

J. EDGAR BEANPOLE
& FRIENDS

**NIGHT
WATCHER**

DICK BOHRER

Glory Press
West Linn, Oregon

*To the Rev. Joe Daniel Ruberg,
of Matthews Community Church,
Matthews, Indiana,
our much-loved pastor,
first reader of "Bean,"
encourager and dear friend*

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1.

Cyclone at Our Door

We guys were talking sports. The girls were talking about what their mothers would do if they shaved their heads.

It was Wednesday night prayer meeting, and we weren't paying much attention to the opening announcements. We'd already heard them twice on Sunday. It was a lot of the usual—the Dorcas Circle would meet for lunch on Thursday, and the Deacons would have a workday Saturday. The Missionary Society was going to . . .

And then our new pastor—he just graduated from seminary last June, and this was his first church—started in on his regular plea for "someone to volunteer to work with our young teenagers," as he always did in both services every Sunday and again on Wednesday night. Suddenly a nice looking couple stood up, and the man waved.

"Pastor, my wife and I would like to volunteer for that position. We love kids."

We sat up. All the foolishness going on in the back rows, where we were sitting, stopped.

"Did you hear that?"

"Who are *they*?"

"Where did they come from?"

"We hadn't had a youth sponsor in months. The last couple had gone to the mission field, and everybody else was too busy.

Pastor Gruber called the young couple up front. He was shaking their hands and talking to them and asking them questions.

"Hey, parties! We'll get to have parties again," someone said.

"Picnics!"

"Bowling nights!"

"Trips!"

The high school group in our church was booming, but our group—seventh, eighth, and ninth—was dead. Our parents wouldn't let us go out at night unless we had an adult along, but no adults had any time to go with us. We took it for a while because we didn't know what else to do. But when we got tired of sitting around and staring at the walls, a lot of guys started going to other churches.

Trouble is, no one seemed to notice.

Not that our folks didn't want us to have good times, you know, but—like I said—you can only stare at four walls so long when you don't have anything to do.

"Attention, everyone!" Pastor Gruber was talking. "Mr. and Mrs. David Eggleston are volunteering to sponsor our younger youth group. They've moved to Sunny Hills only recently, and they want to join our church."

"Yay!" all of us in the back rows shouted. "Whoopee!" "Yahoo!"

"We'll hear more about the Egglestons in the Sunday morning service. But, now, everyone please turn in your hymnbooks to page two forty-four. Ladies? Jesse?"

He turned to the mothers who were playing the piano and organ and nodded to the songleader, Mr. Jones, who really loved to sing and loved to get others to sing with him. But he

could never get a peep out of us.

Boy, did we surprise him. We all sat on the edges of our pews and sang for all we were worth. We were happy. We were finally getting sponsors for our youth group. We hadn't sung in a service in months—not like this.

"There is power, power,
Wonder-working power
In the blood
Of the Lamb.
There is power, power,
Wonder-working power
In the precious blood
Of the Lamb."

We were grinning and nodding to one another. Things were going to be different around old Maranatha Church! Pastor had caught our enthusiasm, and he was smiling from ear-to-ear. Everybody in the congregation seemed to feel it too. Now maybe we could get some of the kids that had moved away to come back.

My eyes swept past the Egglestons as I looked around the church. Then I looked at them again. They weren't singing. Their mouths were tight lines, and they were sitting very still.

I nudged Shirley Donohue sitting next to me and nodded in their direction.

"So?"

"They're not singing."

"So what?"

I didn't know. It was one of those things that seemed out of sync. It was a little thing, but when little things don't make sense, that's when I begin to stand back and watch.

Well, we had the offering and then the special music. One of the ninth grade girls, Kari, took the microphone out of its

bracket and turned on her tape deck. She fluffed her blonde hair and stood up tall just as her music teacher at school told her to do. She was a good looker, I'll tell you.

"I'd like to dedicate this to Mr. and Mrs. David Eggleston," she said as the music came on.

We all cheered.

And could she sing. I'd never heard the song before, but she sang it for all she was worth. She kept looking at the Egglestons the whole time, and Mr. Eggleston really liked it. He was smiling back. But his wife still had that thin line of a mouth. I guess Kari didn't give her too much of a thrill.

But the Mrs. was smiling after the service when all of us "young people" crowded around her and her husband. We introduced ourselves. Some of us were looking for our parents so we could invite these people home for Sunday dinner when the pastor's wife came up.

"Now don't let these kids monopolize you, Mrs. Eggleston. Pastor and I would like to have you come to dinner Friday night. It'll give us a better chance to get acquainted with—"

"Thank you, Mrs. Gruber, we'd love to. But we're committed for Friday night," Mr. Eggleston said.

"But could we have a rain check?" Mrs. Eggleston asked.

"Of course, you can have a rain check. But my husband does want to speak to you a moment before you get away." And, as she moved away, she said, "And don't you guys and gals hold them up now."

"When can we have our first meeting?" Kari said. "We haven't had a meeting since"—she shook out her blonde hair—"since a whole year ago. And we can't wait to get started—specially with a handsome man—and his wife—his pretty wife—coming to—" She became flustered. We all laughed. That's Kari.

"Well, that'll be up to the pastor, I guess, Kari," Mr. Eggleston said. He put his arm around her as he said it and gave her a hug. She thought it was wonderful, but I didn't. I

wasn't brought up that way. In my book, it's good for a man not to touch a woman that's not his wife. I'll only do it if she's injured or hysterical, or—laugh here —if my public insists.

Mrs. Eggleston didn't like it either, but you couldn't tell if you weren't watching closely. Which I was. That's just the way I am, I guess. I'm not suspicious of everybody. I just listen, and I watch, and I think.

Well, Pastor Gruber took the Egglestons into our little prayer room for people who come forward and get saved. He talked to them for a few minutes, and then they all came out smiling.

We kids were bunched up, waiting. We wanted to start having meetings.

"Think you kids could get enough people together to begin Sunday night?" Pastor said.

"Could we! We sure could!" Kari said, smiling from ear to ear.

"Well, that settles it, then. Sunday night, it is."

"Oh, and I want to ask if we can bring along my wife's brother to help us out," Mr. Eggleston said. "He's a high school senior."

"Why, that would be perfectly fine," Pastor said.

"Who is it?" I asked. "Anyone I know?"

"It's Buddy Horner. He plays baseball. Do you know him?" Mr. Eggleston said.

I guess I looked surprised. "Does he have red hair?"

"Yes," Mrs. Eggleston said. "It runs in our family."

I'd heard of Buddy Horner at school. He didn't have a very good reputation from the little I knew.

I turned to Shirley. "Buddy Horner isn't much," I said in a low voice. "He gets in lots of trouble at school."

"So?" she said. "He's got problems. You got problems. I got problems. Maybe we can help him out. You know, be missionaries to the pagan."

"But he's coming in to teach us!"

"You're too late, Bean," she said. "Pastor seems to really like the Egglestons."

We looked over at them. They were laughing and talking like best friends.

"Well, we can watch," I said. "Watch and pray!"

We should have sounded the gale warning. We had a red-haired cyclone at our door, and we were going to let him in.

2.

Our First Meeting

OK, gang, let's begin with some singing." Buddy Horner had taken charge of the opening song service in our young people's meeting. He was acting as if he owned the place.

"Number thirty-two," someone called out.

"Naw, let's not sing out of these old fuddy-duddy hymnbooks. You know all those by heart. Let's sing some new songs. Have you heard this one?"

And he started singing without the piano.

"Hey, yo! Come alive.
Hey, yo! Come alive.
Hey, yo! Come alive.
Hey, yo! Come alive."

He was snapping his fingers and shuffling his feet in a kind of dance step.

"How do you do that business with your feet?" my friend Shirley asked.

"Oh, this? I don't know. It's a kind of two-step, I guess. I

just sort of go"—and he showed us—"this way and that way. See? It's easy. Do it with me. Everybody up.

We all got to our feet, and then he started in with his "Hey, yo! Come alive" routine. The kids really liked it. It was like dancing, like the stuff we saw on TV.

Then we had a second verse, "Hey, yo! Sing along." And a third verse, "Hey, yo! Pray around." And a fourth verse, "Hey, yo! Spirit come." He had us sing the verses over and over, and then he picked up the speed. The kids were waving their arms and bobbing up and down and shuffling their feet and having a ball.

I didn't like it. This wasn't a high school pep rally. This was church, and we needed to have respect.

And then he had Kari come up and sing it as a solo while the kids all hummed. She loved the attention. All the while, she kept making eyes at Buddy. She put her hand on his arm and then on his shoulder. If she'd had a microphone in her hand, she'd have looked like one of those night club singers you see on TV.

I didn't like it.

"OK, Dave, it's all yours," he said when we finished singing. He came down off the platform with Kari and sat next to her while Mr. Eggleston walked to the podium.

"Nice going, Buddy. You like that, guys? Let's give a round of cheers for old Buddy here."

Everybody cheered and whistled.

"Now we're going to have Bible memory. Every week we'll have a memory verse. Bible memory is very important, and we'll trust God to lead us to the verse She wants us to memorize."

He looked around. "Anyone got a Bible?"

Someone handed him one, and he let it fall open in his hand. He twirled his finger around in the air and dropped it down on a verse.

"Our verse for the week is from Job twenty-five, verse four:

'How then can man be justified with God? or how can he be clean that is born of a woman?'"

Then he made a face. "No, I don't like that one. Let's take one across the page. Job twenty-six thirteen. 'By his spirit he hath garnished the heavens; his hand hath formed the crooked serpent.' There, that's a good one."

He read it over and over. Then he had the kids repeat it after him. Pretty soon they had it memorized.

"If your parents ask you what it means, tell them that it has a special meaning just for you. They'll be glad you're memorizing God's Word, and so will She."

"Who are you talking about?" I asked him. "What's that She business?"

"Oh, He or She, Beanie. It doesn't make any difference. God is a spirit, and spirits are everywhere in the universe. A spirit isn't a he or a she. A spirit is a spirit, so it doesn't matter what we call it."

I had to say something. "But the Bible calls God a Him. We go by what the Bible says in this church. Don't we, guys?"

Some of them said, "Yeah." But it was a pretty faint "Yeah."

"Whatever, Beanie," Mr. Eggleston said with a wave of his hand. He made it sound as if it wasn't important. But it was.

I didn't like that "Beanie" business either. Not even my friends called me "Beanie."

"Now for our message tonight," he went on, "we're going to have testimonies from all of you. I want to get to know you better, and you all need to get to know one another better. Even though you've grown up together in this old church, you probably don't really know all that much about one another. So give us a short bio first."

That sounded reasonable to me. We'd always given testimonies in our church. Pastor Gruber had a testimony time every Sunday night during the service.

So we went around, up and down each row. Dave Eggleston stood at the platform sort of interviewing each one.

"Your name?"

"Shirley Donohue."

"Live near the church?"

"Nine thirty-four West Sixth Street."

"Phone number? Hey, guys, take this down now." She laughed. "Seven-four-seven-seven-nine-seven five."

"Whooooee!" Dave shouted, and a lot of guys whistled. "Grade in school, Shirley?"

"Ninth."

"Favorite color?"

"Red."

"Favorite food?"

"Lasagna—anything Italian."

"What do you want our group to do this year?"

"Parties. Lots of parties with lots of boys."

More whistles from the guys, and the girls all clapped.

"And your name was?"

"Shirley. Shirley Donohue."

"And the boy sitting next to you?"

"Bean Spencer."

"And your name once more?"

"Shirley Donohue."

"Bean. Shirley. Thank you, Shirley."

And then he went to the person on the other side of Shirley. He never did interview me. Then, when he got that person's name, he would come back and say, "Bean. Shirley. Lynn. Bob. Tom." He was getting everybody's name and trying to memorize them.

"Now, you guys are just as responsible as I am for these names. You say them with me." And then we'd all recite, "Bean. Shirley. Lynn. Bob. Tom."

When he'd finished going around the room, he had us recite the names in order. We stumbled on some. We discovered we'd been coming to church with kids we really didn't know.

"Now, it's my turn," Dave said.

We all cheered.

And then he went around the room, pointing at each person as he said both the name and something about each one. He ran up a perfect score. Everybody was really impressed.

"Now I don't know how much you do this here at old Maranatha, but the Bible says to confess your faults to one another so we can get right with the Lord," Dave said. "Tonight, I want you to use your testimony time to tell us what's bothering you about life. Maybe it's sin in your own life—something you're doing that you don't want to do, something you're thinking that maybe you shouldn't think. Maybe it's the hypocrisy of some of the older people in the church. Maybe it's an injustice—they've denied you something that is your right to have. Maybe you've seen them display the seven deadly sins of pride or envy or lust or wrath or anger or greed or sloth. That 'sloth' means laziness. Whatever it is, we can help and comfort one another if we know about it. So, while we hum our new song, let's think about what we'll say and then let's say it one by one."

I didn't know why, but this seemed bad. I stood up. "I don't think we ought to do this."

"Sit down, Beanie," someone called out.

"Yeah, sit down."

"This is fun."

"Go bury your head."

I sat down, and they started in. They hummed that stupid song, and then they started to repeat all the gossip they'd ever heard in the church. They said things that were true, but they said a lot of things that were just rumor. They didn't tell much that was good, I'll tell you. They told stuff that was private and wicked and mean.

And they loved doing it.

I was mad. I turned around to see what Mrs. Eggleston in

the back row was thinking about all of this. She was taking notes!

I stood up and pointed to her. "Look! She's taking notes."

She tried to hide the notebook she was writing in. And then she seemed to get control of herself.

"I was not taking notes. I was writing a letter to my mother."

"Let me see," I said.

"Sit down, Beanie," Mr. Eggleston said. "That's none of your business." He looked at his watch. "Well, kids, we're coming to the end of our time together. Let's call it a night. Don't forget our barbecue Wednesday night at our house, one-one-one-five East Helen Street. Just bring yourselves."

"But that's prayer meeting night," I said. "We all come to church on prayer meeting night."

"Who do you think you are, Beanie?" Kari asked. "Do you think you're our 'Bean Mother?' Well, you're not." She was picking up on a name the girls' volleyball team at school had called me.

"Sit down, Beanie."

"Dry up, Beanie."

"And, kids," Dave said, "tell your old man and your old lady about what we did tonight. Tell them we learned a new hymn and we have Bible memory and we confessed our sins so we could get right with the Lord."

"We confessed *their* sins, you mean," I said.

He ignored me.

"And kids? Don't forget next week, same time, same station. We'll talk about a new dimension of spiritual life I don't think any of you have ever heard about before. See you then. Good night!"

Boy, did I march right up to him. "Pastor Gruber won't like—"

"Don't you worry about Pastor Gruber," he said. "I've gone over all this with him, and he likes what I'm doing. Shape up,

Beanie."

He tried to hug me like he did Kari after she sang, but I squirmed out of his reach.

"My name's Bean."

"Hey, guy, join the pack. Be one of us. You'll like it."

"Not me." I turned and walked out the door. I went right up to Pastor's office and knocked.

"Oh, yes," he said when I told him what happened downstairs in our meeting.

"He's cleared all that with me. That's fine. We're just so happy he and his wife are willing to work with you young folks."

"But it's just a big gossip session. And it's mean!"

"Oh, I think that's just your own reaction to his new teaching techniques, Bean. I've never taught that way, but I believe it's time that you young people were exposed to different ways of doing things."

Nothing I said changed his mind. Someone had pulled the wool over his eyes but good. These guys just out of seminary—did they trust everybody?

But I'd been brought up in this church. Before my father died, he had been the pastor. I didn't like any of this. Not one bit!

And I knew it would just get worse!

3.

Buddy

I didn't go to Egglestons' on Wednesday night. I went to prayer meeting. I'd had enough kooky stuff in my life. I wanted all the good teaching I could get. My pastor wasn't very old, but I learned a bundle from every one of his messages.

So what could he think?

Well, he could have attended our meetings for one thing. If he'd been a fly on the wall, he'd have gotten his ears full.

We started our next meeting with what Dave called "Our Song." He was "Dave" to everybody now—but I noticed it was still "Mrs. Eggleston."

"Come on up here, Buddy, and lead us in some more good songs," Dave called out as we were beginning.

We sang the song with all the monkeys swinging in the trees—all the monkeys but me.

Then Buddy introduced another song.

"You probably all have sung this next song a million times and never really understood the words. Well, we're going to change the words a little bit and explain them to you."

And then he sang "Spirit of the Living God," only he

changed the words to "Spirit Prince of all the gods, fall upon my heart. Melt me, mold me, fill me, use me."

"What this means is that we want our own 'spirit prince' to take over our heart and have our whole being. You want that, don't you?"

All the guys said, "Yeah."

"Great," he said. "Now, let's sing it."

I stood up. "Hey! Who is that spirit prince? Jesus isn't any 'spirit prince.' He's the living God. Why not sing it the way it was written? 'Spirit of the living God.'"

"Because no one ever understood the meaning of the words, Beanie. That's why." And then he motioned to the pianist to start playing.

He never did answer my question about who his "spirit prince" was.

I had the feeling that that was important. But for the life of me, I really couldn't figure out why.

He had the kids sing the song through in a quiet manner three or four times, and then he turned the meeting over to Dave.

"And now I'd like to present this week's verse," Dave said. "It's First Chronicles twenty-six eighteen."

I noticed that he didn't just open a Bible and point at any verse. He'd gotten stung before when he'd had to read Job 25:4. He didn't seem to like verses that had to do with salvation.

"OK, here's your verse. 'At Parbar westward, four at the causeway, and two at Parbar,'" he read. "That can be your life verse, young people. Think of the deep, deep spiritual meaning you can find in that verse. You have eleven words and in those eleven words you have eleven letter a's. In the first phrase, 'At Parbar westward,' you have eleven consonants. Doesn't the depth of this just thrill your hearts? And this is not just mere coincidence. This is God's eternal Word."

He had them repeat the verse ten times, and by then they'd memorized it.

"When you recite it to your parents, young people, remember to do it with feeling. Let them know how deeply this verse affects your heart and soul. Tell them it has deep truth for you and that it helps you meditate on God's Word all day. They'll love it. And the more they love the things we do here, the more they'll willingly let you do them. Remember that."

I just sat there and shook my head.

This guy wasn't just a fake. He had some angle. But I couldn't figure it out. Why would he want to come into our little church and start pulling our kids apart?

"Now, tonight, we're going to study a new spiritual dimension that I'm sure none of you has ever seen before. There is a whole spirit world out there that is available to help you live your life with power you've never known. Each of you has your own spirit. It tells you that in the book of Hebrews. And it is up to you to find out who that spirit is and what is his—or her—name."

The kids were all leaning forward on the edge of their chairs.

"Tonight we're going to sing our prayer. It's a song that you already know, but it has a small change in some of the words. It's this: 'Into my heart. Into my heart. Come into my heart, O spirit. Come in today. Come in to stay. Come into my heart, O spirit.' "

He sang it to the tune we already knew.

The light was beginning to dawn. But I couldn't believe what I was hearing. He was getting our kids to open themselves up to demons. He wanted us to invite some spirit into our hearts to live.

"OK, kids. Now let's all sing this together."

"No!" I called out, standing to my feet. "This is Satanism. This guy wants us to invite demons into our life. Can't you

guys see it?"

"Boo! Boo!"

