

The Fighting Son

By

Dannie Mac

Preface

My name is David. I am a country accountant who specializes in agricultural accounting. I live in the house my grandfather left to me with my wife and three boys.

The church I attend is only a short walk through the woods behind my house. My office is a nondescript bungalow about a mile from where I live. It is a one-room open space that spans four hundred square feet with a desk in the back corner and a bathroom in the other corner. The front half holds a kitchenette and sitting area.

My wife helps with scheduling appointments from the comfort of our home. During tax season, she will work several days a week at the office for clerical needs.

Not long ago, I finished the book about the unnamed man – the first book in this series – and published it. At the time of my first encounter with Rod, the protagonist of *this* story, I had sold fourteen copies of *The Nonentity*.

Dannie's book, which you may have read – the second book in this series – was in the editing phase. My editor was in the process of softening the wording to make it more desirable for the reader without changing the meaning of the story, as well as working on a book cover that would match the story's theme.

It was late September when a man appeared before me. He was simply *there* ... seated in the chair on the other side of my desk. I know for a fact I never saw him walk in or sit down. His arrival startled me, although it was not the first time I'd experienced having someone appear in front of me out of nowhere. I guess it is just one of those things one can never get completely used to.

After impolitely staring at him for a moment, his face became vaguely familiar. Taxing my brain, I searched for where I had seen this man before. After about ten seconds of mind-scrambling contemplations, I remembered a corn field in the western part of Ohio. He was the one who had questioned me as to my knowledge of the unnamed man and then pointed him out to me. I remember his disappearance, leaving no trace of footprints on the dusty lane where I had been standing.

I don't know if he read my mind or saw the acknowledgement on my face, but he looked at me and said, "You do recognize me."

He introduced himself as Rod, a friend of E111517, and mentioned that he calls the unnamed man Dad – just as Dannie did. We sat and discussed life in general for a few minutes before I offered to take the talk someplace other than my office. I suggested a park down the road, but Rod had other ideas.

He paused for about a minute, holding his finger out for me to wait, then said, "The room is clear of all listening devises. Dad is able to search this building through my mind and confirm there are no bugs to hear our private conversation."

I offered him a cup of coffee and he, being a military man, didn't turn it down. The Keurig took only a minute to brew and I fixed a cup for each of us. We made ourselves comfortable on the couch.

His first question was, “Why are you writing these stories? Are you a good writer?”

“I am such a good writer that I became an accountant,” I answered sarcastically. “However, through the experience of writing two previous books and with a bit of help from friends, I have become adequate at writing stories instead of simply reports to customers.”

“What is the difference, in your opinion, between stories and reports?” Rod asked.

I thought for a moment. “My reports are concise and to the point and carry all the information required to make a good decision for business or personal use. Writing stories require more depth of emotions and amplification of attitude to properly bring out the characters in the book. Hopefully, this brings enjoyment to the reader.”

“But why you?” Rod had a good point.

After pondering for a moment, I replied, “You see, I am part of the story and have an interest in its outcome. The part I played was much smaller than yours or Dannie’s, but it is important because I was the first person saved by the man you call Dad. It was my stupidity at age ten that started ‘Dad’ on his lifetime of helping other people out of very hard places – including you. I am an integral part of the story and care very much that the truth about the heroic deeds of the unnamed man and his friends comes out.”

“What about my anonymity from the world?” Rod looked worried about this aspect of the story, and I understood his concern. Not many people in this world walk around with supernatural powers. After all, we do not live in the Marvel Cinematic Universe.

“That is not my job,” I replied. “I am just the narrator. I suppose your Dad and Bricker are the ones who make people disappear from the Internet. I have checked to find anything on E111517 and Dannie, only to find no evidence of their existence. I am guessing that anything you tell me, the unnamed man will find out and Bricker will remove it from existing on the Internet.”

Rod agreed to give me his story. Although *The Nonentity* included a good capsule of his life, Rod’s personal tale is much more interesting. It took only a month to gather the information and put it into story form, as Rod would visit weekly. The following sixteen chapters tells the story of Rod’s life until now.

Chapter 1: Rod's Beginning

Rod's father passed away when Rod was five years old. El11517, whom he now considers his Dad, came into his life at age twenty-eight.

Rod's biological father moved to America, where he met Rod's mother, who was a second-generation American. He started earning money by finding items of quality thrown out by suburban residents and selling them in other parts of town. He eventually opened a small storefront buying and selling miscellaneous items. With hard work, he started selling new products from his store, making enough money to afford a family.

Rod's father had a minor surgery and was given painkillers after the operation. He became addicted to the drug and, when he could not buy them legally anymore, he found an illegal source. The illicit drugs dominated the last two years of his life, which left him unable to care for his wife and young son. In the end, the self-medication stole his business, family, and eventually his life.

Rod's mother tried to convince Rod that his father had been an honorable man, but Rod's only memories were of the hate and pain inflicted upon them due to his father's addiction. Despite her difficult marriage, Rod's mother never spoke badly of his father and wouldn't allow Rod to speak disparagingly against him either.

Rod knew his father had family in Mexico, but his mother never spoke of them, either good or bad. Several months after his mother had passed away, Rod heard a knock at his door. His father's younger brother from Mexico stood there. Rod's uncle, Enrique, explained that Rod's mother had called for help when his father was addicted to the drugs, but Enrique was in no position to help.

Enrique told Rod that his father had previously sent money to him in order to help him start a business, but the business was not doing well at the time that Enrique had received news about his brother's addiction. The uncertainty of the company required him to stay with it or lose it. He did not have the money or the time to travel to America to help his brother and for that, his heart grieved deeply. He had not realized that the addiction would claim his brother's life.

Enrique told Rod that his father really was an honorable man. Addiction runs in the family, he explained, and he knew it could destroy the lives of even the best people. Enrique had lost two brothers to drugs and was raising the second father's children as his own. He explained to Rod that he was trying to teach them to avoid drinking and drugs because of the damage they had already caused to their family. Despite his best effort to educate the next generation, however, one of the young teenagers was already succumbing to the influence of drugs.

Rod's uncle explained that, without Rod's father's influx of cash into his business, he would have lost everything. Because the business succeeded with great help from Rod's father, Enrique made him half owner in the business.

From the first peso of profit, Enrique had split the profits in half and stored Rod's father's portion in a bank. Enrique had come to tell Rod that bank account now belonged to him.

"There is a quarter million dollars in the account," his uncle said, begging him to take it.

“It was your father’s and now it is yours.” Since that time, Rod had received biannual payments of roughly forty thousand dollars from the profits of the company.

Enrique warned Rod a second time about the negative effects of drinking and drugs. Rod never drank and never did drugs as a solemn reply to his uncle’s heartfelt plea. Even in the army, when other soldiers went to the bar and drank up their pay, Rod would drink only ginger ale or coffee. Rod would always be the designated driver for a large group when they celebrated too much.

Before his uncle’s arrival and the surprise bank account, however, Rod had a challenging childhood. Life was not easy for him and his mother after his father’s death.

Rod started working at the age of ten, earning a meager existence to help his mother pay for the house and his upbringing. Doing odd jobs in the neighborhood such as cleaning garages, picking weeds, and mowing lawns earned money for the house. Rod soon gained a reputation for doing good work and neighbors would seek him out to help with the chores around their house.

Whenever his mother asked about his schoolwork not being done, Rod would answer that grades do not pay the bills. His mother was not in a position to complain, as they did need the money to survive.

When Rod was fifteen, a local landscaper named Miller hired him to work after school, with the provision that his grades remained above a “C”. He required Rod to work from six to nine p.m. every weekday cleaning the equipment for the next day. Miller taught him minor maintenance and repairing of equipment and paid Rod more than minimum wage. His work for Miller brought a regular income into the house, making life affordable for him and his mother.

Miller had a son named Fred, who was a year ahead of Rod in high school. They would hang out together occasionally, tossing a football back and forth. Landscaping is challenging physical work, and Fred suggested Rod try out for football his junior year. Not knowing if he had time for playing football and supporting his home, Rod initially declined. Hearing his response, Miller offered to augment Rod’s hours to fit around the football schedule just as he did for his own son.

Rod’s junior year was his first time playing organized football, so he played little throughout the season. Fred was a captain of the team and led the team into the playoffs while playing both offense and defense. Before the last game of the year, the team voted Fred most valuable player for his leadership and skill on the field. Being the lead captain, he awarded the small plastic trophy to himself in a very poignant moment among the boys on the team.

At the beginning of summer practice for Rod’s senior year of football, the coaches asked the seniors to stand and address the underclassmen. There were various similar-sounding goals regarding winning the state for their division of play. However, Rod’s goal struck a chord with everyone. His desire was to be like Fred and win the MVP voted by his teammates for being the leader and player they admired most.

He played the outside linebacker in his position as defense, while his offensive position was tight end. Rod spent the summer trying to master both, in an attempt to fulfill his dream of following Fred’s legacy of leadership.

The start of the season saw three other seniors with five years of experience chosen as captains, leaving his dream unobtainable. However, Rod continued to work on excellence and would offer help for anyone else searching for the distinction. The team finished the season at seven and three, missing the playoffs by just one point.

Before the last game, the team voted unanimously, making Rod a captain and named him MVP of the team. The last practice before their last game, the team presented him the C designation for his jersey and then had him present the trophy for MVP to himself. Like Fred before him, the outpouring of love and respect coming from his teammates filled his eyes with tears, making it difficult to speak.

Several smaller colleges offered Rod a walk-on invite to play football, but no scholarships. Each time, Rod thought “grades do not pay the bills.” In spite of his passion for the game, instead of applying to join a college, he joined the army at the end of the summer. The civil service test put him in a position to choose any field offered by the army. Rod chose Special Forces because of the long-term commitment and because it sounded challenging.

Upon starting the difficult training, Rod found himself wondering about God and why would he allow anyone to grow up the way Rod did. While growing up, Rod’s mother would take him to church every Sunday. He had attended Catechism for an hour, then service for an hour. Rod did not recall understanding much of anything from the classes. He would often just zone out during the services. Now, however, he began searching for answers.

Rod visited the Company Chaplain and asked him the question on his mind about his challenging childhood. Giving him a Bible, the Chaplain suggested Rod search for the answer there. He told him that, if problems remained, he should try praying to God. Rod thought of Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz* having to discover the answer to her problems on her own and followed the pastor’s advice.

There were several important test dates eliminating inferior competition from the training program and Rod survived all of them. Passing the final test, his brothers in the program went out on the town to celebrate, yet Rod remained behind to self-reflect. It was during this reflection that the Holy Spirit entered his soul and everything Rod read and heard about God finally began to make sense. Meeting with the Chaplain again, Rod thanked him for his advice in helping him understand his heart and, ultimately, God.

Although Rod was an elite soldier, his conditioning and training continued without the option of ejection from the program. It was a year later when, during another quiet, reflective night, Rod felt his feet leave the ground. To his amazement, he found himself hovering above the camp. Rod spent the next few nights practicing his flying while pushing the limits of his newfound ability.

Not long afterward, there was a contest announced to see which soldier could navigate a scrutinized field without the observers spotting him. There were marksmen on scaffolding surrounding the field with high-powered air rifles in communication with the spotters. A high-powered air gun would shoot a paint ball, painfully striking the losers who failed to remain

unseen. The man who could make it across the furthest without revealing their position would receive an extra week's furlough.

Rod won this challenge by a wide margin and the video showed him advancing to the lowest cut grass before his movement became apparent. Knowing his position at all times, it became apparent to Rod that he was invisible during most of the contest. That evening, when his brothers in arms left for the city, Rod stayed behind to verify his invisibility. Standing before a mirror, Rod willed himself to be invisible and his reflection disappeared.

Several weeks later, they were running the obstacle course and Rod fell a step behind the leader. As they approached the eight-foot wall, Rod sprang over the wall in one awe-inspiring bound and passed him with ease. After winning the course, it became apparent his special abilities provided him a lift over the wall. Instead of being excited, though, Rod felt like a cheater. Rod was always aware of his ability for super-human power and made sure not to taint his victories with supernatural power.

Unsure of the reason behind his power and therefore the proper use for it, Rod kept it hidden from his brothers in the army. The band of brothers had several ops to unidentified countries around the world. On the first occasion, the authorities scrubbed their mission because there was a political settlement after the operation. The second time, they overran a stronghold before the enemy had even realized they were attacking the compound. One of the opposing combatants suffered a broken arm while struggling to set off the alarm and he was the only casualty. The rest of their overseas missions were a show of force in a political maneuver of superiority.

Through these missions, Rod's brothers looked to him as the leader of the group. There came a point that, when any group decision needed to be made, the team looked to him for guidance. Upon saving the life of one of his brothers, they officially made him the leader with a special recognition. It was Rod's job to make sure everyone did their jobs at the highest level and bring them all back safely from every mission. It was a responsibility Rod took to heart.

Chapter 2: Rod Comes Home

Rod's team was working on strategic planning in a simulated battle when a captain from the CO's office interrupted them. It was rare and unusual for anyone to disrupt their training and Rod suspected a major conflict.

However, the captain pulled Rod aside and told him about his mother's death the night before. He presented him a pass and two-week leave to attend his mother's funeral and put her affairs in order.

Rod arrived back home the same day although it was too late to visit the morgue. Early the next morning, the coroner told Rod that they were performing an autopsy on her because she was too young to die so suddenly from a heart attack. It would take another two days before they could release the body.

Although concerned about this turn of events, he was relieved the delay would give him time to make the necessary arrangements.

Outside the coroner's office, Rod met his mother's priest, who told him about the plans she had prearranged, which the church had already set in motion. The women's auxiliary was taking care of all the funeral arrangements and gave Rod time to handle the few financial requirements she left behind.

A detective contacted Rod after the funeral and assured him that his mother had, indeed, died of natural causes. The man sounded a little disappointed it was not murder, and then explained she had been receiving threats from the gang across the street. Rod felt guilty that he had not been around to help in such a dire situation. His mother had not even told him anything was going on.

He asked the detective for more details. The man told Rod that the gang had wanted her to vacate her home so they could use it as a foothold on the east side of Broadway. The police had given her special attention the previous couple of months because of the intimidations from the gang. The leader of the gang was a very smart young man and would not allow anyone in his gang to participate in stupid crimes that the police could prosecute. The detective had been hoping this death might have been a lead to end the gang's terror over two neighborhoods.

That evening, a young woman was trying to clean her gutters on a two-step ladder with a kitchen broom. Glancing outside, Rod saw her nearly fall while stretching to reach the pile of debris.

Rod hollered out at her to wait, and gathered up his mom's extension ladder along with a bucket of smaller tools. He crossed Broadway to help. After cleaning her gutters of years' worth of leaves and twigs, he watched as the water flowed swiftly through the gutter.

She brought him a glass of lemonade as a thank you for helping her and they talked about her beautiful baby boy, whom she had brought outside to watch the activity.

While putting the tools back into the bucket, Rod heard her ex-boyfriend walk up to the house. He could feel the animosity emanating from the man's heart as he asked what Rod was doing at his girlfriend's house. The young woman backed away in fear.

“Cleaning them,” Rod replied, pointing at the gutters. “Which is something a boyfriend should do instead of a stranger.”

The gangster puffed out his chest in an obvious sign of dominance and started a jealous rant, demanding that Rod not come to her house again.

In that moment, Rod could feel the apprehension coming from the angry stranger as he sized Rod up. Although, they were the same height, Rod’s chiseled physique made the gangster look emaciated and delicate.

Meanwhile, to Rod’s surprise, the very essence of the gangster’s being was presenting itself for Rod to read; his thoughts were clear and resounding in Rod’s head. As Rod packed the ladder over his shoulder and prepared to leave without a fight, the gangster’s thoughts turned to harming the girl in a violent outburst of his crazed mind.

Rod turned a fiery stare at the gangster, which burned to the very core of his heart and he repented from his imagined thoughts of hurting the girl.

That evening, while Rod was praying, the gangster’s thoughts blossomed in his mind with a vivid stream of his intentions. He realized, to his surprise, that the gang leader who had been intimidating his mother, and the jealous ex-boyfriend he met earlier that day were the same person.

It was revealed to Rod that the gangster’s underlings were required to present a detailed plan to rob or injure another person. The gang leader would revise the plan as needed to keep the underlings out of the law’s reach. Since everyone reported to him, Rod now knew everything the criminals had planned for the night, including a plot to throw a brick through Rod’s window in defense of their boss.

Rod waited outside his home to see if the two young hoodlums would appear with bricks, fulfilling his premonition, or if the vision was simply a figment of his imagination. Not long after sundown, two brick-carrying thugs appeared in his yard as the vision had revealed, and Rod descended on them like a hawk after its prey. Rod’s sudden appearance behind them sent them running across Broadway in front of a semi-truck. The chilling sound of the truck screeching to a halt with the brakes moaning from the strain still resonates in Rod’s head.

The other crime for the night was to rob the convenience store at Fourth and Broadway. The gangster advised the robbers to wear black hoodies closed tightly, only revealing their eyes. He reminded them to wear gloves and to wait until several customers paid with cash. The gang leader knew that several businesses in the area closed at nine and the convenience store saw an uptick in revenue after the closing of the town center.

Flying out after the robbers, Rod spotted them in the parking lot across from the convenience store. They had a bird’s eye view of the customers entering and exiting the door with the cashier in plain sight. By ten o’clock, the store appeared empty and the armed robbers drove across Broadway to the store.

As they pulled into the parking lot, Rod dialed 911 on his cell phone to report a robbery at the store. The two in the store had just pulled their guns on the unsuspecting cashier when the police

cars blocked their driver and car in the parking lot. The cashier fell to the floor at the sight of the police cars and the two gun-toting robbers gave up without a fight.

The newspaper reported that 911 operators could not trace the cell phone that warned them that night and the police had a reward for the caller since they had been trying to catch the thieves for some time. Rod chose to remain unidentified, foregoing the reward in favor of anonymity.

That night made him realize his training as a soldier, along with the unusual skills that had been bestowed on him, might better serve the community where Rod grew up than the army.

Contacting his Company Commander, Rod explained there would be no reenlistment for him at the end of the month. When the commander could not convince him to reconsider, he arranged a furlough until his retirement at the end of the month.

Rod spent the next few months using his power to read the thoughts of the over-controlling boss to effectively jail and imprison the whole gang of crooks. Whether drug peddling or robbery, all his subordinates found themselves captured by the law by telling the leader of their plans. The very procedure of informing the boss that had kept them from the law in the past was now the downfall of the gang. Rod paid special attention to the young mother across the street and soon befriended Demitre and her son.

The revealing thoughts of the gangster reduced his gang of thirty to a crew of five hiding out from the law. The gangster had another encounter with Rod about a month after the first. This time, even though he packed a semi-automatic pistol under his shirt, there was fear emanating from his soul. He threaten to kill Rod if he found him at Demitre's house again.

In a moment of anger, Rod lashed out at him in a verbal assault, telling the gangster about his band of brothers and their ability to kill. While his fear of Rod was so great that the gangster failed to understand exactly what he was saying, Rod's anger created a monstrous image in the man's brain of death and defeat. He never bothered Demitre again so she could raise her child in peace outside the crime and violence of the father of her child.

Within six months of meeting Rod, nearly all the members of his gang were in prison, with most accepting plea deals to reduce their sentence. The crew of five were getting desperate, so they began to plot their largest heist - robbing the Wells Fargo transfer station at the end of the month. One of the crew worked as a cleaner at the facility until he was fired for stealing cleaning supplies. He knew the layout and most of the security since his cleaning allowed him access to the whole building. The boss investigated the building and security and set the date for the Labor Day weekend.

In those six months, Rod had made connections in his hometown, including Fred who was now an FBI agent. As the gang's plans to rob the transfer station came to him, Rod informed Fred and he reported it to the FBI.

As Labor Day weekend began, the FBI had agents in every position working Friday night and other agents surrounding the building, with a few more waiting inside. The criminal crew arrived at ten o'clock, as planned. They secured the FBI guard at the gate and then made their way to the double doors from outside to inside. The outside door only opened when the inside door was

secure; likewise, the inside door would open only once the outside door locked. This process took about thirty seconds.

When the inside door opened, there were ten FBI agents standing in front of the team, with automatic weapons aiming straight at the four in the doorway. At the same time, several FBI cars blocked the getaway van in the parking lot, which had been a stolen vehicle.

Over the next several months, the last of the gang settled the court cases in favor of lighter sentences. In doing so, they rolled over on the boss, giving the state and feds more charges against him. When the gangster came for his court hearing, they found him guilty of over a dozen felonies and fifty misdemeanors. Rod was thankful to learn he would be a very old man before walking free again.

Demitre grew closer to Rod as he helped her find better employment and sitters for her baby. After several months, she opened her heart and told him her story. As a teenager, she had resisted the control of her overbearing parents, which had led to unending conflict between them until the day she left home.

Rod convinced her to call her parents and ask for forgiveness, which she was reluctant to do because of the nasty things she had said before leaving the house. She assumed the comments were too angry, and that no parent would ever forgive a child for the subversive and hateful statements she had made.

“What if your son said those things to you?” Rod asked. “Would you hold it against him for the rest of his life even if he changed his ways?”

Demitre pondered the question as she stared at her baby and then started crying. “I’ll call my parents when I’ve found the right words to say.”

“You know, I believe the right words start with I love you,” Rod replied.

That evening, a Cadillac was parked in her drive, with a smiling man loading baby stuff into the trunk. Demitre walked out of her house beside a woman with the same reddish hair as her own. She put the baby in the back seat, sat beside him, and they drove away. The next day, a moving van picked up the rest of her belongings. Rod knew she had returned where she belonged – home.

Chapter 3: Working Security

A week later, a man knocked at Rod's door. Rod opened the front door and recognized Demitre's father at once.

The man introduced himself as Joe. He then said, "Thank you, Rod, for protecting our daughter through a very rough relationship and guiding her to call us for help."

"You're welcome. It was no big deal," Rod replied.

"She told me you protected her from her outlaw boyfriend and stood up to him, which scared him off."

"I didn't threaten him, just stared him down, nothing special."

"Demitre also told me that you helped put him and his companions behind bars, limiting the crime in the neighborhood. She didn't explain how you did it, just that you were part of it."

"Just doing my civic duty," Rod replied, downplaying the heroics implied in Joe's statement.

"Demitre also told me you were recently discharged from the army and are out of work."

Rod felt a little uncomfortable about all the positive attention, and was not quite sure how to respond. "Well, I have a few options and some savings while I try to figure out what is next in life."

Joe told him about a job opening for a security director for his company that just opened. He wanted to offer it to Rod. Rod explained there was nothing about security that was familiar to his background but Joe offered to train him for the position. Joe liked Rod's military background and knew Special Forces training was demanding mentally and physically. His exact words were, "Security takes a hard ass like Special Forces to run effectively." He then smiled and added, "Infantry, 1975, just missed 'Nam."

Having nothing better to do with his time, Rod took the position with Joe's company as head of security for ten convenience stores, including the one at Fourth and Broadway. In 1980, Joe had started with one store, working fourteen hours a day, six days a week, until it made a profit and he was able to hire others to help him.

When Rod began his position, he spent the first day organizing a disordered desk and files. It had obviously been some time since Joe had found a good security worker. A baggie of brass keys sat on the desk. They had no teeth cut into them so they remained for two weeks gathering dust until Rod discovered their purpose. He found a file stating that the locks for all the stores had not been changed in ten years, even though several employees had left and not returned their keys.

Rod's first rule of business was to change the locks and get some new keys made.

Between advice from Fred and some books on security, Rod's job became clearer and more understandable. The security cameras went through the store's computer and, from the computer, the video traveled through the Internet to the home offices.

One day, Rod noticed one of the stores having trouble with the video transmission several times a month. On Saturday night around midnight, the stream of the store's operation would stop for twenty minutes, and then start again.

When Rod asked Joe about the regular loss of video from this store, the older man mentioned the store's financial numbers had been sinking and failing to meet expectations. They both wondered if the two were connected. Joe said it was Rod's job to determine that.

Half an hour before midnight the next Saturday night, Rod followed a customer into the store invisibly and undetected. He flew to a corner and started videoing with a camcorder. The night manager leaned over the computer and shut down the video security stream. He then helped an under-aged customer with some beer, with a premium going into his pocket.

Shortly thereafter, another customer backed his pickup truck to the front doors where the manager and the driver filled the back with cases of beer. With a handshake as the only payment, the pickup drove off and the manager restarted the stream of videos to the office.

While viewing video with Joe the next day, Rod searched harder into the financial reports from the store. The accountant found the amount of beer reported on the store's report did not match the amount of beer paid by the company. Learning to read financial reports made Rod's head spin, but it was a necessity to master security for the company.

