest, no hint in his face of any worry about what will come later. When the rejoicing finally subsides, some hours later, they all crowd around him. It's still not time for him to leave, but they lay hands on him or on someone else who is touching him and proceed to lift him up earnestly to the Lord. Their prayers move George to the point of tears.

Some talk now, after the prayers are finished, about the Lord's mention of "the fires." Marvin points out, quite correctly, that one of the plagues that follows the great earthquake is that of hail and fire. The Spirit assures them once more that they have no need to fear, for they will be protected.

An angry buzz passes through the town below that grows louder each day. Many mumble darkly of a conspiracy among the "Christian cult" to curse the planet. This, people are saying, is causing all of the disasters befalling the world. There is no more serious allegation than that someone is a Christian. It becomes a convenient way to get rid of enemies. Many Christians flee into the mountains, where they face roving gangs. Others stay clustered in their own tight little communities, where they have at least a temporary measure of safety. Marvin's little flock is more isolated than ever, unable to communicate even with other Christian groups in town. The earthquake has destroyed most remaining communication. There is no more phone service, not even a newspaper to turn to.

Cars full of jeering men frequently roar through the neighborhood, but they never stop. Sometimes they

throw rocks at anything that moves; always they throw curses. So far, though, the hedge of the Lord's protection remains unbroken. Apart from strained nerves and a few broken windows, the thugs do no damage.

On a clear night not long after the earthquake, George sits with Martha and Marvin on their front porch. They talk of small things, occurrences that make up the day-to-day. At times they speak of greater things, such as the fulfillment of prophecy. As she has for many years, Martha rests on the swing with her head cradled on her husband's shoulder. Suddenly she sits upright, startled.

"Look at the *sky*! What is that glow, up over the top of the hill?"

George gets up and walks out into the street to get a better look. He turns slowly back toward the porch. "The hills are burning. The fires have come."

Even as he speaks, they can see a line of flames top the ridge above the street. Held back by a force they cannot see, the fire burns a slow arc down the hill on either side of the little neighborhood, but comes no closer to them. Through the early hours of the night it spreads into what remains of the town below. The smoke is so thick and acrid that they are all forced inside. The fire burns through mounds of rubble and consumes much that the earthquake left, leaving unscathed pockets here and there. At one point an eerie calm falls over the night, and the three venture out of the house a few moments to see what new calamity has fallen.

Martha grabs her husband's arm and whispers urgently. "Look! I see clouds moving through the fire!" Like mountains they come, great towering behemoths with black bellies ready to burst open.

Once again a sound like thunder comes to their ears, but this time from the skies above rather than the earth beneath. Amidst the inferno of the firestorm they can hear an incessant booming, a pounding cacophony of breaking glass, battered metal and, of stone that rings like bell tones at the impact. Buildings left standing before, but weakened by the convulsions of the earth, collapse under the new assault. People running for safety from the fire, some into the river, are hopeless against baseball-sized chunks of ice. Yet, on the roof of Marvin's house nothing falls but rain, clearing away for a while the stench of smoke.

The terror continues unabated for hours. Morning reveals a landscape charred and blasted like a war zone. The survivors in town, and there are many, crawl from whatever shelter they have managed to find. Unrepentant, they once more curse God and the Christians they believe are responsible for their misery.

That evening, Marvin calls the church together. The time for the sending forth has come.