"Sit down, Beanie."

"Shut up, Beanie."

One guy came over and grabbed me by my collar and shoved me across the room and out the door. Everybody clapped and shouted. They thought it was hilarious. They *wanted* that junk!

I ran up to Pastor Gruber's office and pounded on the door. The door opened, and one of the deacons put his head out. "Shh! We're having a time of prayer, Bean, before the evening service. Can you come back to see Pastor after the meeting?"

He closed the door.

I didn't know what to do. I went to the top row of the choir loft and just sat there.

Lord? What can I do? I tried to stop them, but they threw me out.

People started to come into the church.

The service started.

I noticed that none of the young people had come up. Usually we all sit in the choir loft during the evening service.

Tonight I was the only one.

I didn't stay there long. I slipped out and sat in the back row in the congregation where I sit when I'm not in the choir.

"Our young people must have been delayed," Pastor Gruber said as he started the service. "The Lord has been doing a real work in their hearts. We're so glad the Egglestons have come to lead them. While we sing, let's be praying for them that God will do His work in their lives."

He hit the nail on the head. That was just what they needed—for God to do a great work in their lives. But God couldn't do it the way things were now. He couldn't do anything until the adults saw what was going on.

I prayed in my heart that He would open people's eyes.

I wondered what it would take for them to see the truth. Maybe someone would have to get hurt. It was just like downtown. The city never put up a traffic light at an intersection until a couple of people had been killed there.

I just hoped it wouldn't take that here in our church before the people saw what was really wrong with Dave.

I didn't sleep well that night. I kept waking up and thinking about Dave's "new dimension." I had to tell Pastor Gruber I was scared. I had to alert him to what was going on.

But I knew he wouldn't believe me. I didn't have a video or a tape of the youth meeting. He hadn't been there. I knew if he asked the kids they wouldn't tell him the truth. They liked what was going on.

And I knew Dave and Buddy wouldn't tell him what they were doing.

But I had to talk it over with someone!

I knew Monday was Pastor's day off, so I went to his house on my way home from school. I was afraid if I waited till Tuesday and went to the church that Dave might be around. He was on the church staff now. We were his full-time job.

I rang and rang the bell. No one was home. Well, I guessed I would have to come back on Tuesday.

Then a car pulled up to the curb just as I turned to go down the porch stairs. Dave and Buddy got out. "Nobody's home," I said as they came toward me.

"You over here to file a complaint with the pastor about us, huh, Beanie?" Buddy asked.

"Bean," I said. I ignored his question. "I rang the bell several times, but nobody came to the door."

"Well, I've got a key," Dave said. "We'll just go in and make ourselves at home. You want to come in?"

"You've got a key? You can go in whenever you want?"

"Sure. I'm part of the family."

I shook my head and turned to leave. Pastor had swallowed this guy hook, line, and sinker.

Buddy smiled. "Come on in and have a Coke, Beanie. You don't have to be afraid of us."

I had a feeling I had every reason to be afraid of him. He'd just given himself away, like a cat inviting a mouse to come in and have a cup of milk. He was so anxious to have me come in that he'd talked about it too soon.

"Thank you," I said nicely. There was no way I was going into that house with them. I turned to leave.

"No, really." Buddy caught my arm and pulled me back.

"You're hurting me," I said. Loud.

"Buddy!" Dave warned.

Buddy backed off.

"What don't you like about us, Beanie?"

"I see right through you guys," I said. "You think we're easy pickings. You're going to come in and capture a whole lot of kids for your"—I couldn't think of the word—"your—witchcraft business."

"Witchcraft?" Buddy laughed. "What makes you think we're into witchcraft?" He looked at Dave, and they both laughed. But those laughs sounded pretty thin. I knew I was right.

"Will we see you Wednesday at Dave's house?" Buddy said.

"No. I go to prayer meeting. I don't socialize when I can listen to good teaching. Our pastor gives fine—"

"Oh, but we're not socializing," Dave said. "We're making plans. You know, picnics and outings and parties. Things like that."

I hoped he could see I wasn't impressed.

"I'll be there," Buddy said, as if that would give me a reason for going!

That fact alone would keep me away.

I didn't say a word. I just walked off.

I had better things to do.

I needed to go sharpen my Sword.

4.

The Smile

Twice the number of kids came out next Sunday night. Pastor Gruber was thrilled. He stuck his head in the door of our basement room just before youth meeting began. I looked up and let my eyes bore a hole in him. *Oh, Pastor, I was saying in my heart, come in. Sit down and listen to the garbage they're dishing out.*

Please, Lord, have him come in.

But he said, "You're doing all the right things, guy. We love having you a part of our church staff."

Dave gave him a big smile and patted him on the arm. "And we love being here."

Pastor shut the door, and Dave gave us all a big smile that seemed to say, "See? We've got it made. He likes us." But I saw through that smile. To me it said, "See? *I've* got it made."

"OK, Buddy," he called out, "time to begin."

Buddy peeled Kari's hand out of his and headed for the podium.

"Song time, guys! Let's stand up and sing our song. Kari says she can play it for us on the piano and, while she comes up, I want to welcome all of you to our 'Real Life Club.' Our

song is easy, and while we sing you all turn around and shake hands and greet one another with a holy kiss."

Everybody laughed.

"A holy kiss, remember," he called out, laughing.

I just stood there with my arms folded while they sang. Some of them actually did kiss. It was sickening.

I didn't want to look like a nerd, but I hated what they were doing. This wasn't my church anymore. I didn't want some social club with hugging and kissing.

But the guys thought it was great.

Buddy had them sing through all the verses of his silly song three times. Each time he got them singing it a little faster. By the time they were done, they were racing through it and laughing all the way.

"OK, everybody. You can sit down now.

We all sat.

Dave came up. "Get your Bibles out, if you've got 'em," he said. "If you newcomers don't have one, don't worry about it. We just use them to memorize our weekly verse. Got to let our old folks know we're spiritual, you know."

The kids laughed.

"Now, first, let's review the verses we've memorized so far." He went through Job 26:13 and 1 Chronicles 26:18.

"What did your parents say when you recited your Parbar verse?"

One girl said, "My mother didn't want to admit she didn't understand it. I told her that 'four at the causeway, and two at Parbar' meant it was an Old Testament missionary verse like where Jesus sent them out two by two."

That brought down the house.

"All right, kids," Dave said, when the laughing died down, "our verse tonight is Revelation twenty-two eight. Read it with me if you've got it. Listen closely if you don't. 'And I John saw these things, and heard them. And when I had heard and seen, I fell down to worship before the feet of the

angel which showed me these things.'

"This is a great verse, guys," he said, "because it shows that we're to worship the angels that are out there. A lot of folks get uptight when you mention spirits, don't they, Beanie? But the Good Book tells us here that we're to worship them.

"OK, let's read it again. And try to memorize it as we go." He started them off.

And they repeated it and repeated it until they had the verse down. Nobody objected. They were all doing everything he said without thinking.

Me? I didn't like it at all. I kept thinking what the Lord Jesus said to the devil in the wilderness, "'Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God and Him only shalt thou serve." We don't worship angels!

I couldn't understand why a verse like this would be in the Bible, so I looked it up. He was wrong! I stood up. "But that's not what it's saying! The next verse says not to do that but to worship God!"

"Sit down, Beanie. If we want to memorize Revelation twenty-two eight, we can memorize Revelation twenty-two eight. Can't we, guys?"

"Yeah!" They clapped and cheered.

"But you're taking it out of context!"

"We can memorize any verse we want. Sit down!"

I sat down.

When they finished memorizing, he turned to me in front of everybody and said, "Beanie, have you ever had this experience? You're at a football game, and you have a hunch. The running back on the other team has the ball down near your goal line. You say to yourself, 'On the next play he's going to fumble.' And, sure enough, he does."

I nodded. "Not often, but it has happened to me." I hated to agree with anything he said. He seemed to want to trap me all he could so that he'd be able to keep me from complaining about him to the pastor. He'd be able to say, "But, Pastor, Bean

himself said in our meeting in front of everybody that this had happened to him."

Dave kept talking. "Now what about this one, everybody? You come into church with a hymn on your mind that you've been singing all day. You sit down, and the service begins. The song leader says, 'Let's turn to such-and-such page for our next hymn,' and it's the very hymn you've been singing all day. Has that ever happened to you?"

A lot of kids said, "Yeah."

"Or have you told your mom that your dad or someone else in the family would be home late because he'd been held up by an accident on the freeway? You didn't know that he had. There was nothing on the news about it. But you had a hunch—a feeling in your heart and mind—that something bad had happened. And when he got home late, it actually was because he had been held up by an accident on the freeway? How many has that happened to?"

A lot of hands went up.

"You all have had hunches that turn out to be true. Well, that's a new dimension to our spiritual life that is healthy and good. God gives us inner sight. We can know things that will happen in the future. You can read minds. You can get good grades because you have second sight. It's a phenomenon that has mystified scientists for hundreds of years. You interested? Want to hear about how to do it tonight?"

"Yeah!" everybody said.

"Well, first I want to remind you we're having a pot-luck wienie roast Wednesday night at Greenwood Park. Bring three wienies and three buns or chips or veggies and dip, and then we'll have enough for any visitors you bring. The church will serve the punch and ice cream."

"Yay," everybody said. Everything he did brought down the house. We hadn't had a program like this before—ever.

"Now, how many of you at one time or another have attended a pot-luck meal? Raise your hands."

We all raised our hands.

"How many of you have ever talked to your plants or to your pets?"

We all had.

"How many of you have ever had someone rub your shoulders to relax you, or you've done that to relax them?"

We all had.

"How many of you have given someone advice on how to cure a sore throat or a cold or a backache or hiccups?"

We all had.

"How many of you have ever made herb tea?"

A lot of us had.

"How many of you have ever straddled a broom when you were little and pretended it was a horsie?"

Everybody laughed.

"How many of you have done it since you've been grown—maybe in horsing around the kitchen with your family?"

A lot of us had.

"Now you may think these questions are stupid. But if you'd been living 450 or 500 years ago and done these things, your life would have been in danger. You could have been drowned by your neighbors. These are the things people accused witches of doing."

"Witches?"

"Really?"

"Is that all they were doing?"

"Are you saying that we're witches?" I asked him.

"Now, don't get ahead of me, Beanie. Let me tell you what I know." He scratched at his elbow. "You guys were telling me about the hunches—the magic power—you seem to have. Beanie's had hunches. All of you have had hunches."

I was right. He had got me in on this for a purpose.

"What you don't know," he went on, "is that there are four kinds of magic power—the power to know, the power to

will, the power to dare, and the power to remain silent. If you know something and you will it, then you do something that needs to be done to bring it about. That's where the magic comes in."

Everybody was very quiet.

"All of you already know the creative forces that are within the world. You're in touch with them when you talk to your plants or with your animals. Now we can actually will to use this power."

"I don't get it," someone said.

"Yeah, talk our language."

"All I'm saying is that we've got a lot of power right here—you and me. We can use it for anything we want. The word *witch* means 'wise one.' If we're wise—wiser about some things than anyone else we know—then we can use our wisdom for anything we want."

"Like what?" someone asked.

"Like Beanie here. He used his power to have the football player fumble the ball so that his team could recover and score a touchdown."

"That wasn't any special power," I said. "That was just coincidence. You know it, and I know it."

"Hey, you guys, and especially those guys that are new. Don't let this Beanie character here get to you. I hear he likes to play detective and figure out what everybody's doing wrong. They call him 'J. Edgar Beanpole' because he's like the old FBI chief J. Edgar Hoover—always figuring out what people are doing wrong."

Everybody laughed and hooted.

"No, you're wrong again, Beanie," Dave said. "There is special power. That's just the way it is with magic. It's as natural"—he shrugged his shoulders—"as life. Those who have it don't know where they get it. It just comes."

"Sounds reasonable to me," a girl named Mary said. "That's the way I do it. I say, 'Aunt Patty is coming over tonight after

supper,' and she does. I don't know how I know it."

"What did I tell you, Beanie?" Dave said. "Now we've got to decide what we're going to do with our power."

"Could we put a hex on somebody?" a girl named Cinci said.

"We can do anything we want—good or bad."

"I'm tired of being good," she said.

Everybody said, "Yeah!" and started to bring their chairs in closer together.

"Let's do something real bad," someone said.

"Got any brooms?" Mary asked. "We could go riding."

Everybody laughed again.

"Well, why don't we ask our personal angel?" Dave said. "You remember our memory verse where John the apostle worshiped at the feet of the angel that showed him the things he had seen and heard. Why don't we sing 'Into My Heart' and ask our own angel what he would like us to do?"

"Yeah." They loved this.

"No. No. NO!" I stood up and shouted. "This is all wrong. This is demon worship, not Christianity. You guys are letting Dave trick you into demon—"

Someone grabbed me by the neck and arm. Fingers were digging into my neck. I was being marched to the door. A hand turned the knob. I wrenched my head around as he threw me out.

It was Buddy.

"Get your hands off me!" I shouted.

"Shh! They're praying in there. It's not spiritual for you to shout while they're praying."

"You guys are ruining our kids and our church. Why don't you just get out now!"

"But Pastor Gruber wants us to stay," Buddy said quietly. "He likes to have us here. Look how many more kids are coming now than came before."

"But they're coming to a circus. Kids love a circus."

"No, they're coming to study God's Word."

"I'll fight you guys till my last breath."

He pointed his index finger at me.

"That's right. You will," he said. "You can count on it."

And then he smiled that same smile Dave had had when
Pastor Gruber shut the door.

It was the kind of smile you'd see on a corpse.

5.

Why Try?

I tried Pastor again, but he thought the sharp increase in attendance was the Lord's stamp of approval on what the Egglestons were doing.

"But the kids are missing prayer meetings," I said. "They're just planning parties over there. They're not being taught God's Word."

"Oh, but they're together for fellowship. That's so important these days, especially since our young people haven't had a youth program for so long." He patted my hand. "Don't let it worry you, Bean. It's all in good hands."

I tried his wife, but she laughed.

"You can't tell me anything bad about someone who has enough courage to tackle teenagers," she said. "And to not only double the size of the group but to triple it—why, those Egglestons are miracle workers in my book."

She said she'd heard from the mothers about our Bible memory and our devotional hymns and our confessing to get right with the Lord; and she knew that if Mrs. Beauregard liked the Egglestons, they must be good.

Mrs. Beauregard? So that's where the power lay—with

Mrs. Beauregard.

But all the adults—not just Mrs. Beauregard—had swallowed the bait. Just because a whole lot of kids came to something didn't make it right. In fact, that alone should have filled them with suspicion that something was wrong. Kids don't particularly like church these days.

These kids were coming out because it wasn't church and Christianity they were getting. They were using the church and God's Word to cover up the wickedness they'd always wanted to do. This gave them an excuse to be their own dirty, rotten selves and still look like they were good Christians coming to church.

It was sick, sick, sick.

But the avalanche was rolling.

And I couldn't stop it.

* * *

The senior high school group didn't like the idea of moving. They'd always been the big group. They'd always had the big rooms with the kitchen facilities attached. They'd always gotten Number One treatment, and now we were forcing them out. The younger teens had tripled in size since the Egglestons had come. The place was being overrun with kids, and the older folks were walking on air.

Pastor Gruber began to tell how many kids were coming out in each group, and he was pitting the senior high group against us. If we could do it, surely they could too. Only he and the older folks were still in the dark about what was really going on. The night of the big switch you should have heard us crow. I admit that it was fun to ride the high schoolers out of their den, but I was sick about the reason we were growing.

Buddy got up to lead singing. "Hey, guys! You like our new room?"

He knew how to get those guys roaring. They cheered and applauded like they were at some big rock concert.

"Sing out now!" And he started his "Hey! Yo! Come Alive" song. And when they'd gone through a million repetitions of the four verses, he said, "Hey, guys, Dave wants me to teach you two new verses tonight."

The guys were so hyped up even that brought applause.

"We'll sing, 'Hey! Yo! Break the bread!' and then we'll sing, 'Hey! Yo! Drink the cup.' Ready now." And off they went into those two verses.

I began to get uneasy.

"Now we'll sing our 'spirit prince' song."

They sang that and "Hey! Yo!" once again before they were sung out.

Buddy left the platform. "Dave?"

"OK, guys. You greeted each other with holy kisses yet?"

"No!" they roared.

"Kiss up," he called back.

What a mess. Everybody was laughing and kissing everybody in sight. Some guys were even kissing guys. I pointed at them and looked at Dave. He saw me and said something. I read his lips. He was saying, "So what?" But no one kissed me, I'll tell you.

"OK, guys. Memory time."

He opened a Bible. "Tonight we learn Romans twelve twenty—'Therefore, if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink.' Thirteen words here tonight, my friends. Thirteen words that tell us that bread is good—and you all know what bread is—"

"Yeah!" They clapped and whistled.

"And you all know what drink is—"

More cheers and applause.

"So let's get the Bible to tell us what to do. Right?"

"Right!" they shouted back.

And then he had them say the verse over and over till they

had it memorized.

"And now we have a verse to memorize that's just for Bean. We're having two verses tonight since you guys are so good at memory."

"Yay!" they roared.

"The verse is Romans fourteen three—'Let not him that eateth despise him that eateth not; and let not him which eateth not judge him that eateth: for God hath received him.'"

The whole place rocked with laughs and catcalls. They got the point. I had no business judging them for their wickedness. It looked like the Bible said so. He had them memorize the verse so that they could use it on me and on anyone else who would ever object to what they would eat or drink.

I didn't know what to do. This guy was shutting my mouth.

"Hey, guys! Tonight we're going to have Communion, and we're going to put a little mouthful of the good stuff in each glass. You who have never tasted the good stuff before will get just a sip. OK?"

I couldn't believe what this guy was doing! Now he was playing with Communion. He was getting these kids to take a drink of liquor all in the name of Christ.

I was through. I stood up and walked out. I wasn't going to have a part in this rubbish one minute longer.

And then I got rushed. Five guys caught me and dragged me back in. They sat me down hard and wrenched my arm behind my back.

Everybody cheered.

Dave got some hamburger buns out of a bag and passed them around.

"Take. Eat," he said. "This is the bread that was broken for you."

There was no mention of Christ, and I was glad.

The kids passed the buns around, and everybody took a

pinch, put it in his mouth, and passed the bun to the next person.

"Now. Take. Drink. This is the cup that was poured for you."

Several guys had the silver Communion trays from upstairs, and they were passing them around to all the kids. Each one took a glass cup and jerked his head back to get it all down. A lot of kids choked. They'd never had real wine before. They brought a tray over to me, and I clenched my teeth. There was no way I was going to take this.

But some guy wrenched my head back and held the little glass over my mouth. I shut my mouth tight. He tried to claw it open, but he couldn't. So he poured it up my nose.

Everybody shrieked and laughed. They were all watching.

I sneezed and coughed, and they let go of my arms. I was so mad I leaped to my feet and started throwing punches anywhere they'd land. They had no business humiliating me this way, and they had no right to give us minors this liquor.

Well, the guys that dragged me back in got hold of me and pinned my arms back.

"You let go of me," I shouted. "Let go!"

They laughed and started beating on me.

"Help! Police!" I called. Someone clapped his hand over my mouth.

"OK, everybody, while Beanie gets himself under control, let's sing our songs."