When the evidence became irrefutable, they contacted the local police. The pickup was matched to a man who had been selling beer to high school students. As it turned out, the Saturday nights that the video shut down corresponded to events happening at the school.

Fortunately, the next event was the upcoming Saturday. The police had a computer expert, whom they called Geek, adjust the computer in the store. He bypassed the store's program to send the stream directly to the police station for recording, regardless of the manager's input.

Rod remained in the beer cooler invisible with his camcorder and recorded them picking up the beer. The police had several angles of the two thieves stealing beer. The police already had proof of the driver selling it to minors.

When the truck was full, the police moved in, arresting both for grand theft, theft by deception, and selling alcohol to minors. Joe had the replacement for the night manager already lined up that night. The company was not responsible for selling beers to minors since they had brought the information to the police and cooperated fully with the prosecution.

This brought up the next problem for Rod to solve, which was cyber-security. Geek, who was a freelance computer engineer, offered his services to the company. Through his guidance, they changed all cameras and software so that a manager could not shut them down. Furthermore, the cameras were wired to stream directly to the office and the local computer simultaneously on separate leads. New accounting software made it easier to see when the manager's inputs did not match the invoice from the distributors.

They received a complaint about one of the night managers verbalizing unappreciated comments to a female customer at two in the morning. Conducting a complete investigation into the complaint, Rod discovered the manager had a misdemeanor charge of assault on a woman

several years before, which was unknown to the company. The charge was given to both the manager and his girlfriend of the time since their fight had left them both with marks. When the police had tried to break it up, they continued to attack each other in an alcohol-fueled emotional rage. The police had arrested the two, allowing them to cool off in jail. The next morning, the prosecutor had released them since neither was willing to testify and they broke up.

In this case, there were witnesses to the incident. They claimed the young woman was drunk and belligerent. She had thrown a soft drink at the night manager for not selling beer after hours and the night manager responded by telling the “bitch” to exit the store or he would call the police. Rod offered counseling for the manager’s unwise choice of terms to describe the young woman but did not further punish the manager, believing his actions were reasonable, given the circumstances. However, they thought it would be best to do background checks on all the managers for their own protection, as well as that of the company.

Rod upgraded the cameras to include voice recordings in the stores. Rod also found himself flying to the stores on a regular basis to observe the ebb and flow of customers. Several stores had large displays in the front window blocking the view of the cash register. If the police happened by, they would not be able to see anyone robbing the place because of the obstructed view. Joe pronounced a new policy of not having any advertisements blocking the register area.

Word came back to the office regarding some of the night managers not charging police for their coffee and Joe asked Rod’s opinion. He was not sure how to answer that one, so he did some research on the subject by talking with several night managers about the police that patrolled the neighborhoods. It seemed that police preferred to obtain their coffee at the lowest cost and would go out of their way for it. The night managers liked having the police stop at random times to ward off robbers. The night managers felt that giving away a cup of coffee was a fair trade to have regular police visits.

The company policy in all but one store changed to offer free coffee for on-duty police officers and they encouraged them to bring a reusable mug.

The store managers grew to both love and fear Rod entering their stores because he helped them remain safe but also had the ability to find various violations of company policies. The same attention to detail that made him Special Forces made him an outstanding security officer for the company.

Chapter 4: Loving the Best

Mary walked into Rod's seventh-grade pre-algebra class and caught his eye immediately. They were boyfriend and girlfriend for a seventh-grade record-breaking two whole months during the first quarter of school. Mary had Rod meet her grandfather, who lived just two blocks from his home, and he approved of Rod dating her. Most of their dates were at her grandfather's house where they would eat dinner together.

Before the second dinner date with Mary, under the supervision of her grandfather, whom Mary called Pop, Rod's mother suggested that he dress for the occasion. When his mom told Rod to dress better, it sounded like nagging.

However, during the date, Pop made the same comment. It rang with grandfatherly advice. In those few weeks of dating Mary, Rod learned to trust Pop's recommendations and suggestions. While walking home one day, Rod realized that Pop's recommendations were the same as his mom's nagging, and Rod could not determine why one sounded inviting while the other was off-putting.

In their many weeks of dating, Rod and Mary held hands on several occasions but never kissed or went any further. They did not break up, but sort of drifted apart, not seeing each other as an item. She was busy with schoolwork and Rod had his odd jobs to pay the bills. They remained friends throughout the school year and they went to the seventh-grade dance together in May.

Mary excelled in her school work and all her classes were advance classes starting in eighth grade except for gym class, which didn't have an advance option. She would have taken it as well, if she could. At least once a week, Mary would have lunch with Rod and they would swap stories, as they remained friends.

Mary and Rod were in a unique status in the school between the popular kids and the unpopular kids. Mary was too smart for the popular girls and Rod was too self-reliant to be popular. This allowed them to be friends with some of the popular and unpopular kids. Although there were invites for them to attend popular parties, they generally avoided them in favor of hanging out with smaller groups of friends.

There was a boy named Tommy who was hitting on Mary and she did not like it because he was rude and obnoxious. Tommy was one to two years behind his scheduled class and bigger than most eighth-grade boys. One day, he tried to cut the cafeteria line but Rod would not let him. Tommy and a friend met Rod on the way home after school to remind Rod who the king of the eighth-grade boys was.

However, Rod had been working since the age of ten and was much stronger than most eighth-grade boys. When Tommy shoved Rod, Rod shoved back with more force. Angry at Rod's strength, Tommy tackled Rod. The wrestling match only lasted a short while before Rod had the older boy pinned to the ground. When Rod let him up, the bully threw a punch at Rod, connecting with his shoulder. Rod picked him up and threw him to the ground. When Tommy rose in anger, charging at Rod again, Rod charged back – picking him up a second time and throwing the boy harder to the ground.

Tommy lay on the sidewalk, knees and hands scuffed, with a knot growing on his forehead.

“Are you getting up again?” Rod asked, glaring at the bully. Tommy slowly shook his head.

“Leave Mary and me alone or you’ll get more of the same.” Tommy started slowly backing up and when Rod turned to stare at him, he ran away.

News of fights usually spread through the eighth grade like water from the fire sprinkler, covering the whole school quickly and thoroughly. The next day, however, there was no mention of Tommy and Rod’s fight in any of their classes or lunch break.

Tommy liked to pick on the unpopular boys because they were generally smaller and weaker. One afternoon, he was picking on a boy who was Rod’s friend and Rod happened to appear, asking his friend if he wanted help. Tommy’s demeanor changed from bully to pal in an instant and he helped Rod’s friend pick up his books.

All through high school, Mary would win scholarship awards as she excelled in school. Rod preferred to work thirty to forty hours a week than keep up with schoolwork. Mary always sat with Rod once a week to help him study for quizzes and exams. It was during this time that they talked the most with each other. In their junior year, Mary complained about a boy she dated one time, saying he had the personality of a dirty washcloth, but he kept asking her out.

“Do you want me to talk with him?” Rod asked.

“No!” Mary blurted out. “I do not want you to bounce him off the pavement.” At that moment Rod realized the story of the fight in eighth grade did make the rounds throughout the class.

Mary graduated with a 4.0 grade point average in all her advance classes while Rod had 2.5 in the usual classes. Many universities offered Mary full scholarships to the college of her choice but when Stanford called with an engineering program, she accepted the challenge.

Mary said goodbye to Rod at the beginning of August. She told Rod that his strong work ethic kept her going throughout high school. She hoped to take his ethic with her to college to inspire her.

They promised to stay in touch with each other as she went to college and Rod went to the army. They did stay in contact at first, but as their lives became busier, their communication dwindled to nothing. Rod hadn’t heard from her since Christmas of her sophomore year in college.

When taking leave from the Army, Rod always visited his mother with at least a quick stopover to see Pop. Most of Pop’s advice mirrored Rod’s mother’s suggestions but Rod understood it best when coming from Pop. Upon retiring from the Army, Pop helped Rod acclimate to civilian life and cope with his mother’s passing. A year after the gangster arrest, Rod went to see Pop and ask him for advice on what he should do next in life.

As he parked his car in front of Pop’s house, to his shock, Rod saw Mary stepping out of her truck. He quickly got out and walked over to greet her. She had happened to stop by to visit with her grandfather. Mary and Rod sat in Pop’s living room and talked all afternoon and well into the evening.

The next day, Pop visited Rod's office just before lunch. Rod, still wanting his advice, asked him out for lunch. After all, he had not taken the time to chat with him the day before.

They ate at the diner next to the offices, which was known for its excellent sandwiches. Before the service person could ask for their drink orders, Pop handed Rod a piece of paper with a phone number printed clearly on it.

"What's this?" Rod asked, examining the paper.

"Call her," Pop answered with a small smile on his face.

"Who?" Rod asked, completely confused.

"You see, Rod, I was looking forward to an afternoon with my granddaughter when you came and stole her away by your very presence. After you left, there was a glow to her that her grandmother and I saw very clearly. My wife told her to call you, but Mary said she couldn't be that forward and she wasn't even sure if you liked her. I saw your face as you were leaving, and I saw the same admiration on your face. So, call her!"

Pop never gave Rod bad advice, so Rod called Mary that evening.

Meanwhile Mary's grandmother had given her Rod's number, explaining that Mary was a fool if she didn't call the young man. Mary was holding a piece of paper with Rod's number penciled on it, wanting to call when the phone rang. Within a minute, they had a date for Friday night.

While they ate dinner together, Mary told Rod that she was working at a lab for the nuclear industry. Stanford had offered her a job as a professor, but the lab had offered her a much better paying job as a research scientist. Besides, as a research scientist, she didn't have to deal with people. She had earned her master's degree in Material Science in five years, although most students take five years for a Bachelor's in the same field.

When Rod asked how often she visited Pop, she mentioned that her apartment was in a nearby community to the east, along the ocean, but she was in town over the weekend. The topic switched to cooking ability. Rod mentioned his skills in the kitchen were sufficient to create a meal that would not kill anyone. Before Rod knew what was happening, he was offering to cook them supper at his house on Saturday night.

Saturday brought a certain nervousness with it as Rod prepared a meal that he believed just might affect the rest of his life. Everything was going just as planned when Rod looked up and saw a cobweb around the light fixture. Grabbing a paper towel, he rose into the air to wipe it away and then noticed the web stretched across the ceiling. As he was cleaning the rest of the cobweb off the ceiling, Mary walked through the open front screen door.

"So, this is what makes you so special!" Rod turned around in shock. It is hard to deny a superhuman ability to fly when you are two feet in the air wiping an eight-foot high ceiling. He stammered something, and then accidentally turned invisible, completing the reveal of his powers.

Rod landed on the floor and turned visible again, his embarrassment plain to see. He felt like a child with his hand in the cookie jar at the moment his mother catches him. While he was

searching his brain for what to say and how to defend his condition, Mary blurted, “That was amazing! Do it again!”

Talking about his special abilities during dinner, Mary asked about his emotions and any distresses while invisible. After dinner, Mary mentioned that she wished she could fly with Rod and so they held hands while Rod tried to fly. To his surprise, she rose in the air with Rod as their reflection in the mirror disappeared.

After nine months of dating, they decided to get married and live together. Rod was hoping it would only take a couple months to plan a wedding when Mary mentioned the priest at the local church could marry them that very week. The priest agreed to marry them the following Saturday and on Monday afternoon they met downtown to acquire the license to make it legal.

By the time they reached Rod’s house later that evening, Pop and Grandma were waiting for them to give them hell for planning a wedding by themselves. They were planning that just the two grandparents, her parents, and two witnesses would attend but Pop had already contacted most of her family and they were coming to the church. Pop contacted a local restaurant, reserving their banquet room for the evening for one hundred people attending.

So, their quiet little wedding blossomed into a full wedding within several hours. That was life in a tight-knit community where everyone knows everyone and there is very little privacy. They went from casual wear to Mary buying a new dress and Rod purchasing a new suit.

Chapter 5: The Summer Home

Rod and Mary married with the only objections coming from their rather short notice and lack of planning. Mary's mother was quite upset since she had grand ideas for a wedding and reception. However, they did not want a grand wedding and compromised on the mid-size wedding to keep the peace among the family. Mary suggested that her little sister could be the recipient of her mother's idea of a grand wedding and reception, since she liked the limelight.

There were concerns about them not having a honeymoon, with many believing it was bad luck to forego the marriage vacation. The spur-of-the-moment timing did not allow either of them to request vacation time, but they soon took a nice holiday vacation to Mexico to visit Rod's uncle and extended family. While in Mexico, they toured the business half owned by him.

A month after the ceremony, Mary's maternal grandfather lost his battle with heart disease. The 91-year-old man bequeathed a substantial estate to Mary's mother and two uncles. One unique property was a redwood log home with a magnificent view of the bay leading to the ocean. He built the two-bedroom house on stilts perched on a rocky ridge with a fence surrounding the house. A natural stone fortification protected the home from the northern winds blowing every winter.

Originally, there was ten acres of property, but Mary's grandfather loaned nine of the acres to the park for everyone to enjoy the view. If the park maintained and upgraded the property for thirty years, those nine acres become the property of the park. The agreement was with the county park system, which became part of the state park system several years before and the agreement remained valid. A thirty-foot right of way from the street to the house on the north side of the park kept the house separated from the park.

The family wanted the property to stay in the family, but no one wished to make the repairs that would bring it into modern specifications. The family put the house up for auction among the grandchildren and Mary and Rod started the bidding at \$30,000. It turned out to also be the final bid and the house became theirs for the low amount. After the deed transfer, they saw the agreement with the park and realized that all they had bought was the house on an acre of land.

They drove out to see their newest property but were halted by the driveway, which had piles of dirt making it hard to reach the house. A man was there surveying the house for demolition when they arrived. He told them the state park requested bids to tear down the house. The bids were much higher than the park wanted to pay and so they had asked him to give a bid. He personally understood why the bids were high because the house was of excellent construction and sat steadfastly over the rocks. Rod showed the demolition man a copy of the deed for the property and the man refused to bid on a property whose ownership was in dispute.

The park administrator was under the impression that, when Mary's grandfather died, the park inherited everything including the house. While the original agreement came with the deed, the state park service did not have a copy of the contract for the land. The administrator, checking with his lawyers, continued with his plans of disposing of the house and claiming the land for the park.

Mary read over the agreement and insisted the park was in the wrong. They hired a lawyer who acquired an injunction from the county court using their deed. The park countered by having a state judge in the capital overturn the injunction. They were heading to state court for trial in a month when their neighbor to the north contacted them. He was already in the state court in their county because the park put a lien on his property since when he dies the park has first right of refusal. If Rod and Mary owned the land directly next to his, then the park did not have the right for first right of refusal on his property.

The neighbor subpoenaed them to court and they brought their evidence of the recorded deed with the contract signed twenty years before. The court discovered all the records from the park were internal documents made after the transfer from the county park system and none of the documents were recorded in the county or state archives. The court ruled in favor of the neighbor and Rod and Mary's documents.

They spent the next few months cleaning and repairing their summer home by the bay. Then one Saturday, they drove up to find a fence blocking their drive from the roadway into the park. The park administrator, in a vindictive challenge, blocked them from using their entrance. The original agreement said the park was to build a separate entrance into the park, but that proved costly and Mary's grandfather had a verbal agreement they could use his drive until the funds came available. Mary with some spite of her own hired a surveyor to mark out the property line and had the fence moved, blocking half the drive into the park.

The park rangers appeared wishing to stop the construction of the fence before it blocked the drive. Mary and their lawyer, armed with the deed and surveyor's plot in hand, countered the police. The park police agreed to allow the fence to remain down until the court date in a week. The court ruled in their favor for building the fence blocking the entrance since they were the clear deed owner to the property and there was a signed contract to that effect. Any verbal agreements were null and void because of the signed contract.

The park administrator filed an appeal in friendly state court in the capital to make the park complete again. Mary filed a counter suit in the court of their county for them to capture the nine acres back from the park since they violated several provisions in the contract including not building a new entrance. There was a jurisdiction dispute and the state superior court heard both cases in one trial.

The signed contract won, and the park lost all nine acres of land it had previously maintained. The state board of parks became upset at the local administrator for spending an exorbitant amount of money on the trials and still losing nine acres and fired him from his post. The new administrator came to Rod and Mary, asking if they would honor the contract even though the park had treated them so badly. They answered that they would not honor the old contract but with their grandfather's wishes in mind, they would make a new agreement.

The park agreed to a new contract that matched the original agreement. Marc, the park ranger, was a good friend of their grandfather and became friends with them through the ordeal. Marc mentioned they had a problem with vandals in the park and asked Rod to keep an eye on it, upon hearing about his job as a security director.

That night found Rod sitting up watching the park when a car entered after closing. Rod followed it from about ten feet above as it traveled to a pavilion. Four teenage boys exited the car and began to drink beer from a silver cardboard box. Rod flew to the top of the trees and called Marc and he appeared five minutes later.

The boys were underage, and all had beer cans in their hand when Marc flashed his lights at them. Their parents came for them and the ranger informed the owner of the car that the next time they showed up after closing time, the car would belong to the park. The boys, however, did not know about any vandalism.

A week later while Rod was patrolling the park, he spotted four girls tagging trees and rocks in the older part of the park. After Marc got another phone call from Rod, the park ranger snuck up on them, catching them in the act of vandalism. The ranger arrested them and had the county sheriffs take them to jail where their parents retrieved them. The judge ordered them to make restitution and spend ten hours each week cleaning the park over the next summer. This ended the vandalism in the park.

Mary and Rod found themselves visiting the summer home every weekend the following summer. Rod chuckled as Marc supervised the girls picking up others trash left behind. One of the fathers followed behind his daughter pointing out gum wrappers and other small items left on the ground. He barked at her like his basic training sergeant with an eye for the smallest detail.

One hot August day they were enjoying the cool breeze off the ocean when the police sirens sounded around them. Rod was shooting soup cans with a BB gun when an SUV ran down the hill to the beach alongside their house and met a watercraft coming from the bay. Two coastguard officers jumped into the ranger's patrol car and it backed up the steep incline. They sped away out of the park heading south at a high rate. A few minutes later, Marc raced into the park and confronted two young men at the far side of the clearing.

Another car pulled in behind Marc's SUV and the driver stood back as the ranger arrested the two young men. Something felt wrong about the situation and Rod flew closer to the scene. The ranger had the two at gunpoint, waiting for back up to arrive. Rod, standing just a few feet behind the third man, sensed his thoughts and feelings. Being the leader and mentor for the young men, he was planning to help them to escape.

The unmarked SUV returned, and the other park ranger along with the coastguard, helped subdue the two men. The one ranger backed close to the third man, who reached for the ranger's gun. Rod moved faster than lighting, striking the third man in the head as the gun cleared the holster.

The man lay on the ground unconscious with the gun still clinched in his fist from that single blow from a trained soldier. The police took control of the situation as Rod backed up with his hands in the air. Marc announced his heroic act to the other police and Rod was able to relax.

The three men had been part of a local anarchist group planning the bombing of a local business because they believed it was too large. The two had escaped their compound by boat only to have the coastguard overtake them. They had run their smaller boat against the rocky shore where the larger Utility Boat could not follow, and the park ranger had followed the boys to Rod's back yard. The third man had tracked their escape to the park to free them from the police.

Marc mentioned later that he saw the event take place. He saw the third man reach for the gun and, in less than a blink of an eye, Rod moved ten feet to strike the man. The trained observer did not see him move from one spot to another. It was as if Rod transported to the man in protection of the officers without moving. They put the whole confusing instant to the hysteria of the moment.

Mary and Rod bought a home in a quaint village that put them about a half an hour from either of their offices. They were originally looking for a cottage with a white picket fence surrounding it, but settled on a colonial with a chain-linked fence in the back yard. Mary indicated that the fence was good because it would keep the dog in the yard.

"What dog?" Rod asked. Mary just smiled in response.

They went dog shopping the day after they moved into the home.

It took six months of living in the new home before Rod could sell his house on Broadway. He sold to an Asian couple who had moved to America in their twenties from a small town in their old country. Rod never did find out which country was their old home, but it was quite clear America was their new home.

The couple invited him and Mary to their open house to celebrate their new home. It was their custom to have a party to celebrate momentous occasions like the first ownership of a home in their lives. They had also heard of his deeds in the neighborhood and wanted him there to change the official ownership from Rod to them.

Rod showed them the quirks of the house and regaled them with some positive stories from his youth. Rod toasted them with hope they would have many fond memories in his old house. They answered that it was now their new home.

The table was set with a mixture of food from both American casual cuisine and elaborate dishes from their original country. The food from their cuisine was amazing and Rod wanted seconds, but it was so popular that there was none left.

They opened a wine bottle, which they had brought with them to America for a momentous occasion. Rod took a small sip, even though he tried not to drink alcohol. Mary, knowing Rod's promise to his uncle, drank both hers and Rod's, saying it was delicious.

A little later, someone pulled out a game called Touqua that only existed in the town where the couple had grown up, according to their eldest daughter. She found the game boring but as Rod watched, he became fascinated. A black tapestry of about two by four feet with gold lines formed the base. Everyone held red rings, some looking like cheap plastic bracelets, others like pipe cleaners formed into circles, and a few were straws bent around with one end inside the other.

Everyone started with the same even number of rings. The object of the game was to keep an odd number of rings in a line and the first person to have all their rings on the tapestry would win. The first person would start by placing one ring on the middle row of the five rows on the tapestry. The next person would add to it carefully, planning a strategy for losing all their rings.

After watching several games, someone gave Rod their rings to play the game that fixated his attention. The first player put one ring on the middle line and Rod arranged ten of his twenty

rings, filling in the line and putting him in a clear lead. The next player squeezed one small ring at the end of the line, making an even number in the row and picked them all up, giving him the victory for clearing the board – which was the other way to win. Just like that, Rod had caused everyone at the table to lose. They understood that it was only his first time, and all had a good laugh.

The rules were simple, yet it was a very complicated game to win. It usually would take many years of practice and experience to win. Mary wanted to try the game that fooled Rod so easily and she won her first game by contemplating the probabilities in her head of the possible moves.

In spite of the earlier hesitation he had, Rod now felt much better about selling his childhood home to this couple and their family. He could now accept leaving the house and all its memories behind, good and bad. No longer would he have to walk into the room where, in his memories, he could almost see his dad beating his younger self while in a drunken rage.

The bed that his mom had sat beside, stroking his head when Rod had the flu, had been given to the couple's young son. The house also contained his memories of his and Mary's first months together. It was hard for him to let go of the home but seeing the warmth of the new family made it much easier.

Chapter 6: The Darby Problem

A week after Rod stopped the anarchist from killing an officer and freeing his cohorts, Mary announced her pregnancy. She gained almost sixty pounds over the next several months. Rod cannot think of one food she preferred over another, but her appetite was ravenous. Her doctor was not concerned about her weight gain, given the size of the baby in ultrasound and the weight distributed properly over her body. Within three months of giving birth, she returned to her pre-pregnancy weight while it took Rod five months to reach the same goal.

Fred contacted Rod one afternoon and told him that a man had contacted him asking questions about Rod's insight into the gang activities. He was most inquisitive regarding how Rod knew about the robbery at the transfer station during which the FBI captured the leader and the last of the gang. Fred contacted the local police and found that the mysterious man was asking several officers and detectives about Rod. The man presented himself as a federal agent but did not say what department he was in.

That evening, while flying around to various convenience stores, Rod felt like he was being followed. He flew to a schoolyard when the follower appeared to him.

The man introduced himself as Captain Darby, and said that he worked for an intelligence gathering firm in conjunction with the CIA. He mentioned that the CIA does not work within the United States, as they focus on gathering foreign intelligence, and so they hired his firm to conduct information gathering and recruitment.

He asked Rod if he would agree to work for his firm, since they were gathering flying people to help secure their nation against internal threats. Darby referenced Rod's military record and said it was a prerequisite for joining the firm. Darby said that he had researched Rod and found that he wanted to use his powers to help those who couldn't help themselves and that Rod's attitude would fit perfectly with their organization.

At first, Rod declined because of his commitment to his current job, but Darby mentioned that Rod could work part time on an as-needed basis. This sounded a little more interesting and Rod accepted Darby's offer to visit his base in the mountains of their state.

Two weeks later, Rod had a free weekend and he met Darby at his private compound. The main gate cleared Rod to pass to a registration office. He had to fill out a form stating the purpose of his visit. A man gave him instructions as to where on the compound Rod had permission to travel. Rod was given a green pass and only locations with a green insignia were accessible. Four colored lines were painted on the pavement and Rod followed the green line to its destination – Darby's private residence overlooking the Emerald Valley.

They met in a place called the entertainment suite. Darby told Rod about his organization, and mentioned it had worldwide reaches. He handed Rod a manila envelope marked with a code and sealed with a red thread. He asked Rod to read it to understand how Darby could help Rod improve upon his skills. Rod agreed to run some tests with him and arranged a night they could meet.