They all began singing like it was a big revival meeting. Any shouting I did was covered by all the singing. And then they threw me out.

I limped upstairs to Pastor's office. I knocked on the door, and then I slumped down against it.

The door opened, and a deacon caught me as I fell.

"Why, Bean." Then he must have smelled the liquor. "'I'm shocked." He looked back over his shoulder and told someone, "It's Bean. He's drunk!"

They dragged me into the office and put me in a chair.

"Why, Bean! I'm so disappointed," Pastor said. Then he looked at his watch. "The service is about to begin, so I can't stay here and tell you how ashamed of you I am. Go into my bathroom there, and wash your face and hands. The idea! Drunk and in church! One of our own young people!"

He went out the door with the deacon.

I got up and went into his bathroom and cleaned up. I took off my shirt to see my bruises. I had two I could see over my shoulder and some down my front.

They hurt.

I couldn't leave. I had to show him I wasn't drunk. But he wouldn't be back for an hour.

I opened the door and walked into the sanctuary. He'd be able to see that I was walking like any normal person and wasn't drunk at all. But one of the deacons was at the pulpit praying. Pastor had his head down and his eyes shut. I waited until the prayer was over and then walked to my usual seat in the back of the church. I looked to see if he was watching, but he wasn't. He was watching the young teens march in to take seats in the choir—those that Eggleston could get to stay.

Pastor was smiling and nodding little greetings to the kids as they passed by him.

He couldn't have been prouder—of *them*.

No one would listen. No one was on my side. No one saw through these liars, these witches.

I couldn't believe it.

But staying home or switching churches was no way to handle the problem. I couldn't just walk out and leave it. This was my church. My father had been pastor here. I had to help. I had to do something.

But I didn't know what.

So for the time being, I pretended that I had learned my lesson. I just went to the meetings and didn't say a word. I sat

and watched. I tried to keep my eyes from looking like I was thinking. I wanted them to think they'd won the Beanie battle and had silenced me for good.

But I hadn't counted on Shirley.

She came up to me one Sunday. "Bean, I want to talk."

"Not here. Upstairs," I said. I didn't know what she might say, but still I didn't want anyone to see us.

Our church has two floors—three actually, if you count the basement. It had been a high school once, and it had classrooms on all four sides. The auditorium was in the middle. On three sides up on the second floor, you could go through doors onto the balcony.

Shirley and I went up into one of the classrooms.

"What do you want?" I asked.

She sat down. I stood by the door.

"Come here and sit down," she said.

I did what I was told.

"Bean, you're different. You used to be full of fun and mystery—like at school when you figured out what was wrong with our football team. But now—"

I shrugged. "Were you there when they beat me up?"

"Is that why you're acting like a whipped puppy? When I see you at school, you act like you don't even know who I am. We've known each other for years, Bean."

I didn't say anything.

"Why, Bean? Why are you like this? Where's the fire? Where's the old spark?"

"I don't know."

"Sometimes you're so open a person can walk right in. And then you close up. The iron bars come down across your eyes, and you don't let anyone in."

I shrugged.

"Why?"

"I don't know, Shirly. Things are going on here. How come you can't see them?"

"Oh, I see them. Maybe I'm just not spiritual enough to figure out what to do about them. But we're having a lot of fun we never had before. Don't you just love the parties and all? We're so free!"

I just looked at her.

Couldn't anybody see the truth?

6.

Erga

Everyone who saw my beating would know I would try to stop the Egglestons. They knew I was trying to convince my busy pastor that they were dirt. They knew I wanted my church to be what it was before, when my father had been the pastor.

So everywhere I went I got dirty looks. People avoided me like I had a disease.

And things kept on getting worse. Now that he had them hugging and kissing and confessing their dirt openly and taking pot and drinking, Dave must have felt it was time to go for broke.

"Guys, tonight we've planned something special. We're going to turn the lights down real low so it's nearly dark in here. And then we're going to ask our angel to appear in some form. It will all seem very mysterious to you, but it's very holy and very serious. That's why we don't want any laughing, and we don't want any smart remarks or anything like that. Understand?"

Everybody murmured that they did understand.

If they'd known what was going on in my heart, Buddy

would have said, "What about Bean?" But, over the weeks, I'd continued acting dopey on the outside, and they'd forgotten the real me.

"Buddy? The lights." Dave motioned him to turn the dimmer switch. "Now, guys, bow your heads, and close your eyes, and let's join hands and sing our song." And he began singing "Into My Heart."

The kids did what he said. They sang along quietly with him.

But I wasn't singing their song. I knew that Satan hates the blood of Christ, so in my mind I was singing,

*What can wash away my sin?
Nothing but the blood of Jesus.
What can make me whole again?
Nothing but the blood of Jesus.
Oh, precious is the flow
That makes me white as snow.
No other fount I know.
Nothing but the blood of Jesus.*

They sang and sang, and the lights went lower until it was dark. And then we heard a chanting that sent shock waves through all of us. It was Buddy—no, it was higher. It didn't sound like Dave. I couldn't figure out whose voice it was. It sounded like a woman's, and she was calling on the spirits to come and make themselves known to these spirit-servants who were waiting to do their master's bidding.

"Erga calls. Erga calls," she said over and over.

But no one answered.

She carried on like that, and nothing happened. Then the woman's voice said, "Something is wrong. He's not coming. Who is here that is offending him?"

Then I heard Buddy say, "Bean?"

And then I heard an "Ahhhhh. Yes, Bean" from the

woman's voice.

Dave spoke up in the darkness. "Bean, are you here?"

I didn't make a sound. I even slid lower in my chair. I didn't want them to find me. If I was the one keeping this show from going into high gear, I wanted to stick around. No way did I want our kids to get sucked into this stuff.

"Turn on the lights, Buddy," Dave said.

The lights came on.

"Bean? Bean? Anyone see Bean in here?"

No one answered. Everybody was looking around. I was bent over, hiding my face in my lap.

"Sorry about this, guys, but with Bean in here we can't get through. We have to have all of us in tune and singing and waiting. Anybody see him?"

Nobody did. Shirley was next to me on one side, and the wall was on the other. She didn't make a sound. In fact, I felt her toss her coat over my back so people would think I was just clothes.

When nobody pointed me out, Dave said, "Well, let's try again." He motioned with his head, "Buddy? The lights." Then he said, "OK, guys, heads, eyes, hands, and let's sing. 'Into my heart, into my heart . . .'"

I wondered what I should sing in my heart this time and—am I ever glad I memorize the words to hymns because you never know when you'll need them. Into my mind came the words—

*There is a fountain filled with blood
Drawn from Emmanuel's veins
And sinners plunged beneath that flood
Lose all their guilty stains.
Lose all their guilty stains.
Lose all their guilty stains.
And sinners plunged beneath that flood
Lose all their guilty stains.*

I was laughing inside. They couldn't get their spirit to come again. Something was keeping him away. I was fascinated that little me could think about the blood of Christ and keep these guys from getting through to their demon.

Talk about power! But I knew it was the power of God and not of Bean.

Poor Erga, whoever she was. She was so frustrated that her "angel" wouldn't—or couldn't come.

"I'm sorry, guys," Dave said. "We're just not getting through tonight. We'll try it again next week. Lights, please."

"I'll turn them on," I said, throwing off Shirley's coat and standing up.

Boy, did I start something. They were furious! And do you want to know who was the maddest?

Erga—

Mrs. Eggleston!

7.

One More Try

I didn't care whether I created a disturbance or not. I walked right into the church service and up to the foot of the stairs to the platform. Mr. Jones, the song leader, was directing the music, and the congregation was singing for all it was worth.

"I've got to talk to you, Pastor. I've just got to," I called.

He couldn't hear me over the singing.

I saw him nod to an usher, and I felt someone take me firmly by the shoulder and arm and start walking me out into the hall.

I kept looking back and calling, "Pastor, I've got to talk to you. I've just got to."

I tried to wrench away from the usher. I twisted and I fought. But another one came up and then a third. They got me out of there and down the hall.

"What's got into you, boy? You've never acted like this before."

"I've just got to talk to Pastor," I said. "But he's always too busy. It's an emergency. I need his help."

"Well, wait here, and I'll see if he'll come out. I know he won't want to disturb the meeting. He's very careful that

nothing disturbs the meeting."

The usher went back in, and I could see him head for the pastor. But the song had ended, and the pastor had come to the pulpit to lead in prayer and start the sermon.

The usher turned and came back out.

"I'm sorry, Bean, but the sermon has started. Can't this wait until after he's through?"

I sighed. "I guess so."

Buddy and Dave came up the stairs from the lower floor. "He's one of our boys, usher," Dave said. "We'll take over."

"No." I clung to the usher. "No, don't let them get me. They'll kill me."

Buddy tapped his head and nodded toward me. He was telling the usher I was out of my head.

I felt the usher pushing me toward them, so I broke free and ran through the door into the auditorium. I didn't want to make a disturbance, but I didn't want to go anywhere with those two monsters.

I ran up several rows and then danced across knees until I was deep into one of the rows. I sat down in an empty seat and sat low.

The usher prowled the aisle, motioning me to come out. But I just sat lower and looked the other way.

There was no way he could reach me, and he didn't want to disturb the meeting either. He turned and walked out the door. I guess he told Dave and Buddy he couldn't get me.

They must have left because I didn't see them come back in that door. I thought maybe they'd come back through another door so I kept turning around to look. I didn't want them creeping up behind me. I guess I was making more of a disturbance than I thought because finally a woman's hand planted itself firmly on my knee. I looked up into the face of a stern old lady. I froze.

She must have been a schoolteacher when she was young. I didn't know who she was, but she had that look. You can

spot it a mile away.

I sat.

And I sat still.

And, since I was safe for the moment, I listened to the sermon. This was what I really wanted all along—to be able to have the good sound teaching my pastor was able to give me. I wanted to learn all I could about the Lord and about the life I could live with Him living in me.

"Wow, that was good, wasn't it?" I said to the lady when the sermon was over and the benediction sung.

"Yes, it was, young man. It really was. That's what I like about Pastor Gruber. He's a real teacher."

"Yeah, but he's too busy. He doesn't have time for kids."

She sort of pumped her shoulders when I said that. "Humpf. Humpf. Well, I don't know why not," she said. "That's what he's here for."

"Well, he's too busy for me."

"And just what do you want to tell him?"

"Oh, you wouldn't understand, ma'am. You're too—"

She drew back. "Old?" she asked.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I didn't mean to hurt your feelings. But we're having trouble in our youth group and well—never mind. I don't mean to bother you—"

"You're Billy Spencer, aren't you? I knew your father very well. And your mother is very dear to me. I've watched you grow up, and I've followed your escapades very closely this year. You certainly get involved in a lot of mischief, don't you?"

I smiled. "If you want to call it that, ma'am."

"You're into something now, aren't you? I can sense it in your manner."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Something to do with the young teens youth group, I would imagine."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Well, why don't I ask your mother if the two of you can't come over tonight after church for a little something sweet and a little talk perhaps."

"She's not here tonight, Mrs.—"

I let my voice trail off.

"Beauregard," she said.

I opened my eyes wide. This was the lady Mrs. Gruber said had all the power.

"Beauregard?" I said. I was surprised, and I didn't know what to say.

She waited for me to speak, and, when I didn't, she said, "Your mother?"

"Oh, yeah. I'm sorry. She's been made manager of her store, and she has to leave the house very early in the morning. She goes to bed early on Sunday night."

"But you could come?"

The wheels were turning in my head. If I could convince this lady that something was really wrong—especially since she knew my dad—maybe Pastor would listen.

I nodded. "Yes, I could come."

"Well, meet me in the parking lot. I've got a white nineteen-sixty-three Cadillac. My license plate is B-E-A-U. You can't miss it. I park near the door. I'll be out in a moment. I have a couple of people I need to see."

People were filing out and making all the happy noise of a contented congregation. A lot more people had joined since my dad was the pastor. I didn't know most of them.

I kept a sharp eye out for Dave and Buddy. No way was I going to let them creep up on me. I made myself as invisible as possible. I sidled up behind a family and got mixed up among them. They were laughing and talking and didn't notice me at all.

I got out into the foyer and went down the steps with them. I stayed with them down the steps of the church and out to the parking lot. By now they were giving me some

funny looks, but I pretended I was just going about my own business and not even noticing I was mixed up in their group.

Sure enough, her white Cad was parked near the door. I went to the far side of it and waited. The car had trim you wouldn't believe—doodaws and lights and horns and grillwork and ornaments. I was running my hands up and down, getting a feel of the loops and curves when she came bustling out the church door.

"I'm coming. I'm coming." She stuck her key in the lock on the driver's side. Once in, she leaned over and unlocked my door. "I suppose I really don't need to lock the doors when I'm parked in front of a church. But I feel a little more secure—especially since this old bus has become something of an antique."

She started the engine. It purred like she had milk and honey in the gas tank. "You comfy?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"I need to stop for some ice cream. Do you mind running in for me?"

"Be glad to."

She drove carefully down the streets, telling me she'd lived here for years and years. She hadn't started coming to our church until a few months before my dad resigned. He'd died a short time later.

"I dearly loved your father. He was such a man of God. I pray you'll grow up to be like him, Billy."

"My friends call me Bean, Mrs. Beauregard."

"Oh? All right—Bean. Ah, here we are." She fumbled in her purse and took out a ten dollar bill. "Get me a half gallon of vanilla and a half gallon of something else. You pick out what you like."

I was in and out in just a few moments. I counted out her change into her hand and gave her the receipt. "Is that right?" I asked.

"To the penny," she said. "I appreciate how carefully you handle other people's affairs, uh—Bean. That's a good quality."

I didn't say anything.

She started talking again as we drove. "I'm sorry to hear you are concerned about your youth group. I thought things were going along so well now that we have the Egglestons and their brother running things."

I didn't say anything.

"We were so tickled when they volunteered to take the sponsorship. Some of us ladies had wanted to do something, but teenagers don't want some old biddies clucking around." She patted my knee. "I won't ask you to comment on that statement."

And then she began to tell me how concerned she and her lady friends had been for our group and how they had prayed God would send just the right leaders.

About the time I was going to open up, she pulled into the driveway of a very nice house. The drive circled an island, and her front porch had tall pillars. Some other cars were parked in front. I guess the white Cad was her Sunday-go-to-meeting car.

I could see why this lady had power. She had the big bucks to make things happen.

She led me around to the kitchen door.

"Put the ice cream there," she said. "It should be soft enough by now to dish up. Do you mind? The scoop is in that drawer. The dishes are in that cupboard over there. I want to put my things away. I'll be right back."

I got out the scoop and two saucers. I scooped some vanilla and some bubblegum-peanut butter-goulash on each plate. She'd told me to get the kind I liked best.

She came back. "Only two plates? We need five."

"Five?"

"Why, yes. Didn't I tell you? I asked some very concerned

friends of mine to come along too. I hope you don't mind."

If her other old lady friends were as powerful as she was and as concerned as she was, I didn't mind. I needed all the prayer support and influence with Pastor I could get.

I dished up the other plates. She was amused that I'd gotten the goulash. I'm sure she'd expected strawberry or some ordinary flavor like that.

She got out a tray and put the plates on it. She had spoons and napkins. She had cookies and cakes on a large dish that she was carrying.

"Let's come into the living room where the others are, Bean. Here we come with the ice cream and cookies, everybody," she called out.

I turned the corner and followed her into—

I stopped cold.

She had invited friends all right—friends who were really concerned about the younger teens youth group. Only there were two. A husband and wife, sitting on her couch. Smiling.

I didn't drop the tray.

I should have.

I was mad.

She had tricked me.

"Thank you for your hospitality, Mrs. Beauregard," I said. "I thought you were someone I could trust. Good night."

I set the tray down on a table. I turned the corner into her hallway and looked for the front door.

Someone grabbed me.

It was her third friend.

"Let go!" I fought him and kicked him hard in the shins. But he was a senior and a lot stronger than I am. He had an armlock on my right elbow before I could blink.

"You're going back in there, and you're going to behave. One word out of you about what we're doing and you're going to breathe that last breath you were talking about at church."

Mrs. Beauregard had followed me out into the hall, but she didn't get there in time to hear Buddy's little speech.

"Why, Bean, is something wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong, Mrs. B.," Buddy said. "Beanie just remembered some homework he hadn't done, and he was going home to do it. I just had to remind him that you're such a good friend of the youth group that he should be extra polite to you. He tends to be pretty bratty at times, and he just needs to be reminded to behave."

He gave me a playful little shove. But it was a shove back in the direction of the living room.

"Beanie has a friend, Shirley Donohue, Mrs. B. Have you met her?"

"Why, no, I haven't. Is she a nice girl?"

"Beanie's quite concerned about her. She doesn't always look where she's going, and sometimes she falls down and hurts herself. Beanie tries to watch out for her. He doesn't like it when she gets hurt. Do you, Beanie?"

He was telling me that, if I caused trouble, he'd not only get me but he'd get Shirley.

I sat down. Frozen. I hoped the lady could tell I was scared from the way I was sitting. I didn't say a thing. We sat there eating her cake and ice cream.

"I hope you don't mind this bubble-gum ice cream, Mrs. Eggleston," Mrs. Beauregard said. "I asked Bean to pick out his favorite kind, and he came out with this." She laughed. "I think it's so cute. He has such a sense of humor."

Erga stretched her mouth so that it looked like a smile.

"You were telling us that Beanie has a concern for the youth group he'd like to share? Is that right, Mrs. Beauregard?" Dave asked.

"Yes." She smiled back at him. "I took the liberty of telling you and inviting you over because I was sure you would want to know about any serious concern one of your youngsters had."

"Of course. Of course. It was very thoughtful of you. We like to give a lot of individual attention to each of our youngsters. The Bible says, 'Train up a child in the way he should go and when he is old he will not depart from it.' We believe that, and we practice it. That's why we've started such an active program for these kids."

"And we old-timers think you are wonderful for doing this," the lady bubbled. "It's such a ministry. It's so important. I'm sure God is so pleased with what you're doing."

Her gushing all over the place made me sick.

"Well, now, Beanie," Dave said. "Tell us just what's been bothering you."

I had to be honest. I couldn't and I wouldn't lie just to protect myself. But I knew these guys. They'd go after Shirley and really hurt her. Demons don't have any morals.

I couldn't lie, but I couldn't tell the truth. No matter what I did, it would be wrong.

Lord, I prayed. *Help*. He'd answered me so many times before when I'd been in a tight spot like this.

"Well—uh—" I hesitated.

"Yes?"

I couldn't tell them. I just couldn't.

Lord?

And then, as I remembered how I felt when Mrs. Beauregard was gushing and how it had made me sick, the answer came to me. I laughed inside. It was as if God was right there with me, waiting for me to ask for help so He could give me the answer right away. I wouldn't have to tell them, after all.

Now, don't turn me off for this. But when you're in a tight spot, this always—it always—works.

"I don't feel too good," I said, which was true. I groaned and put my napkin to my face with both hands. I held the napkin with one hand to cover what I was doing, and then I stuck the first two fingers of my other hand down my throat.

You have to use two fingers, and sometimes you have to jiggle them.

One won't work.

Two fingers work like a charm.

I threw up.

Lots of things happen when you heave—and all of them did.

Mrs. Beauregard was horrified for her oriental rugs and stuffed furniture—as well as for me, I'm sure.