The following Wednesday, they met at Darby's compound. Rod noticed that they followed the red line this time around. Several cameras and other detection equipment were placed in a circle with a red dot in the middle. Darby stood Rod on the red circle and had Rod turn invisible. The camera failed to see Rod; however, the motion detector and thermal camera showed Rod's presence. After the testing, Darby again asked Rod to join his organization, yet Rod remained unwilling to commit.

A couple weeks later, Darby and Rod flew over to a nearby military base and met with General Scott. Scott was assigned to a military information division. He attested to Darby's ability to gather information for the army and his organization, which carries the full faith of the army and CIA. A third time, Darby invited Rod to join his organization and again Rod refused. Rod couldn't quite place it, but he knew he had an uneasy feeling regarding Darby.

Darby met Rod at work and said they had a special project for that night and asked Rod to join them. Arriving at Darby's compound, the guard told Rod to use the blue line to find Darby. Darby had a layout of an army base just down the ridge and wanted Rod to retrieve some property from a warehouse located there. To Rod, the covert mission appeared unethical and probably illegal.

Darby was a very charming person when Rod first met him. However, over the ensuing weeks, his personality had shown a darker side that rubbed Rod wrong. Rod refused his request to appropriate property from the military base and told him he was not interested in joining his organization. Furthermore, Rod asked him never to contact him again.

At this news, Darby became angry although he tried to hide it from Rod with an ungrateful smile. Like the gangster, his anger triggered something in Rod, allowing him to connect with Darby on a subconscious level.

Almost a month later, Mary and Rod were antiquing in a small hill town to the north side of the state. While Rod was checking out an old military store, she proceeded down the hill to an old dress shop. As Rod left the military store, Darby's evil nature came to mind. Rod saw two men approaching Mary as she crossed to the park.

Mary was athletic and very capable of caring for herself. When the two men tried to seize her, she put up a fight. Rod ran and flew simultaneously to safeguard her from the two malicious men, but a man from the park who came to her aid reached her first. The two scoundrels escaped before Rod reached them. Thankfully, they did no harm to his wife and child.

The man from the park claimed that Rod ran down the cars parked along the curb with his feet barely touching the roofs. Several people inside the shops also saw Rod running atop their cars and checked for damages. Normally, Rod would be invisible while flying, but he had wanted the two men to see him.

The police searched for the two men, but they had vanished without a trace. No one on the next block even saw them, which led Rod to believe they were flyers with the capacity to go invisible. Rod could feel Darby in his heart and knew he was behind this attack on his family. Mary and Rod drove home where Rod loaded a .45 caliber pistol so she could be safe until Rod arrived back home.

Rod drove near Darby's compound and used his Special Forces training to avoid the detection equipment. Rod felt Darby and knew he was in the discotheque where Rod had previously met him. Rod entered from the valley side of the house and one of the henchmen met Rod at the top step to the dance floor. The grunt soldier was no match for Rod's years of training and after a brief struggle, Rod continued on his quest to find the man who was trying to hurt his family.

Darby sat alone in the corner of the dance floor. He looked up when Rod entered the room. "If anything happens to my family, you are dead," Rod stated, then flew out the door, setting off all Darby's detection equipment. Alarms rang out all over the compound, but Rod was already gone.

Several months passed and Rod thought all the Darby drama had died down. Joe, Rod's boss, wanted to buy a warehouse near where Rod grew up and asked Rod to meet him there. Entering the building itself brought back so many memories. It was an old opera house built in the 1920s but had sat empty since 1960. He remembered running through the unused building with his classmates as kids – playing in the rafters and pretending to be acting stars on the stage.

The stage had been transformed into an office area, and the large seating area housed racks for warehoused goods. Joe received price breaks by ordering in larger quantities and shipping to one location. From that one location, he could ship the goods to individual stores at a lesser price. Rod's job was to determine if they could secure the location to protect the goods waiting for delivery to the stores. Rod's advantage was that his childhood taught him every conceivable way one might try to break into the building.

Working late one night, Rod heard the sound of a door being busted open. He turned invisible as three men entered the building. Two of them had military rifles and the third possessed a .50 caliber Desert Eagle. The man carrying the handgun stepped in front of the other two, and Rod instantly recognized him. It was none other than Darby. They could not find Rod because Rod was invisible, and Rod could not see them because they were invisible.

"Behind you!" Rod heard a voice in his head shouting out. Rod was shocked, but the moment the voice rang out, he could sense that one of the men was directly behind him. Turning with a single punch, Rod knocked the man unconscious with the first blow. The second blow, fueled by adrenaline, caused more of a headache for the man. The second rifle-toting gunman came to mind and, as he was flying down to him, Rod dispatched him with a single blow.

Darby, not knowing he was the only one left, stood in the middle of the warehouse floor without backup. Rod flew behind him. He knew that ending Darby was the key to end all the hostilities. Rod grabbed Darby around the head. The man barely had a second to gasp in realization before Rod twisted and snapped his neck. Darby's body crumpled to the warehouse floor.

Rod flew out of the warehouse and waited at home for the police. The police never came and there were no reports in any newspapers about the death of the secret agent at the warehouse. Rod supposed the CIA did not want any news of them operating within the country and so they must have covered the whole incident with a blanket of secrecy.

Less than a week later, the man Rod now calls Dad came to visit with Rod. The unnamed man explained how, from the other side of the country, he was able to warn Rod about the danger lurking behind him, thus turning the advantage to his favor.

Rod and the unnamed man worked to discover his abilities. In the process, Rod learned more about his abilities than he would have been able to discover on his own. It took a better part of a year to master, but Rod developed the ability to fly completely invisibly, while his overall speed doubled.

Rod's newfound "Dad" demonstrated his ability to take the power to fly from people with powers who tried to misuse their capability. While working together, Rod also saw how Dad projected images into people's minds and he began trying it for himself. The first obvious target was Mary, but he soon realized that trying to project his presence in her head without her ability to do the same would be unfair and could lead to a toxic relationship. Mary spoke to him of the importance of using his skills for good and not simply to see how much he could do with them, and he realized just how much he needed her by his side. One did not need to have special powers to have great wisdom in knowing how to wisely use them.

After Dad returned from a trip to a country in Africa called Zudal, he showed Rod how to manipulate metal. As they worked together, the language of Zudal came to Rod even better than Spanish, which was his biological father's native tongue. Upon learning Zudal, Rod was able to communicate with yet another flyer, named Nat, who lived in Zudal. They began communicating with each other on a regular basis.

After spending some time with Dad, Rod's speed increased, but it still couldn't rival The Nonentity's.

Chapter 7: Fighting and Visions

One evening just before bedtime, the phone rang. It was the manager of the Broadway convenience store calling to inform Rod of a robbery. The robber had taken nearly seventy-five dollars from the night manager. After being threatened by the robber's gun, the night manager had given the gunman everything from the drawer, including coupons and other notes.

The night manager and clerk on duty were unharmed and safe, but the theft meant that Rod had to go and make a report on the incident. He despised leaving the house when he was already ready to sleep, but it was part of his job as security Vice President of the business.

They lived a half-hour from the store and the police were completing their reports upon his arrival. The detectives were watching a video of the robbery when Rod appeared. He joined them in watching the robber, who had clearly made sure to avoid letting the camera see his face.

As they discussed the case, the night manager suggested that they check the outdoor videos. They switched cameras and found that the robber used a late model car with a unique dent in the right front fender, but he had covered the license plate with a piece of something blue.

As they watched the robber leave the parking lot on cams, a vision came to Rod of a car pulling into the drive of 2556 Pine Lane on the nice side of town. He saw the paper bag used by the clerk to load everything from the drawer for the robber to carry. Rod told the detective that he remembered seeing a car that matched the one in the security footage on Pine Lane and the detective sent a patrol car to investigate.

The officer called back about five minutes later stating that a car of the same make, model, and color was in the drive. Additionally, it had a unique dent on the front right fender. Upon closer look, he saw that the license was still covered by a blue rag, which was also seen in the footage.

The detective took Rod over to the house where a young man and woman were exiting the house. The police did a felony stop of the man and disarmed him of his weapon. It turned out to be a toy gun with the red barrel painted black to conceal the fact that it was a toy. The man had the papers from the register drawer stuffed in his pockets.

"Okay, I confess I took the money," he pleaded. "I just wanted to impress my girlfriend."

"For the last time, I am not your girlfriend, and I will never be!" The young woman yelled at him before turning to the detective.

"I have to admit that I'm not mad at you arresting him. He has been begging me to date him for months. Today he came to my house to offer me money in hopes that I might change my mind."

The robber looked at her pitifully as she made that statement.

"Seventy-five dollars in loose money does not buy girlfriends! I thought he stole the money since a good portion was in coins but I honestly had no idea it was at gunpoint," she told them. "The cash is inside on the kitchen table."

It was after two in the morning before Rod was finally able to go to bed, but Dad was in his head at six in the morning calling for his help. Reading his mind, Rod quickly understood the urgency of the situation and pulled on jeans and a shirt from the dirty hamper.

Aliens were hovering in a spacecraft that had penetrated Earth's atmosphere. Dad rose high in the air to reach the minds of the people on the spaceship attacking the Earth and Rod followed him. The Nonentity was giving instructions to both Nat and Rod when he stopped midsentence, shooting a drone from the sky. The image of the drone exploding like a bottle rocket from the powerful blast from his fingers still replays in Rod's mind.

Dad had him and Nat disable the main guns from the battleships positioned around the world. Then Rod started putting images of Earthlings confiscating one of the battleships in the mind of one of the captains and he fired upon one of his own. Doing the same to the captain of the attacked battleship, he returned fire. Soon the battleships were firing upon each other. Rod, with his ability to manipulate metal, made anything made of metal fall apart as they tried to maneuver the city-size ships, which almost cause two of them to collide.

The captains reported that magical guns were damaging their battleship – due to the images placed in their heads by Rod. The drone operators saw the coordinates for their own ship appear before them and the drones started attacking the ships. As the chaos increased, the despair from the captains increased until the main ship recalled all the battleships. This meant the battleships recalled the drones before they returned to the mother ship.

As the drone operators tried to dock their planes, images within their heads distorted, causing them to crash into the side of the battleships. After loading the drones, the battleship that returned to the main ship had had the same problem of loading. Furthermore, the docking anchors were metal and easily failed at Rod's command. One of the battleships crashed through the mothership, foiling the alien invasion once and for all.

A little more than a week later, while sitting at his desk, Rod was counting the bells on his chime clock waiting to start his lunch. On the sixth bell, Rod had a vision of a foreign land where Rod was a dog. Living alongside Rod were cats, rabbits, and rats in a city of grassy knolls.

Rod's given job was convincing the residents of an impending fire that would soon sweep through, ending the life of all the inhabitants. They were to meet Rod at a predesignated point if they wanted rescue from the certain death of fire. Rod spent the next seven days searching for anyone who would listen and be saved from the impending doom.

Some thought Rod was a crackpot because no one could possibly have this knowledge and there were modern inventions to prevent such catastrophes. Other believed he was speaking the truth about the impending fire, but would not accept that there was a force that could save them from the fire. A few souls – mostly rabbits, a few cats, and just two dogs – heeded the promise of salvation from the fiery end of their world. The rats scoffed at the notion of dying by brushfire without being given any logical or sound reasoning to the warning.

The day came when the fire fell upon the land. It had rained that morning, and everything was wet and green from the revitalizing cloudburst. An hour later, Rod ran after everyone, telling them to meet him at the point mentioned so many times before. The rats laughed at the absurdity of a fire burning any place so saturated with the life-giving rain and the other animals joined in the hilarity of the moment. The ones that believed his message started for the point with some figuring it could not hurt and some truly believing the end was near. Two of the rabbits who

originally believed his story refused to go because of the social pressure from the other animals laughing at Rod.

Meeting at the point, they found no spaceship, ark, or other vehicle that could save them. A wall of fire burned out from the ground consuming everything in its path and coming closer. There still wasn't anything that could protect them. Several ran away believing with their eyes and not their heart while the few remaining looked to the one to save them. In that moment, the ones who trusted were transported from the grasslands into the sky on a field of clouds.

Rod's heart was saddened by the notion of his friends left behind who had been consumed by the flames of destruction, when a lion appeared to him. The lion explained it was not his job to save them, but he was pleased that Rod told everyone about the final fire. The lion chose those who would believe, but they needed to hear the truth in order to have the chance to believe. The consolation for the sadness of those who died was the animals who lived because Rod foretold the impossible and chose to believe.

The dream ended after a week's worth of work in his strange existence as a dog. Suddenly, Rod was back in his office hearing six more bells on his clock chiming. However, Rod knew that it was not a dream. It had been a very real place with its own time and dimension. Rod felt like he had been gone for a whole week and yet less than a second passed in his world. This was very confusing and Rod wondered what it meant.

After discussing the dream with his wife and then meeting and discussing it with their priest, Rod started telling people about God. Rod knew there would be people who would scoff at him, but they would never believe unless someone told them about God. Maybe his talk of God would be the declaration they needed to hear in order to believe. From that point forward, God was the center of all his communication and interactions with other people.

Several weeks later, a college-aged night manager named Alex asked Rod to meet him one night. Even though it was about security of the store Rod, brought up the need of the security of one's soul. Something Rod said triggered emotional needs within the young man's life.

"I guess, I've always been searching for an ideal or standard to guide my life," Alex admitted.

"Maybe you should consider the peace of knowing God," Rod mentioned.

Alex longed for peace in his heart and mind and asked Rod how he could possibly achieve it.

Rod, growing up in the Church, found that there were reference points in his life that had pointed him to God. Alex had none of these references in his life and Rod broke the concept of God into basic units to make it understandable.

Alex knew Rod could not meet him every night since Rod had a day job and so asked for his email address. Questions would appear on Rod's browser anytime during the day or night from the young man. Rod always tried to answer the questions within twenty-four hours. Sometimes this meant asking his priest about the concept so Rod knew how to answer it.

The first few questions were easy, but as time went by, Alex's questions became more detailed and personal. Then one day after a particularly difficult question, Rod mentioned that he often got his answers from someone else and Alex asked for his name.

Rod referred him to his priest, and the two started meeting weekly. Soon, Alex came to know Christ and started attending church every Sunday.

Chapter 8: Melvin

Mary was asked to join a club for people with exceptional intellectual ability. As they drove by the club one evening, it appeared to be swanky from the outside. They found that the club remained open every evening for study, offering classes in advance computer and Internet capabilities.

Once a month, there was a gathering of families on Saturday afternoon for socialization. A member named Calvin invited them to the next gathering and asked them to provide a side dish. The intent of the invite was to introduce Mary to the members and to have the families meet each other for consideration of joining.

Mary wore a nice dress and Rod, anticipating an elegant event, also dressed sharply. He pulled his polished Oxford shoes from the back of his closet, along with black slacks with the crease down the middle and a white linen shirt. They arrived to find everyone else wearing shorts and t-shirts with gym shoes ready for strenuous activity.

Rod and Mary placed their homemade green bean casserole between a bucket of fried chicken and a large pizza. While the families devoured lunch, Rod sat with Calvin who apologized for not being clear on the dress code. He was a computer programmer or, as he relayed his title, the head technician in charge of a software company. He was also a fellow at The Hoover Institution and on the board of two companies including the one where Mary works.

His older sister, Clare, was a medical researcher at the state college where she headed up several medical breakthroughs. Rod told him that he was a security manager for a chain of convenience stores. Calvin asked Rod to speak to his company about security since someone had recently broken into the facility and stolen property.

Calvin was very interested in Rod's work since his own work buried him in cyber codes all day. He was quite familiar with cyber security but was at a loss for building security even with the latest electronics at his disposal. Calvin introduced Rod to several other members, and they all had impressive degrees and titles.

Calvin explained that they had formed the club, which Mary had been invited to join, because people tended to treat them differently when they would hear about their intellectual abilities. This club allowed them to be just people trying to live an enjoyable life.

After lunch, a young man standing before the volleyball net began bouncing a ball on the ground. Soon there were about ten people standing on each side of the net. Calvin yelled that they needed one more on his side and asked Rod for help. Rod tried to participate in his street shoes and fine clothes but did very little since he was focusing on trying not to fall.

On his first attempt to spike the ball, Rod's fine linen shirt tore at the seam, leaving a huge hole. Clare called Rod inside and found a pair of tennis shoes belonging to her son, clean sweat socks from an unknown person, with shorts and a tank top from the "lost and found" basket.

When Rod got back to the volleyball court ready for some serious action, and in his new outfit, several catcalls erupted from the bystanders. He couldn't help but hear a few comments about his chiseled physique. Clare's son, Melvin, was playing opposite Rod and liked to spike the ball with

full force and authority. Rod found himself defending their court from Melvin's superior athleticism. While both were six feet tall and about the same weight, Rod was in his late twenties trying to stay in shape while Melvin appeared ten years younger and seemed far more athletically inclined.

Rod's military background gave him the advantage of seeing situations more quickly and he was able to anticipate the opposition's reactions to the ball. While Melvin only how knew to spike the ball, Rod learned to dink the ball just over the defender into the spot they vacated, leaving an open opportunity to score. Additionally, Rod prepositioned for Melvin's spikes, which allowed Rod to block most of his forceful blows on the ball.

In the past, Melvin's team would win every game because of his superior athletic prowess. But today Rod equaled or bettered his ability with a higher knowledge of the game. Melvin would usually score about fifteen points a game but that day he scored just five points in three games.

Mary said later that she thought Rod was using his power to fly to assist him against the young man, which Rod could not deny. Clare ended the volleyball tournament that day because of Melvin's frustration of not scoring at will. The fatherless son had trouble dealing with defeat, and his frustration would often lead him to violence. Clare saw the signs in his behavior and shut down the game, knowing her son wouldn't stop otherwise.

Melvin challenged Rod after the game, trying to rile Rod into a fight. He told Rod about his five years of martial arts training and kept bragging about his toughness. Then Calvin suggested they spar a few bouts so the young man would have the opportunity to test his mettle. This scared Rod since the last man he fought was now dead, but he reluctantly agreed to bout with the boisterous younger man.

Melvin circled Rod cockily, looking for an opportunity to strike. As he made a lazy move towards Rod, Rod quickly knocked him onto the ground and struck at his throat stopping just short of contact.

"That's one," Rod declared as he regained his feet for another testing of his ability. Melvin tried a roundhouse kick from the movie "Billy Jack" and Rod grabbed his foot in midair, twisting his leg behind him.

"Now you have a broken leg," Rod stated. The third attempt to down Rod resulted in the inexperience fighter seeing Rod's hand stop just short of his throat again. Rod stared into his opponent's eyes stating, "This is the second time you died today."

Melvin, shocked by Rod quickness and ability to anticipate his every move, questioned the truth of Rod's statement by asking, "What makes you think that move would kill me?" Rod explained that the same move killed an enemy combatant in Afghanistan not more than five years ago. With this piece of information, the young man knew he would never defeat Rod in combat, which settled his demeanor.

A little later, Calvin told Rod that he recognized the tattoo on Rod's right shoulder as one belonging to highly-trained soldier since his older brother sported a similar tattoo twenty-five

years prior. While Rod's tattoo had a blue, red, and gold outline, his brother's only had a blue outline as he was trying to obtain the red when killed in action during the first Gulf War.

Calvin then told Rod about a documentary he had recently watched on elephants. A park in Africa had several adolescent males causing problems in the park by killing other wildlife for no reason. The park superintendent had brought in some older bull elephants to intimidate the younger testosterone-filled bulls. The behavior of the misbehaving young bulls changed to societal norms of the pack and they stopped the indiscriminate killing.

Calvin was hoping that Rod was the "dominate male" when he suggested the bout with his nephew, since the tattoo suggested to him that Rod could control his rage, and teach Melvin an important lesson as well.

Rod was unable to meet with Calvin the next week, so they made an appointment for the week after. Rod met with Calvin on Sunday, spending an hour with Calvin and his boss who suggested a comprehensive examination of their facility to determine any security shortfalls of the company. Before Rod agreed, Calvin's manager offered Rod \$1,000 for his time and expertise.

They went through the building looking for security problems. The first window they approached, Rod easily opened with a finger pull since it was unlocked. It turned out that about half the windows on the ground floor were unlocked. The camera positioning was all wrong. Some required adjustment as to their angle, but over half of them needed a new location if they were to have proper insight to potential problems. None of the interior doors had locks and valuable electronic equipment had been left on counters and desks.

They examined the door where the burglars had entered the building. Using nothing more than a knife, Rod opened it easily.

They completed the physical review in five hours and Rod suggested that he review Calvin's personnel habits during the day. Calvin was hesitant at first, since their business worked on sensitive material for several government agencies. Rod assured Calvin he would not need to see the screens or individual offices. Calvin found a place from which Rod could observe the movement of the office personnel.

Rod returned on Monday to observe the office. Not a single person asked why Rod was sitting at the reception desk watching them all day. Checking with Calvin, Rod found that only two people said anything to him, and the rest went about their business focused on their own tasks.

Although, this intense focus was good for productivity, it made for very poor security of the office. People would enter from the foyer and no one would greet them or acknowledge them. Vendors and customers walked through the office as if they owned the business. When Calvin asked why that was a problem, Rod told him that five staplers had been pilfered from various offices throughout the complex – including Calvin's own – and it was only lunchtime. He said that electronics were part of a comprehensive security program that needed to start with the employees being aware of their surroundings.

Calvin made the changes Rod suggested and then had Rod address the production personnel one afternoon. Most thought it was a waste of time, but Rod stole five more staplers before the

meeting began, including one belonging to the man who was the most opinionated about Rod being a fraud. Then Gary burst into the room with his FBI-issued M-16, holding them captive. He left the room after about a minute and none of the highly intelligent people working at the highest level could describe Gary, the rifle, or the situation accurately.

They spent the rest of the afternoon learning to observe details of people and objects in a stressful situation such as a robbery or other intrusions. Calvin's company paid Rod an additional \$2,000 after seeing the amount of work and depth of knowledge he had bestowed on their company.

Calvin, impressed with Rod expertise in security, asked Rod to help with the club since he discovered missing equipment and other valuables. Again, they walked through the club for a cursory examination of the club and for the second time, there were windows and doors to the outside left unlocked for any intruder. Calvin gave Rod a key so that Rod could complete his evaluation of the club at his leisure.

It was several nights later before Rod could perform an exacting determination of the security needs of the main building. There was a library, a study room, a computer room, a kitchen, a couple of offices for the administration of the club, and a great room used for dining and sports activities in inclement weather.

While standing in the center of the great room, the door opened and Melvin entered, highly intoxicated. A month of Saturdays previously, he had acknowledged defeat to Rod, but his inebriated nature would not accept that humbling experience. When he recognized Rod, Melvin tried for a second time to best Rod's skill. Rod easily dismissed the young man's drunken flaying of feet and fists in order to avoid a fight at all cost.

When the reality of his stupor-driven angst was no match for Rod sober defense, Melvin drew a knife to escalate the attack. When the stainless steel blade waved passed Rod the first time, Rod turned invisible. In a blind rage, Melvin continued swinging the knife wildly in the air as if Rod was still there.

Fearing that the young man may accidentally harm himself, Rod rose to the ceiling out of Melvin's reach and reappeared above him. As the fact of Rod hovering several feet above his reach slowly settled into Melvin's alcohol-swollen brain, it dawned on him that he was no match for Rod's ability and he stumbled out of the building.

The next night while Rod was confirming the diagram from the night before, Melvin appeared again. This time he was sober and humble. He asked Rod to sit and talk with him about the night before so he could apologize for his alcohol-fueled rage. They sat down in the library and Melvin cleared his throat.

"You know, I remember everything while intoxicated. My friends don't remember anything after a certain number of drinks, but I am aware of everything until I pass out. So, I want you to tell me something. I know I saw you flying. And I know you turned invisible. I was drunk, but not that drunk. How did you do it?"

Rod looked hard at the younger man. Instead of answering his question, Rod returned with one of his one.

“Why do you want to kill yourself?”

“You’re crazy, man. I don’t want to die,” Melvin retorted. After Rod stared at him for a moment, he admitted that suicide does enter his mind as a resolution to his problems.

“How did you know that I felt that way?” Melvin asked. Rod could not admit that he had been reading his thoughts during Melvin’s sadistic rage the night before. Rod did tell him about a fellow soldier who acted out in the same outrageous manner and eventually killed himself.

“I was too young and stupid to recognize the symptoms then,” Rod finished. “But I vowed I would not let it happen to another friend.” He then added, “Suicide does not end the pain, Melvin. It only transfers the pain to loved ones. Do you really want to do that to your mom?”

Melvin’s desire to commit suicide, but also his fear of death, puzzled Rod and he continued to ask probing questions.