"It must have been that goulash ice cream!" She ran for some sponges and a mop. She called Buddy to help her and to get some hot water.

Then Erga began to get sick. Just the smell of someone else getting sick works on a lot of people like that. You get sick. They get sick. You heave. They heave.

Erga threw up.

Only she didn't get hers on the rug.

She got it all over Dave.

I don't mean to sound disrespectful, but I could imagine the Lord watching and just doubling over with laughter. He hated these people's witchcraft even more than I did.

Dave rushed Erga to the downstairs bathroom near the front door. She was a mess. He was a mess.

Then Buddy threw up when he was helping clean up the goop. And he was a mess.

Now there was no way they were going to sit around after a performance like this and ask little Beanie what was bothering him about the young teen youth group.

They said their good nights, and they got out—fast.

Lord, I told Him, laughing, You're wonderful!

8.

The Mess

Nothing I said satisfied Mrs. Beauregard. Her house was Nankle high in bubble gum peanut butter goulash the second time around, and she was no happy woman.

I will say this. She was concerned for me. She attended to me and wiped my face and shirt and said nice words.

Then she had me help her clean up the mess. I told her to go out the back door and get some fresh air. I didn't have anything more to come up. She did.

I got fresh hot water in a bucket. I got the mop from behind the kitchen door. It took me a couple of changes of water in my bucket, but I got it all cleaned up.

She told me where an old towel was and some floor polish, and I dried and buffed her floors. I really worked to show her I was sorry.

Only I wasn't sorry about what had happened. If I had to do it all over, I'd throw up again because I was safe and Shirley was safe and I hadn't had to face those three jerks.

True, I'd missed a chance to persuade Mrs. Beauregard, our seat of power, that her youth leaders were a bunch of fakes. But if the Lord could take care of things like this, He

could take care of the problem right on to the end.

"I'm sorry we didn't get to have our little talk, Bean," she said as she was driving me home. "I really did think I had done the right thing to invite the Egglestons and their brother over to let you tell them how you felt. But perhaps we can get together some other time. Would you like that?"

I said nothing.

"I said, would you like that?"

I still said nothing.

"Hmm." That's all she said.

Soon she had me home. I thanked her and apologized again.

"Don't worry about it, Bean," she said. "And be careful not to wake your mother."

I closed the door, and she drove off.

I turned to go up my walk and into the house. The porch light was on, but it lit up just the half-circle around the front door. Out by the curb it was dark.

I took a step and fell flat on my face. Someone had tripped me.

Before I knew what was happening, I was lifted up and then smashed in the face with a fist. I tried to cover my face and took a fist to the stomach. I was so surprised and shocked, I couldn't call out. I couldn't scream.

I doubled over and went down. I was picked up and hit again and again.

How many times I was picked up and knocked down, I couldn't say. And who was beating me up—I couldn't see. It was too dark out by the curb.

But I knew who it was.

Oh, I knew who it was.

I don't know when Buddy left.

I was unconscious.

I woke I don't know how much later. But I couldn't move.

I faded out again.

I woke again, knowing I had to get in the house. I had to get in my own bed.

But I couldn't stand up.

I pulled myself over to the stairs and got up them one by one. I dragged myself to the door. Somehow I got my key out, got the door open, and dragged myself inside. I got the door closed—and locked. I didn't know if that red-haired cyclone would be back.

I passed out and came to a couple of times before I got myself into my room and onto my bed.

Light was beginning to color the morning sky. I buried my head in my pillow and began to sob.

I was home.

I was in my own bed.

He tried to kill me.

And I wished he had.

My mother must have checked on me before she went to work. My shoes were off, and the shades pulled. She'd put a cover over me and left me just as I lay. She must not have turned the light on or she would have seen the blood. It was all over my bed.

I don't know what time it was when I woke. My head was throbbing. Every bone felt like it was broken.

I looked in the bathroom mirror. My face was pulp. My lips were swollen. My nose was huge. My eyes were black and swollen shut. I was sure my teeth were loose.

I couldn't wash up. I couldn't even undress. There was no way I could go to school. I just went back to bed. I had to sleep.

I had to.

Later, I was conscious of someone moving about my room. I felt a hot towel on my face. I heard loving sounds of concern. Mom was home.

I started to sob again.

I heard her on the phone. Then she was back with me,

changing the compresses and bringing in ice. It felt so good.

I must have gone out again. I felt myself being lifted. A man's voice was telling me to relax. I would be all right. I guess I was trying to sit up, trying to fight back. But the sound of his voice was so nice. He was so concerned that I be comfortable. I felt a prick of pain and knew I was getting a shot. I felt I was floating, and nothing mattered any more.

I woke in the emergency room of the hospital. My mom and Tony, my old friend from the rescue squad, and a policeman were standing there talking. Two nurses were bandaging me and cleaning me up.

"I just thought he'd come home late and was dead tired," my mom was saying.

"What time was that?" a man's voice said. I guess it was the cop.

"I leave about five."

"You didn't see the trail of blood up the sidewalk, across the porch, and through your house?"

"I don't turn on the lights when I get up. Bean's a light sleeper. Light wakes him, and so does the sound of voices. Ever since he was a baby, he wakes when he hears people talking. He doesn't want to miss anything—" Her voice broke, and she was weeping.

"You have no idea who did it?"

"None."

"Where was he last night?"

"At church. He goes to youth group and then stays for the evening service. Sometimes the kids go out for a Coke. He's usually home about ten, but I'm asleep by then. I just leave the front porch light on. He lets himself in."

"He have any enemies you know about?"

"Not Bean. He's very popular at school."

"Haven't I seen his picture in the paper a lot?"

"Well, he has an inquiring mind, and he's helped a lot of people solve the problems that have been bothering them.

Usually it has to do with sports teams at school."

"Sunny Hills High, right? I know this kid. He helped us get all those championships, didn't he?"

I guess I moved.

"He's awake," a nurse said. "He's been awake for about five minutes. He's been listening."

"Oh, darling," my mother said. "Who did this to you?"

"It was dark. I couldn't see."

Even then, I didn't want to lie. But I couldn't prove it was Buddy. So I didn't want to say.

"Any idea who would do this to you?"

"Yes."

"Who?"

"I don't want to say. I'm afraid."

"No need to be afraid, sonny," the policeman said. "We'll give you police protection."

I smiled. I knew it would be police protection for a day, maybe—but not for the rest of my life.

"No."

"Well, my name's Mole. Joel Mole. Here's my number day or night. Call me right up if this guy starts to give you any trouble again, OK?"

Somehow I got through my week. My friends at school tried to get me to tell them who did it. Shirley tried. There was no way I'd tell. I took it as easy as I could. Bruises and welts and black eyes can take a long time to heal even when you're young. My teachers said I could hand my homework in late. I was glad for that. I not only had time to heal, but I had time to think.

I knew I'd see Buddy again. Would he think I didn't know he beat me up, because it was dark and I hadn't seen him? I figured the guy had more sense than that.

What would he say to me?

What would I say to him?

In a way I didn't want to go to young people's any more.

One part of me said, "Look, you've died for the cause, Bean. Let someone else have a turn at getting beat up."

But I knew I couldn't stay away. I had to keep my eye on those jerks. Somehow I would find a way to pull the rug out from under them and expose them for what they were.

I was the only one who was onto them. The Lord needed me there.

And Buddy needed to see that I wasn't afraid of him — that I was still a threat.

But *was* I afraid of him? Maybe I was. But should I be? After all, he'd beaten me up in the dark. He had the advantage of my silhouette against the porch light. He knew where I was so he could punch me silly. I couldn't see him at all.

And then I saw the truth.

Buddy was a coward.

No. I wasn't afraid of Buddy.

I'd get Buddy.

Buddy needed to see me down on the front row every time we had a meeting. He and his crew needed to know I would fight them to my last breath, like I said.

9.

Erga Gets Through

I told Shirley not to sit with me. I was down on the front row.

"Why? You don't want to be friends?"

I paused and looked her in the eye. "You want to look like this?"

I leaned closer so that no one would hear me. "Think, Shirl, think. They're watching you 'cause you're my friend."

She got suddenly serious. "Oh, Bean."

She looked around the room. Kids were still flocking in. Buddy and Kari were over by the piano, laughing and singing. Dave and Erga were talking seriously where she always sat in the back of the room.

Shirley stood up. "OK, I get the hint," she said in a voice loud enough to be heard on the back row. "You found someone you like better? All right for you, Bean. Lead a girl on, and then drop her for someone else." She pointed her finger at me. "There are other guys in this world. You're not the only Mr. Macho!"

She leaned down to pick up her coat and Bible. "Now I know why Buddy's got Band-Aids on his knuckles," she said

in a low voice.

She flounced her hair as she stood up. "So long, nerd."

She crossed to the other side of the room and sidled across some knees to an empty seat near some girls she knew. She started to talk and laugh with them and blended right into the woodwork.

I was afraid she'd overacted. But we'd done the right thing. I hoped that, as she thought through what had been happening, she'd help me figure out what to do.

Buddy got the singing started. It was more of his "Hi-de-hi, chicken-in-the-sky" kind of songs—no real meaning. He went through all the songs he'd taught us, and he laughed and joked and danced. He got Kari to come up and sing. She still liked to make eyes at him while she did it.

I didn't stand up for any of the songs. I'd brought my crutches, big as life. Buddy made it a point never to look at me, but I drilled my eyes into his. He knew I was there.

Dave came and led the guys in a Bible memory verse review. Then he added another one to the list.

"You're doing great, guys. The old folks really like the way you're memorizing verses. They like it so much that one old crow is going to put up the money to send all of you to the circus when it comes to town next month. Whoop-de-doo!"

Everybody applauded. Some guys whistled.

"So your new verse brings you new truth today. It covers something you probably haven't thought of much. You've sort of left it up to your parents. But it's Luke eighteen twelve, telling about the man God loves. The verse is, 'I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess.'"

He closed the Bible he was holding and put it down.

"Let's memorize it first." And he had them say it over and over.

I looked up the reference while they were repeating it. The verse came from the parable of the Pharisee and the publican. He was having them memorize the Pharisee's boast to God

that he was a righteous man because he fasted and tithed.

We should have been memorizing the publican's prayer, "God be merciful to me, the sinner." Why would he have us memorize the Pharisee's prayer?

"OK, now that you have it in your memory pack," Dave said, "let's talk about it. It's important if you want to grow strong in life that you learn some of the secrets. One of them is giving.

"I know. You're saying to yourselves that you don't have anything to give. None of us has very much. But the Bible says that God's good people fast twice a week and take the lunch money they save and tithe it on Sundays at young people's. God will really bless you for that. The Bible says that She loves a cheerful giver."

There was that "She" business again. I sure hated it. And it puzzled me that it didn't seem to make any difference to the kids. The new ones—they didn't know anything, anyway. But the old ones—the ones who'd grown up in the church like me—they should be fighting tooth and claw.

Dave sort of looked at me when he said, "She loves a cheerful giver." I always used to bristle and squirm. But I didn't have the energy to move a muscle. I just sat.

I guess he thought from that that I was really cowed by the beating I'd gotten. I knew he knew about it. He'd probably driven Buddy to my house. Erga, too.

"Now, kids," Dave said, "we're going to make another try at getting through tonight. My wife's all ready.

"Let's join hands and bow our heads. Close your eyes, and let's sing our song. Buddy?"

I saw Erga come forward as the light was dimming. She went up on the platform and knelt down, facing the kids.

I figured I might as well let them do their damage. With this many witnesses, the word would surely get out to the parents.

I couldn't take my eyes off Erga. She knelt there quietly, looking right out into the air in front of her. She didn't seem

to be focusing her eyes on anything—just staring out with a dead-pan look. Then she sat up and began to mumble some words. Her voice sounded like a violin string being scraped up and down. She began to wring her hands and cry out higher and higher in a screechy sound.

I began to get scared.

I felt an evil presence I'd never felt before.

It seemed as if Satan himself was there.

It was as if a real demon was screaming through her.

All our singing had stopped. I was sure everyone was watching. We'd never seen anything like this in our lives.

Then she started wailing a sad, sad song. She was moaning and mumbling words we couldn't understand. Slowly she calmed down. And then she was quiet.

After a bit the lights came on slowly, and Buddy started singing his awful "Into My Heart" song.

The kids started singing with him.

I couldn't believe it. Didn't they see how awful this was? It was out of hell. Couldn't they see?

"Well, guys," Dave said, as he helped Erga stand to her feet. "You've had a real spiritual experience tonight. Didn't you feel it?"

The kids all said, "Yeah!"

"Didn't you feel the power?"

"Yeah!"

"Didn't you feel the excitement and the mystery?"

"Yeah!"

"Didn't you love it?"

"Yeah!"

"Did you ever have anything like this upstairs?"

"No."

"You want to do this again?"

"Yeah!"

"OK. Bring your friends next week. We'll do it again. And—oh, yes—Pastor Gruber wants me to announce that

he's having a special speaker in the evening service next week, and he would like to have all of us sit in the choir loft. So bring your comics to put inside the hymnbooks, and we'll fill the loft for him."

There was some groaning and some laughing. These kids didn't want church after they'd had hell.

"See you next week, everybody. Tell your folks you really had a deep, spiritual experience with God tonight. Don't tell them about Erga though, or they'll get mad and make us stop having our meetings. In other words, keep the faith, baby!"

He meant they should keep their mouths shut. Everyone went out.

I just sat there.

Erga's voice behind me at the entrance said to someone else, "Who's that down there?"

Dave said, "It's only Beanie. He won't bother us any more."

Buddy said, "Learned your lesson, Beanie?"

They laughed and turned out the lights. They knew I was on crutches. They knew I'd have to crawl to get out.

I felt like the disciples at the Last Supper when Judas went out. The Bible says, "And it was night."

Oh, Lord, I cried out in my heart, It's night. Those guys have made it night in here.

And it's night in the hearts of my friends.

That same darkness seemed to wrap itself around my soul. We'd seen a terror, and it had happened right in our church—my dad's church—and I hadn't stopped it.

I had to do something.

Mrs. Beauregard loved the Egglestons.

The kids loved the Egglestons.

They'd taken us over by storm.

I had to talk to someone

So I talked to my mom. I don't know why I hadn't talked to her when this trouble had started. I'd just tried to do it all by myself.

She listened with horror on her face. She loved this church as much as I did. More. She'd given years of her life to this church. Most of these kids were born into their families when she was the pastor's wife. She couldn't understand why they'd allowed themselves to be sucked up into all this.

"They just want something new, Bean," she said. "They're excited by something they've never known before."

"But why don't they see through these guys?"

"They're good looking. They speak the language the kids are speaking. They're feeding the flesh—the physical — instead of the heart."

"But these kids have grown up all their lives listening to the Bible. Can't they see how these guys are misusing it?"

"I guess we didn't concentrate enough on the book of Romans," she said. "These kids need Romans six."

"What'll I do?"

"I don't know, Bean. You've been to everybody. I'm so swamped with work I don't have time. But let's pray together now and pray together in our hearts through the week. This is the Lord's work. Surely He'll hear us and do something."

So we prayed together.

It's so good when you and your folks can pray together. I don't know what I'd do without a mom like I've got.

And we talked and prayed all through the week.

I was getting a lot better. It didn't hurt to walk any more. I exercised all I could so my muscles loosened up, and I was more limber. The swelling went down, and the black around my eyes began to fade. My teeth tightened up. I was feeling pretty normal again.

Kids at school still asked me what happened.

"I guess I got caught in a garbage disposal," I'd say.

Anything more would get back to Buddy fast. I didn't want to have to go through another beating like that again.

I had expected school to be electric with excitement after what we'd seen Sunday night, but no one was saying

anything. I knew they were excited, but they knew what would happen if their folks got wind of Erga. The kids all wanted to see her do it again. They weren't going to do anything that would get those three kicked out.

But they were paying the price. I'd never seen them so hard-hearted about the things of the Lord. They sat in Sunday school class with me and didn't respond to anything. They'd locked their ears to any warning, and in the process they'd locked up their hearts.

But I knew Who would have the last word.

I knew Who would not let Himself be mocked.

Long ago, I'd learned the verse in Sunday school, "Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap."

10.

My Tactic

They had her do it again the next Sunday night, the hour before the Bible teacher Pastor Gruber had invited would begin his deeper life messages. But before Dave let Erga have her turn, he passed the hat. He reminded the kids of the value of tithing and asked them how many had fasted during the week.

I was surprised. Almost all of them had.

And they emptied the money out of their pockets as if it was going out of style. They had to get extra collection plates out to hold all the money.

Buddy had a big grocery bag, and I watched the guys that had taken the offering dump all the money in there. Buddy had that smile on his face that I'd grown to hate.

When Erga started her rumpus, I was struck with the words she said over and over again. They made me think of "Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers"—only it wasn't that. She seemed to be using these words to get herself all psyched up.

And I wondered if she was using them to teach the kids that they could do the same thing she was doing if they used

those same words.

When she started to whine and shriek, I just cried out in my heart, *The blood of Jesus. The blood of Jesus.* And then I began to say those words out loud, quietly. "The blood of Jesus. The blood of Jesus." Like I said before, Satanists hate any mention of the blood of Christ. That was why Erga wasn't singing that first Wednesday night when her husband volunteered to take over the youth group. That night we had been singing, "There is power, power, wonder-working power in the precious blood of the Lamb."

Suddenly, Erga broke off.

"He's not coming," she told Dave. "He doesn't like something here, so he's not coming."

"Beanie?"

"Yes."

"Turn the lights on, Buddy," Dave called.

The room stayed dark.

"Turn the lights on, Buddy!" Dave called again.

"He's not here."

"He's out counting the money."

"Would someone please turn on the lights?"

As the lights came on, the door opened, and Pastor Gruber stuck his head in. "Sorry to interrupt, folks, but the meeting upstairs will begin shortly, and we need to have you people fill the seats in the choir. Will you come now, please?"

I was just sorry he hadn't come five minutes sooner.

Well, Dave didn't have time to tear me apart for ruining his little show. They all filed out and went upstairs.

I went with them. I didn't need my crutches anymore, so I didn't have any trouble going up the stairs to the top row. I liked being in the back where I could see everybody. Only tonight, being in the back of the choir meant that I was in front of everybody in the congregation.

A big crowd had turned out. The speaker was someone who had a radio program, and a lot of people in our town

listened to him. I was in school when he was on, so I didn't know much about him at all.

Neither did any of the other kids.

We sang like we were supposed to. We made a lot of noise, in fact.

And then he introduced the speaker, and I settled down to wait for the jokes and stories.

"Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap!"

I sat up.

"Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap!"

The second time he said it was louder than the first. He said it a third time, louder still.

"Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap!" Then he began to preach a message that would tear this church apart.

11.

My Long Walk

I looked around the church. From where I was sitting, I could see all over. The speaker, Johnny Farthing, down on the platform was facing the other way, but his words went everywhere.

He was speaking right to the hearts of all of us that just because we had a lot of people coming, just because we had a ton of young people, didn't guarantee that this was a church God could use.

"Numbers mean absolutely nothing! Gideon had thousands to choose from. He wasn't a great general because he had numbers. He was a great general because he listened to the Lord. Are you listening to the Lord tonight, my friends?"

It seemed as if all the kids in the whole church were there. Out front every seat was taken.