“Dude, I’m already seeing a psychiatrist for my depression. I don’t need any more help with that stuff. But if I tell anyone about a man turning invisible and floating in the air, the doctors will lock me up. So, how exactly can you do that?”

“They are gifts from God.”

“There is no God,” Melvin definitively proclaimed.

“Do you believe in anything larger than your life to place your faith?” Rod asked.

Melvin shrugged dismissively. “I know the universe is the largest object in existence.”

Rod pointed out that knowing something is true is not the same as believing in it or trusting it. Again, Rod asked, “Is there anything in your universe bigger than you that you can place your belief or trust in?”

“What do you mean by believing in or trusting?” Melvin asked.

“An entity, assumption, or object that is more powerful, meaningful, or encompassing life,” was Rod’s reply.

Melvin answered no at first, then stopped. “You know what, maybe I do. Just give me a sec to think about your question.”

Rod took the hint and got up. He finished walking around and comparing the diagram to the building as Melvin sat in a chair trying to decipher Rod’s question. After fifteen minutes, Melvin called out for Rod and he returned to the library.

“I cannot think of an overriding entity, assumption, or object in my life that could change the outcome of my life,” Melvin stated.

“Does this not make you the most important entity in your life for guidance for judging the future?” Rod followed up. Again Melvin asked for a few minutes to think about that question.

Rod, after reviewing his drawing for a few minutes, was summoned back into the library.

“I guess I am all there is that controls my life,” Melvin admitted. “Now that I’m eighteen, even my mother loses her control over me.”

“Then, when things go wrong in your life, who is to blame?”

“There are circumstances outside my life that affect my life and I have no control over these outside forces.” Rod was surprised by Melvin’s deep and philosophical response.

His prying reply was, “True, but you can control your reaction to the outside forces to either motivate you or let it destroy you. You are in control of your life and since you are the greatest entity in your life, only you are to blame for your bad reaction to these forces.”

Melvin admitted, “The random proceedings against my life are uncontrollable and devastating.”

“You just admitted that you are the most powerful entity in your life and yet you are willing to admit there are forces greater than you,” Rod said. “Either you are the only entity to control your life or there is a force greater than you in your life. Which is it?”

“Okay,” Melvin admitted. “There are forces greater than me in the world.” He then countered, “But that doesn’t mean there is a God.”

“But what if there is a God out there looking out for you and wanting you to have a better life?”

Melvin explained that he studied the subject from many perspectives and believes there is no such thing as God.

“You studied the possibility of God from the stance that God does not exist. That is like trying to find a unicorn knowing none exists. You will never find evidence for an unknown with the presupposition that what you need does not exist.”

Melvin eyebrows lifted at this notion. “I have to admit that’s a decent point.”

Rod rose from his chair and floated above Melvin.

“You know, until yesterday I bet you thought people needed a plane to fly. Imagine what you will find if you allow your heart to believe in something greater than yourself.”

Melvin came to Rod several times over the next few weeks asking Rod questions about God. The questions quickly tested Rod’s knowledge of God and he referred Melvin to his neighbor who studied the Bible regularly and had deeper knowledge of the Lord. They met on Friday nights for a Bible study and Melvin agreed to join their Bible study group.

Rod committed to praying for Melvin every day as Melvin continued to search for answers in his life. He was grateful to learn that, while Melvin continued with the psychiatric treatments he had been receiving, he also spoke with Rod’s neighbor’s pastor on a regular basis. Rod felt confident that the young man’s journey toward a deeper faith would continue.

Chapter 9: Another Dimension

Mary returned from the local grocery store and called Rod into the kitchen. There was some stress in her voice as if an urgent difficulty was pending. He rose from where he sat on the living room floor entertaining their toddler. Before his left foot touched the kitchen tiles, Rod passed through a supernatural entrance into a very different world. He entered a dreamlike state where his essence was there but everything he knew about life had changed. He didn't feel different physically, but the very core of who he was now flung into this alternative universe. Rod felt the same and yet while everything seemed normal, it also felt very strange.

In this universe, Rod had changed from an ex-military man to an Ivy League graduate. He went from wearing jeans and a pullover to a tailored suit that fit him perfectly. His hands hosted manicured nails flawlessly rounded by an emery board. Instead of tennis shoes, he was wearing Italian loafers with silk socks. Every hair on his salon-styled head was completely in place.

Rod was given a picturesque girlfriend living in an upscale apartment on the swanky side of the large downtown. Although, she appeared to be his long-term girlfriend, there was a peculiarity to her that he didn't recognize. Everything about the place appeared very normal during an evening with his girlfriend, but Rod was apprehensive.

In this realm, the powers that be made Rod an influential banker at a reputable bank. The bank had the respectability of being honest in a dishonest world. That is why Rod was working for them. However, the bank needed to make loans and collect interest in order to stay in business. So they dealt with the corruption of the dominion. Rod knew his job was to make the loan while keeping the appearance of the bank being beyond reproach. If he was able to succeed in this mission, there was a large bonus and a significant promotion for him.

That night, they were hosting an investor seeking a loan to revitalize a run-down portion of the city. This meant having the city forcibly remove the current owners and tenants from the property and sell the new appearance to the public as generosity. Ingratiating the mayor and the councilman smoothed out any future difficulties and detriments. There was a price to pay when taking property of one person and selling to another well below market price. Again, in this realm, the immoral act of taking from one and giving it to another was not just acceptable, but honored as doing right for the community.

That evening, the counterfeit couple hosted a lavish dinner for the mayor and the councilman with the finest food, alcohol, and female entertainment. Rod could not secure the loan for the inside investor until there was an agreement with the city to use their power of eminent domain to take the property from the rightful owners. The city would in turn sell the appropriated property at a discount to the builder of dreams intending to beautify their city. There were nine people at the party including Rod's fabricated persona, his glamorous girlfriend, the power-seeking mayor, the overfed councilman, the impatient investor, three bought escorts, and a hired maid to serve the food and drink.

The realm made Rod the account manager for a reputable bank and by necessity made him under the assumption that the night's amusement was the course of normal business within the city. It was his job to make sure there were the proper permits and protocols in place before making a

loan to a customer. Rod's personality would not allow for illegal activities and he made everyone else know that bribes and payoffs were grounds not to clear the loan.

The mayor and councilman pronounced they were not corrupt but needed money for future political ambitions. They were not asking for money but were focused on the votes they may win or lose in the deal. They both mentioned that having a strong campaign fund would help them influence the opinion of the voters. They were careful not to imply a quid-pro-quo but indicate there were expenses in delivering the old community. Both subtle politicians expounded on the millions of profits derived from their help as they indicated that the new community replacing the dilapidated neighborhood would boost the city's image.

The investor could buy up the community with his own money, but that would take time and cost more. Then, if one of the homesteaders complained, the city might rise to protect the one homeowner over the greedy developer. It was important to have the city working as a stakeholder; that would remove political opposition in the future. The investor risked complete loss if the project fails and when all their funds going to the project. So everyone was depending on Rod to make the loan happen.

The professional working women knew not to repeat anything discussed during the night's entertainment and yet all party guests discussed matters carefully so as not to reveal any collusion with politicians. As Rod listened to the negotiations, he noticed how the traders limited their speech around the maid. While his girlfriend was a pinup beauty, the maid was a normal woman with ordinary assets. There was a strong presence surrounding her, indicating she was not for sale and would not participate in unlawful behavior. Although he had never met her before, her face touched Rod deep inside, and it seemed as familiar as an old friend's.

The negotiating men became irritable by her constant interruptions as she brought hors d'oeuvres and fresh beverages to the guests, as her job dictated. The mayor spoke unkindly to her and called her the unflattering name of a female dog after having pups. The investor told her to keep her fat ass out of the room until they called for her, while the overweight councilman pounded down his cocktails and finished another plate of crostini. Then the painted women made vulgar comments about the plainness of the maid, making the men laugh.

The worst offence made to the maid, who was just trying to make a living, was by his girlfriend who started forcibly pushing her into the kitchen.

Rod pronounced, "This is my house, and I will not tolerate disrespectful comments from anyone directed at anyone."

Rod commanded his pinup girlfriend to apologize for mistreating the hired help in such a callous manner. Rod told the men that if they did not apologize to the young woman, they could leave without the loan. The men capitulated to his demand and remorsefully confessed their sins to the maid. His girlfriend said in a superior tone, "I am sorry you misunderstood my intentions. I only wanted to make sure the meeting was not disturbed."

The negotiations continued for another half an hour. Then the maid peaked out of the kitchen and announced that dinner was ready.

She asked, “Should I serve it now while it is fresh and hot or wait?”

Rod looked at the other men for an answer. But before they could answer, his girlfriend pushed the maid back into the kitchen. This time, the maid reacted by pushing his girlfriend back, and a fight ensued. Although six inches shorter and ten pounds lighter, the maid knocked the girlfriend in a couple of punches without saying a word.

Rod’s counterfeit girlfriend suddenly became a giant, brown, rabbit-looking creature, which stunned him. He ran from the apartment into the street in horror. As Rod ran up the street, he started to cry for God. A tornado-type wind picked him up and drew him to the clouds. As Rod rose to the sky, there were clouds of formation showing the majesty of the heights with one cloud appearing to penetrate the upper atmosphere. This cyclone deposited him on the edge of a small town in the sky.

There was a restaurant bar with several people getting drunk and others walking aimlessly throughout the streets with hopelessness in their eyes. This was not heaven. But it wasn’t the hell he’d just left. While paved roads led through the quiet town, a winding dirt road ascended past an old cathedral. There was a great power pulling his heart to the church. He was seeking the wisdom from inside. Seeing a door to the basement open, Rod chose to enter by stepping down the steep, granite staircase.

There were two priests guarding the room; they had the power to remove him if his answers were unjust. “What is your purpose to see the king?” they asked.

Not knowing it was the king’s house, Rod responded, “My girlfriend is a rabbit.”

They parted, revealing a fully maned lion lying on the floor emitting an awe-inspiring aura. The very presence of the lion brought a fear to Rod’s heart he had never felt before. The lion royally commanded, “Describe the rabbit!”

Rod fearfully explained, “It appeared as a floppy-eared rabbit with human legs and long gorilla arms. Its skin was brown, leathery, and it had canines penetrating from the sides of the mouth like an alligator.”

In a kingly tone, the lion asked, “Is the rabbit dead?”

Rod answered, “No.”

The lion stated, “Kill it and you will go home.”

“This is a creature of nightmares,” Rod responded. “I do not know how to kill such a thing.”

The lion ordered him from his sight, saying, “I have given you the power to slay the beast.”

Leaving the kingly manor, Rod roamed back to the town looking for a passage back to the hell he left. There was despair in his mind from not knowing how to kill the beast, and yet there was hope in his heart for the lion-sized promise guiding him.

Reaching the far side of town, Rod saw a pasture of meadowlands looking peaceful and calm. There was an invisible roadblock keeping him from continuing his travels, and Rod bumped into it. With the promise still raging in his heart, Rod slashed at the obstruction with his right hand, in

his palm, a golden sword appeared, which slit the veneer. The delightful image of the peaceful, green valley divided in two with the first cut and disappeared with the backhand stroke of the beautiful sword.

Now there was a white, fluffy surface as if Rod walked on top of the clouds. It extended out as far as his gaze could reach. His steps stayed on top of the clouds, not sinking into them nor scraping them like snow. They appeared as soft as pillows but felt as firm as bricks. Rod looked for a hole to get back down.

The knowledge came to him and Rod sliced through the cloud straight in front of him. He gashed another slice from the left of the first cut and finished it to a point behind him, then began a third slice on the right of the first and finished at the point behind him. As the third slice completed the triangle, the cloud gave way and Rod started plummeting to the ground. His speed constantly increased with every second until he raised the sword into the air.

Then Rod found himself back in the apartment where the men had cornered the maid in the bathroom and prepared to break down the door. Rod stopped the three men from their vigilante pursuit of the maid with just a commanding word. Approaching the bathroom door, Rod called out to the young woman and she answered with a mournful cry. This sorrowful sobbing broke into his heart from the other world and Rod knew the maid was his wife. Upon this declaration of love, the maid came out of the bathroom and they hugged. Then the maid vanished from sight.

His false girlfriend of the realm seductively appeared from the bedroom, completely naked, trying to convince him she was the one. In a defiant and deliberate act, he reached for the sword and slashed her twice in an X motion. The sword deftly moved down from right to left for one cut, and down again for the second cut, left to right.

As the girlfriend collapsed to the floor, she turned once more into the brown rabbit of nightmares. Rod faced the mayor and councilman and exclaimed that the blond monster was not his girlfriend, and that the simple maidservant was his wife for life. They looked indignantly at Rod for loving a plain and ordinary person.

Turning back to the brown rabbit, Rod dropped to one knee while plunging the golden sword through her chest, piercing her heart. In an instant, the beast turned into a cloud of dust and then evaporated from sight. When the sword struck the floor, it vanished, and within a second, the whole room dissolved, and with it, the evil people.

This left Rod on one knee in the kitchen, and his wife stared at him with astonishment, still carrying her groceries. Mary carefully placed the bags on the counter while never taking her eyes off his kneeling frame and then asked what happened. Still traumatized from his experience, Rod remained motionless and speechless on the kitchen floor. Seeing the trauma in his face, Mary helped him off the floor and sat him at the table.

As she started a pot of coffee, she explained, "As you entered the kitchen, in a millisecond, you went from walking with a smile to kneeling with concern on your face. It was if there were several frames missing in a film and it jumped from one to the other, omitting the missing images."

Rod conveyed the description of those missing milliseconds while it was fresh in his mind.

“Everything in the alternative world felt normal, but it was not right. All that is evil in our time was made to seem normal and acceptable. People were rewarded for their ability to manipulate other people, and the more devious the plan, the more rewards. It was as if the devil was trying to entice me to go against God, so my eternal soul would be his for all time.”

Rod shook his head in despair.

“Mary, you were there. You appeared as a maid from a humble background. Where everyone else had fancy clothes, manicured nails, and salon-hair styles, you were very ordinary. I didn’t know you when you first arrived, yet there was something about you as the maid that caught my eye. Everyone made fun of your simple features when they were dressed and painted to perfection. When they tried to kill you, my love for you burst through the evil surroundings and I saved you in the end. Yet your love saved me, too. I didn’t fall for the illusion because of my love for you and God. Discovering this love, I knew how to escape that realm.”

Mary still tried to comprehend. “The reason I called for you was because I had a premonition of a tall blond at the store. This exquisite woman was dressed in a white evening gown. She was six feet tall with a blemish-free face and every blond hair perfectly in place. She had a bountiful breast high on her chest with a slender waist and hips, all proportional. She had remarkably long legs that were shapely and perfectly tanned.”

“That sounds like the girlfriend in my nightmare,” Rod said, still shaking.

“The girlfriend promised me she would have you before the night is done. I guess that didn’t happen.” Mary smiled while handing a cup of coffee to Rod. “You know it is good to know that you’d choose me over a supermodel.”

“I am beginning to think that was the reason for me being there – to choose between you and the model or between God and the devil. By choosing wrong in either case, I would have lost both.”

Mary, with the mind of a brilliant engineer, explained, “There are eleven dimensions in the universe. Length, width, and height are very familiar to everyone. Time, or the distance from one point to another, is the fourth dimension everyone relies on for everyday activities.”

Rod nodded. “Yeah, I am aware of these.”

She continued, “There are seven additional dimensions wrapped around the familiar ones that hold them together like a coaxial cable line. I surmise that one of these other dimensions opened for you to enter where the known four dimensions are not true in comparison to our world. It is access to this dimension that allows you to fly by avoiding the normal constraints of this earth.”

She took a thoughtful pause, then continued.

“This other dimension can also suck you into its strange world, changing your perspective on life and possibly altering life forever. It seems this other dimension has both good and evil fighting over it. There is a struggle over the souls of the people who enter it. Take the lost souls in the clouds. They were given the same instructions as you, but couldn’t find their way out the way you did and they wondered around aimlessly not having faith in God.”

“What does this mean?” Rod asked, as he became calmer.

“I don’t know. I have to think about it.” This quandary put Mary into a thoughtful mode. Then, she uttered, “Somehow, I believe if you hadn’t left the cloud city, you would have died before me. Maybe I am being paranoid. But it is a possibility.”

Mary took a couple more sips of coffee.

Then she said, “I am reminded of an old philosophical debate that revolves around a rich and confident ruler. Someone asks him, if he wasn’t raised in the royal house, would he be as confident? Today we discuss it as nature verses nurture. You went through that experiment. You became a Christian and married me given the circumstances of your life. When your life was totally different, you still chose God and me. This is nature, it is who you are. God created you for this purpose. That cannot change, even when all the environmental details are the opposite of reality.”

It took two cups of coffee and an hour for Rod’s heart to return to normal. There was something comforting in Mary’s explanation because it allowed him to make sense of the situation. They prayed to God for strength and guidance into the future.

Neither of them thought this was the last of the other dimension.

Chapter 10: Father Thomas

Father Thomas was the priest who married Rod and Mary five years prior with little notice since they were in a hurry. He was an honest man, and full of wisdom, and both Rod and Mary had visited him over the years seeking advice.

One morning, Rod told Mary that he was thinking it was time for them to have another child, since it had been two years since their son had been born. Mary said that with two children she would have to stop working to care for them. This subject became a point of contention between them in the subsequent weeks and Rod met with Thomas for clarity on the subject.

They started by discussing the pros and cons of having two children as opposed to just one. They agreed it is better for a child to have a sibling as a lifelong friend which was something missing in Rod's own life but Mary had it in her sister. Additionally, Rod wanted children early so he and his wife could travel when they were older.

After Rod stated his case for having children sooner rather than later, Father Thomas asked Rod, "How would you feel if you had to give up your career for a family?"

This question stopped Rod in his tracks and enabled Rod to think about Mary's needs before his wants. Driving home that evening, Thomas' question rattled in his brain looking for a solution. The thirty-minute trip gave Rod an opportunity to ponder the situation in a logical and organized manner. Considering Mary's position of not wanting to give up on her career and recalling that she made more money than Rod did, Rod realized that maybe it would be best for him to give up his own career to stay home with the children if they had another.

Upon reaching home, Rod told Mary about his thoughts of being a stay at home dad and she laughed at Rod as if he was not serious. Rod explained that consulting on security jobs had increased in recent months and that would provide Rod with a resource outside taking care of the family. Rod usually prepared most of the meals and kept the kitchen clean, but he would learn to do the laundry the way Mary had always been careful to, so as not to harm any of the more delicate clothes.

Discussing every household chore in detail showed Mary that Rod was serious about his appeal. They agreed that she would think about for a few days before giving Rod a response.

Mary went to see Father Thomas for counseling on this subject. She was under the impression Thomas was in favor of Rod becoming a househusband, but in fact he was quite surprised to hear about Rod's resolution to his question. Mary explained her caution to having children and her need to stay on at her job at this time.

Mary explained that, from her perspective, it was not important to have a sibling close in age because she had one that bothered her almost daily throughout their young life. Father Thomas asked one of his thought-provoking questions, "What would your life be if your younger sister was not pestering you almost daily?"

This question rattled her brain all the way home as she contemplated life without a sister. She admitted to herself that even though they got on each other's nerves, she could not imagine a life without her younger sister in it. However, she was still not sure if she was ready for another child

in her life and asked Rod for some time to think about it. Now, though, she understood the importance to Rod.

Father Thomas contacted Rod a week later about a security consultation. He told Rod there was an initiative from his superior to secure the church from intrusions since there had been several problems in recent months around the country involving churches. He had a very small budget for security but wanted to know the full extent for securing the church and the properties around it.

Rod met with Thomas a week later and reviewed the church, the rectory, and a halfway house for people recovering from drug abuse. The total for securing the church property was just over \$10,000 not including his consulting fee and Father Thomas had a \$2,000 budget. Rod asked if the church could choose to begin securing only part of their property, what would be the first on the list.

Father Thomas answered that the main hall of the church with its gold goblets and other precious material was the most likely to be robbed.

Rod agreed to do the work himself if the church bought the material. A technician who dealt in security equipment attended the church and agreed to help or at least show Rod how to install the equipment free of charge.

While Rod was working in the basement of the church, securing the windows at ground level on the outside, Father Thomas turned the lights off on Rod. Rod stumbled across the basement and finally reached the stairs, when Thomas turned them back on with a hearty belly laugh.

Rod appeared the next day with his baby since his mother-in-law could not watch him that day, intending to return the practical joke on Father Thomas. Smearing chocolate fudge on a diaper, Rod took it to the Father and asked if the color of his baby's poo was too dark. Rod claimed he had never seen it that dark before. Thomas grew concerned and started examining the diaper stating it was too dark and something might be wrong. Then Rod stuck his finger in the diaper and tasted the darkness stating it was sweet while smiling for the first time.

Thomas balled the diaper and tried throwing it at Rod, but Rod ducked out of the office before he could. Running out of his office, Thomas followed Rod with the diaper in hand looking to hit Rod with it. They ran through the offices until Thomas stumbled and fell which brought everyone running. The associate priest, church secretary, and the cleaning lady all rushed to his side. The secretary who been with him the longest admonished Thomas for carousing around in his condition. She explained that their resident practical joker had pancreatic cancer and was not supposed to exert himself too much.

Every week, a mysterious donation allowed Father Thomas to proceed with another phase of security. It would take Rod a day or two to install and merge the new phase with the existing security measures. Every day at the church, Rod remained cautious, anticipating Father Thomas' next practical joke. One of Thomas' favorite was to take the devices laid out in order and mix them up before returning to his office where he would sit grinning like a Cheshire Cat.

Rod and the parishioner placed one of the security cameras in Thomas' office but he did not want his desk to be in the picture so Rod carefully aimed it at the door so the camera captured none of the papers on the desk. Later that day, Rod turned invisible and rearranged everything on Thomas' desk. The priest came out complaining about it and stating that papers on his desk were not for practical jokes. Rod replied that they should check the security footage to prove that no one but the priest had been there. They reviewed the camera in his office, and it showed no one entering or exiting in the past hour.

Then Thomas asked Rod, "What is the secret you are hiding from the world? There is a supernatural presence emitting from your existence and I respectively ask to see it."

"Is this a confidential confessional?" Rod asked.

Thomas agreed it was. Rod showed him how to turn off the camera in his office for moments of confessionals.

Rod then told his story. He had been praising God one day and found himself floating above the Earth. When Thomas asked if it was a dream, Rod rose to the ceiling in his office and then became invisible for a moment, before appearing again and returning to his seat.

Thomas marveled at his ability and asked why Rod thinks God gave Rod these abilities.

"God has a plan for my abilities just as he has a plan for anyone else," Rod replied. "My job is to follow God and trust him no matter where he wants me to use them."

Rod told Thomas about the people he had been able to help using his powers and Thomas said that it was the good work of the Lord. Then when Rod mentioned the more mysterious uses of his abilities, Thomas sat back with a perplexed look on his face. After the lengthy story about other dimensions, Thomas queried about the sword, its color, and design.

Rod replied that it was a steel sword about three feet long and three inches at the guard. The blade tapered to a point with gold inlay along the fuller. The pommel was gold with a black medallion and had the grip of fine leather.

The older priest asked Rod to describe the inlay in the fuller and Rod drew the figures on a piece of paper. Thomas dug an old book from his library and showed two words in the ancient Hebrew language. The first was JUSTICE and was etched on one side of the sword while the other side simply contained the word LOVE.

Father Thomas reached for another book in his library and found a picture of a sword of legend. Some authorities believe it existed, but most believed it was folklore. He showed Rod a drawing based on writings that dated back to more than three millennia prior. It was close in design to the sword given to Rod by the lion to free Rod from the altered dimension. Rod wondered if the sword could enter our world from this tear in reality.

As their meeting time was ending, Thomas mentioned it would be nice to know the freedom of flying. Rod smiled and told Thomas to meet him that evening at the church. As soon as the sun set, Rod took him around town to see the city from a bird's eye view.

They repeated the flight a week later but there was not a third flight. Rod received a call one morning from the associate priest that Father Thomas' health had a turning for the worse the day before and he lost his battle to cancer early in the morning.

Thomas had written a special thank you for Rod's friendship during the last few weeks. The associate priest thought it was referring to the practical jokes they played on each other and Rod let him believe that.

Chapter 11: Most Terrifying Moment

Rod and Mary participated in a weekly Bible study in the neighborhood. Five families participated in this time of fellowship as they ate dinner and then studied the Bible as a group. Any given Friday evening there was anywhere from six to ten adults, one young man, and occasionally a teenager joining together in fellowship.

Sometimes they would have a question relating to the Bible or life and they postponed the study for a week to add light to a specific question. This study has spurred Rod to study on his own and gain new insight into God as he studied His word.

The Bible study host was Rod's next-door neighbor. Tom, his neighbor, had started studying theology at college but it was not fulfilling as he thought. Halfway through seminary school, he dropped out and fell back on his first career, which was selling and servicing computer software.