But in the choir the guys weren't even listening. The guy next to me was just staring at the back of Shirley's head. Charlie was playing games with his fingers. Jack was reading a comic inside a hymnbook. Bob and Fred were Indian wrestling—but not so the congregation could tell. Jill was

doing homework.

It was like they had their fingers in their ears. But every word Johnny Farthing was saying seemed to be going right through me. I could see all my sins—my lies, my deceit, my anger—right out in the open. I knew God was standing there, pointing at them one by one.

And then I looked back over my shoulder. It seemed God was pointing up to the wall behind me. That was where someone had hung a huge empty cross. A crown of thorns, slid down from the top, sat on the cross bar. I'd seen it a million times, but tonight it was all different.

I felt I had to get away. God was going to ambush me. He was going to take me out and hang me. I could see the scaffold up ahead.

"If you feel our God is speaking to your heart, I want you to listen," Johnny was saying. "Is He pointing out your sins, one by one? I want you to listen. Do you see yourself in the pigsty of sin? I want you to listen, for your heavenly Father is calling you home."

I had to get away. But where? I would have to climb over the laps of a dozen kids. Why had I sat in the very top row of the choir loft—up where everybody could see every move I'd make?

"Is He saying to you, 'Come unto Me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest'? Is He saying to you, 'My son, my daughter, give me your heart and your life. I want you to live your life for me from this night and forever'?"

He was talking right at me. I knew it. I'd been so proud that I knew the truth when nobody else did, that I was resisting the devil in Erga's sessions, that I was the true soldier of God, the eagle eye, and everybody else was dirt.

But God was showing me that any service, any standing for the truth had to be by His power and His only. I couldn't take any of the glory that I was doing a great work for Him.

"His work is His business, and it will be done His way!" the speaker was saying. "Oh, won't you dedicate your life to Christ tonight? Raise your hand right where you are, and let me know you want me to pray for you."

I wanted to raise my hand, but some kind of rope seemed to be around my arms keeping me from doing it. It was as if all my friends were looking at me and shaking their heads no.

But they were the ones who should be raising their hands. I was the good and faithful servant. I'd been trying to do His will.

It was as if this Farthing guy had his ear to my heart. I no sooner thought something than he said, "You've been trying to do God's work. You've been trying to work His will to the best of your knowledge. But it has all been you, you, you. Don't you see? It's got to be all Him, Him, Him.

"God says, 'My son, give Me thy heart.'"

He was tearing me apart.

"You know you're saved—this is not a call for salvation. This is a call for dedication. God wants your life—your whole life—everything you are. He wants you. Show Him you love Him so much you want to remain His servant forever. Won't you tell Him that?"

He paused.

"Right where you are. I'm waiting for you."

I knew everyone could see me, but I had to raise my hand.

I edged my hand up the side of my face. I'd done it a million times before. Whenever other preachers had asked me to raise my hand to give my whole life to Christ, I'd always raised one finger beside my ear. But none of them ever saw it. I wondered if Johnny Farthing would see it now.

"Raise your hand. Raise it high."

I raised my hand above my head and put it down. I couldn't look up. I knew God was still there. Waiting.

"You who raised your hands, do you mean business?" He

was talking again. But he was looking the other way. If he meant me, wouldn't he have looked at me?

"And you in the choir, you young people—do you mean business for God? Is He speaking to you? Will you stand up right where you are and show Him you want to dedicate your life to His Son?"

I couldn't move. How could I stand? I was in the top row. Everybody would see me—all my friends—all the kids I'd grown up with. They'd see me. They'd try to stop me.

"You can show the powers of darkness that you are on the Lord's side. You will be a soldier of the cross. You will be a victor in Christ. Remember, the blood of Jesus Christ, God's Son, cleanses us from all sin."

I wanted to stand up. I really wanted to. I was tired of all my hypocrisy, all my lying and deceit. I knew myself for what I was—down deep. I told myself that if Johnny Farthing said it one more time, I would stand.

"This is my last call. Won't you say yes to the Lord Jesus tonight? Won't you die to yourself and live for Jesus? Won't you come home?"

I stood.

I had my eyes shut, but I knew Buddy was looking at me—and Dave. They could see the tears in my eyes. They could see me shaking.

"And you who have stood, won't you come down here to the front and let me pray with you? While the choir sings 'I Am Coming Home,' won't you come?"

I had to go to him. He would help me. He would listen to my problems with myself and my problems with the young people's group.

I had to get to him. I needed his help!

I pushed past the knees of the guys sitting on my right. One of them circled my thigh with his two thumbs and forefingers.

"Don't go ruining things, Bean," one of the guys said. "You

tell, and we'll have your head on a platter," someone else said.

And then someone—I couldn't tell who—pinched my leg hard as I passed. I didn't care. I had to get it settled. I was getting out of that mess finally and forever.

I walked down the final steps and around to the front of the platform where Pastor Gruber was standing with Johnny Farthing. He reached out and shook my hand. The choir had stopped singing.

"Why, here's Billy Spencer," Pastor Gruber told everyone. "He's come to give his life to the Lord."

I stood to one side to make room for any others that were coming. The choir sang another verse, but no one came. I was the only one.

They ended the meeting then, and everybody moved into the aisles. One old lady came up to me with a big smile and shook my hand.

"I'm so glad you came to Jesus, sonny," she said. She gave my hand a few more shakes and then moved up the aisle to talk to a friend.

Johnny Farthing was busy talking to a couple, so I looked for some place to go until he could talk to me. I saw the door to the prayer room and went in. I knew that was where people went to get saved, and I figured dedication wasn't much different.

I stepped inside. It was just like a Sunday school classroom with chairs circled around a little podium.

I sat down and waited. My pulse had stopped beating its drumroll in my ears. I shivered. I didn't know why I was cold.

I don't know how long I waited. The seat was hard, so I sat first on one hip and then shifted my weight to the other. I waited. And waited. But still no one came.

The church got quiet for some reason I couldn't figure out. I knew the people were leaving, but every other night they

stood around talking for hours. Had the altar call taken so long that they had to rush home?

Finally, I got up and went to the door. The auditorium was pitch black. They'd all gone home—even the pastor. Didn't they know I was waiting to give my life to Jesus?

Didn't they care?

I left the light on in the prayer room and the door open and walked to where I'd stood with the pastor. All the choir seats were empty, and where the congregation sat there wasn't a sound.

"They call me out of the choir, and then they don't care," I said out loud. "They get people to make a fool of themselves in front of all their friends and then they walk out on them."

I crossed the front of the church toward the side stairs.

"Well, I'll walk out, too."

I noticed I'd left the light on in the prayer room. I knew I'd better turn it out, or I'd get in trouble. I memorized the path I'd need to follow to get back out in the dark.

I reached inside the prayer room and felt for the switch.

And then I froze.

Sitting on the same chair I'd sat on was a figure dressed in black. He had a demon's mask on, and he was looking right at me. And then he lunged toward me and shouted, "Get him!"

He had a knife.

I flipped the switch and ran.

I raced up the side aisle toward the swinging door into the foyer. They'd ambushed me. I had to get away.

I could see black figures coming toward me across the auditorium, black against black. Then the guy in the prayer room turned the light back on.

I made it through the swinging doors and flew up the stairs to the second floor. It was pitch black, but I knew the church like the back of my hand. I stumbled on the steps. I could hear them yelling behind me.

I turned left at the top of the stairs and ran down the hall. I was hoping they'd turn right. I knew if I ducked into one of the little rooms, they'd corner me. If I could get to the roof, I could take the fire escape down. But if these were guys from the youth group, they knew that as much as I did. We'd played hide-and-seek in this big building all our lives.

There was no point in taking off my shoes. They were making so much noise I didn't need to run silently. But then the noise stopped.

I didn't realize it at first and kept running. And then I realized they'd taken off their shoes. Now they'd heard me and knew where I was.

I heard a noise ahead of me. I turned to run back the other way. And then I ran into somebody. We hit hard and went down in a pile.

"I got him. I got him!"

"Shut up!" I said in a loud whisper. "He's in the balcony."

It worked. Whoever it was let go, and I scrambled away.

And then it got to me. I'd lied.

But they wanted to kill me! I knew I shouldn't have gone forward. But I'd wanted to get to someone who cared. Anybody!

I found the stairs and started down. Behind me, they were yelling, "He's in the balcony."

And then I ran into some of them coming up the stairs.

One of them grabbed me. "Back up there," I said. "They're calling from the balcony." I turned and walked with them back up a few steps so they wouldn't realize who I was.

And then I turned and ran down the stairs.

"He's going down the back stairs!" someone shouted. They came after me.

I had to get to an outside door.

I cut back into the auditorium. I could see from the light in the prayer room. If I could run across diagonally, I could beat them to the side door.

I leaped up on the back of the first row of wooden bucket seats and ran from back to back across the auditorium. I jumped down when I got to the center aisle and leaped back up on the other side. I still had my shoes on. They couldn't do this in their socks.

And then the lights came on. Someone had found the master switch. Figures in black were coming at me from all sides. But no one was in front of me.

I was just leaping off the seats when the lights went out again. I stumbled when I hit the floor and went down on all fours.

But I was scared to death. I was up and running before they could put one hand on me. I went down the stairs to the outside door four at a time. I don't wear size twelves for nothing. I dug in and ran for my life. I could hear them banging the door and screaming, "Get him! Get him!"

I ran down an alley and through a vacant lot. But they had socks on and couldn't follow. I crossed a street, ran behind a couple of houses, and cut through to the next street. This was my neighborhood, and I knew my way around.

Once I hit my street, I ran like greased lightning. No way were they going to get me.

No way.

I darted across the street to my house. The front porch light was on.

"Oh, no."

I stopped in my tracks.

A figure dressed in black was sitting on my steps. It had on a demon mask.

I could see the red hair.

It was Buddy!

12.

Mole

If this was Buddy, the guy at church must have been Dave. But why were they going to all this trouble just to silence me?

I knew the answer to that. I was the only one who knew what they, were doing. They probably got \$500 in cold cash out of our kids in that collection.

But, tonight, I had the advantage. Buddy was in the light. I was still in the darkness--out in the street. And I knew my neighborhood, and I knew my yard.

I cut through the neighbor's backyard to my back door. I quietly let myself in. I event to the phone and dialed Lieutenant Mole's number.

"Mole."

"I'm Bean Spencer, Lieutenant. You gave me your card in the emergency room."

"Your guy bothering you?"

"He's sitting on my front porch, waiting for me to come home. He's got red hair, and he's wearing a demon mask."

"Be right there."

I went out the back door again so I could watch. I circled

around front. He was still there. He was a dope to sit there in the light. Didn't he realize I could see him when I came home?

He just sat there, waiting.

And then he sat up. He heard something. I did, too. It was a siren.

Mole said he'd be right there. I didn't think I had to tell him to sneak up on Buddy. He was coming, sirens wailing and lights flashing.

Buddy was off that porch and out of sight in seconds. "Where is he?" Mole said when he jammed on the brakes.

"He went that-a-way the minute he heard your siren. Didn't you know he'd run the minute you turned it on?"

"Traffic was heavy," he said. "It was either that or not get here for ten minutes. I figured if he was mauling you, the siren would scare him off. You hurt?"

"No. Just disappointed. It's time he got what's coming to him.."

"Tell me his name."

Should I tell? What could they charge him with? Lots of guys have Band-Aids on their knuckles. Besides, I never saw him the night he beat me.

"I can't tell yet."

"Well, let me know if he bothers you again. See you, Bean."

"Hey"—I stopped him—"would you wait a second till I get in the house? That guy could come out of the bushes and—"

"I got you covered," he said. "Go for it."

I waved to him when I got the door open.

He waited till I'd shut it before he drove off.

I turned around—and froze.

Buddy was standing there in the hall. He had one hand over my mother's mouth. With the other he held her right arm high behind her back.

I turned and flicked the front porch light on and off, on and off .

"You can't get away with this, Buddy. This is unlawful entry. We had no proof against you before because I couldn't see you when you were beating me up in the dark. But we have proof now. You broke into this house. That'll be five years, Buddy. And we'll get you for assault. That'll be ten more. You're eighteen, Buddy. You're an adult. You'll be forty before you get out of jail."

I kept turning the switch on and off, on and off.

I made the sound of a siren in my mouth without moving my lips.

I told you that guy was a jerk.

He took his hands off my mom and was out the back door before a guy could say, "Scat."

My mother was laughing and crying, "Oh, Bean. I don't know how you do it. You think so fast. You're so clever."

"No," I said. "I just know that guy. It's easy when you know you're dealing with a coward."

But I knew that cowards always need revenge. They always shoot back.

Usually from behind a tree.

Or a skirt.

13.

Next Day

Hey, Bean! I hear you walked the sawdust trail." Some guys were laughing when I rode into the bike rack and reached for my lock.

"Got religion last night, huh, Bean?"

I knew it would be all over school. You get your name shouted in front of all your friends—and you the only one walking forward—and you hear about it forever. I went in the building to my locker.

"Hey, Bean! How's Jesus?"

"How was heaven?"

I didn't say anything. I just got my books and went to math.

The kids were chanting when I got to class. "Hey, Toppers! Beat the Trojans! Hey, Toppers! Beat the Trojans!"

The bell rang, but the chanting went on.

"I said, 'QUIET!'" Mr. Courtney banged the desk.

As the class quieted down, someone said, "Bean found Jesus last night."

"Yeah? Where was He?" someone else said.

"Did you let Him out, Bean?"

Everybody laughed.

Mr. Courtney looked at me. "You found, Jesus?" He was smiling.

"They had an altar call at church," someone else said. "Yeah, and Bean went forward."

"And the preacher said, 'Here's Billy Spencer, every-body. He's come to get right with the Looord.'"

Everybody shrieked. I laughed, too. It's the only way to handle situations like this.

"You found the Lord, did you?" Mr. Courtney said again.

"Hey, Toppers! Beat the Trojans!" someone began chanting again. Everybody picked it up. Mr. Courtney tried to stop it, but he couldn't. He'd been having trouble handling us all semester. But I could see the wheels going around in his head. He was pretty smart. He'd think of something.

He turned and wrote some letters on the blackboard: (-w-p) = H. The class quieted right down.

"What does that mean?" someone asked.

"This class is full of players who need clearance Thursday if they want to play, right?" He pointed to his equation. "No work? No play. That means the Trojans win over the Hilltoppers. Simple."

We got the point. He was no dumb cluck. He worked us hard that hour. But hard work was good to settle a guy down.

"I think it's great you received Christ, Bean," Mr. Courtney said out in the hall after class. "I got saved when I was about your age."

"Wow!," I said. "A Christian teacher. We've got a lot of Christian kids in this school—but some are better than others, I'm afraid. Did you know we've gotten a Bible club started, and we've been meeting every week? You want to come?"

"But I thought you just got saved."

"No. I went forward to dedicate my life to the Lord, but the

pastor went home, and nobody came to the prayer room where I was waiting."

"Did he know you'd gone to the prayer room?"

"I just thought that everyone who went forward went to the prayer room. I guess not, huh?"

"I was blaming them for not caring."

"Oh, I'm sure they cared. It probably just never occurred to them that you'd be waiting in there."

"Wow. A Christian teacher. I'd talk some more but I've got to go." I pushed the door open.

"In the girls room?"

He was laughing, but he was right. I was already in-side before his words hit me. It was too late. You'd have thought I'd entered a chicken yard. Those girls set up such a ruckus I was out of there fast.

Mr. Courtney was still laughing. "See? Mistakes happen. Like the prayer room."

He had a point, and I felt a lot better. I'd really been hurt to think that Pastor Gruber didn't care.

I saw Shirley in the hall later in the morning. "Bean, we have to talk."

"How about lunch?"

"Will someone see us?"

"How about in the lobby of the girls gym."

"See you."

I knew not many guys would be having lunch in the girls gym. We'd be as safe there from prying eyes as we would anywhere else. I just didn't want Buddy or any of his pals to see us talking together. They might beat her up.

She was waiting when I got there. "Why did you go forward?"

"God was dealing with my heart. I wanted to give Him my life."

"The kids thought you were going to rat on them." "Well, they need to be ratted on."

"Why"??

"Why? Who's side are you on? You weren't brought up this way. You know better than to worship Satan. You know what she's doing when she goes into her song and dance. What do you mean 'Why?'"

"Oh, they're harmless."

"Tell me about it," I said, putting my hand up to feel my nose. "Harmless. Hah!"

"So someone beat you up. There's a lot of guys around here that don't like you. It could have been any-body."

I began to get suspicious..

"You're different, Shirl. Who's been talking to you?" "What do you mean?"

"You threw your coat over me so Buddy and Dave wouldn't see me that first time Erga couldn't get through. And then you whispered that Buddy had Band-Aids on his knuckles. You seemed to feel what I was feeling about these jerks. But now you're taking their side. Why?"

"Well, you told me to think. So I've been thinking."

"With somebody's help. Whose?"

"No. We're not so dumb. You think all of us are swallowing everything they're saying. We're not. We're just looking them over."

"And giving them our lunch money and learning their verses and singing their dumb songs. Yeah, just looking them over."

I stood up. "OK, hug the fire. Hug it tight. But don't be surprised when you start to burn, Shirley. You can't play with fire and not be burned."

I walked out. I didn't have time for a girl that didn't have something on the ball for the Lord. If she was this blind, nothing I could do would help her see the light.

I went to the rest of my classes. Things had settled down. Oh, there were still some wisecracks from guys who had seen me go forward. But not as many as I had expected.

What I couldn't understand was why there weren't a couple of guys who would stand up for what they believed. Maybe there were some good guys in the woodwork—guys I'd find if I kept looking.

But I knew—down deep—that I wouldn't find any.

It was the story of my life. I was always running out of people I could depend on—people who would think things through and then take a stand.

I hated gutless people.

Lord, I prayed. I want what You want.

Help me always to have guts.

Even if it means I always have to stand alone.

I was glad when the final bell rang. I knew I still wasn't 100 percent even though I had run away from those killers at church. I never did figure out if they'd have killed me if they'd caught me. I was sure they had only wanted to scare me.

Well—pretty sure.

The thought of a little nap after school sounded good.

I went out and got my bike, tightened my book bag on my back, and rode off.

I had about a mile to go, but traffic was usually light. Kids were coming out of school and walking off in all directions. I waved to some I knew.

And then I saw Shirley. She was walking with her arm around a woman's waist.

I laughed. Was her mama meeting her at school every day to walk her home?

I waved as I rode past them.

But it wasn't her mama.

It was Erga.

14.

Johnny Farthing

I couldn't sleep. I had to do something. Seeing Shirley with Erga dropped the bottom out of my stomach. I must have scared her right into their hands when I told her they were watching her. I guess it was a case of "if you can't fight 'em, join 'em."

I called the church.

"Hello. This is Bean Spencer. Is Mr. Farthing around there anywhere?"

The church secretary said he'd been in in the morning but wasn't there now. She suggested I try Pastor Gruber's house.

I called there.

"Oh, hello, Bean," Mrs. Gruber gushed. "We all thought it was so wonderful that you came forward last night. It showed us how right we were to ask the Egglestons to be our youth leaders in junior high. We were so pleased to see you..."

Oh, no! I groaned inside as she talked on. Everything I do, everything I say, gets misinterpreted.