He worked many evenings, since the computers that required his service were not in demand, so he had the opportunity to correct the code and programs without others interfering. His work took him all over the southern part of the state.

Sue, Tom's wife, was an elementary school teacher at a private Christian school. It did not pay as well as public schools, but she had more leeway on how she could give instruction in class. Sue had recently entered her last month of pregnancy as they were excited to have their first child.

Sue asked if Mary and Rod would be surrogate helpers during the labor and delivery if Sue required help while Tom was away on a business appointment. It was an honor to have friends asks them to help with such a glorious event. Rod figured the odds of something going wrong and Sue needing them was slim because the two were very organized people.

During the last month of Sue's pregnancy, Mary had the flu and Tom had a very important job an hour away. However, according to the doctor, they had two weeks before the special event and Tom felt safe in making the trip. He left on a Saturday morning to arrive at location just before noon when the office closed for the day. He had about eight hours of work ahead of him and planned to be home around nine.

Having nothing planned for the day unless there was an incident at one of the stores, Rod stayed within ten minutes of Sue. Sue and Mary both considered the men as overprotective husbands and fathers, planning the day so tightly when there was likely two weeks left of the pregnancy.

The sun settled just after five in the evening and Rod remained home to watch their baby so Mary could get some rest. At around six o'clock, his phone rang. It was Sue with panic in her voice, stating that she needed help and asked if Rod would drive her to the hospital.

Mary rose to watch their fed and bathed baby as Rod went over to help Sue. Sue instructed Rod the garage door was open and invited Rod to enter the house from the garage.

Upon gaining entry into the house, Rod called out for Sue. The return for his calling out was a loud guttural growl that reverberated through the house. The sound came at Rod from several directions and Rod went searching for Sue. As Rod approached the stairs, Rod could hear Sue calling to Rod in a weak voice.

Entering their bedroom, Sue was on the bed trying to catch her breath from the last pang of an urgent contraction.

Sue shouted, “THE BABY IS COMING” with an urgent tone in her voice.

Trying to remain calm, he said, “We need to get you to the hospital.”

“NO, THE BABY IS COMING RIGHT NOW!” she hysterically stated.

This news left Rod frozen in the moment, not knowing what to do. Rod had jumped out of low-flying airplanes, faced enemy combatants with guns, and encountered evil characters from another dimension, but never felt so helpless as he did in that moment.

She shimmied off her pregnant pants with the elastic stretchy stomach revealing the reality of the impending child. Rod stood there staring at the improbable sight of his neighbor ready to have a baby.

She let loose with another guttural growl as her body was telling her to push the baby out. This roar of purpose woke Rod from his frozen state and brought the reality of the situation to mind. Rod called 911 looking for help since he knew nothing about birthing a child.

Reverting to his intense military training, when the operator asked Rod to spell the street name, Rod used the Phonetic Alphabet.

The operator explained that their community EMS was on a call and they were a half hour away asked if Rod wanted the next community EMS to respond. Before Rod could answer, Sue let an extremely loud growl, to which the operator stated she was sending the backup EMS. The operator asked how close the contractions were.

Rod exclaimed, “I can see the head.” With this news, the calmness in the operator’s voice left as she asked Rod to hold.

A nurse practitioner returned to the phone stating she had the knowledge to help Rod through the birthing process. Rod put the phone on speaker and described the situation to the nurse. She started giving Rod instructions as how to birth the child for the best interest of the mother and child.

Each time her body felt the pressure, Sue would let out a guttural growl as she pushed through the pain to achieve her objective. The sound emitting from this mother reminded Rod of basic training. After the latest growl, a baby-faced deputy entered the bedroom with his gun drawn. Hearing him enter, Rod turned to see the man fixated on an impossible situation. His face revealed the state of shock Rod felt when he had likewise been first confronted by this reality.

Rod barked out to the officer to find clean towels, which snapped him from this dazed state of confusion. He asked, “Where are the towels?” and then realized neither they were in a position to answer him. He started randomly opening doors until he found the linen closet. Returning with every towel in the closet, he found that the baby’s head had cleared the canal.

Rod stopped to rest as his instructor said he should let the woman relax for a moment. Just then, he heard the siren of the approaching ambulance. He told the deputy to open the front door and direct the EMS to this room.

Before the paramedics arrived at the room, the rest of the baby had been birthed right in front of Rod. The medics took over with great professionalism and efficiency. One worked on the baby, clearing her face of mucus and getting her breathing while the other tended to Sue's needs. Their every move was proficient and deliberate as many years of training exuded through their work.

Proper etiquette said that Rod should leave, but he was amazed that he had been part of this momentous occasion. There was an emotional connection with the event and Rod felt that he had to stay to the end. Watching the paramedic cut the cord and announce that the baby and mother were doing well, Rod felt a sense of rising wonder.

One of the paramedics tried handing Rod his phone, as the nurse was still on the line and calling out to him. The paramedic instructed her as to the situation and then got Rod to accept his phone. The nurse congratulated Rod for performing well under pressure. Rod felt total relief upon hearing her words, yet there was a certain pride coming over Rod, knowing he was part of this impromptu birthing room.

The local EMS showed up about ten minutes later and took over because the visiting EMS had a run in their community. They packed up baby and mother, sending them to the hospital. The deputy cornered Rod for answers so he could report it properly in his notes. After informing the officer, Rod locked up the house using Sue's keys and garage remote.

The next morning, Sue's parents appeared at their house and Rod met them in the drive. They explained that they and Tom both went to the hospital to meet Sue. Her parents wanted to clean up before Sue arrived home.

Tom came home at lunchtime to clean up and Mary made him a sandwich. Tom thanked Rod profusely for helping them in such a trying time. Rod tried to explain his anxiety of seeing his wife in a compromising position, but the new father was too grateful to understand his concern.

Mary understood his feelings of embarrassment of seeing Sue completely, but she did not agree with them. She tried to explain that it was a natural event and nothing to be ashamed of witnessing, but Rod feared this surreal encounter with Sue would forever affect their friendship.

Sue came home on Monday with a clean bill of health for her and the baby. There was a robbery at one of the stores, which kept Rod out until midnight. Tuesday was a meeting at the club and again it was late before arriving home. The rest of the week was the same with Rod not arriving home until late, thereby avoiding any complications of seeing Sue and avoiding any embarrassment.

Some of the diversions could have been avoided, but Rod choose to work until late in the evening, completely missing any opportunity of seeing Sue.

However, on Saturday, Sue and Mary planned a thank you party for everyone who helped them through the birthing process. When Rod tried to get out of going, Mary glared at Rod in a manner that caused Rod to rethink his decision.

It was nice for mid-winter and Rod spent most of the party outside on the deck with the deputy who had also been working that night. He had many of the same feelings Rod did about seeing a woman other than their wife in a private endeavor. It left them both with mixed emotions of

embarrassment of seeing a naked woman and pride for playing a part in helping a mom birth a healthy baby. They both agreed it was best not to think about it and definitely not discuss the situation with anyone.

The deputy excused himself and left Rod alone the deck or so he thought. Turning and seeing Sue wearing a sweater to keep her warm for a prolonged discussion with the man avoiding her. Mary had told her about Rod's feelings of embarrassment, and she was there to hash them out with Rod. Leaning against the deck rail, she thanked Rod for being there with her that night.

Rod casually acknowledged the appreciation and Sue stated unconditionally, "No, you cannot just blow that off. Rod, I am truly thankful for you being there for me. You might have saved my and the baby's life and you cannot ignore that fact. The fact that you are an angel sent by God to protect my baby and me takes precedence over any guilt you feel for seeing my anatomy. You are the good neighbor in Jesus' parable that stopped and helped instead of walking on the other side of the road. You are minimizing this neighborly function while dwelling on physical constructs of a prudent society."

Her forceful appreciation for his actions that afternoon made Rod rethink the problem. One of his fears did come fruition, namely that their friendship did change because of that night. They became closer friends than ever with a bond that would never break. She tried to name her daughter after Rod, but they could not change his masculine name to a feminine version. Sue did state that her children would always call him Uncle Rod.

Returning to the party, Rod held the baby for the first time. Staring into the eyes of the baby girl made Rod feel special. He thought to himself, "I want one for my own." Mary saw Rod holding the girl and saw the importance of giving Rod a chance at having a daughter.

Going to bed that night, she asked Rod if wanting their boy to have a sibling was just a ruse. She asked if Rod really just wanted a daughter.

Rod could not refute this statement.

Chapter 12: The Sword in the Stomach

On a Tuesday morning, within a month of becoming Uncle Rod to the neighbors' daughter, Rod woke with a pain in his lower left abdomen. It was an annoying pain but felt like it would soon pass with some exercise. Mary had to be at work at seven in the morning and Rod's workday did not start until nine. This left him time to get their three-year-old baby to the sitter's house. Mary would pick him up at four on her way home.

There was a store on Liberty Street that everyone referred to as the Liberty Store. It was a good store but it had a terrible parking problem. People used the parking lot to carpool to the big city for their job or in order to shop in the plaza next to the store. The Liberty Store had easy access to both east and west, leading to the southbound traffic since Liberty Street was a boulevard with a concrete divide in the middle.

Traffic coming out of the corner restaurant could only turn west or north because of the traffic barriers. People leaving the north exit would have to travel a half mile north, past two stoplights, before making the legal U-turn and coming back to continue heading south or turn east at the intersection.

The parking congestion was so bad that most customers could not find a parking place and had trouble navigating for the gas pumps. Joe determined this to be a security problem and placed it on Rod's desk. Rod formed a contract with a local towing company, and they placed placards around the location. For a month, they put notices about the new towing policy on cars parked for more than an hour. This eliminated some of the problem, but the congestion was still there.

Then, to the dismay of many freeloaders, they began towing cars. There was a twenty percent increase in revenue the first week and another twenty percent increase the second week. However, several people complained to the manager of the store and one person called the corporate office.

Rod answered the phone. The man tried to say that the times he buys gas once a month would make up for the thousands of dollars they were losing from the lack of parking. The man offered to rent the space and Rod gave him a price of one tenth of what they were losing in revenue every month, which came out to one thousand dollars per month. The man had some choice words for Rod, and ordered him to lower the prices before hanging up.

Rod received a call from the new owner of the nearby sandwich shop regarding parking. A portion of his customers live east or south of the establishment and they find it convenient to park in the convenience store lot. The owner wanted to know they could work out a deal to allow his customers to park there for the short-term parking only. Rod explained they only started towing cars after an hour of parking in their lot and there were security cameras placed strategically that showed the license plates of the vehicles parked.

The restaurant owner offered to rent ten spaces with the understanding that after an hour of free parking, his customers were subject to being towed. They agreed on two hundred dollars per month and the new owner threw in one free sandwich for the ten spots on the right of the parking lot, nearest the restaurant. Rod thought the sandwich was a joke but agreed anyways.

The agreement had a thirty-day notice clause if the experiment became problematic. The owner's attorney drew up the agreement and the Joe's attorney said it met his guidelines; therefore' Rod signed it. The written contract included one free sandwich per month.

Rod had a meeting with the third-generation restaurant owner of the sandwich shop next to the Liberty Store on the day his side was bothering him. They just finished the first month of the trial run at the restaurant using their parking lot and Rod went to review the results directly after lunch. The sales remained up for the Liberty Store and showed no ill effect from the temporary parking.

Rod instructed the workers to allow an hour and a half for those eating at the restaurant. They had towed a dozen cars from the lot in the past month and the owner explained two of his customers complained about their towed cars. His customers thought it was unfair since they were only there for about thirty minutes. He assured Rod the complaining customers were not the type to complain unjustly for he had known them for many years.

After the meeting, Rod returned to the Liberty Store. The pain in his lower stomach caused him to walk gingerly because it had gotten worse. Rounding the corner of the parking lot to the Liberty store, he saw a tow truck with his own car hooked to it. It had been parked in the employee only parking section because Rod was security.

"Excuse me, Sir, but this car is not for towing. I am security for this store." Rod explained.

"It will cost you one hundred dollars to put it down," the driver drawled.

"You should not have picked it up from the employee parking!" Rod responded.

"It will cost you one hundred dollars to put it down," the driver repeated.

Aggravated by the pain in his side, Rod demanded he put the car back with an angry voice.

"It will cost you one hundred dollars to put it down."

"No! Absolutely not!"

The driver called his supervisor who said, "It cost you one hundred dollars to put it down."

Rod grabbed his phone and called the owner of the tow company. He angrily stated that the owner of the towing company had violated the terms of the agreement.

"I am cancelling the contract," Rod stated.

This call out of the blue surprised the tow company owner and he wanted to know what happened. Rod frustratedly explained that one of the drivers had his car in the air from the employee parking reserved spot. The owner acknowledged they were not to take cars from the employee parking and vowed to call the driver.

Then he hesitated, and asked Rod to pay the driver, and he would return the one hundred dollars. Rod agreed, and the driver lowered his car into the parking lot.

It was three-thirty by the time Rod labored into the corporate office. Joe immediately noticed the pain in his face. He sent Rod home, telling him to visit a doctor to examine him. Mary arrived

home shortly after Rod and took him to emergency room. They x-rayed his abdomen and found a bright white spot either in or on his lower colon.

Rod was not allowed to eat that night, instead consuming medicine to clean out his colon. The next afternoon, the doctor performed a colonoscopy, which showed the interior of the colon to be clear. An MRI was scheduled for the early evening and they wanted a dye to help delineate the surfaces of the intestines which overlapped on each other.

They administered the dye at six in the evening, stating it would take an hour for it to coat through the intestine. After an hour's wait, the orderly came to transport Rod to the MRI machine. She invited Rod to sit in a wheelchair, which was an agonizing struggle given that his ache was worse than the day before. In his feeble state, it took a good minute with help from the orderly to stand up. Before he could reach the wheelchair, however, Rod entered another dimension.

Rod realized that he had been changed into another character in this different dimension. This time, the setting was a sooty kitchen where the workers prepared meals for the realm's ruler. The workers were as soot-covered as the equipment and they had no initiative to work. Their skin had become blackened with a leathery casing that made it painful to move about. They had a matted mane around their necks, giving them the appearance of a sea lion with legs and arms. They went about their never-ending day in hopes of no beatings from their tormenters on high. They were weak and feeble creatures moving slowly around the kitchen.

Rod could not stand the messiness of the kitchen and started cleaning it. After cleaning one appliance and moving to clean the next, the first would become black with soot once more. Finding a bathroom, Rod entered it with an urgent need to relieve himself. As the door closed, the toilet disappeared and Rod no longer felt the pressure from his bladder.

The master of the kitchen level came and promoted the worker who did the least amount of work. The other workers received a beating. Rod discovered there were worse things than death since the creature that they was could not die but they could still feel pain. The master had learned over the millenniums how to inflict a large portion of pain to specific areas of the body for the most gruesome and excruciating outcome. The master took no joy and felt no sorrow for inflicting this pain, but if the pain was not sufficient, he received the pain himself.

The remaining workers hated Rod for what he had done to their hierarchy in the kitchen. His fervent work ruined their system of providing enough to not get beaten, yet not more than they needed. The master changed the rank of several of the workers, leaving Rod as the scapegoat. Now, they wanted to hurt Rod as the master caused them pain. Rod was stronger and healthier so the scurried off to the side of the kitchen when he came. They knew Rod could not kill them, but he could inflict more agony than the master.

The production fell in the kitchen and the powers controlling the dimension removed Rod from the kitchen. Rod was now on the second level where outcasts from the beginning of life collected. These creatures were weaker than the other level but their hatred was much stronger. Seeing Rod with normal skin instead of blackened leathery skin, they wished to kill Rod. They had the knowledge to kill Rod but lacked the strength. They knew they would need at least

twenty creatures to subdue Rod, but they did not trust each other. They knew that if half turned away, the other half would receive a beating from Rod that would be even more powerful than the master of the realm.

At this level, more of Rod's awareness about who he really was came through and he remembered his wife and child. The blackened creatures that Rod passed by were uneasy around him, yet they yearned for Rod to save them from their predicament. Rod was able to communicate with them and began to gain their trust as the day progressed.

Rod continued to make friends with the creatures of the strange realm and they looked up to him as their hero. With their help, they believed Rod could defeat the master of the realm and set them free from the beatings. At first, only two followed Rod and he protected them from the others. Seeing how he protected his followers, more chose to follow Rod. Rod explained his military training to his followers, and they were able to protect themselves from other creatures. It did not take very long for their group to gain over fifty creatures.

The master of the realm understood Rod's intentions of overthrowing his position and urged Rod's removal from his realm. And so, Rod found himself in the third realm. Here, Rod knew himself completely and remembered his friends and ability. However, in this realm, his powers became mute. Rod was unable to fly but felt contact with Dad and Dannie in his own world.

In this realm a large beast-like man waited in the center of thousands of blackened creatures. The figure stood six feet, ten inches, tall. His skin shone pale and white from not seeing any sunlight since he had been sent to this realm. He wore metal chainmail that was dark with soot.

Rod got the sense that he was drawing his power from the other creatures in the dimension, leaving them weak. He also felt that the man held power over all of the creatures of this realm. They were stronger than the other two realms, but it would still take ten of them to defeat Rod. Whereas the other two realms held disorganized creatures, these creatures followed the orders from the beast, for they feared the beast more than they feared Rod.

When Rod called on Dad and Dannie for help, they appeared in the dimension by his side. Without saying a word, Dannie told Rod the beast was Dainjore and the blackened creatures were Magtons. The Magtons answered directly to the Dainjore and he controlled their movements. The Dainjore was governor of this dimension and had been appointed by the Vile One.

"The Dainjore has instructions to kill us, so thanks for calling me into this battle," Rod heard Dannie say in a half sarcastic tone.

Dad, Dannie, and Rod were not just talking to each other through telepathy. They were in each other's thoughts in real time. Every thought from them was clear in Rod's mind as his thoughts appeared clearly in their mind. It was as if their minds were melded into one cohesive thought with three inputs from three different people. They were three separate beings who could act as one against the giant before them.

"You must be anointed ones if you expect to kill one who cannot die," Dainjore called to them. He continued to mock them with his superiority until Dannie interrupted.

“You died by a single rock to the forehead. However, it was not the rock that sent you to this dimension. David had the shield of God, and it was God giving him the power to defeat you. Goliath, we carry the same shield of the Lord to rid this dimension from your tyranny.”

As Dainjore ordered the Magtons to attack, Dannie placed in their heads the idea to move to another location. She could not countermand Dainjore’s commands, but she could confuse the Magtons as to their location in the realm.

Dad instructed Rod to pull out his sword and when Rod did, the pain in his abdomen ceased. The sword had been hidden in his abdomen until the moment it was required. As the sword exited his stomach, it grew in length and stature. Dad sharpened the cutting edges of the Sword of Justice and Rod started eliminating the Magtons.

As the sharp edge of the blade sliced through their leathery skin, the Magtons dissipated into nothingness. The sword took on a life of its own as Rod swung, using all his concentration. As the blade swung through the air, it found the best angle to split the Magtons. Their leathery and soot-covered skin dulled the sharpened edge and Dad worked tirelessly to keep it sharp.

As one section of Magtons evaporated, Dannie instructed another group to their demise. As each Magton vaporized, Rod’s strength grew and the sword moved faster. At first, Rod attributed this added strength to his adrenaline, but he soon realized it was the Holy Spirit in Rod taking over the fight.

It only took a few minutes for half the Magtons to vanish from existence. The other half feared Rod more than the Dainjore and fled that realm, leaving the Dainjore to defend himself. Stopping to catch his breath, Rod realized there was no breath to catch for he was rejuvenated and ready for another fight.

The Dainjore pointed at Rod and Rod instinctively raised his sword for protection. A powerful red light of destruction reflected off the sword. Then the Dainjore pointed at Dad, who took a half step backwards as the light reflected off his person, spraying outward. Dannie then took his power and returned it with force. Dainjore took one step back and then fired in anger at Dannie again. This time, Dannie took all of his power by not letting him stop sending it to her. When all his electrified power had left his body, she stored it in her hands.

The Dainjore started walking towards them, stating he would just kill them with his bare hands. Dad connected the chain links in his mail, making it hard for him to move. Rod advanced forward to defeat him with the Sword of Justice. They met face to face, and Dainjore sneered at Rod as if to say his time had come. The sword blocked a powerful swing of Dainjore’s right hand and when he tried to hit Rod with his left hand, the sword took off two of his fingers. The sword struck Dainjore’s chest, which did not cut him, but caused a painful blow to his heart.

They were standing less than five feet apart when Rod heard Dad’s voice in his mind, telling him to be ready to kill Dainjore. Dannie was placing images of their victory in Dainjore’s mind that he found repugnant. In anger, the Dainjore lunged at Rod with all his might while Dad turned his chain mail to dust. With a single thrust of the sparkling point of the Sword of Justice, it plunged into the heart of the beast and he instantly evaporated into nothingness, never to exist again.

The three of them stood alone in the realm with darkness all around them. Even though they could see each other, there was only darkness. They were able to see as if there was light, but no light would penetrate the darkness. Yet in the darkness of the realm, they could still feel the light of God in them and they gave thanks for His strength in them.

“How do we get out of here?” Dannie asked as she searched for a porthole out of the dimension.

“I am not familiar with these dimensional shifts until today and have no idea,” their father figure replied.

Rod realized he knew how to exit the dimension. He plunged the sword into the ground as he took a knee. Where the ground was struck by the point, it started to evaporate and, within seconds, they were back in their world.

Dannie and their dad returned to their respective homes wide awake from the thrill of battle. Rod found himself in the hospital room on one knee as he had in the kitchen more than a year ago. The orderly asked if Rod was okay. She described it as an instantaneous kneeling without any motion. Moreover, the pain that had brought Rod to the hospital was gone.

The orderly pushed Rod to the MRI machine, which showed nothing in his abdomen except signs of a healthy man. Furthermore, the dye delineating his colon from the surrounding organs was gone. The confounded doctor said it had to take at least forty-eight hours for the dye to dissolve but there were no remnants of it in just over an hour.

The doctors attributed his pain to a bowel obstruction and the glare on the X-ray was a glitch in the system. Upon Rod mentioning the pain was still there even when the colonoscopy showed nothing, the doctor assumed it was residual pain from the blockage and with time, it eased. Clearly, the doctor was trying to make sense out of an irrational situation.

The hospital released Rod that night, seeing that the pain was gone and the MRI showed no signs of problems. Rod thought it strange his insurance paid for an X-ray the doctor called defective. Mary left their son with the neighbors and came for Rod at ten o'clock at night. On the way home from the hospital, Rod told Mary about his latest excursion to another dimension. Rod slept in his own bed with his wife next to him and it was a Godsend.

When Rod arrived home from work the next evening, he found Mary telling Dannie and Dad her theory of the eleven dimensions absorbing them into its jurisdiction. She confirmed that since none of the first four dimensions were present, they must have been in one of the other seven dimensions. Mary explained her theory as their feeling of up and down carried with them from their world. If she were to have a camera peer into the dimension while they were there, she stated, they might actually be upside down or sideways. They were assuming up and down from only knowing there was an up and down. Because they stayed attached to the ground, they assumed it was gravity, but she said that gravity actually does not exist in the other dimensions. That was why they could not fly in the other dimension.

They had a nice dinner as Mary continued to explain her theory on the seven other dimensions and their effect on them in this universe. After dinner, Dad suggested to Rod that Mary pee on a

stick because he was pretty sure she was pregnant. While loading the dishwasher, Rod asked Mary if she was possibly pregnant.

“Why would you ask such a question?” she asked. Without thinking, Rod mentioned that Dad thought she was pregnant.

Mary stormed into the dining room.

“How dare you read my mind?” she confronted the Unnamed Man. “That thought was on my mind and it is very personal. You had no right to read my mind.”

Rod’s dad popped into her head and told her, “Here I am, do you see me?”

“Yes,” she answered out loud.

He explained that, when he enters loved one’s minds, they know because of the preexisting connection. In other words, he had not been sneaking into her mind.

Mary then asked how he knew she was pregnant.

He explained he had six grandchildren and knew before the mother revealed it in every case. He attributed the ability to being a grandpa and not one of his special gifts.

Through Mary’s turmoil with Dad, Rod missed the meaning of her being upset. Then the proverbial load of bricks fell on Rod when Mary turned to Rod and stated, “You have eight months to train your replacement at the convenient stores.”

Chapter 13: Finding His Calling

Mary was a strong woman who stood up for herself and often asked Rod not to interrupt or intercede on her behalf in difficult situations. Rod was an old fashioned man who thought it was a man's job to protect his wife – not because she was weak but because she was that important to him – so he found it hard to let her fight her own battles.