"... decided that we would give the Egglestons an increase in salary for the fine work and fine influence they are on you

all. We've even decided to put their brother Buddy on the payroll. Don't you think that's wonderful, Bean?"

"I don't mean to interrupt, Mrs. Gruber, but I would like to talk to Mr. Farthing. I waited in the prayer room for him last night, but he never came."

"Oh, Bean. How awful. I think he just thought you'd gone home when he didn't see you after the service." "Is he staying with you?"

"Yes, but he and my husband are out playing golf right now. Mondays are for pastors what Saturdays are for other folks, you *know*. But we're having guests for dinner so I know they'll be back early. I'll tell Johnny you called, Bean, dear."

"Thank you, ma'am."

I did my homework.

I set the table for supper.

Mom came home, and we talked about the problem., I told her I wanted to tell Johnny Farthing. She agreed that I had to get across to someone who had some authority.

We got the supper dishes cleared and washed and put away. I tried to help all I could since Mom is really tired when she gets home.

I finished my homework and waited.

No one called.

"It's almost nine," I said to my mother. "He still hasn't called."

"Mrs. Gruber said they were having *company* to dinner, didn't she? Perhaps he can't break loose. He'll call." He didn't call.

She went to bed.

I waited a little longer, and I went to bed.

Lord? Don't You want anyone to know? What'll I do about this mess? Can't You find me someone who will listen?

No one called the next morning before school.

I left and went through my day. It was a day like all the other days. All work and no play. I tried to think of a plan of attack. But my mind was blank.

I got my bike lock off and was kicking my leg over when I heard my name. I looked up.

"I was hoping I'd run into you here."

The man was Johnny Farthing.

"They told me you rode your bike to school. I figured I could catch you here. Can we go somewhere and talk?" I looked around. "The cafeteria is closed."

"Oh, we don't need to eat anything. Isn't there a bench? We can sit and—"

I pointed to the tennis courts. "They've got benches over there."

"Fine. Lock your bike up. Let's go over there." I locked up and took my book bag off my back.

"I looked for you after the service the other night. Mrs. Gruber said you were waiting for me in the prayer room. I didn't know you were there. And I'm terribly sorry, guy. You must have thought I didn't care."

I nodded.

"I'd gone to bed."

"I figured."

We walked through the door in the fence and sat down on the bench. Guys were practicing their tennis, making their "pop-pop" sounds as they volleyed back and forth.

"The Lord's been working in your heart?"

"Yeah. I really want His will in my life."

"You showed that Sunday night. It wasn't easy to come down in front of all your friends."

"Yeah."

"Did you have any questions about dedicating your life to the Lord?"

"No. You made it very clear. I know what's involved."

"You know that moment by moment prayer is part of living the Christ life?"

"Oh, I pray all the time. I couldn't do anything with-out the Lord's help."

"Are you reading your Bible every day?"

I nodded. "Maybe not every day—not because I don't want to, but some days I'm up and running before I have a chance to even think."

"What about feeling guilty?"

"I know I don't always do the things I should and a lot of times I do the things I shouldn't."

"We're all like that, but we can confess our sins and know that He will be faithful and just to forgive them."

"Yeah. I'm glad of that."

"Anything else you want to talk about?"

I gave him a long look. Could I really trust him? I knew I had to try.

"It's our youth group."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. We've got new leaders."

"Yes, I met them. Mrs. Gruber had them over to dinner last night. They were there until quite late. That's why I couldn't call."

My heart sank to my socks. "Did they mention me?"

"Come to think of it, they did. We laughed about a notion Dave said you'd gotten into your head—something about his being a warlock and his wife being a witch. Where do you get ideas like that, Bean? These aren't the Dark Ages."

My heart went out through the soles of my shoes. Dave had cut me off again. He was making it a point to get to people ahead of me and convince them he was right.

I was so disappointed. I just wilted where I sat.

And then I got mad. I stood up and pointed my finger at him. "You guys are so trusting. Why don't you ever-think? You believe the first person that gets to you, and you just swallow everything everybody says without testing it without checking up on it. You don't know those guys. You don't know what they're doing."

I was so upset I started to cry. I turned away, and then I

came back at him. "They *are* witches. They *are* demon possessed."

He laughed. "Those are the exact words he said you'd say."

I couldn't talk to this guy. I had to get out of there. I turned and just bolted for my bike.

I got the lock off, and I was down the street before you could say your name.

I didn't even look back.

I was so furious I couldn't even cry!

15.

Peter Piper

Like I said, I couldn't stay away. I had to keep my eye on everything Dave and his apes were doing. I couldn't let them get away with a thing.

The next Sunday night, Shirley sat beside Erga. I went down to the front row. Nobody sat beside me. No-body talked to me. Nobody even sat near me.

Buddy came in with Kari. They went over to the piano and looked at some songbooks. When he thought most of the kids had come in, he got up to start the singing.

"Hey, guys, we got some new songs."

He got whistles and cheers.

"These are new words to some old songs you already know, so you won't have any trouble learning them." More cheers.

"First one is this." He began to sing "Rock of Ages" as Kari played, but he'd changed the words. It was awful.

But the guys loved it. They had it memorized the first time through.

And then Buddy taught them some others I wouldn't even want to repeat. They were the melodies of our good old

Christian hymns, but the words were either dumb or dirty.

Like I said; the kids loved them and laughed and blatted them out like drunks in a barroom.

These guys were clever. Anybody walking past out-side our door wouldn't hear the words. He'd just think we were singing the good old hymns.

Well, they took the collection, and Dave announced the party Wednesday night. "We have a ding-dong specia?, that will really ring bells in your head, guys."

"What? What?" Everybody wanted to know.

"A teenage witch! She's out of this world!"

"Wow! Whoopee!!" They yelled and cheered like crazy.

Then Dave had memory review, and we had more confessions. Some of them were really personal. They were nobody's business but the person who was telling about it. We didn't need to know their private sins.

But Dave thought it was wonderful. He was really into it, encouraging them and telling them how brave they were to share those important things.

He didn't tell anybody how to get rid of the guilt. He didn't mention Johnny Farthing's meetings. He just seemed to lap up the evil like a hungry dog.

"Anybody got any questions?" he asked when the last person sat down.

"Yeah," I stood and called out. "What does 'Peter-Piper-picked-a-peck-of-pickled-peppers' mean?" But I mumbled the words so they'd sound like the ones Erga said.

There was a shout from the back of the room. Erga stood and started waving her hands and moaning like she did when the demon thing came on her before. She started chanting. And then she started talking in a low voice that wasn't hers. It was the demon's. I knew it. He'd never spoken through her before.

The kids were wide-eyed. TV horror movies were nothing like this. They were fascinated.

I sat down and put my head in my hands. "The blood of Jesus Christ, God's Son, cleanses us from all sin," I said out loud, over and over again. And then I sat up and said it out loud so every one could hear me.

Erga stopped her carrying on. The demon had left her. She was limp.

Dave was furious. He pointed his finger at me and said, "I don't want you to ever do that again, you hear? Don't you dare say Erga's words out loud again. Those are secret words. They're Erga's secret words to call to her spirit friend. They're not your words. They're hers. You use them again, and I'll get that spirit to get you and bring his friends to get you too, you hear?"

His eyes were wide like he was scared to death himself.

And then I sensed that his attitude toward me was changing. He hadn't liked me before, and I'm sure he drove Buddy to my house to beat me up. But now I saw real hate in his eyes when he looked at me. I was the only one around who was fighting him. I was the only one who was any threat.

Kari began to play "Hey! Yo! Come alive," and the kids started singing it softly. That seemed to calm Dave down, and he became more like his usual self.

"I have an announcement, guys. Those of you who have nothing better to do and who are staying for the evening service need to sit in the balcony. The high school group will be in the choir tonight. OK, meeting's over. See you around."

But nobody moved.

They just sat there, singing. They were still wide-eyed with the terror they'd experienced. They'd been in the presence of an evil spirit, and they knew it.

They didn't know what to think.

Dave changed the song so that they were singing "Into my heart. Into my heart. Come into my heart, O spirit."

"No!" I stood up and shouted. "The blood of Jesus Christ,

God's Son, cleanses us from all sin. The blood—"Get him! Get him!" Dave shouted.

He was furious again. I had to get out of there. But, there was no exit up front. I knew I couldn't ever make it to the doors in the back of the room.

I had to do something.

I looked around. A little door in the side of the platform led down into the boiler room under the church. I knew that place like the back of my hand. I'd played in this church for years.

I ran to the platform as Dave and Buddy and some guys started coming down the aisles to get to me.

I got the door open and scampered down a ladder on the inside. I felt my way along the passage in the dark. I knew how many steps to take before I came to another ladder, and I knew how many steps it had in it. I knew where the switch was, but no way was I going to turn it on. And I knew Buddy and Dave had no idea where the switch was. I didn't know about the guys with them. If they'd grown up in the church, they knew. If not, I was safe.

I waited a while to see if they were following me. I felt like the phantom of the opera.

When I was sure they weren't coming, I made my way through the boiler room and out the other side, walking quietly among the adults who were slowly coming into the auditorium.

I followed the crowd. If I could just bury myself in the middle of the congregation, there was no way those jerks could find me.

I felt a hand on my arm.

"Not in here, Bean."

I looked up. An usher had reached in to stop me.

"Teens meet upstairs. We're reserving downstairs for adults and visitors. Didn't Dave announce that in your meeting?"

I smiled. "Yeah."

He led me back down the hall to the stairs.

I thought I'd just go home. There was no way I was going to sit with that crowd in the balcony. But the usher was taking me personally up the stairs.

"I know the way."

"I know you do. Dave just told us to make sure that all you kids got to the balcony. I'm just doing what I was told."

That Dave thought of everything!

The usher led me into the balcony and delivered me to Dave, who was motioning everybody to seats.

I tried to sidle behind him. I wanted to sit on the far side near a door.

"Important people down in front, Beanie," he said, pointing me down to the seats by the rail.

"But I want to sit—"

"I said down in front. Buddy!" he called to his henchman. "Make sure Beanie gets down in front."

Buddy grabbed my arm and rushed me down the stairs to the front row. It all happened so fast even I didn't know what was going on. But he got me against that rail, and he was pushing me over!

I was losing my balance. The rail caught me mid-thigh. I was flipping over it!

I reached back—for something. Anything!

I caught the tail of his coat.

I screamed and heard a great "Oh!" from all the people down below.

Buddy was trying to peel my fingers off his coat, but I was around behind him and he couldn't really get at me. I looked down. People had frozen.

"Help me!" I shouted. "Help me! I'm falling!"

I guess my shouting got the ushers. I sensed- they were clearing out the row right under me. They were trying to get the people out in a hurry before I fell and hurt someone.

I could feel my grip slipping off Buddy's coat. And then the coat came loose. He'd unbuttoned the front and was letting me pull the coat off his back. I tried to reach for the rail, but my fingers couldn't grab it. I screamed as I fell.

Strong arms reached up and caught me. They swung me out toward the aisle to break the momentum of my fall.

I thought they'd hug me and thank the Lord that I was safe, but they grabbed me by the clothes at the back of my neck and rushed me right up the aisle and out the door into the foyer.

"And just what do you mean by creating a scene like that?" One of the ushers was shaking me. "This is church. This is no place to play! What do you think we are here? Play school? This is *God's* house."

Someone came running down the stairs. It was Buddy!

"That's my coat," he said. "He grabbed my coat."

"Apologize to this man, Bean," the usher said, shaking me again. "And you the son of Pastor Spencer. You know better than to behave like this in church. What do you say for yourself?"

"I'll take him," Buddy said. "He's in our youth group. We're sitting upstairs."

I was scared to death. "No, don't let him take me. He's the one who pushed me over the railing. He's—"

"Don't worry about him," Buddy said. "He's just scared. He could have hurt himself playing around like that. He's always been a joker, hasn't he?"

The usher laughed, "Yes, Bean's just full of tricks. But he should know better than to—"

He was going to hand me over to Buddy.

I wrenched free and escaped down the hall. I had to get out. But up ahead I saw some of the kids on Buddy's side. They were covering all the exits.

Where could I go?

There was a broom closet down the hall. Inside was a

ladder up into the pipes that heated the upstairs classrooms. I'd been up there a million times, too. I ran for the door and scooted inside and up the ladder.

Buddy came after me. His hand caught the light switch inside the door, so he could see where I was and where I was going.

He came up after me.

I don't know where the usher went. I guess he thought Buddy could take care of me, or maybe he had to go and help take up the collection.

I climbed higher in the pipes.

He kept coming.

Like I said, I'd spent hours playing in these pipes. You don't spend your whole life in one church and not know everything there is to know about it. And I had one advantage over Buddy. I knew which pipes were hot.

I swung and turned and scooted from pipe to pipe, but he kept coming.

He learned soon enough that there were hot pipes up there, but he didn't know which ones. I got so interested, watching to see if he'd burn himself that I forgot to keep my escape route open.

Then he put his hand down on a hot one and burned it.

I laughed.

And I turned the wrong way.

He saw at once that I was cornered, and he came right after me.

We were about twenty feet above the cement floor and back in a corner.

"I'm going to kill you for that," he said.

He kept coming, but something had changed. His smile was fixed on his face again like a mask. It was like he was possessed. His eyes were bright—and crazy.

I backed into the corner and straddled a big pipe.

As he came closer, I went over a hot pipe to the next one, a

smaller one, and scooted to the far end.

He came parallel to me, reaching out to get me.

He was right beside me, and I cringed as far away as I could get. He reached over to grab me, and I slammed his hand against the hot pipe and held it there.

It was boiling hot, and he screamed.

He snatched his hand away and tried to stick it in his mouth. It was really burned, and he wasn't thinking of anything else.

I scooted back down the pipe, over to a bigger one, back the way I'd come in. I got to the ladder and scampered down. I should have turned out the light when I got to the bottom, but I knew he wasn't going anywhere, and I wasn't mean.

An usher was running down the hall toward the closet as I came out the door.

"And just what is all that noise? It's disturbing the meeting? Why can't you learn that this is not a play school, Bean?"

I held the door open.

"It's Buddy. He's burned his hand on the pipes. He needs help. Want me to call the rescue squad?"

"You keep out of this. You've done enough mischief for one night." He pointed to another usher. "Jensen, make sure this boy gets to the front door and gets out. Tien go call the rescue squad. From the sound of things, we've got a badly burned person to take care of."

"Thanks, Mr. Jensen," I said. "You saved my life."

"I don't know what you're talking about," he said as he gave me a push.

I didn't even try to explain. I just took off and flew for my life.

I laughed as I ran. Everything Dave and Buddy had tried to do tonight, the Lord had botched up for them. I had a nice feeling.

Lord, You're there.

*You're working.
You're on Your throne.
And I'm on the winning side.
I laughed again.
I love it, Lord.*

16.

Shirley

I had no trouble sleeping that night. I didn't have to do the worrying. I was doing God's business. He'd take care of the details.

I got a glimpse of Shirley in the hall between classes. She looked like she'd been up all night. Her hair was all tangled, and she had a sad look on her face. She didn't see me. The look on her face made me wonder if she saw any-body.

I should have followed her. But I had to get to my own class on time. It never occurred to me that I could be late just once.

The look on her face kept bothering me all through class. I knew I had to talk to her to find out what was wrong. I couldn't just give up on her.

I went to the attendance office to see if I could get her schedule of classes. "I need to find Shirley Donohue. Can you tell me her next class?"

"English. Room two twenty."

I went upstairs.

She wasn't in the room.

I waited in the hall for her to come.

She didn't come.

The bell rang, and the halls cleared, and still she didn't come.

I walked down the hall to a monitor. "Seen Shirley Donohue?"

"What are you doing out of class?" the guy said.

"I got to find Shirley." "Why?"

"She looked sick when I saw her in the hall. I got to get her to the nurse."

"Maybe she's already down with the nurse." "Thanks. I'll go down and see."

"Not without a pass, you don't."

"But look. She's sick. It's important."

"You her brother?"

"No."

"Related?"

"No."

"See you around."

"I can't even go down and come right back?" "Nope."

"You running a concentration camp here?"

"Get!"

I got.

But I was worried about Shirl.

I didn't see her in school on Tuesday—or Wednesday. I called her house after school, and her mother said she wasn't feeling well so she'd kept her home. She said she was going to let Shirley spend that night with Mrs. Eggleston because she seemed to have a calming influence.

"Oh, no!" I said. "Don't let her go. Please, don't let her go!"

"Oh, I don't see why not. A nice Christian older woman like that can be a very good influence on my Shirley.

"But Mrs. Eggleston's not a nice—"

"Now, Bean, I've heard that you don't have a very high opinion of the Egglestons. But it so happens that I do. Nothing you can say can poison my mind the way you've

tried to poison other people. In fact, Shirley has already left the house. She should be over there by now."

I slammed down the receiver.

How can I get through to these people, Lord? I prayed.

I had to do something. But who did I have who was on my side?

I thought through the events of the last several weeks. Wasn't there some one person who cared? Some-one I could count on? Someone who would come and help me?

I paused.

Of course.

I did have someone. There was one person who had come with sirens screaming and lights blazing when I called him. I dialed his number.

"Mole."

"Spencer here."

"Hi, Bean. He bothering you again?"

"Oh, man, I need you," I said. "You're the only one who'll listen to me. You're the only one who takes me seriously. Can I come over and talk?"

"Sure. Where are you? I'll come get you."

"I'm at—" I paused. "Look, I don't know if someone is watching my house. I don't know what these guys might be up to. Is there some neutral place I can come and talk to you?"

"You like pizza?"

"Love it."

"You know that pizza parlor down on Grant? Grant and Seventh? I'll meet you there in twenty minutes."

"You wearing your uniform? You driving your police car?"

"You no want?"

"No. I don't want. I don't want to give these guys any warning."

"OK. You no want, you no get. I'll come in plain clothes. See you."

Lord? Have we turned the corner?

I left Mom a note that it looked like we were making progress. I told her I was going to meet Lieutenant Mole for pizza and to go ahead with supper without me. She would know I was safe if I was with Joel.

I jogged down to the place. I got there first and found a booth back in a corner where no one could get behind us and listen.

A waitress came over with a menu. "You want to order?"

"I'm waiting for a friend. We'll order when he gets here."

She brought two waters and two rolls of silverware wrapped in red-checked napkins.

I drank some water and sucked an ice cube while I waited. But I had a problem. I didn't know if Joel was a Christian. If he wasn't, I didn't want to get his eyes full of crummy Christians when he should get his eyes on a loving Savior.

He came in. I didn't recognize him. He looked like nobody. He had on a black tee shirt that had "Varrooom" written across the front. He wore jeans—he just looked like everybody else.

"Hey, man. I wouldn't have recognized you in this disguise if I didn't know it was you."

He laughed. "You ordered?"

"No. I waited for you since you're paying the bill." "Good idea."

He called the waitress and ordered a large with everything on it. "And I want a bowl of black olives. I got an olive lover here." He pointed at me.

"Coming right up, and it's all free if I'm not back in five."

"Go for it," he told her. Turning to me, he said, "Hey, you look good. You heal fast. You were just pulp not too long ago."

"It took a while, but I'm OK."

"That guy out after you again?"

"He has been. But I got him good. He chased me through a

boiler room and burned his hand—bad." "Oh? Where did this happen?"