However, after several years of marriage, Rod learned to trust his wife to handle her own affairs. Mary was very smart and liked to handle difficult situations with her wit and not with violence. While most people would become snarky or sarcastic, Mary would simply ask questions or make a statement showing concern for the other person which would change the tone of the debate.

The anniversary of their nuptials was on a Wednesday and Mary's mom agreed to watch her grandson so they could celebrate privately. Rod met Mary at the local grocery store to help her get the needed supplies for dinner. She had planned a special main course and Rod's duty was the salad and dessert.

Mary's friend had given a recipe for a Mexican-styled dish that only called for a bit of garlic that could be as easily omitted. The recipe required chili peppers but did not denote a specific pepper. Her friend had said that the type of pepper depended on the people eating the meal since peppers have different flavors and heat levels.

Mary's experience with chili peppers was strictly from reading and she did not have a strong knowledge of the flavors each pepper contained. The grocery store had a section devoted to chili peppers and as they stood over it, Rod explained each pepper and the flavors they brought to foods. He took about fifteen minutes to complete his hot pepper lesson, carefully describing the taste and heat of each one.

"Behold, the beautiful orange-red of this habanero," Rod exclaimed. "It has a very fruity taste yet enough heat to run a power plant for a day." Mary laughed at his description and they moved on to the other peppers. After a few minutes, Rod took the cart to gather the salad ingredients while Mary remained to pick her peppers.

A woman approached Mary holding a handful of lettuce and asked, "Are these greens fresh?"

Mary looked them over and replied, "There are no dark blotches, so I think they are fresh."

"How much are they?" the woman asked.

"I do not know," Mary answered. A perplexed look was apparent on her face.

"You should know the prices," the woman said with a raised voice.

"I don't know what kind of greens they are, let alone the price for them."

"This is your department, and you should know what you are selling," the woman screamed.

Now Mary understood the situation and asked meekly, "Why do you think I work here? I am not wearing a uniform." She gestured to her charcoal wool sweater and knee-length black skirt, which were far from the pale blue Polo shirts and black pants of the store employees.

The woman, not noticing what Mary was trying to say, started yelling louder about Mary being white trailer trash who didn't know her own job.

Rod would have walked up to the woman with a menacing glare to scare her away at this point but Mary continued to try to reason with her. Remaining quiet and non-confrontational, Mary asked again why the woman thought she worked there.

"I saw you helping that man with his shopping, so you most certainly work here."

Mary, becoming more and more confused at the woman's illogical statements, finally stated clearly and distinctly, "I do not work here."

Mary turned back to her shopping. At that moment the woman became infuriated by what she thought was a total lack of respect. She grabbed Mary's left wrist and spun her around screaming in Mary's face. Now, Rod's instinct was telling him to help, but years of marriage held him back to let Mary handle her business. The woman stated loudly that she was taking Mary to the manager to get her fired for being rude as if Mary were a small child in trouble with a teacher.

Shocked by the woman assaulting her, Mary paused for a second, then remembered when Rod showed her how to break a hold. Mary took her right thumb and plunged it between the knuckles of the woman's gripping hand. She jumped back, screaming vile threats. At this point, the polite, thoughtful Mary completely lost both her temper and tact. She angrily told the woman off with some "F" bombs and other cuss words added into the mix. Rod, standing twenty feet away, was shocked and rather proud to hear his polite wife tell the rude woman to leave her alone in such an impolite military fashion.

The woman's husband saw the exchange from about ten feet away and Rod felt the man's anger rise. The man started towards Mary with violence in his heart. Rod sprang between them, placing his hand across the man's chest. The man was about an inch taller and looked like he weighed fifty pounds more than Rod, but Rod stopped him with an open hand to his chest. The man stepped back and did martial arts pose that remind Rod of a cartoon character. Rod stood between the stranger and his wife at a quarter turn to verify the exact location of both.

The man attempted a roundhouse kick at Rod. His right-footed kick was slow and clumsy, and Rod's left hand easily caught it. Rod's military training was activated from the move, and without thinking, he drove his right elbow down the outside of the man's knee causing it to crumble under the pressure. Rod let go of the man's foot, and he dropped, writhing in pain on the floor as a manager approached. Soon after, a policeman appeared at the site of the incident.

The man was clutching his knee screaming in pain while his wife was hysterically calling for the manager to fire Mary for being rude and hurting her. The police officer cornered Mary and Rod while the manager attended to the man on the floor. It seemed only like it only took a minute for other policemen with paramedics to appear. The woman insisted her hand took priority over her husband's knee even though she was able to move her hand while his knee was swollen and disfigured.

Several other shoppers stated that the other couple were the aggressors in the short-lived fight. One witness stated she saw Rod at his cart and a split second later, Rod was between the

charging man and his wife. This caused the police to ask the manager to see the security footage. After reviewing the CCTV, the police arrested both the aggressors. They handcuffed the man to his gurney and handcuffed the woman behind her back as she was still calling for Mary to be fired.

Apparently, Rod's elbow to the man's knee caused a lot of damage. The force broke the patella and dislocated both the tibia and fibula from the joint, tearing cartilage and tendons alike. Rod declined to press charges until a week after the event when the lawyer for the couple said the wife was suing the grocery store and them for the damage to her husband's knee. The letter stated that, since it was a store employee's husband doing the damage, the store was responsible for medical cost and Rod was responsible for the pain and suffering. The couple's lawyer sent the initial letter in hopes of settling the dispute out of court and listed the demands of her client.

The grocery store's lawyer sent a copy of the video to the lawyer with the notice that Mary was a customer, not an employee, and the lawyer dropped her case against them. The couple tried to find another lawyer to take their case since he would miss a year's worth of work because of his knee. That is when Rod and Mary pressed charges against the couple.

The police asked Rod to come talk to them a month after the incident. They explained the couple took a plea deal for their part in the incident. She pled to disturbing the peace for a year's probation and he pled to simple assault for a year's jail time commuted to two years of probation. The agreement stated that neither were to contact the store or Rod and Mary for three years or face pending jail time.

The District Attorney was seeking charges against Rod for excessive use of power. The county legal authority said it was not the act but the damage it caused that was his concern. A few days later, Rod's attorney, the DA, and Rod himself met before a judge to determine any possible charges. It was an informal hearing, but the judge hoped to clear the matter that day.

They reviewed the reports from witnesses and grocery management with the video of the fight. Then the DA read the hospital report describing the damage to the victim's knee. The emergency room doctor did not believe the damage came from a single blow to the knee by a man's elbow. Rod's attorney invited the prosecutor to press any charges they had, but the video spoke for itself and he would have a jury trial. Rod felt bad about the damage to the man's knee, but he had been protecting his wife from a furious man. The video clearly showed the immense anger on the face of Mary's attacker and that fear in the situation spiked Rod's adrenaline, causing the excess damage.

The judge admitted there was no way for the county to gain a conviction based on the evidence. The level of damage, although severe, did not qualify as a crime. He dismissed the charge with prejudice so it could not come against Rod again. Rod had to sign several legal papers before he was able to leave. The whole process took less than two hours.

As they were leaving, the judge asked Rod to stay behind, assuring his lawyer it was personal and not legal. The judge asked Rod how long he had served, and Rod explained his military background in detail. He asked Rod if he had ever heard of PTSD and then explained he knew

something that could help him recover from the ghosts of war because it had helped him when he returned from the first gulf war.

The judge told Rod about a group that met every Monday night at the hospital's conference room. It was free and the trained counselor volunteered his time to help other vets.

Rod's face must have shown disdain for the idea, for the judge began to say why he had originally joined the recovery group. When he had left the army after the first Gulf War, he was in a very dark place. He had trouble sleeping since the normal noises of the city would wake him in a cold sweat, his heart pounding, waiting for an explosion. After several months of not sleeping, he started to think of suicide as a solution to his problems and then sought help. The judge found the recovery group that a wealthy benefactor had started to help veterans cope with post-war symptoms after he had lost his grandson who had been stationed overseas.

The judge gave Rod a card with the address of the next meeting and asked for Rod to consider it. Telling Mary about the proposal from the judge, Rod was surprised when Mary said he should go and check it out. She reminded Rod there were a couple of nights that he had sat straight up in bed trying to catch his breath as past battles entered his dreams.

She added that the dreams themselves were not necessarily bad, but if there was a way for them to stop, Rod should try. He should go if only to remove a minor annoyance. Rod did not know how she did it, but "minor annoyance" were the exact words that had been going through his head.

Rod went to the meeting and found ten other veterans sitting around a large conference table. Some of the veterans had tablets and played games as it often helped calm them in stressful situations. The counselor had been in the First Gulf War and introduced himself as a first sergeant retired in 1994. He asked Rod his name and Rod told the group. Dom, the man next to Rod, looked at him strangely.

Another veteran had gone through a panic attack that week and was anxious to speak about it. The others listened intently to his experience and then asked what the trigger had been.

"Commonplace commotions are often the triggers," he admitted. "In this case it was a lawn mower backfiring. I was just sitting on my couch by the window, but all of a sudden I was back in the trenches, gun shots all around me, and my hand clenching a gun with no ammo left."

"Commotions happen all the time. The trigger was not outside, but inside your mind. The commotion simply activated the trigger within your head," Rod said.

"That's quite a deep thought," the counselor said. "Would you expound on it, Rod?"

Rod explained, "There is a mechanism within all of us who train to kill. It comes from years of working towards being ready to fight at any time. By understanding that the trigger is within us and not some external force, we know the focus of our fight. In basic training, the sergeants taught us to know our enemy. This enemy is our own mind and training. However, because we can recognize that the enemy is in our mind, we can see the gravity of the problem. How do we fix our minds when bullets and bombs cemented into our thoughts the habit of being ready at all times?"

They discussed several mental exercises the other vets regularly performed, which were designed to do just that. Then, the soldier suffering the attack asked what Rod would do when the next attack strikes.

“I do not know what you should do other than hang in there until it passes. However, when I feel anxious, I pray to God for deliverance and keep praying until the suffering passes,” Rod said passionately.

Half the room groaned at his suggestion while the other half seemingly ignored it.

Dom asked Rod about his service. After Rod told him where he served, Dom asked Rod to show him his patch. Rod removed his shirt, showing the tattoo on his shoulder.

“My friend Murph had one just like that, only bigger.” Rod asked about Murph and Dom replied, “He took his life a year ago. That’s when I sought help for my sleepless nights.”

Dom looked closer at Rod’s tattoo.

“You know, that’s exactly like Murph’s tattoo except for the gold outline around it.”

Rod could see the gears in Dom’s head turning. Dom looked at Rod. “Were you Angel Eyes?” he asked.

Rod turned to the young man with indignation burning in his heart because that was their code name while on mission so no one could track them after the mission. “No one was to know that name!” Rod exclaimed ardently and Dom went silent.

The counselor assured Rod and reminded everyone else, that everything in these meetings was to be confidential and should stay in the room.

Dom explained to the rest of the group what a badass Rod had been. His explanation included that the gold outline around the Rod’s tattoo was for his heroics on a mission saving everyone from certain death. The other men in their fighting group must have given Rod the gold outline for being their leader on and off the field.

Dom guessed that, because of religious reasons, Rod did not want the tattoo but got a small one as part of the group. Dom regaled the men with mission secrets about Rod’s team that were prohibited to speak outside their command. Rod wondered how Dom knew these details.

After the meeting, Rod asked Dom more about Murph.

“So, you do remember him?”

“Yeah, Dom, I do. Murph was a good man. I just never knew what happened to him after I left the army.”

“He left too, you know, pretty soon after your departure. With nothing to do, Murph quickly sank into the bottle. I was in basic training with Murph and we remained friends, always staying in contact over the years. I served just one hitch to receive help with college payments, while Murph made it a career. Your departure broke up the team. When Murph came back he was pretty depressed about it. Your team was the only family he knew, having been raised in several

foster homes. He would always tell me stories about his brave leader. That's how I recognized your name, and why I asked to see your patch. I needed to know if you were the one."

When Rod told Mary about Murph, she concluded it was incumbent on Rod to continue the counseling because of his family history with drugs. She didn't want Rod to leave her before his time. For the first time, Rod could see the fear in her eyes about his wellbeing. Rod told her that the counseling would continue until he did not wake up anymore in the middle of the night.

Then Mary asked about the other men in the room and what their response had been to his suggestions. Her insight was that they took what Rod said to have more importance than the counselor's. She suggested Rod might be able to affect the lives of those men even if he had not been there for Murph.

Rod hugged her because the very thought of not being there for Murph was eating at his heart, and he needed to do something about it.

Chapter 14: Demons Invade

Rod trained his replacement as security director. Joe became Rod's first client for his security consulting. Basically, Rod was to monitor the new security director for the next year to be sure he didn't take advantage of his position and to offer help when required. Joe had several other business owners contact Rod regarding security consulting. Rod's part-time job was paying immediately.

Even though Rod had been hoping for a daughter, he was overjoyed to welcome another boy into the world at twenty-two inches and seven pounds, eight ounces.

Mary had a month of maternity leave from her job in addition to two weeks of vacation time due to her anniversary date quickly approaching. After six weeks of being a mother to two boys, she began to wish to stay home with them, but also wanted to continue working. Mary called her manager and explained to him her feelings during the six weeks off.

He clarified that most of her work was accomplished remotely since she primarily worked in theoretical and not actual projects. He offered that she could work from home and visit the office once or twice a week for meetings and coordination. Mary agreed it was the best solution she could think of.

When the new baby was two months old, Dad appeared one afternoon and asked to meet Rod on top of the hill.

A few hours later, they met on the hill, where Rod had met Dad, and also Dannie, for the first time.

"How are Mary and the baby?"

"They're good, but that's not why you called me here." Rod could tell something was bothering the man.

"Can you use the Sword of Justice in this realm?" Dad asked.

"The sword only exists in the other dimension and it isn't available to me in our dimension."

"What about the pain in your side in this dimension that went away when you pulled the sword against Dainjore and the Magtons?"

"I can feel the sword in the other dimension as if it has a life of its own or is controlled by a higher power. I don't feel it in this dimension because it only exists in the other dimension."

"Draw the sword from its sheath," dad said.

"Haven't you heard anything I said? I can't," Rod replied.

"Show me the action then. Show me what it looks like when you draw the sword," the Unnamed Man insisted.

Rod slowly obliged and stretched his right hand to his left hip, acting like he was gripping the handle of a sword and then pulled as if it was sliding from the sheath. As his hand turned upward, the sword itself emerged in Rod's hand. He almost dropped it in shock.

The gold and polished steel glimmered in the midafternoon sun. Rod gawked at it in amazement. He had never seen the beauty of the blade before, except through the tainted light of the other realms. In the light of day, it was absolutely glorious in appearance.

The dad smiled at the appearance of the Sword of Justice in this realm. However, his smile suggested it was not just the beauty of the sword, but the power it brought with it. Rod asked his dad if he had a premonition about the sword.

“Yes,” he replied. “I saw it in your hand while standing on this mountain top.” Rod believed there was more to the premonition, but he knew Dad would not tell him the details until after the events played out.

Rod arrived home and showed Mary the Sword of Justice. She commented on its beauty, but asked why would Rod need it in this realm and if Dad knew about it.

“Dad showed me that I could retrieve it in our world.”

“Then he knows more than he was telling you. There is always a reason for Dad doing something, so why did he choose this time to show you that you can use the sword here?”

“It’s Dad. We won’t know the reason until it happens,” Rod reminded her.

“I understand, but Rod, stay on guard, please. Something is going to happen and it’s going to happen soon.”

A week later, Rod woke to Dannie standing over him in his room, gently tugging on his shirt sleeve.

“Rod, we have to go now. Come with me.” Rod quietly rose out of bed which woke Mary.

“I have to work,” Rod whispered to her.

Mary mumbled, “Kill them all,” and rolled over to fall asleep again. Rod stumbled out the door to see Dad standing there waiting for him. He greeted Rod, but kept one eye on the western sky with a worried look. They started flying west but Dannie soon had to come back for him because Rod couldn’t keep up with their pace.

They arrived at the weekend retreat by the state park. Dannie looked over the water.

“The fissure is bigger than any I’ve seen before, and it is still growing,” she stated. Rod joined her. Where the other dimensional fissures were vertical, this one was horizontal and stretched a quarter mile wide and fifty feet high. Then, as Rod stared at the surface of the bay, a gray form appeared, rising out of the water.

Dannie with her illusion power caused them to blend in with a flock of other humans scrutinizing the fissure. In reality, only the three of them were standing on the shore, but it appeared in like hundreds of defenseless beings standing in awe at this wonder. Six shadowy figures flew from the fissure and approached their position. They stopped when they saw the people gathered on the shore. Then the people from Dannie’s illusion began throwing rocks at the figures, which went right through them without harming them.

Dad told Rod to remain still as he and Dannie rose up against the figures in the night. Dad shot at one of the shadows only to have the blast pass straight through without harm. Dannie shot at another and her blast reflected off it. The six shadowy figures retreated back to the fissure after the two flyers' ineffective show of force.

"Was that it?" Rod asked.

Dannie replied, "Those six are only reconnaissance for the main army that have been sent to fight. They were looking for a show of force and are now reporting back to the main army that they will not have to fight since we are unable to affect their being. By absorbing enough people, and killing them, they hope to gain the strength to take over the world before we gain the strength to kill them."

The trio didn't have to wait long before the horde of demons came through the fissure. Dad, who flew to the hill behind them, told Rod to draw his sword and kill them all. Without thinking, Rod drew the sword from his side and made himself ready to fight. However, the demons were flying all around and Rod couldn't reach them.

"Use the power of the sword and do not rely on your own abilities," Dad shouted with dismay.

Rod pointed the sword at a demon that was quickly approaching and zapped it from the sky. It turned to powder then faded away.

"Keep killing them!" Dannie hollered. Rod swung the sword towards the sky and a current streamed out of the point, creating a large black cloud which cast a shadow in the moonlight. The creatures came at Rod faster than he could kill them. Rod found himself the only one on the beach. Soon the demons surrounded Rod as he swung the sword wildly, evaporating many of them, but some were able to touch him. With each touch, Rod felt his life pouring out of him.

Rod fought harder with an adrenaline rush, but his body became weaker as each new demon attached to his body. Then a bright white light shone around him killing the demons in contact with him and strengthening him to full potency.

Dannie invaded the minds of the demons, telling them the fissure back to their domain was closed and their only hope was to defeat Rod. As long as the sword flashed in the night sky, the thought of retreat was poison to them. Rod flew straight up in the sky to meet them and he could feel their fear as Dannie messed with their thinking.

The battle ensued with Rod killing hundreds at a time before they could reach him, but eventually the multitude of demons proved too much, and they started attaching to him again. As his body began to lose its strength, the bright light shone around him again, killing the ones clinging to him and strengthening him for another round. Now there were less than hundred to fight and Rod flew after them. They didn't have the strength to roam far from the fissure, but Dannie kept telling them they couldn't go back. As the sword killed the last demons, they disappeared into a cloud and drifted away in the wind, leaving the moonlight shining bright.

Dannie told Rod to shoot into the fissure, and as the power exited the sword, Dad was recharging him again. Since it was a rather large fissure, it took a while to clear the opening and verify there were no more demons coming from the fissure. Dannie flew into the fissure, grabbing the top

and pulling it down to the bottom, closing it forever. As the gray light dissipated from sight, Rod put the Sword of Justice back into the sheath and it disappeared from view. Rod could feel that it was on his hip but couldn't see it.

Dannie affirmed, "Even the sheath is as beautifully decorated as the sword itself."

They met over the bay and discussed the battle as the adrenaline still coursed through Rod's body. It was Dad who first pointed out it was God's power they were wielding and they needed to thank him and give the glory of the victory to him. They took turns praising God before returning home.

As they started for Rod's home, he easily kept up with the two faster flyers. It was only a few seconds until they were at his house. At first Rod thought the two others were flying slowly for his sake, but then he realized he had their speed when his home appeared so quickly.

Still inspired from the fight, Rod couldn't sleep. Mary rose a half hour after the flyers arrived at Rod's home. Dad, Dannie, and Rod were sipping coffee when she staggered into the kitchen, still not quite awake. They were talking mentally so as not to wake her and the boys, and she was surprised to see everyone sitting around the table. The two other flyers left for their own homes as they felt uncomfortable waking up the house.

Mary said they didn't need to leave on her account and she would be fine after a cup of coffee. The sugar container was empty, so she kicked the step stool to the counter to reach the spare bag of sugar on the top shelf of the cabinet. In her morning daze, she unsteadily reached for the sugar, slipped, and started falling from the stool.

Normally this was one of those situations where you could see it happening but could do nothing but watch it in slow motion. However, with just a thought, Rod was beside her to catch her fall before any harm could come to her. They hugged and she thanked him for being there for her.

Rod told her how he transported across the kitchen and didn't even need to move to get her. He had just suddenly appeared next to her, ready to catch her without thinking. Then she reminded him of the incident in the grocery store where Rod had just appeared on the camera angle showing the brief skirmish.

"Yes, I don't recall moving that time either," Rod said. Then their newborn son cried wanting to be fed and needing a diaper change. Rod told her to have a sip of coffee while he changed their son and then she could come up to feed him. With just a thought, Rod was in the room with the baby. Mary arrived while the clean diaper was being secured tightly. She had been startled by him disappearing directly in front of her that way and requested Rod not to do that around the children ever again. With an understanding yes, Rod agreed it was not a good idea.

As she fed their son, she postulated that Rod was able to use the other dimension to teleport himself to where he was needed. It was much the same as leaving for several days to the other dimension and arriving back within the same moment in time. Where three days passed in the other dimension, no time passed in this world. Likewise, Rod had the ability to transfer to the other dimension and return to this dimension in a different location with no time expended in their world.

As Mary continued to feed their child, Rod stepped out of the room. Rod asked Dad if he knew where he was. Dad, eating breakfast, stated confidently that Rod was just outside the nursery door and between the words nursery and door, Rod appeared in front of his dad at his breakfast table.

“This is new,” the man stated, with a surprised look on his face. Rod popped back home in the same split second.

Entering the nursery, the comment of Mary groggily telling him to kill them all came to mind. Rod asked Mary about her comment. She pointed out that his phone didn’t ring so the only business Rod had could only have been something from the other realm, which always involved killing of some evil creature. Being married to an incredibly smart woman was a blessing.

The following Monday, Rod went to his PTSD meeting. About halfway through, he felt compelled to tell them about his fight with the demons. Rod told the story as a dream, and the other men in the room took it as a metaphor of their life. After he told them the demons had him surrounded, they started telling of similar dreams where they were surrounded by their demons.

Where Rod’s were actual demons, one spoke of zombie-like creatures with their current boss as the leader. They had crowded around him in a menacing manner threatening to kill him and before they could, he woke up.

Another’s story was about walls closing in on him like in one of the Star Wars movies. He knew in the dream that the walls would crush him but there was nothing he could do. A third mentioned tabby cats were in his threatening dream, but the one thing in common with all of them was that they all woke before being killed.

Rod pointed out that in the end he defeated his demons, each and every one of them. Rod had help from God who strengthened him throughout the battle and kept reenergizing him every time the demons were about to succeed in killing him. In the end, the demons died, and Rod lived.

The counselor concluded that Rod was further into recovery than the other men since he could see a way out of impossible situations. The other men had not reached that point in their recovery. The whole circle of men wanted to know his secret and Rod told them about God who strengthened him.

“He keeps me fighting even when I want to give up. You have to keep fighting the demons your life whether they look like demons, walls, zombies, or kittens.”

Mack, or “the cat man” as the others referred to him the rest of the meeting, stated that was the problem. They could not fight even though they had been trained to fight. The other men agreed to this statement.

“There are other ways to fight than with fists, knives, and guns. The counselor is always recommending ways to fight against the demons in our lives. The problem is the demons are in here.” Rod pointed to his chest.

“How do we fight ourselves or how do we change to who we need to be?” the cat man asked.

“The counselor has given very good suggestions, yet we ignore them.”

Another soldier pointed out he had tried them and found that they didn't work for him.

Rod insisted, "The only thing I do not like about the counselor is that he is not the drill sergeant that taught us how to fight with their hands. A drill sergeant will get in our face to make us learn while the counselor only suggests in a friendly manner. We have to keep working on what the sergeant wants until we get it right. Then we keep working on it until we don't do it wrong anymore. I have sat here for several months now, listening to one story after another about how you tried one time to change, it didn't work, and you gave up."

Rod apologized for being on a soapbox and sat back in his chair. In unison, the men asked him to continue pushing them because, deep down, they knew they had to change, or suicide would soon tempt them more strongly than they could resist.

Rod then asked how many of them liked video games. Every hand went up.

"If I was to start you on a new game at level fifty, would you be able to play the game?"

They acknowledged they would not.

"If you start at level one, can you learn the game?" They all said yes, except for one smartass who said it would depend on the game – if he didn't like it, he wouldn't learn it.

"That is my point. You are not going to like the change because it means giving up on what you know in favor of an unknown world. It is a very scary change, but you need to change one step at a time."

They were already ten minutes past their allotted time, and no one wanted to leave but the counselor said they needed to vacate so they could close the building. The manager was standing outside the door but said she did not interrupt because of the tone in the room. As everyone was leaving, the counselor told Rod he was the staff sergeant for these men. It was up to him to push them beyond their limits to learn what they needed to do. Following the metaphor, the counselor stated he, personally, was the general setting the direction ... but the men needed a sergeant to push them through to the end. Since Rod had been through it, they elected him to lead them.

The meeting ended just after eight and Rod arrived home at nine. Rod told Mary about the meeting and how Rod had been "elected" as the sergeant to push the men through a difficult time in their lives. Rod explained to her about the night's discussion and the effects it had on the men. By the end of his lecture, they were looking at him like new recruits looking at the sergeant. Whether Rod liked it or not, he was their leader to push them past the pain they feel.

Mary hugged him. "I've always been proud of you, Rod, and all your accomplishments," she whispered. "But this, this goes beyond anything you've done. Those men are lucky to have you as their sergeant, and I'm the luckiest woman in the world to have you as my husband."

They went to bed after making sure their sons were asleep. Later that night, Mary got up to feed the baby, trying not to wake Rod since she reckoned he needed the sleep after a very rough session. However, as she climbed back into bed, Rod woke up. He lay there awake for what seemed like a few seconds but it was really an hour. He tried to go back to sleep, but then the image of Mack appeared in his head. The veteran was standing over a bridge looking down to the rushing river. Rod could feel his thoughts. Mack was calculating that if his body hit the current

right in the center, there was no escaping it and it would surely throw him into the rocks and boulders of the fast paced waters. Then the pain of life would end, and he could be free.

Rod sat up in bed suddenly, and with just a thought, he was standing next to Mack, wearing nothing but his underwear.

Mack was startled to see Rod, said nothing as the booze he had consumed made him sway with the wind.

“What are you doing?” Rod asked in his best sergeant voice.

Mack muttered, “Just watching the water run pass the bridge.”

“That’s a lie. What are you doing, Mack?”

“I am thinking about life in general and what you said tonight.”

“Mack, you’re still not telling me the truth. What are you doing?”

Mack started crying as he told Rod about wanting to kill himself to end the pain of this life. He cried to him that the cats in his nightmares were metaphors for all his problems. Problems of having trouble keeping a job, drinking too much, not sleeping because of PTSD from former battles, and knowing the pain he causes to his family.

“Suicide does not end the pain. It only passes it on to your loved ones. The pain you feel now is minor compared to the pain of hearing a person’s husband or father killed himself. You have lived with the pain so long you cannot imagine your life without it and the devil is telling you there is no other way out. I am here to tell you that God can bring you out of this and you can live a joyous life with him if you trust him.”

Rod sat down on the bridge and gestured for Mack to join him.

“Dude, this is the first step I mentioned in the meeting,” Rod said. “Your one little baby step tonight is saying, *I am not going to kill myself today.*”

“Your family loves you,” Rod said. “You need to be there for them. Do you have any children?”

“Yeah, three boys. Aged three to ten.”

“They need you in their lives. You know, I have a friend about my age. His father committed suicide when the boy was just ten. It still haunts that man today, decades later. Do you really want to kill yourself, and have three boys haunted by their father’s death for their entire lives?”

Mack broke down crying, saying, “I will not kill myself today.” He walked quietly back to his car and drove off.

Rod popped back home into bed. Although his departure and return did not wake Mary, the sudden cold from him out in the night air in only underwear made her shiver and wake up. She admonished him to please warm up next time before getting back in bed.

The next Monday at the recovery meeting, Mack told everyone about his drunken dream where Rod appeared to him like an angel in his underwear convincing him not to jump off the bridge.

He stated that was his first step. The second step was to figure out how to stop the pain and he was fighting against it.

The counselor then gave them advice as to how they could combat their negative feelings. This time, the men were paying attention and asked questions specific to their needs.

Several of the men later asked Rod how to implement these changes in their lives.

“Your heart will tell you and I will help you guys through it based on your needs. The demons live within your heart and mind and I cannot access that to see what needs to be done. But if you call me and tell me what’s going on honestly, I will do my best to talk you through it.”

Another man told the group about his own life and asked about little things he could do to change. Everyone gave him suggestions and agreed to hold him accountable to what he decided that night.

Someone then asked, “How do we know when the demons are gone from our life?”

The counselor informed everyone he would let him know when they reached that point. Everyone knew this was a lifetime challenge.

Chapter 15: Foreign Service

Dad and General Bricker appeared at Rod's doorstep one morning. Usually Rod could sense when his dad was approaching and would have coffee ready for him. But Mary had gone to work that day and Rod was busy home alone with his children. The knock on the door was quite a surprise for him, since he was in the middle of playing with their oldest son.

Rod had never met Bricker before, and Dad introduced him as an intelligence officer for the army in a branch Rod had never heard of. As Rod made coffee, Dad did a mental sweep of his house for listening devices.

"Why are you here?" Rod asked.

"Long story short, there is a hot spot for criminal activity in an African coastal nation," Dad said. "The criminals supply terrorists with weapons and supplies for suppressing innocent people throughout the world. The last two people sent into the country to obtain information regarding this contraband business turned up dead within a week. Bricker here is hoping you could infiltrate their compound to gain the knowledge to defeat them. The problem is that our nation and the nation housing the compound do not have a diplomatic relationship. This country is hostile to America on account of certain past happenings. But I believe with your powers and athletic ability, you could achieve the objective of gaining intelligence while surviving safely."

Bricker spoke up, laying out a general plan of operation but admitting the plan was elementary in design and would require details using Rod's powers and abilities. He was hoping Rod could fly into the compound, gather pictures, and return unnoticed by any of the guards. The navy would take him to a point just off the coast where it would be easy for him to fly into the compound and fly back. The whole plan would not take more than a couple of days, he assured Rod.

After discussing it with Mary that evening, she insisted Rod do what was necessary to make the world safer. The next day, Rod popped to Bricker's office following Dad to the location.

Further intelligence had arrived from other agencies indicating that it was not as easy as flying to one spot and flying out. It seemed the criminals did not keep their products in the compound but buried somewhere in the nearby desert. Rod would need to discover the location of the cache of weapons and explosives in order to take the necessary pictures.

Bricker was surprised at how well Rod read surveillance photographs of the region as he laid them out on a table. There were about a dozen sites in the desert where they might have been hiding their supply of destruction and torment. Upon examining the various pictures, Rod located a mine to the east of the compound. It was a good way to infiltrate the operation and possibly discover the network of hidden weapons.

However, the new plan would take several weeks instead of a couple of days. Rod's ability to work this mission was dependent on Mary agreeing to run the house and work from home for two to three weeks without him. Rod told the two older gentlemen he needed to speak with his wife before agreeing to the new plan.

Rod popped back to Mary and told her about the new problems with the plan and how it might now take several weeks to complete. She answered without a second thought, "Let me make

arrangements with my mom and work for the next three weeks. Then you are to fulfill your mission.”

The next day found him back at Bricker’s office to meet Dad and Bricker. A CIA representative with high clearance for intelligence gatherings arrived shortly after Rod. The rep had an air of superiority to him. He was not smug, but experienced, since he had spent a number of years researching the target coast of Africa, the people, and the problems. He was against any involvement concerning the region since the last two agents had gathered nothing but a death toll. He wanted more time to discover other alternatives, but Bricker pointed out there was a large cache of arms ready for sale and the matter was urgent.

The CIA man would not reveal any information until he knew more about the operation. He also didn’t see how Rod would be any more successful at entering the operation than the two agents who had gone in before.

Dad told the CIA man that anything the he saw in the office must stay in the office and then convinced Rod to demonstrate his powers to the man. Rod disappeared right in front of the man and then started put notions in his mind of him breaking out in hives. As the man glared at the empty spot in the room, he started scratching himself all over his body. Then Rod reappeared directly next to him which made him jump. Rod told him to stop scratching his body as the hives turned into a slimy goo making the man feel creepy.

After relieving him of the creeps, Rod escorted him out the door past his assistant who had been left in the hall. The assistant could not see them leave because Rod made him see nothing but an empty hallway. Upon reaching the main office complex, Rod asked the CIA man to call out for his assistant. The assistant came running, wondering how they made it past him and asked if there was a secret door while insisting that they did not pass him in the hall. Upon returning to Bricker’s office, the CIA agent was convinced of Rod’s ability to enter the region, gather the intelligence, and return alive.

They spent the rest of the day planning details of the engagement with the criminals in the compound. The agent said that the weapons were buried in the desert but the criminals went in the dead of the night and always when the skies were full of clouds. They would take a dozen trucks to various spots in the desert and never the same spots twice. However, the CIA believed the munitions were all in one location and they identified several spots that they may be buried from tracking the trucks and seeing common stopping locations. The criminals always kept a lookout on top the hill overlooking the desert floor.

A Seal Team had been preparing to invade the desert and destroy the arsenal if they couldn’t hit the target with a missile. The compound itself had surveillance cameras and the entire perimeter had guards constantly watching for intruders.

The criminal group had two leaders. One was an American and the other an African who had a class in common at Oxford University. One assignment they had was to write a paper on selling illegal arms and both found it was easier than anyone thought to sell these coveted weapons. After they realized they had met someone who shared their views, the two young men quit college and started selling weapons for a living.

They made a deal with the current government – paying a high rent for housing their compound, a price that included keeping foreign governments from searching the desert. They had recently borrowed fifty million dollars from a drug cartel so they could make a large purchase of guns and explosives. The CIA was hoping to track the selling and capture the weapons from the sale.

The American spoke Spanish and dealt with the portion of customers that included many from the drug cartels. His code name was Candy Man. Although he did some selling, his main job was buying and financing the deals.

The African man wore Muslim garb and knew the Quran well enough to speak eloquently to any Imam in convincing terms. However, the CIA had pictures of the man consuming ham and other pork products while visiting Europe and Asia even though their African compound remained pig free. He only met with the Muslim leaders at the compound under the guise of the Quran laws. His code name was Bookie.

Everyone decided that Rod should leave the next day in case inside information leaked out regarding the mission. Before leaving well into the night, Rod asked Dad why he didn't take this job. His mentor answered that he had another premonition that Rod was the one who should take on this task. Since these insights came from God, he didn't share them with anyone.

After a few hours of sleep, a private jet flew Rod to Africa just outside the country in question. Rod flew to a spot just outside a small town in the country of trouble. There, Rod made his appearance look like a man needing a barber very badly and his clothes resembled a man who had been traveling for many years. Rod was wearing a wide-brimmed hat to keep the sun from burning him, but made it appear tattered and torn. Rod was wearing his army boots from when he was in the service and made them appear as though the sand had worn the shine off them.

Traveling by the mine, Rod crossed the corner of it where there were boards laid down to support the wheelbarrows pushed to the mines by the workers. The boards had faded to gray due to the muddy sand pushed in the wood grain by rubber wheels traveling back and forth repeatedly.

Many of the mineworkers were in chains, either because they were in slavery or under prison sentences. It was nine o'clock local time and they had been in the mine since sunrise that day. They would continue to work until the sun set twelve hours later.

Rod followed the boards until they circled to the mines where he veered off to the east and started for the compound. It was a four-hour walk through the desert to reach the compound. Rod spotted a man on top of the hill overlooking the desert valley. Rod turned invisible and continued walking the rolling terrain with an occasional stop behind the hill to rest for a minute before continuing. Rod steadily made his way through the desert after avoiding detection from the watchmen. It was important he left a trail in the sand of where he walked for his cover story to enter the compound.

An oasis was directly in front of him with large palm trees and bushes appearing green after the night's rain. Rod soon came across the compound and purposefully walked directly in front of it. The guard by the main gate stopped him as Rod strolled past it looking to fill his canteen with water.

Since his skin was not that of a local, the guard ordered him to stop.

“What are you doing here?” the guard asked.

“Passing through on my travels. I was hoping to find water.”

The guard, not trusting his answer, ordered him to stay while he investigated him.

With a disdainful look, Rod told him, “Look, I am just passing through hoping to find water. I will stay if you are offering water, but if you refuse me water, I will continue onward.”

The guard made the mistake of trying to force him to stay and he quickly found himself on the ground in a compromised position. As Rod knocked the guard to the ground, a horn sounded off in the compound and Rod left the man with a sore arm as he bolted to a group of trees. Ducking behind a tree, Rod disappeared while other guards rushed from the compound to help their comrade.

The sergeant of the group came looking for Rod in the clump of trees and Rod flew up to the top of the tallest tree. The sergeant called out in an English accent that he just wanted to talk to him, and Rod dropped out of the tree directly behind him. Rod removed the rifle from the sergeant’s hands and explained that if he wanted to live, he shouldn’t call out to his men. The sergeant told him he was always looking for good men to join his guard and would like Rod to consider it.

“I’m traveling and do not plan on staying but I am willing to trade a day’s work for some food and water.”

The sergeant again invited him to stay the night, stating that he would feed him, allow him to shower, and send him off in the morning with his fill of water. He stated Rod’s only commitment was to hear his proposition to work for him. At first, Rod said no. Then he altered his response and stated, “I could use a shower to remove a month’s worth of dirt.”

Handing the rifle to the sergeant, Rod followed him until they joined his men outside the compound. The guard, whose arm was now regaining feeling, reached for his pistol and Rod removed it from the sore hand before it left his holster. Within two seconds, the gun was dismantled into several parts and handed back to the ill-prepared guard.

The sergeant asked where Rod learned that trick. Rod described his many years in Special Forces. Rod told him that a good friend had been having mental problems but his superiors kept believing him when the man said he was fine. On Rod’s insistence, they ordered his friend to a counselor but he was given a clean bill of health. That very night, his friend ate a bullet in a drunken stupor. After that, Rod explained, he didn’t reenlist and just started walking. After using up all his favors in America, Rod worked a ship heading to South Africa. From there Rod had been walking the continent looking for forgiveness for letting his friend die.

The sergeant wanted to see his badge. Rod removed his jacket, showing him his pseudo tattoo which impressed the man. He asked Rod about his arrival in the region, since he had come from the desert. He told the sergeant he had a problem in town and was avoiding the main road in case anyone was looking for him. Rod told him about cutting through the mine and across the desert because there was a man searching the desert for him. Rod explained that he would not return to that town.

The sergeant mentioned his guards needed more training and offered Rod the job of teaching them. He said proof of their inability as his guards was that they had allowed Rod to slip by undetected. Rod mentioned there were better men for training than him. Rod stated his managing to sneak by was a fluke. The sergeant insisted if that Rod could give him a couple of months as a trainer, he would send him on his way with cash and new set of clothing.

After negotiating for a couple minutes, they agreed to two weeks and a small amount of cash and new boots since Rod's were worn. The sergeant assigned Rod to the barracks with the other guards and left him to his dinner.

The next morning, Rod was not in the barracks and an all-out search for him ensued with the sergeant checking near the water tower. Rod had flown up the night before and jumped down as he passed by it. Rod landed with a thud next to him. The sergeant looked at the barbed wire on the fence surrounding the tower and wondered how Rod got up there. Rod just tapped his shoulder and started for breakfast. The sergeant told Rod he had to sleep in the barracks and Rod explained it been many years since he shared a room and he could not sleep in a room full of other men. Rod would sleep on the water tower.

After breakfast, Rod bumped into a man in the compound he hadn't yet met. He introduced himself as a mixed-martial artist champion and attacked Rod. It took Rod two moves to put the champion down on the ground with his right hand on his throat. That was when a well-dressed white man stopped them, stating that Rod shouldn't pull his vocal cords out of his neck. Rod knew it was the Candy Man. He was impressed by Rod's abilities and sent his champion away. This left Rod and Candy Man with two of the better trained guards in the middle of the courtyard. The guards were close enough for an accurate shot but remained far enough to make it hard for Rod to defend himself.

Although the CIA backstopped Rod's persona and changed his history, Candy Man had found him on the web through social media apps with the help of another Oxford student specializing in computers. In twenty hours using social media he was able to pinpoint the existence of the fake persona and discovered enough lies to make Rod a liability to the organization.

Quickly reviewing Candy Man's mind, Rod saw a marksman on the building behind him, preparing to shoot upon the signal. Candy Man asked him several questions as to his appearance in his compound. Knowing the truth, Rod refused to answer him and remained silent against the charge.

After the third unanswered question, Candy Man gave the signal to have him shot. Rod dimensionally popped out of the way before the bullet could travel the two hundred feet to kill him. Rod put in the mind of Candy Man that the bullet had gone through his thigh, sending pain to his mind with a visual of blood pumping out of the wound because of the femoral artery. Rod caused a fog-like cloud to fill the courtyard blinding everyone to his whereabouts and then convinced the two guards to come closer where Rod knocked them out.

Rod was concentrating on the fog and the placebo leg wound, which it made it difficult to search the mind of the Candy Man for the cache of weapons. Then Rod cried out to Dad, "Where is my damn sister when I need her?"

“Stop your cussing, Rod. I am right over you,” Dannie said in her best mom-like voice.

“Okay, I have the site of the weapons. Here you go, Dad. And, Rod, you better get out of there. I’ll keep the fog going until you’re able to clear the wall.”

Rod flew over the wall, landing on the other side. After his departure from the compound, the fog lifted and the dummy wound disappeared, leaving the men clueless as to what happened.

Dad gave Bricker and the CIA agent the exact location of the illicit guns, bombs, grenades, and other weapons of war in the desert. Bricker sent the coordinates to the ship off-shore so it could send a missile. Then Dannie announced the weapons were fifty feet underground in a fortified concrete bunker and asked if the missile would reach the cache. It was quickly determined it would not, so Dannie and Rod left for the desert. It took almost twenty minutes for the helicopter to arrive with the Seal team.

Dannie flew above, causing a fog to roll in the middle of a desert, distorting the vision of the observers. This fog kept the lookout from firing on the Seal team. Rod was waiting by the entrance which was under about an inch of sand. After the Seal Team rushed down the shaft of the tunnel, the lead Seal turned.

“Hey, Rod, fancy seeing you here.” He grinned.

“Geovanni?” Rod was taken totally by surprise. They had met during Rod’s last year in the Army when Rod had gone to a convention of sorts for highly trained men. This gathering of the best fighters was fun and enlightening for all who gathered. It was a relief to see a friendly face in this stressful situation.

“Yeah, Man. Good to see you,” Geovanni said before joining his men in placing explosive devices throughout the maze of corridors of the bunker.

After they were done, Geovanni offered him a ride back to his ship but Rod refused. The Seal insisted that Rod had just sixty seconds to clear the area. Fifteen seconds later, the helicopter lifted off for their ship. Rod flew up to Dannie well into the sky to watch the events unfold. Dannie lifted the fog so the watchman could see the bunker door get blasted a quarter mile away. An enormous fireball shot out from the ground for well over a minute as the various weapons and explosives blew up. Rod was amazed to see sand on the surface jiggling like a bowl full of jelly.

Rod didn’t follow Dannie as she needed to pick her babies up at the babysitters. It would take her less than a half hour to reach her home since she was remarkably fast, so instead Rod flew to Bricker’s office within two hours. He glided invisibly to the building, bypassing security for the urgency of the matter. Rod forgot the CIA agent was there and scared him half to death upon his sudden appearance in the room. The agent questioned Rod about being in Africa a few hours before their meeting in America.

“That is why nothing leaves this office. If word gets out about what you saw today, jail will be the least of your problems,” Dad said with authority.

Candy Man and Bookie had sought after the largest weapons deal outside the U.S. government ever to be had. They had financed everything on mostly their word. After the explosion, they lost everything except a very small sample, which was not even enough to secure their compound.

Candy Man went on the run from the drug cartel that had loaned him the money and the several potential buyers who had given him earnest money for the weapons. The communistic country that sold the weapons was still owed several million dollars and they wanted Candy Man as well. He disappeared and there was no trace of him. Intelligence believed he was dead, but they were still looking for conformation of his death or his existence.

Bookie turned to his Muslim friends and used his knowledge of the Quran to secure safety in a Muslim country. However, pictures mysteriously appeared on the internet of Bookie eating pork products. Then a video showed up in which he stated that his current host was so gullible to believe this god crap, while eating pork sausage and drinking beer. Furthermore, he continued to belittle the man hosting him and his religion for about five minutes in the video. There was a very public viewing of Bookie being stoned by actual believers. Rod did not care to see any of the videos as it did not affect his life.

Rod returned home much earlier than expected, which made Mary very happy. It took much less time to calm himself after this mission than his previous missions because of the counseling group. However, the counselor noticed the change in his thought pattern and asked him about it. Rod couldn't tell him the truth and instead made a story up about having nightmares the previous week.

The counselor compelled him talk about them in front of the group. The revelation of his setback gave the group hope. They felt better knowing that even the strongest of the group also had setbacks. Everyone agreed to work on the exercises the counselor requested of them that week.

Chapter 16: The Trial

Rod was eating breakfast when he got a phone call on Monday morning. He answered and was surprised to hear the voice of a new member of the counseling group. They called him Cowboy, and he was a twenty-nine-year old veteran.

“Hey, Cowboy. What’s going on?” Rod asked.

“Rod. Rod, I don’t know what to do. I’ve been sober for a month, you know. But then I found out that my dad died unexpectedly last Wednesday. I’ve been hiding in my basement ever since.”

“Wait. You’ve been in your basement since Wednesday. Why?”

“I can’t go out there,” the scared man answered. “If I do, I know I’ll drink. I feel like I really need to, but I can’t. Man, I can’t start drinking again. My mind is all messed up and foggy, but I can’t leave here.”

“Hold on,” Rod said. “I’ll be right there.”

Rod drove over and let himself in the house. He opened the basement door and found Cowboy in the fetal position, sitting in the corner, gripping his shins while wearing nothing but his underwear. He had not been to the bathroom in over twenty hours and the strain from holding his bodily fluids was causing great discomfort.

He couldn’t move because he believed, if he did, any movement would send him back into the bottle. And that meant his wife, currently living at her mother’s house, would divorce him. His father, with whom he’d had a strained relationship all his life, had been helping him become sober. Now that his father was gone, he found his life at a loss.

It took Rod a half hour to convince Cowboy to relieve his normal functions in the bathroom. Rod knew to search the bathroom for anything that might make him drunk, but the young man’s father had already cleaned out his stash.

Rod retrieved clean underwear and clothes for him to wear, and then made him take a shower. Rod found himself barking orders at the man as if he were a new recruit at basic training. The more forceful Rod’s voice, the more Cowboy responded to it. Using that same forceful voice, Rod told Cowboy that he was loved and that there were people in his life who wanted to see him live his life to the fullest. Cowboy believed him because of the command in his voice.

As the man showered, Rod made him some eggs and toast for brunch. It wasn’t much but it was all Cowboy could manage to eat. He stopped crying at this point and began talking to Rod directly while telling him about the deepest demons in his life. He said there were many things that scared him, but the scariest was coping with life without the numbing effect of alcohol.

He then explained that his father had left the business to him and left his sister with the house and cash. His father told him that having to run a business would make him “straighten up and fly right.” This scared him because he didn’t want to let his father down.

There were several things that needed to be done that week, but he was in no condition to deal with any of it. He was just trying to make it through another day. Rod told Cowboy he could

help, but that he would have to keep a secret in order to obtain Rod's help. This meant Cowboy couldn't become drunk for any reason because he might tell the secret in a stupor.

Cowboy agreed to Rod's terms and then, right in front of him, Rod changed his appearance to match Cowboy's. They were now the same height, weight, skin tone, and even Rod's fingerprints would appear as Cowboy's. Rod would accomplish the things that needed to be done this week and keep the young man informed. Cowboy asked how Rod would keep him informed. In response, Rod walked into the living room picked up a Bible and started reading it. As Rod read from the Psalms, the words went directly into Cowboy's brain, letting him see them as Rod saw them.

Rod left for his new business just after lunch but before he could leave, the young man indicated he would like the Bible from the living room. The Bible was still open to Psalm 95 and Cowboy wanted to read it while Rod was traveling. Rod brought the Bible to him and he continued to read from where Rod left off on verse four. As Cowboy read the words, a peace came over him as he sipped a cup of coffee.

Upon arriving at the office there were two guards present since it was shift change. They asked Rod his business and Rod answered, "Yes, this is my business."

The guards looked at him strangely and Rod pointed to the news board behind them where it had an article stating Cowboy was the new owner of the business. They looked at the paper clipping then looked back at him and soon realized what Rod was saying. Cowboy thought his interaction was funny and appropriate for a badass Special Ops.