"Church."

"Bats in the belfry, huh?"

"What's a belfry?."

"Belfry is the bell tower. That's an old time expression—means someone's crazy. He's got 'bats in the belfry' instead of a brain."

I smiled. "How long you been on the force?" I had to have a little more time to think. Could I trust this guy? Was he a Christian?

"Nine years. I majored in police science in college. A job opened upright after graduation. And I get all the fun and excitement of vice and crime in the big city here."

I laughed. Sunny Hills was no big city.

He talked about his wife and kid for a while.

And then the girl was back. "Here you go. Four minutes and thirty-nine seconds."

"Hey, a record!" Joel said.

"Hope. We cracked the four-minute barrier last week. And we had to fly low to do it, too, I'll tell you. What'll you have to drink?"

We told her, and she left.

"You want to say grace, or shall IT" Joel asked. "You," I said with my outside voice. My inside voice was saying, *Hey, Lord, You're sure full of surprises.*

He prayed a good prayer.

"I didn't know you knew the Lord."

"Hey, I've been shot at, nearly scalped, beat up, crashed into. There's no way I'm going to face all that alone. A cop needs the Lord more than anybody."

I got all limp. "Man, I just don't believe it. I've been moaning around about not having anyone I could talk to, and the Lord had you out there waiting the whole time. He's sure great."

"You got to level with me, Bean. What's going on?"

He handed me a big slice of pizza, and we dug in. So we talked with our mouths full. That's the way men do when they've got a lot to say and a lot to eat.

I told him the whole story, and he couldn't believe it. He said what Johnny Farthing said, "Hey, this ain't the Dark Ages. This is now!"

I told him about the seances, the first chase through the boiler room, my fall from the balcony, and my flight across the pipes when Buddy said he was going to kill me and burned his hand instead.

"And you can't go to the pastor?"

"He's too busy. And, besides, Dave's gotten to every-body first. People believe the first one who tells them something. Then they challenge the second one with the information they got from the first one. They don't like to change their mind so they keep believing what the first one told them."

"You're pretty smart to have figured that out. But, you're right. That's the way people are."

"Well, you're bright enough to see why."

"Yeah. But if a kid can prove he thinks—"

"So why didn't you turn Buddy in when he beat you up before?"

I told him about how Buddy broke in I figured out from the way all the parents were clucking over Mr. and Mrs. Eggleston that it was the parents who were blinding Pastor's eyes to the truth. Evidently all the kids had gone home spouting their memory verse and talking about the new song and the confessions. Their folks were seeing some excitement their kids had never shown before. What they saw they liked, and that's what they told Pastor. The Egglestons were "God's gift to the church," they said.

"OK, let's join our hands and bow our heads." And then he started the singing, "Into my heart, into my heart, come into my heart, O spirit...."

Someone grabbed me by the neck and arm. Fingers were digging into my neck. I was being marched to the door. A hand turned the knob. I wrenched my head around as he threw me out.

"But Pastor Gruber wants us to stay," Buddy said quietly. "He likes to have us here. Look how many more kids are coming now than came before."

"I'm sorry, guys," Dave said. "We're just not getting through tonight. We'll try it again next week. Lights, please."

I saw him nod to an usher, and I felt someone take me firmly by the shoulder and arm and start walking me out into the hall.

"Well, he has an inquiring mind, and he's helped a lot of people solve the problems that have been bothering them. Usually it has to do with sports teams at school."

A big crowd had turned out. The speaker was some-one who had a radio program, and a lot of people in our town listened to him. I was in school when he was on, so I didn't know much about him at all.

Pastor seemed quite pleased. Having so many kids in the choir showed the world how big and important our church was.

The kids were chanting when I got to class. "Hey, Toppers! Beat the Trojans! Hey, Toppers! Beat the Trojans!"

"Well, since it wasn't for salvation, they might not have thought to go in there if they didn't see you standing around."

We were walking down the hall. I wasn't looking where I was going. I thought I was outside the door of my next class.

I got the books I needed out of my locker after school and went out to get my bike. Kids were milling around. A couple were talking to a man standing there. I didn't look twice.

"And then you called yesterday. Mrs. Gruber didn't remember to tell me until her company had gone home, and by then it was eleven o'clock."

Buddy's howls and screams for help were sounding through the church. The first usher went into the closet and closed the door behind him to muffle the sound. The second one took me past Buddy's henchmen and down to the front door.

"Pastor's a great man. So is Johnny Farthing. But they're just too trusting. They trust adults more than they trust kids."

"No proof. I didn't see him in the dark. No judge is going to send him up when not even the victim saw him do it."

to my house. I told him what I said and how Buddy got out of there fast.

He laughed. "You got to be a cop when you grow up, Bean. You think like a cop.

"I like to think," I said.

"Well, you sure do a good job. Here, let's finish this up.

I was almost full. "Wow! I haven't eaten this much pizza since—I can't remember when. This has been a real treat. Thanks a lot for inviting me out."

"My pleasure. So what's on the docket for tonight?"

"Those Egglestons have gotten the kids away from church every Wednesday night. Dave's told Pastor that they have to have time for fellowship and planning away from the church. And Pastor's gone for it. I don't like it be-cause this takes the kids away from the good lessons Pastor's been giving in Bible study on Wednesday nights. We need *all the Bible we can get."

But I have a feeling something's coming up. My friend Shirley—"Shirley Donohue?"

"Yeah. You know her?" I didn't wait for an answer. "Well, anyway, she looked like the walking death when I saw her in the hall on Monday. Her hair was a mess, and she had the saddest look on her face. I didn't follow her—I should have. I called her mom this afternoon, and she said Shirley wasn't feeling very well so her mom had kept her home.

"And then she said that she was going to let Shirl go over

to the Egglestons tonight because Mrs. Eggleston had a calming effect on her. I told her she shouldn't let Shirley go, but she said she wasn't going to let me poison her mind the way I'd tried to poison other peoples' minds about the Egglestons. Shirly had already left."

"And you think there's going to be trouble over there tonight?"

"I'm really suspicious. Things can only get worse when you've already had seances in your youth group and you've gotten the kids to do a lot of kissing and drinking and stuff."

"So what do you think we should do?"

"Go ourselves, and keep our eye on them."

"Even though they've tried to beat you up and flip you off a balcony and kill you, you want to go keep an eye on them? You sure you don't have bats in your belfry?"

I shrugged. "You can't send a string of squad cars. You have no proof that anybody's done anything wrong."

"Right."

"But if I can get in with a plainclothes policeman who's carrying his badge and who knows what to do in emergencies and who could call in the troops, I don't see how they could hurt me any."

"You got guts, Bean."

We figured the guys would be getting to Egglestons in about twenty minutes.

We wanted to be there early so Dave would know I was around. I liked it that I made him nervous. It would make him more nervous because he wouldn't know who Joel was.

"How'll I introduce you to Dave? He might know Joel Mole's on the police force."

"Call me Steve Stephen's my middle name." "Joel Stephen Mole, huh?"

"Yup. My parents called me 'Joel' because it means 'God is almighty,' and they wanted Him to be almighty in my life. And they called me 'Stephen' because it means 'a crown.'"

They told their friends that the Lord had crowned their year with His goodness when He gave them me."

"Christian parents, huh?"

"I'm the sixth generation of Christians in my family," he said.

"What last name will I tell him?"

"Tell him Wahlstad. That was my grandmother's name."

By this time we had turned off 460, gone down Speedway to Park and were turning right on Helen Street. Cars were already parked along the street. There were a lot of trees around—it was almost woodsy. The backyard had woods in it.

There were kids all through the house and out on the back deck. More were milling around in the yard. The Egglestons had put out a big spread, and the kids were devouring it.

"Hi, Beanie," Dave called out as we walked into the house. "Who's your friend?"

Joel Stephen. I couldn't lie. "Friend of mine."

"Any friend of Beanie's is a friend of mine." He made a laughing sound that wasn't really a laugh. "Food's out here, guys. Come and get it."

We pushed our way through the crowd. Nobody said hello. They just ignored me as if I wasn't there.

We went out onto the back deck. I couldn't look food in the face after all that pizza. But I took some pretzels and a glass of drink. For some reason I smelled it before I drank it.

I nudged Joel. "Smell this."

He smelled his. It made his eyes light up. "Mm. Kickerool!"

He was acting the part just like he was one of us kids. He was blond and thin. You really couldn't tell how old he was.

"You in high school?" Dave came up and asked Joel.

"Isn't everybody?" He laughed. "Nobody ever gets out of high school." He nudged me with his elbow and giggled the way a high school guy might do when he was nervous about being asked his age. It seemed to satisfy Dave. He moved off

to talk to some cute girls.

"Did you get a whiff of his breath?" Joel said. "No."

"He's been drinking a lot of his punch."

"Hey, everybody," a voice said. It was Buddy. "Don't fill up on this stuff. We're going to barbecue down in the yard."

The guys all groaned. They'd had their dinner at home, and they'd been filling up on the snacks.

And then Buddy was face to face with me. "Buddy. Joel." I introduced them. "Buddy's a senior."

"You in high school?" Buddy asked.

"Isn't everybody?" Joel tried his same line with him.

I helped him out. I was afraid Buddy might get suspicious and tell Joel he'd never seen him at Sunny Hills.

"Yeah, he told Dave that nobody ever gets out of high school. You graduating in June, Buddy? You going in the ministry?" I gave Joel an elbow. "Buddy's great on taking collections."

Our red-head didn't like being laughed at. He was wearing his arm in a sling.

"Hurt yourself?" Joel asked him.

"Pretty bad burn," he said. No more, no less. But he did look at me with cold codfish eyes. I had the feeling that if Joel hadn't been there, he might have tried to slip a knife between my ribs. He had no love for me—at all!

"OK, everybody." A call from Dave came up from the woods. He was standing beside a bed of hot, glowing coals. "Let's move on down here."

Kids began to move down the stairs of the deck to the lower level.

Joel took a flat flask out of his belt and emptied it. Then, trying not to look suspicious, he poured the contents of his cup into the flask. He screwed the lid on and tucked it into his belt again. He was looking around as if this was something he did every day.

"Move on down," Dave was saying.

We moved on down.

I saw Dave eyeing Joel. I got the feeling that, since he didn't trust me, he didn't trust him either.

He had the kids crowd in and sit down on the grass among the trees. It was a great setting. The woods were cool, almost too cool. A wind had picked up. Girls pulled their sweaters tighter around them. Kids huddled in close around the bed of coals, trying to keep warm.

Buddy started singing some of his songs, and soon he had the guys singing and laughing. He taught them some camp songs that were funny. He really knew how to get a group of kids to relax and have a good time. Joel and I were sitting off to one side. I wanted Dave to forget we were there. And I wanted to be near the stairs in case we had to get out of there fast.

Dave got up. "Now, this is supposed to be a planning meeting as well as a meeting for fellowship—so let's plan." The kids clapped and cheered a little.

"Circus is coming up, remember. Old Mrs. Boring Guard is going to take us to see the clowns and the animals so we can have a good time." He said it like he was a spoiled little kid making a smart announcement.

The kids laughed when he made fun of Mrs. Beauregard's name. Most of them knew who she was—the church kids, anyway.

"The Goobers are going to come visit us-2. The kids shrieked with laughter when he did that to their name.

I thought that was a wicked thing to do. They'd never take Pastor Gruber seriously again.

"They're coming next Sunday night to visit our meeting."

The kids went, "Boo!" They didn't want any of the adults to see what they were actually doing.

"Sorry about that, kids, but we'll just sing some of the old songs out of the hymnbook like you used to do before you found our new dimension. Speaking of our new dimension,

we're going to show you something tonight you've never seen before. It's one of the secrets of the Far East, and it requires you being very still and reverent. First, we'll sing our favorite songs, and then one of the girls is going to do something that will prove to you we've got the power that is going to transform this world. And you're in on the ground floor!"

Everybody shouted, "Yay," and whistled.

"What's she going to do?"

"She's going to walk across these hot coals in her bare feet."

"Ooooooh," everybody said. They'd heard of things like this, but none of us had ever seen it.

"OK, Buddy, let's have our songs."

He got up and led off in the "Hey! Yo!" song and then "Into My Heart." He had them sing that second one over and over and quieter and quieter, building a mood of mystery.

I looked up. The moon was showing through the bare limbs of the trees. I nudged Joel and pointed. It was a full moon. He was crouching, ready to spring into action to stop any funny business.

When they'd sung on a bit more, Dave stood and said, "All right, everybody. Be very quiet now. Don't move. Don't say a word." And then he called mysteriously, "All right, Erga. We're ready. Come ahead. Bring down the teenage witch of Sunny Hills High!"

The kids all started to cheer as two figures moved out of the house and started down the stairs near us. One was Erga, wearing a flowing red dress. She was holding a fiery torch that was shining brightly.

Behind here came a figure wearing a billowy white dress. Her hair was combed back straight and shiny. She was smiling and almost dancing down those stairs. She had bare feet.

It was Shirley!

She passed us going down the stairs. "Hi, Bean," she said.

Her tone of voice was childlike and innocent. "Hi; Joel Mole. What are you doing here?"

"That's Joel Mole," she said to Erga. "He's my cousin. He's a lieutenant on the police force."

The minute she said, "Police force," there was a shriek from all the kids. They knew what they were doing was wrong. The last thing they wanted was to be caught in a police raid. Everybody got up, screaming and shouting, and ran for their cars.

I stood there and couldn't stop laughing. They were reacting like girls do when you toss a mouse into a girls' rest room. I had to hold onto the rail, it was so funny.

Of course, Dave and Erga and Buddy were raging. I'd broken up their party again. Only this time they couldn't do anything about it because I had the police.

"I don't know what you folks were planning to-night," Joel said. "Maybe it's good that Shirley recognized me. Had you gone ahead with her walking over those coals, we'd have had a mass arrest here. I would have called in the troops with my walkie-talkie, and you three would have spent your life in jail. You folks had better watch your step, is all I have to say. Come on, Shirley. Get your shoes on. You're going home." He grabbed her arm.

She wrenched back. "You let go of me. I'm staying here."

"You are not staying here!"

He picked her up. She was kicking and screaming. "You put her down!" Dave and Erga were shouting. Joel stopped in his tracks. "Shut up, Shirley." She shut up.

"And if you folks interfere with me," Joel said, "count on it. I'll have the squad in here so fast you won't know what hit you."

"You don't have anything on us," Buddy sneered.

"I don't? How about the sample of this brew I got.

Serving alcohol to minors, and I don't have anything on you? Hah! Try me."

I'm no coward, but I didn't want those three walking behind me on our way out of there.

I walked in front of Joel.

I'm not that dumb!

17.

The Grubers' House

Where are you taking me, Joel Mole." Shirley was mad. "I want to go home, and I want to go home right now."

"You'll do what I say, or I'll have your hide." "You wouldn't touch me."

"Try me."

"I hate you. I hate you. I hate you." She was screaming now.

She tried to grab his hands off the steering wheel.

He pulled over to the curb.. "You behave, Shirley Donohue, or I'll crawl right back there and reduce you to ashes. You should be glad I rescued you from those kooks. You were going to walk through hot coals? You never would have walked again in your entire life. You're a fool, Shirley. An absolute fool!"

She started to cry.

He turned back into traffic. I could tell he was driving right to Pastor Gruber's house.

Thank You, Lord, I said in my heart. Now we'll get some action.

He pulled up in front. "You're getting out here." Shirley saw where she was. "I won't."

"Oh? You won't?"

"Don't you touch me." She got out. She still had no shoes. But she didn't look as much like a pixie as she had when she was dancing down those stairs.

Joel rang the bell.

No one came.

"What time is it?" I said.

"About nine."

"Well, they should be along any minute. Service is over at eight thirty. The only thing that would hold them up is if they got a lot of people coming forward."

"What service?"

"We're having a week of special meetings with Johnny Farthing, the radio Bible teacher."

"Bean went forward Sunday night," Shirley said. "Little prissy had to run tell the pastor about the bad little chill'en in the youth group." She was using that same spoiled brat kind of talk that Dave liked to use when he was poking fun at someone.

"They believe everything Dave tells them," I said to Joel. "He hates me as much as he hates Pastor Gruber and Mrs. Beauregard. Only he can't trick me the way he's tricked them."

"That's 'cause Beanie thinks," Shirley said in that same nasty tone.

Joel grabbed her chin. "If you'd have done some thinking, young lady, you wouldn't have gotten yourself in the fix you're in. I'm going to see to it that your pa trounces you. He should get after your mother too. Letting you go off with those kooks! Wait till I give her a piece of my mind."

A car turned into the driveway. The Grubers stopped by the porch when they saw Joel standing near their front door and Shirley and me on the steps.

"Yes?" Pastor Gruber didn't recognize Joel out of uniform.

"Lieutenant Joel Mole, sir. We need to talk to you and your wife. It's urgent."

"Oh, dear," Mrs. Gruber said. "Oh, dear. It's urgent." She came around the car. "What is it, officer?" Then she recognized Shirley and me. "Oh-oh. Is it a morals problem?"

"No, ma'am. Can we go inside?"

"Of course," Pastor said. He unlocked the door and stood aside. "Come in."

Mrs. Gruber turned on the lights and led us into the living room. "Can I get you something to drink?" "No, ma'am. Please sit down."

We all sat down.

"My friend Bean has been trying to warn you for weeks of a terrible condition that has arisen in your church. One way or another and for one reason or another, you've put him off. He's turned to everybody he thought might be able to help him. He's talked to you, Pastor, and to you, Mrs. Gruber. But you won't listen."

"But "

"Please, ma'am. Let me finish. He's talked to Mrs. Beauregard. He's talked to Mr. Farthing."

"But he has his own youth leader to go to first, " Pastor said.

"No, he doesn't. He refuses to submit to the authority of that liar."

Pastor Gruber stood up. "You're talking about a trusted member of my church staff. He is not a liar. He's an honorable, trustworthy man. My wife and I have come to love him and his wife and brother. They're fine people, and I won't stand here and have you say one word against them."

"Hooray!" Shirley crowed. "Good for you. We love Dave and Erga and Buddy. Don't let Joel take them away from us."

Mrs. Gruber went over to her. "Don't you worry, Shirley. We'll stand up for them through thick and thin."

"Why, they've both sat in my home this week and given me glowing testimonies of their faith in Christ," Pastor said. "We trust those people like they were our own family. Why, we've even given them a key to our house so they can come in and use it any time they wish."

Joel wasn't going to be put down.

"I have every reason to believe that you have been too trusting, sir."

"Why, Johnny Farthing has the same confidence in them that I do."

"As I said, sir, I believe you folks have been too trusting."

"And just what do you base this charge upon?"

"I was at Mr. Eggleston's house tonight. A number of young people from your church were there."

"Yes, they meet there every Wednesday for fellow-ship and planning."

Joel reached into his belt. He took out the flask. "I'd like you to unscrew the top of this bottle and take a smell. I took a sample of the punch that was being served."

Pastor unscrewed the lid and put the bottle under his nose. "Are you sure?"

"I'm sure. And serving alcohol to minors is a crime, punishable by law."

"Someone must have spiked the punch."

"It could be that one of the youngsters did it without Dave's knowing it. We'll have to take that into consideration. But what is a youngster from your youth group doing at a church function with a bottle of this stuff? Is this what you teach them?"

"Oh, dear, no," Mrs. Gruber said. She took the flask and smelled it. "That's terrible," she said.

"And I would like to bring to your attention the feature of the evening." He took a step back and swept his arm back as if he were presenting Miss America. "Miss Shirley Donohue was going to walk barefooted across a bed of hot coals as the

special feature of the evening. Mr. Eggleston introduced her as the 'Teenage Witch of Sunny Hills High.'

The color drained out of Pastor's face.

"Shirley?"

"Oh, I could have done it. Erga has been helping me get ready for a week. She said it was a matter of mind over matter. She said it would be a demonstration of the power of the god."

"But God doesn't ask people to walk on fire to demonstrate His power."

"You weren't listening close enough, Pastor," I said. "She didn't say 'God.' She said 'the god.' It would be a demonstration of the power of the god that the Egglestons have been teaching us to worship."

"Worship?"

"Oh, yeah," Shirley said. "She's a great god. She loves us. She comes to dwell within us when we sing her song." "Her song?"

"We sing her song. It goes, 'Into my heart. Into my heart. Come into my heart, O spirit.' We sing that a lot before we have the special word."

"Special word?"

"Yes, she brings us a special word from the angel. We've memorized a verse from the Bible that tells us to worship angels."

"Worship angels?"

"Yes. Revelation twenty-two eight—'And I John saw these things, and heard them. And when I had heard and seen, I fell down to worship before the feet of the angel which shewed me these things.'"

"But that's out of context," Pastor said. "The passage doesn't teach that at all."

"That's what I tried to tell them," I said.

"We memorize lots of verses," Shirley said. She scratched her head. "Let's see. This one's from Chronicles. I can't

remember where it's at, but it has a deep spiritual meaning, Dave says. 'At Parbar westward, four at the causeway, and two at Parbar.' One girl told her mother that was an Old Testament missionary verse—like Jesus sending the disciples out two by two. Dave loved that. We all laughed."

She swung her feet up beside her on the couch. "And then he taught us Luke eighteen twelve—'I fast twice in the week; I give tithes of all I possess.' He told us to go without lunch two days a week and to bring the money and put it in our offering. We give a ton of money every week. Dave's good for this church. None of us ever used to give money before."

"And what does the church do with that money, sir. Joel asked.

"This is the first I've heard of it." Pastor passed his hand through his hair. "We've never asked the children for money. It's a rule of the church."

"Well, they get a bag full every week," Shirley said. "This is getting worse and worse," Pastor said. Mrs. Gruber was wide-eyed and speechless.

"Yeah," Shirley said, "and, let's see. We had Communion, and Dave used real wine—only Bean wouldn't drink it so they poured it up his nose. It was wild, man, wild." She laughed some more. "Those Egglestons are great. They're why all the kids are coming out."

The look on Mrs. Gruber's face changed from disgust to pity. She had covered her mouth with her fingers and was shaking her head as if she was saying, "No."

"And did you know that the Ablington's oldest daughter had to get married? They always said she'd gone to Cincinnati to take care of her sick grandmother. But there's not a word of truth in that. Betty Lou, their youngest daughter, told us all when we had our confession meetings. And we know that the reason the Binghamptons have so much money is that he dipped into the treasury of the bank before he married Mrs. Binghampton, be-cause she said she'd

never marry a poor man. And—"

Pastor Gruber stood to his feet. "Officer—"

"There's more, sir. Much more."

"I'm sorry. But I can't take any more. I'll call a meeting of the deacons and elders in the morning. It's late now. Thank you for coming."

He escorted us to the door.

He shook Shirley's hand. "Thank you, Shirley, for being so open."

He shook my hand. "Thank you, Bean. I'll owe you a very sincere apology if these things turn out to be true." His hand was leading me through the door and outside.

"If these things turn out to be true?" I repeated. "But they are true. They really are!"

"As I say, I'll look into them in the morning. Good night."

"Good night, Pastor Goober," Shirley called from the curb. Then she broke into hilarious laughter. "Good night, Pastor Goober."

"I see what you mean, Bean," Joel said. "I see what you mean."

He shook his head as he started the car.

"It's hopeless," he said.

"Hopeless."

18.

Thursday Night

A 11 day I wondered what was going on at church in the deacons' meeting. I imagined they called in Dave and his crew.

Oh, Lord, I prayed, help them to see through these guys.

I knew those men were godly men. I knew they wanted the best for the church. But none of them had been in our meetings. None of them had run into anything like this before. How many churches have you heard about where a witch and a warlock come in and take over the youth group and turn it into a coven?

I knew Pastor would tell them about Shirley and me. But we were just kids. These men would look Dave in the eye and ask him to explain. He would look them back in the eye and deny everything.

And I knew who would get believed. Dave!

Sure enough, Pastor got up in the service that night and said, "We have some pressing business that we must attend to before we continue these revival meetings with our dear brother Johnny Farthing."

There was a murmur of interest through the congregation.

"A charge has been made by one of our young people that we are harboring a witch and a warlock on our staff. This young man, who comes from sterling stock and whose father at one time pastored this church, is charging that Mr. and Mrs. David Eggleston. and Mrs. Eggleston's brother, Buddy Horner, are bringing witchcraft into our church."

People looked surprised and shocked.

"Our Board of Deacons and Elders had a special meeting this morning. We reviewed the charges of Police Lieutenant Joel Mole and our own Billy Spencer and Shirley Donohue given at the pastor's home last night.

"Then we called in the Egglestons and conferred with them. They have denied every charge. They say they have been misunderstood. They say that young Mr. Spencer has plagued and badgered them the entire time they have been serving our youth in this church."

He was interrupted by loud talking as people just had to tell one another how they felt.

"The Egglestons have asked for time in this meeting to allow testimonies from the young people who have been in their charge. And we members of the Board have agreed that we will listen at this time to any testimony from youngsters who wish to speak. Is there anyone? We've set up a microphone down front. Anyone who wishes to speak may come to that microphone right now."

I hadn't been told about this. No one called me or told me anything about it.

But kids got up from all over the sanctuary and came forward. They lined up and stood there waiting their turn. "My name is Ldatitia Inglebarger, and I'm in ninth grade at good old Sunny Hills High. And I want to say that I never did attend church much before the Egglestons came here. I had better things to do, I felt, than sit in church for hours Sunday morning and Sunday night and Wednesday night. And then the Egglestons came and changed all that. Church

is now so exciting to me I can't wait to come. We have Bible memory and songs and hymns and devotions. It's made such a difference in my life. I just love it."

I was sitting up near the front. She turned and gave me a hateful look when she finished. She sat down, and the next kid went to the microphone.

"My name is Randy Hillary. And like Latitia said-I didn't have much interest in church before. But Dave and Erga are the greatest. They take an interest in us. They're. the best thing since—since milk."

Everybody laughed.

He sneered at me as he passed.

A short boy pulled the microphone down to his mouth. "I'm Charlie Brown—2"

People laughed.

"And I'm in seventh grade. We don't have a Lucy here, but we've got Mrs. Eggleston, and she's a real great lady. I've learned a lot from her. I don't think I'll ever for-get her. She's better than Lucy any day."

More laughter and applause.

"I'm Angela Doyle," a girl said. "I'm in eighth grade. And I really enjoy our sessions because we get to know what's going on inside of each other. We all know that kids have problems--with our parents and with our teachers and with one another and with ourselves. Well, we get to tell one another about our problems, and I find thatwell—I get a lot of good out of sharing what's on my heart with other people. And I get more good out of finding out that the problems I'm having are the same ones they're having. I used to think that I was the only one in the whole world who had problems. And—well—I better sit down now because I like to talk a lot and, if I don't sit down, you won't get to hear anyone else besides me."

Another guy spoke. "My name is Charles Artress. I've been going to this church almost all my life. And I don't mean to

say anything against Pastor's teaching and all that, but—well—it never reached my heart until Dave and Buddy and Erga came. Now I like to come to meetings where we get right with the god and memorize. And we go out together and have fun and parties. I may even want to be a preacher when I grow up if church is really like this."

A lot of people burst into applause when he said that. He gave me a dirty look when he sat down.

One after another, the kids went forward and talked. I listened closely and took notes.

After each one spoke—it looked like they all were programmed to do it—they looked at me and made a face. They wanted everybody to see how much they disliked me and what I was charging.

Time after time the congregation burst into applause after the glowing testimony of one or another. It broke my heart that not one kid stood for the Lord. You'd think there would be one!

When they were all done, the congregation enjoyed another round of applause.

Pastor got up and walked to the podium.

"Thank you, young people, thank you. My, haven't our hearts been warmed as we've listened to these glowing words from these happy young people?"

More applause and cheers.

"I really do appreciate the concern of our young brother Billy Spencer, especially since his family has been woven into the heart-strings of this congregation for, so many years. But I think the testimony tonight has been overwhelming in the support of our youth minister and his family."

More applause and cheers.

Pastor turned to a group of deacons and elders on the platform. "Gentlemen, you've heard this testimony. What is your verdict—"

They were going to vote! Wasn't anybody going to say

anything on the other side?

"I'm sorry, Pastor," I said, rising. "But —I mean— don't you usually try to listen to the other side before you decide? Isn't it the Christian thing to do? To hear what I have to say?" I knew I had them. They had to let me speak.

I stood at the microphone. "A lot of my friends—and some of them are kids I've known all my life who have grown up like me in this church—a lot of them have talked tonight. They've told how happy they are now that the Egglestons have come. They look so good and true, and I hope they really are. But I listened closely. Did you?"

No one said a word.

"I listened closely, but not one of them talked about the Lord in their testimonies. Isn't this a church? Don't we talk about the Lord here?"

"I listened closely, but not one of them said he read his Bible more or prayed more since the Egglestons came.

"Not one of them said he was a better witness for Christ now that the Egglestons are in charge of our youth group.

"Not one of them has said he's trusting Christ as Savior as a result of their ministry.

"Isn't this part of going to church? Aren't we here to learn to love our Savior more? Shouldn't our testimony be about how much more we love Him now than we ever did before?"

"Yes, I've grown up in this church. I've gone to Sun-day school in every room upstairs. I was saved in this church. I dedicated my life to the Lord last Sunday in this church. I love—" my voice broke —"I love this church."

I had to pause a moment while I got myself under control.

"But I love the Lord Jesus more than I love this church. And I can't stand to see Him made fun of any-more. I can't stand to see His Word made fun of and used to prove wrong things. I can't stand to see our kids ex-posed to wickedness and evil and demons--"

The place fell apart when I mentioned demons.

"We object!" Dave and Erga came forward with Buddy. "We have a right to speak just as much as this kid," Dave said. "He has no right to stand there and falsely accuse us in your presence. We all know he can put on an act. But he has no right to stand here and lie to you good people tonight. These are sheer lies.

"And I would like to point out that not one of these many young people who spoke here tonight has mentioned anything about demons or evil spirits. And I challenge this punk yes, I said punk—to prove what he's been saying."

The place fell apart again.

Lord, I prayed, I need you now.

Pastor stood at the pulpit. He didn't seem to know what to do. He had a battle royal on his hands, and he didn't like church fights. He was young. He was just out of seminary. He'd never had to face this before. But he had two sides here—two sides pulling in two directions—and he had to do something about it.

He looked at me.

"Bean? Do you have anything else to say in response to what Mr. Eggleston has charged just now?"

I was sure he was hoping I wouldn't and that I would just leave. But I had to say something.

Lord? I prayed.

And then I smiled. I remembered.

"Yes, Pastor, I do. I have a few words to say. Just eight, as a matter of fact. But before I say them, I would like to tell you all that, when this matter is settled, you should know it will take years for us young people to re-cover. Your neglect of us has driven us into this."

I was really upset. My voice was quivering.

"And, now, let me show you what has been going on every week in our youth meetings under the ministry of the Egglestons. Will Mrs. Eggleston please come up?"

"Pastor," Dave interrupted. "I'd like to point out that this

boy isn't well. He was in the emergency room recently, and he has not been himself—"

I interrupted. "Pastor, ask him who put me there."

"I ask you to forbid him from continuing with these outrageous charges against us who stand here before you as the Lord's servants—"

"Which lord? Not the Lord Jesus," I said.

"Did you hear that remark, Pastor?" He turned to the people. "Did all of you hear that remark? That shows you that this boy is a master of sowing discord among brethren. That is something the Lord hates. It says so in the Bible."

"Where?" I asked him quickly. "Where?"

"Well, it's—" He paused and then shrugged. "I know it's in there."

"Yes, Pastor, it's in there. It's in Proverbs six. I learned it in Sunday school here in this church. And it says, "These six things doth the Lord hate: yea, seven are an abomination unto him: A proud look, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood, an heart that deviseth wicked imaginations, feet that be swift in running to mischief, a false witness that speaketh lies, and he that soweth discord among brethren."

"It is not sowing discord to tell the truth. These people are guilty of all seven of these things the Lord hates."

I turned to face Dave and Erga and Buddy and called out her mumbo-jumbo, "Peter-Piper-picked-a-peck-of-jickled-peppers." And faster. "Peter-Piper-picked-a-peck-of . . ."

It was more than Erga could stand. It sounded like I was calling the name of her demon, and she had to respond. She began to chant and moan. "Peter-Piper-pickedi-peck-of ..." She swayed and moaned and shrieked.

And then a deep voice began to come out of her mouth. She was powerless to stop it. Dave tried to put his hand over her mouth, but she forced him aside. She seemed to have the strength of ten men.

Dave and Buddy tried to pick her up and carry, her. they

couldn't.

They tried to push her up the aisle to the door. They - couldn't.

People screamed and ran for the doors.

Pastor's face was white. He had to hold onto the pulpit to even keep standing.

I had to do something. I ran up the steps of the platform and went for the mike.

"While this lady gets herself under control, let's sing 'There Is a Fountain Filled with Blood.'" I started to sing. A few people picked up on it and then more. Erga groaned and shrieked even more when we mentioned the blood. She began frothing at the mouth and throwing herself about. The ushers tried to get her to move out of the sanctuary, but she tossed them aside as if they were matches.

But she couldn't stand the sound of the hymn singing—especially the mention of the blood of Christ. She began screaming and running, wild-eyed, up the aisle. People shrank away from her in fear as she got near them.

She finally got to the door and went out into the hall.

I noticed that the kids who had spoken had also gone out. They realized their ship had sunk the minute Erga started her show.

We finished singing, and the congregation just sat. No one said a word. People were in deep shock. None of them had ever seen anything like this before.

Johnny Farthing came to the platform and took over the meeting.

"Oh, God," he prayed. "We're speechless at what we've seen. How blind we've been. How gullible we've been. We have not tested the spirits as our young friend Bean has."

He started to cry.

"Thank You, Father, for this young man. For his courage to stand up for his convictions—for Your convictions—for Your truth."

He held me and wouldn't let go. "Oh, Father, we're here to celebrate revival. But we need more than revival. We need Your forgiveness. We need opened eyes. We need convictions of our own. We need Your truth grip-ping our hearts. Exalt Your Word here tonight. Exalt Your Son. Capture our hearts."

He didn't preach very long. But he called for some deep soul-searching. He included himself, because he had believed the Egglestons without questioning them. He said that a lot of mischief needed to be made right, and he suggested that people use the microphone. He told them not to confess private sins, just public ones—ones that involved others in the church.

Pastor Gruber made right for the microphone.

"I am the one most at fault," he said. "I welcomed these people and installed them in office when they first volunteered. Of all people, your pastor should have been alert to their spiritual credentials.

"I confess to you the sins of my eyes. They looked so good that I wanted to hire them on the spot. So I did. But I have a far worse sin to confess and ask your forgiveness for." Tears rolled down his cheeks. "It's the sin of neglect. I neglected our young teenagers. They went for months without a leader. I thought I was doing all I could when I made the plea at each meeting for someone to take over the sponsorship of the group. I felt I was too busy to do it. So I shoved my responsibility off on the first ones to volunteer. Forgive me, young people." He began to weep.

Mrs. Gruber went and stood beside her husband. She put her arm around his waist and waited for him to get control of himself.

"I bear the same responsibility—and more," she said. "I discouraged my husband from doing anything about the youth group problem months ago because I felt he had extended himself too far. In one way, I was right to do that

because he cannot do everything himself. But I was wrong in that we didn't turn to you. We could have hired a Bible institute graduate who loves the Lord and loves His Word. We see so clearly when we look back."

She took a sobbing breath. "I'm as guilty, young people. Please forgive me, too." She put a handkerchief to her face. Her shoulders were shaking.

Mrs. Beauregard went up and put her arm around Mrs. Gruber. She reached for the microphone. Johnny Farthing took it off the pedestal and handed it to her.

"I don't know where to begin. I saw the whole conflict weeks ago when Bean was searching for someone to share his burden. I took him home with me and, unknown to him, invited, the Egglestons to come and confront him. He became so upset, he became ill. I thought it was his manners, but it was—his heart."

Her mouth began to work as she fought to keep from weeping. "But I have an even greater guilt to confess. I've been proud of the influence I've had among the church women. I've heard some of them say that, if Mrs. Beauregard believes something, it is right. I believed in the Egglestons, and I was wrong. Oh, so wrong."

She turned to me. "Bean, I'm so sorry that I wasn't there to listen and help when you needed me. And, young people, I haven't been there for you either when you needed an older person to talk to and confide in."

She paused for a few moments. "Pride is a deadly sin. I confess it, and I ask the forgiveness of all of you."

She and the Grubers sat down.

Other adults lined up at the microphone. Shirley's mother was one of them. She could barely get through her little talk. And she apologized to me for the way she had talked to me on the phone.

What got to me was when the young people got up one by one and confessed how willingly they had gone along with

the evil that the Egglestons had brought in. They confessed to loving it to loving sin and hating righteousness. They knew it might take a long time for them to recover from all the evil they had consented to. They apologized to Pastor for the way they had behaved, and *they* apologized to me.

Shirley thanked me for watching out for her and rescuing her. Then she broke down and came sobbing over to me. I stood and held her until she calmed down. She gave me a quick kiss on the cheek before she sat down. People murmured their approval, and some of them clapped.

Revival began in our church that night. The service lasted way past midnight. A lot of tears were shed at Maranatha church that night.

A lot of tears.

19.

War and Peace

I thought Pastor Gruber would ride the Egglestons out of town on a rail, covered with tar and feathers. But that's not the way he works. At the Friday night meeting he told us he and Johnny Farthing went to them to see if he could lead them to the Lord. He said they threw him and Johnny out of the house. He said their language was vile and that they were out of control.

He said he couldn't ask the police to arrest them because he couldn't prove they had put the liquor in the punch. He also had no way of knowing how much money had been in the collection. Since Shirley Donohue had not been injured, no law was broken there.

He said the church should continue to pray for the Egglestons and Buddy and to warn others about them.

He said if we learned to think and care more for one another and let this experience cause us to love and depend on the Lord more than ever before, then we could survive. Anything short of that and we should close up shop and go home.

We all assured him we wanted to go on with the Lord.

And Mrs. Beauregard, to show how sorry she was, set up scholarships at a Bible institute for any young people wanting to study God's Word. She said they would be the "Bean Spencer Scholarships" because she wanted kids to learn to stand on the Word and on their convictions the way I had done.

Wow, Lord, I prayed. I told You You were wonderful.

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