One guard had rounds to do and offered to take Rod on a tour of the building. The second now in charge of the desk asked to see Rod's identification. Rod pulled out the license, which was Cowboy's, complete with picture and proper state numbers. They toured the office complex with it ending at the president's office. The secretary asked him why Rod was there and then recognized him as Cowboy and immediately called her boss, Mr. Jones.

Jones came out, met Rod in the foyer of the offices and then led him to the conference room while showing contempt for him being there. Rod's first impression was that he was upset because Cowboy had taken over the company. Reading him more, however, Rod realized his concern was for the employees and business as Cowboy had not shown any reliability over the past two years.

In his mind, as Rod updated Cowboy, he asked Rod to tell Jones that he would require Jones to continue running the company to the best of his ability. Once in the conference room, Jones curtly handed Rod several items while mentioning he was supposed to be there at nine in the morning and it was almost two in the afternoon. Rod didn't have to read his mind to see this upset the man and confirmed that Cowboy was not ready to run the company.

With Cowboy's permission, he said, "I am in a very dark place and I am in no position to run this company. Again, I am asking you to take the lead the way dad would want things done, since you have been a faithful employee for many years. If and when I am able to deal with life on a daily basis, I will become involved with the company as an owner but not in a managerial way."

Jones acknowledged the statement by relaxing his attitude and asked if Cowboy was alright. He had known him from childhood.

“Not really. Between trying to become a sober member of society and dealing with the death of dad, I am a total train wreck and not sure what day it is, let alone when I am late for a meeting.”

Jones, realizing the darkness of Cowboy’s situation, asked if there was anything he could do to help. Rod said, “Pray for me and have your whole Church pray for me.”

Cowboy was surprised by this comment but after some thought, it made him smile. Jones handed Rod a packet, stating that Cowboy’s father told him to gather it in case of his demise. Jones wanted Cowboy to sign for it. As Rod wrote out the signature, it matched Cowboy’s perfectly even having the shakes from the withdrawal of alcoholism.

Jones looked at him, then said, “You appear alright on the outside, but something tells me you are hurting deep inside.”

“You have no idea of the demons creeping around my soul at this very moment.”

As Rod was leaving the industrial park, there was a large driveway for the semi-truck to make a comfortable turn in and out of the complex. Less than a half mile south was a bend in the road with a semi heading north. Rod had plenty of time to pull out and head that way. As the car started to roll out, a Cadillac SUV screamed around the truck on the blind no-passing curve. Rod completed a U-turn back into the drive with the semi clipping his back bumper. This contact with the fast-moving semi spun the car around. Rod was facing back out towards the street as he felt the car rocking from almost being overturned. The semi drifted to the left to avoid the collision then saw the SUV passing him. The SUV served to the left to avoid the semi, caught the ditch, and ended up slamming into a telephone pole.

The SUV driver was a short man in his mid-fifties and was hopping mad about being forced off the road. He was blaming Rod and the semi driver for the accident as if they should not have been on his road. The county engineer was traveling south and stopped as he witnessed the accident. Furthermore, the truck was equipped with three cameras showing front view and both blind side views. The passing zone didn’t start for another two hundred feet north.

The County Sheriff’s department came and took a report of the situation. The deputy investigating the incident was told by the crabby man not to call the state police even though the incident had taken place on a state highway. Another deputy explained to Rod that the sour man was the county judge, named Douglass Johnson, and he controlled much of the politics for the county. However, the county engineer was from a different party and was more than happy to testify against him. There would be no charges filed as long Johnson agreed to pay the damages for Cowboy’s car and the truck driver’s company.

The judge, knowing the law, also knew he was getting away with some big traffic fines and other political problems and agreed to the terms.

Rod arrived at Cowboy’s house where he found him sleeping for the first time in forty-eight hours. Rod left the pack with him and returned home, telling Mary about his intervention. She

understood how Rod might have to pop out now and then to help Cowboy out since it was a critical time for the younger man.

Cowboy slept soundly until the next morning, woke around six, and enjoyed the cereal and milk Rod left for him. He found the packet from his father on the kitchen table and started reading it to gather exactly what he inherited. Around ten in the morning, he called out in his mind for Rod to join him and Rod popped right over with a cup of coffee already in hand.

Cowboy explained that he was now sole owner of his dad's business, the building, and the grounds where it sat. He mentioned that the land and building belonged to a real-estate holding company and was separate from the business. The real-estate company owned several buildings in the industrial park as well as the ball parks near the back of it. He explained the ball parks were rented by a nonprofit organization to hold recreational games.

According to the auditor's map, there were five fields for playing soft and hard ball games. Cowboy stated that everyone was up to date on their rent except the ball fields. The nonprofit had not paid rent in over a year and their rent was ten dollars per month. They needed to maintain the fields, dugouts, bleachers, and fencing around the fields as stated in the contract.

Cowboy wanted to see his holdings but was unable to leave the house at that time. His niece was playing that night at the park and he wanted to see her but couldn't leave his house yet.

"Are you trying to ask me to go for you again?" Rod asked.

"Yes, please."

Rod promised to meet Cowboy in his mind when he arrived at the ball field later that evening. His niece's game started at six-thirty and Rod would be there at six. Rod then made Cowboy some lunch.

Rod popped over to the fields that evening and instantly connected to Cowboy who was steady but still very weak emotionally. The first thing that came to mind was that, with the exception of one field, the ballpark had not been maintained as described in the contract with the league. Four of the fields were now meadows for small animals. The fences, bleachers, and dugouts were in complete disrepair. The high school girls' softball field was in pristine condition with lights for nighttime games and manicured grass with a rock-free infield.

Rod met a woman in her late thirties who instantly greeted him with a big hug around the neck. Taken by surprise and slow to answer her with the depression of Cowboy's persona, Rod was stumbling to say something when Cowboy informed him it was his sister, Linda. Cowboy's niece, Lisa, was playing right field and they sat out by her.

Cowboy asked him to keep an eye on her since he had never seen her play before. Rod noticed Judge Johnson was the umpire for the game. Linda said he always umpired his daughter's game. Her strike zone was always smaller than everyone else's but they were able to play for very little money since Johnson owned the fields. Rod knew this was not true but didn't mention it to her. Cowboy was watching his niece play through Rod's eyes and not paying attention to their talk.

At the beginning of the fifth inning, a girl on the opposing team twisted her ankle while running to first base. Then Rod heard a sweet voice call out, "Uncle Cowboy, can you fix my glove?"

Rod hopped the fence to mend her glove. A leather thread had been pulled out of the socket and Rod was able to work it through and retie it to where it belonged. As Rod handed back her glove, Rod heard the umpire holler, "Play ball!" and Rod ducked down and moved to the fence.

The umpire called out ball loud enough for Rod to hear him, then stopped play again. The Judge went to the fence and asked a couple of men to escort Rod out of the park since he interrupted the game. The injured girl had not left the field when this took place and Johnson was merely inserting his perceived dominance over Cowboy.

The two men identified themselves as city police and instructed Rod to leave the park. With this, Cowboy sprung back to reality announcing they had no jurisdiction outside the city, and he owned the land where they were playing ball. By providence, the deputy who had helped Rod the day before appeared at the park for a drive through and saw the arguing. Getting out of his car, he asked if there was problem and why two city officers were trying to throw their weight around in the country. The officers claimed the city annexed the ball fields and they had jurisdiction.

Then the deputy radioed someone else, and within five minutes the Sheriff appeared. The Sheriff handcuffed one officer telling him that was what he would do if he caught him misusing his authority at the field again. Rod had the distinct impression that the Sheriff didn't like Johnson and his henchmen officers running roughshod over the people at the ball fields. He quickly reminded him of the court ruling just the month before, stating the annexing of the field was illegal without the owner's permission and since the county zoned the property as a private park, it couldn't be forced to join the city.

The city police had no family playing that evening and were told to leave the park by the Sheriff or face arrest for harassing citizens. The Sheriff and Rod joined Cowboy's sister where Rod waved to the umpire behind the plate. He looked to see the officers leaving the park. Rod told the Sheriff that the nonprofit violated the lease, and they were playing tonight out of the generosity of the old owner, Cowboy's dad and now Cowboy. The Sheriff suggested they start proceedings to remove the official ball club from the property and Cowboy agreed that would be wise.

Upon leaving that night, the two officers returned to the ballpark to trespass Cowboy off the property. Rod explained they cannot trespass the landlord from his property since the contract states Cowboy had a right to be there to inspect anytime. They tried to tell him about the rental laws in the state. Cowboy informed Rod this was a commercial rental and not a residential and did not fall under those laws. So, he may inspect at any time per contract.

The next day they discovered that Johnson owned the nonprofit and had been keeping one league of six teams ongoing for his daughter to play. None of the other players liked her, but since the umpire skewed the game for them to win, they wanted her on their team. At one time there were adult softball leagues using three fields a night, but Johnson forced them out by charging exorbitant fees to play. They eventually found other places but preferred this one since it had easy access for all the players.

Rod, still acting for Cowboy, filed in state court to remove the league at the end of the season in hopes of having someone else run the games at the park next summer. The state court tried to throw the case back to the county, but Cowboy's lawyer argued that since judge was the

defendant in the case, the state court had to hear it. This was the same state court that first ruled the city could annex the ball parks even though it violated several state laws to do so. A higher court overturned the verdict during this season. A quick search of his mind showed Rod that the state judge was good friends with Johnson and owed his current position to Johnson's political ties.

However, Rod had political friends as well. Almost two years before, The Chief Justice for the state's Supreme Court had car trouble and Rod was able to help him and his wife out of a very difficult situation. He had told Rod that if he ever needed anything to call him, and gave him his card. So, Rod called the Chief Justice and told him that Johnson and the presiding judge were old friends and political allies. The Justice was aware of their friendship and, more importantly, aware of some of the unscrupulous happenings around Johnson. The Justice stated he would put a formal review on the case as a matter of routine.

The request for formal review appeared a half hour before the trial started, which meant the presiding judge had to follow the law and proceed normally during the trial. In the month between filing the eviction and the trial, Cowboy's mental state improved dramatically. He was still a little hazy in his thinking but he was insistent on appearing in court instead of Rod filling in for him. Johnson moved to have the case dismissed because of the existing contract and Cowboy's lawyer pointed out Johnson violated the contract, and it was no longer valid. Johnson face shrunk in a comical fashion when the state judge ruled against him.

Cowboy was called to the stand and his lawyer asked him about the contract. Cowboy explained that Johnson had not paid the monthly rent of ten dollars in eighteen months and then showed pictures of the four fields in total disrepair. The contract clearly stated all five fields must be maintained for play year-round.

Johnson, representing himself and the nonprofit organization, cross-examined Cowboy. Rod was in the court room and started putting various thoughts into Johnson's head trying to trip him up. However, Johnson had a disciplined mind and was able to stay on subject despite Rod's interference. Johnson kept trying to trip Cowboy up by asking misleading and loaded questions, but Cowboy pushed through, carefully answering Johnson's questions. Cowboy's lawyer had several questions thrown out because the state judge was still deciding in accordance with state laws and protocols.

When Johnson confronted Cowboy as to his alcoholism, a change came over Cowboy. His mind went clear. Rod could see Cowboy's face going from a depressed, befuddled man to the sharp-minded intellectual that he had been before the alcohol destroyed his confidence. In that moment, Cowboy went from barely answering questions to anticipating the next question and answering it in a wise and cunning fashion. In a blink of an eye he went from trying to follow the questioning to controlling the questions coming at him.

Even when Johnson led with another loaded question about the condition of the park when new, the lawyer saw the confidence and let Cowboy turn the question on Johnson, making him look like the fool.

Before Cowboy had lost his wits to alcohol, he was headed to be a lawyer. His professor in college stated he was one of the sharpest minds she had ever seen. He passed all his classes with straight A's and was a shoe-in to pass the bar on his first attempt when he crawled to the bottle. Johnson's irritating questions triggered something burning deep down inside and lit the fire of inspiration into Cowboy. Rod knew he still had a lot of problems to work through, but his mind had become correct and clear.

Before the next question came from Johnson's mouth, Rod found himself in another realm facing a dodgy-looking man that reminded him of Johnson. The room had a black curtain around its entirety with a floor of gold and silver blocks set up in a checkerboard pattern. Rod knew the man not to be the devil, but one high up on the chain of command.

Rod tried to call out to Dannie and Dad, but there was no response. The devil's aid was trying to probe Rod's head, but he wouldn't let him in. It was the constant probing that kept the calls for help from reaching his comrades. Rod was alone in this fight.

This demon said, "I brought you here since you have taken one of my projects away and attempted to derail another project from hell. I brought you here without your sword at your side and without your power to call for help. You will replace Cowboy, who escaped my possession by calling on God for help while on the stand. God saved him, but here you have no way to protect yourself."

Rod reached for his hip and there was no sword, just as the demon had said. Then Rod felt the handle of the sword touching the back of his head as it was strapped to his back. The devil wanted him there without the sword on his hip and he was granted permission from God to do so. However, God would not lead Rod into battle without the Sword of Justice and had strapped it to his back.

A small smile came over Rod's face as he realized that fact.

"Give it your best shot," he told the demon. The demon blasted him with both hands. Rod could feel the power pressing on his chest and it pushed at him like a wind heralding a great storm. A half step back was all Rod needed to resist the demon's best effort.

For the first time, Rod released a stream of power back at the demon and he laughed at the weakness of it. Then when the demon tried to gain access into his mind, Rod blocked him again by putting images of angels singing God's praises in heaven into his deranged brain. This enraged the demon and he released sharp knives from his fingertips like a wild tiger. He chose this method to strike fear in Rod's heart at the sight of his prowess. If the demon could get Rod to fear him over God, it would keep Rod in this domain forever.

Now it was Rod's turn to laugh at the demon's childish attempt to scare him. With this, even more rage filled the demon's mind. Now all the hate in hell was filling his being and he charged at Rod haphazardly.

With one quick move, Rod pulled the sword and slashed him across the chest before he could reach him. The façade of Johnson quickly disappeared, revealing an ancient creature without

form. It was just a rigid blob of gelatin mass unable to move anymore. Rod speared the sword through the middle of the blob and then sliced upward, splitting the top half in two.

With all his might, Rod struck through the center horizontally and the two pieces from the top fell in different directions. Then Rod sliced down through the bottom ooze. As the split pieces fell to the floor, the blob evaporated into dust. Another demon of equal power appeared, and Rod stabbed the sword into the gold and silver floor and the whole realm evaporated from existence, taking the second demon with it.

Rod found himself back in court as Johnson was asking another loaded question, only to have Cowboy turn it back on him with his witty reply. Johnson ended his questioning of Cowboy. Cowboy finished the morning by presenting more evidence of Johnson's failure by having the groundskeeper for a professional baseball team explain why the four fields failed to meet minimum requirements of playing ball. Johnson tried to have him excluded from being an expert witness, but he was renowned for being the leading keeper of all the MLB. The state judge, knowing his work would be reviewed, found he was an expert witness.

Just before lunchtime, the plaintiff rested their case to break the lease and removed Johnson from the field. The Judge declared a lunch break with everyone instructed to meet back in court at two in the afternoon. Rod joined Cowboy and his lawyer for lunch. The lawyer was trying to map out what Johnson was trying to do that afternoon, so he would not be caught off guard. Rod found Johnson having lunch with the State Judge and the judge told Johnson about the request from the Chief Justice about reviewing the case and how he had to act carefully. They decided the best course of action was that they maintained the one field they were using, and it wasn't Johnson's fault there were not enough players to keep five fields active.

Since Cowboy was suing for damages for not paying rent including the failure to maintain the fields, Johnson said this was grounds to at least dismiss paying Cowboy for reclaiming the four abused fields. Cowboy quickly contacted several other ball team leaders in their county, and they faxed and texted several letters from Johnson to them with irrational demands or throwing them out of the park for arguing with him.

Before two o'clock start time, Cowboy had amassed fifty different emails, typed and signed letters, and nasty hand-written notes that had been left on people's cars from Johnson telling them they were not welcome anymore. One coach drove fifty miles to be in the courtroom at two o'clock. When Johnson claimed it was not his fault the other fields were not used, Cowboy's lawyer presented the fifty pieces into evidence and called the one rebuttal witness.

In the end, the state judge ruled in Cowboy's favor. He gave him the damages of past rent and about half the money needed to correct the dilapidated fields stating that was what Johnson would have spent to keep them maintained as the contract called for. Johnson was issued a warning not to go on the property again or face trespassing charges.

Cowboy's sister put the money up to repair the fields and there was a new contract signed with another organization to play ball there. They were given the same terms of ten dollars per month and keeping the fields in good repair. Beginning in April the next year, all five fields were full of teens and adults playing softball. The new organization even opened a concession stand to raise

money to keep the fields in good order while servicing the spectators. Up to a thousand people were enjoying the fields on any given night.

As for Johnson, a local newspaper reporter took a picture of him and the state judge having lunch during the trial. This led to an investigation from the Supreme Court. The state judge was suspended without pay for two months from his position as judge. Johnson lost his law license as the investigation found many examples of him using his position as judge to intimidate and abuse people. After the Bar were done with their findings, it was passed over to the State Attorney and the criminal charges were filed.

Cowboy was on the road to recovery. Cowboy told Rod in that moment when Johnson was grilling him, he asked God for help for the first time in his life and he received clarity of mind. He announced it was like the devil had a hold of his mind, keeping it cloudy, but then God chased away the devil, leaving him with a clear mind.

Cowboy improved exponentially and soon began helping Rod lead the other men to health. He took on a paying role in his company as an advisor to the people running his company. He also remained active in the ball fields. The best part was, his wife promised to move back home if he remained sober and working for thirty more days. Although he confessed to Rod that he would be a recovering alcoholic the rest of his life, he loved the purpose he found working to help other recovering alcoholics.

Rod found this man's new purpose gave him the opportunity to think more deeply about his own purpose in life. He had started out wanting to be a professional soldier, then a security manager, but then realized he was finding his calling as a husband, a stay-at-home father, and a counselor for veterans who were suffering from the ails of war.

Not everything was smooth sailing, however. Although Cowboy turned the corner to recovery, another newcomer to their group ended his life in a car accident. The coroner had ruled it as an accident, but the members of their group were convinced it was suicide since many of them considered ending their lives the same way at one point too.

Although Rod was not sure where God might take him next, he did know one thing where God led, Rod would follow.

What is more, Rod vowed to use the powers God granted him to do his work – both in this world and in whatever realm where God might need Rod to serve him. Rod never found out why he was called to fight and vanquish evil creatures from other realms, but he felt confident that God was with him every time he entered another realm or dimension.

While God's plans remained hidden from him, and Rod could only see what he needed to know in the moment, Rod knew that he would trust God's plans for his life, his gift, and his family.

Epilogue – Author’s Note

After we finished recording the final chapter of Rod’s life so far, he offered to introduce me to his wife and children. He admitted that Mary had told him to invite me, so she could meet the person who was writing down Rod’s story.

I rose and started for the door so we could fly, but Rod stopped me and said, “No, we can leave from here.”

With that statement, he took my hand. Within a second, we were in the kitchen of his house.

Mary walked into the kitchen a few moments later holding a baby not quite a year old. A four-year old boy followed, inquisitively staring at me. Mary offered me a cup of coffee, and I agreed.

“Are you really as smart as Rod’s story says?” I asked. Then, somewhat embarrassed, I retracted it and said, “Sorry, this is very confusing and I didn’t mean to be so prying.”

Mary laughed the question away and stated that she did have the ability to solve complex equations in a way very few people are able to do.

“Then could you explain these other dimensions that the flying people go to?” I asked.

Mary sat still for a moment, pondering, and then answered, “In our world, we have four dimensions that shape our thinking. If you look at a piece of paper, there is vertical – up and down – and horizontal – side to side. There is also depth, which makes a cube.” She made the shape of a box with her hands.

“As a person moves from one point to another point within the cube, that is time. The space between the two points is distance. Time and distance happen simultaneously.”

She paused to make sure I was keeping up with her before continuing, “Imagine a world where there is no time or distance and therefore no directions of up, down, or side to side. The land, air, or even water do not exist. They are just there.”

“Sort of like the Holodecks on Star Trek?” I asked, hoping I was tracking so far.

“Yes,” she answered, smiling encouragingly. “As people move around, they feel the movement because of the conditioning from our world even though they remain stationary. However, even the idea of stationary is misleading because the point on which you stand is nonexistent.”

I could feel my face become discombobulated at this comment and Mary hesitantly added, “Our minds always try to reason with the environment around us. Have you ever been someplace for the first time and yet it felt familiar or like you had been there before?”

“Yes, kind of like the weird feeling of Déjà vu.”

“Exactly. It is your mind trying to normalize a new situation. So, when Dad, Dannie, and Rod visit these other dimensions where nothing is physical, their mind normalizes the experience so that they can navigate and function in an unreal world. This explains the dreamlike state where they can cut through clouds, fall, and end up on another ground. Only in those circumstances can one stab the ground with a sword and have it completely vanish. It was still there, but not existing physically as we know things to exist.”

I pondered the whole idea that things exist but at the same time, do not exist, while she stopped to wipe the four-year-old's nose.

"From time to time, there can be openings from the foreign dimension to our world," she continued. "Dannie said it looks like a tear in the seam of a dress and that is because it is a tear in the space-time continuum. It is this gateway to other dimensions that allows them to fly and obtain their other powers. These powers do not exist in our world except through the micro-fissures into this universe. When several of the tiny openings line up, they allow bigger creatures to pass from the nonexistent to the existing world. As they pass through the gateway, it augments their appearance. Then Dad, Dannie, and Rod need to fight them."

"Scientists ponder these tears as the means of time travel, but they consider it a possibility. It is one of those fanciful ideas they pass around over drinks and not necessarily a serious science. One problem is, they never actually detected a tear and so, time travel remains a fantasy to those whose minds are sharp enough to understand the complexities of it. Me, on the other hand, I had my husband and his friends tell me they been through these portals. The problem is, I cannot write about without exposing their story to the rest of the world. But I believe their ability to fly in this world has something to do with time travel. When Rod pops from one spot on earth to another, this is definitely a form a time travel."

"Why are the creatures so evil?" I asked.

"That is the dimension that breaks into our world. Where most of the other dimensions just act as glue to hold our world together, I think one of the dimensions is evil and another is good. When I say good, I do not mean an earthly good, but a Godly good. When I say evil, it is the devil's realm bleeding over to us. Each of these realms affect us every day, pulling us one way or the other. Chaos verses order, evil verses good, and yin and yang are how philosophers portray this tension. For some reason, probably because the devil wants this Earth, portals occasionally open to our world with characters trying to gain control over it. It is the job of the flyers to stop them from taking over the world. God chooses special people to fight the evil before it can control the Earth."

My translation of Mary's explanation was a close approximation. Where my translation used more moderate terms, she mentioned laws, principles, and theories to back up every assertion. She did clarify, on several occasions, that although everything made sense scientifically, it was pure speculation on her part from the stories of Rod, Dannie, and Dad.

We had a wonderful afternoon discussing life with a flyer and the talk gave me a better insight into Rod and his personality. In many ways, he was a hard-core military man but at the same time he was caring and giving while remaining gentle and humble.

She then said of Rod, "I tell him all the time not to compare his intellect to mine because he is smarter than most people." Rod spoke up and mentioned his grades in high school, but Mary revealed how he would work forty hours a week while still maintaining a C average. "Not bad, in my opinion," she said with a smile.

When the afternoon was over, I had a good view of who Rod was and completed the rewrite of his book within two weeks, adjusting the story slightly to weave in Mary's descriptions of Rod.

Where Rod's story made him sound like a hard person all the time, it was now tempered somewhat by Mary's view.

Rod told me that he would be that last to tell me a flyer's story. Nat was content to stay in his beloved Zudal. Even though the trio had tried to persuade Nat to tell his story, he refused.

I am not sure if this is the end of their stories, but it sounds like these battles of good and evil have been happening throughout the history of humans and will continue into the future. I do not know if this is the end for Dannie, Rod, and Dad.

Their job might be done. Only God knows what the future holds. If there are more stories to tell, I hope they choose me to reveal them to this world. Thank you.

THE END

(About the book)

Having retired from the Special Forces to work retail security, Rod is certain of his past and confident in the future. That is, until the day he steps into his familiar cozy kitchen only to realize it's not so cozy after all.

Rod is sent plummeting into another dimension and he's right back in action. But with the support of his high school sweetheart, surely he can take on anything.

Beginning an extraordinary adventure, Rod retrieves the Sword of Justice from the Underworld – a sword that grants the bearer great power and abilities. But with the abilities come a great responsibility – that of protecting Earth and all life upon it.

Now, Rod stands between the universe and total destruction. Can he secure his own fate—and that of everyone else while under such immense pressure? Or will he lose himself, his family, and the world in the process?