

Chapter Two

Nathan succeeded in dragging Jeremiah to a bar during the week. "I still can't believe we're out on a Wednesday night," Jeremiah continued to protest. "I've got class tomorrow, and I have to go to work after that."

"Jer, chill out, I promise not to tattle on you." Nathan held the door for Jeremiah to make sure he actually went through it into the bar.

Jeremiah ordered the first round of beers and scanned the nearly empty place. "Explain to me again how we're increasing our chances of picking up women by coming out here during the middle of the week?"

"Less competition. You don't see any other eligible bachelors in here, do you?"

"I don't see any eligible women either."

"Be patient, my young apprentice. I shall use the power of the Force!" Nathan promised, drinking his beer.

"Give me a break." Jeremiah lifted his bottle to his mouth and nearly spit out his beer as he watched four attractive young women bounce through the front door. Tapping Nate's shoulder, he pointed in their direction. "ObiWan, your knowledge of the Force is impressive."

Nate casually turned toward the women taking places at a nearby table. Politely he waved at one of the ladies.

"Hey, Nate!" she hollered drunkenly loud and walked over to hug him.

"Hey, Deanna."

"What're you doing here?"

"We came by for a beer. What are all of you doing out on the town?"

"The rumor Stacey heard," Deanna pointed to one of the girls, "was that Kenny Chesney would be making a surprise visit to the Grand Ole Opry tonight. He didn't, but that's where we went."

"Who was there?"

"Pam Tillis dropped in during the second set. I didn't recognize any of the other performers."

"That's cool that you got to see a big name," Jeremiah said to include himself in the conversation.

"She was ok," Deanna answered with a shrug. "I'm not really a country music fan, except for Kenny Chesney. Ohmygod, he's so hot!"

"Did I hear someone say Kenny is so hot?!" Stacey shouted.

The woman sitting next to Stacey slapped her on the shoulder. "Stace, where was my Kenny tonight? Your source sucks!"

Stacey raised her arms and shrugged. "I don't know. Believe me; I wanted him there more than you did."

The women at the table loudly debated who reigned as Kenny Chesney's number one fan. To explain their exuberance, Deanna told the two men, "We stopped at another bar before this one. Shelby, the girl right there with the really big boobs, she convinced the owner at the last bar to sell us two-for-one shots."

"Why did you come here?" Nathan innocently asked.

"I'm meeting another friend here; you know her. Lori Ann, she works in Purchasing."

"Oh, yeah, I know her."

"I'll be back in a little while, if you're planning to stick around here."

“We’ll be here for a little longer,” Nate replied.

One of the girls played the jukebox, which drowned out most of the noise in the bar. Knowing he couldn’t be heard, Nate leaned in close to Jeremiah. “I overheard Deanna talking to Lori Ann; that’s how I knew she’d be here tonight.”

“You sly dog,” Jeremiah toasted his friend. “I knew you didn’t know shit about the Force.”

Nate politely waved to Lori Ann when she arrived. Not long after that, a slow song came on the juke box.

“Sure, I’ll dance with you,” Deanna answered Nate’s request.

Stacey went up to the bar to order more drinks. Jeremiah seized the opportunity to formally introduce himself and help her when she couldn’t carry all the drinks to their table.

“Who ordered the Corona Lite?” He loudly asked above the music.

“Me!” one of the women called.

“Rum and Coke?”

“Me,” Shelby answered. “You might as well sit with us while your friend dances with Deanna. No reason for you to sit at the bar by yourself.”

“Thanks.” Jeremiah grabbed a chair from another table.

Stacey looked at the only man at the table and shouted over the music, “We were just talking about what we love about Kenny. What do you love about him?”

“His ass,” Jeremiah blurted out.

The ladies howled with delight.

One of the two women he didn’t know eyed him curiously. “You go to DSU?”

“Yeah,” he answered trying to place this person he failed to recognize.

“Don’t we have American History 150 together?”

He stared at her for a moment. “Oh, yeah, you sit in the back by the window. Didn’t you used to have different color hair or something?”

The other women laughed. “She’s always changing it!” One of them called out.

“Yes, that’s me. I get bored really easily with a color. Hey dude, you got pretty worked up during that report you gave.”

Deanna and Nate returned the table. Everyone scooted around to make space for them.

The jukebox finished the songs, and the ladies debated how long they planned to stay.

“We need to get going,” Nate said to Jeremiah.

“Yeah, I’ve got to work tomorrow.”

“I’ll walk out with you,” the woman from his class said, grabbing her coat to hold off the chill of the cold fall night.

Jeremiah sneaked a glance at her chest arching out as she put her arms back into the sleeve of her coat.

“My car’s here, and I have to work tomorrow, too,” she explained on the way to her car. “I’m Shawna. Thanks for walking me to my car.”

“Glad to do it.”

“I’m writing a term paper on people who join cults for my psychology class. The Mormons may or may not be a cult, but you had a lot of information about religious zealots who would do anything for their leader. Could I talk to you about the Mormons?”

Surprised, Jeremiah said, “Sure,” and gave her his cell phone number.

On the ride back to their apartment Jeremiah asked his roommate, “Why didn’t you tell me? If you had said, ‘Hey dude, we’re going out to meet some chicks.’ I would’ve said fine, no

problem. Instead, you give me this long song and dance about wanting to get out of the apartment.”

“You get too nervous, so I waited. If I had told you what I had planned, you and your little hormones would’ve been raging by the time we got to the bar. You’d have gotten yourself so excited, you’d have never been able to talk to them.”

Jeremiah sat stunned.

“You know it’s true,” his friend insisted.

After thinking over his lack of ability to communicate with the fairer sex, he replied, “You’re right. I do get tongue-tied around chicks.”

“I can’t believe any girl that heard that hotheaded presentation of yours would want anything to do with you.” Nate chuckled, taking the sting out of his words.

“Thanks for the vote of confidence.”

“Don’t get pissed. I did you a favor. You were so cool and collected that when I came back from dancing you had a table full of ladies hanging on your every word.”

“I created my own luck; didn’t I?” Jeremiah smiled, pleased with himself.

“That you did, my good man.”

“So what’s the deal with you and that co-worker? What was her name?”

“Deanna. She works in Accounting.”

“Let me guess, from your position in Inventory, or Warehouse, or whatever department you work in, you can manufacture reasons to go to Accounting. Your frequent trips to the Accounting Department explain the way you *happened* to overhear the lovely Ms. Deanna’s conversation. You know work relationships never work out.”

Nate shook his head. “Who said anything about a relationship? I want laid.”

“You need to respect this young woman for the person she is.”

The pair looked at one another for a moment before cracking up.

Thomas drove Sally and Isaiah to a Nashville suburb. The younger missionaries agreed to a time and place for their leader to pick them up after a day of door-to-door evangelizing. “I know we need to go where God calls us, but those dangerous neighborhoods make me nervous,” Isaiah admitted as they made their way to the first house. “You notice a difference here?”

“Don’t think I like the ghetto just because I’m black,” she sternly informed him.

“Where did that come from? I meant I expected not to be scared when I was doing the Lord’s work.”

“Oh,” Sally said, embarrassed at her faux pas.

Isaiah continued before her embarrassment could fester, “This feels safer, more like my hometown.”

“I grew up in the suburbs.”

“Where are you from?”

“Warren, Michigan. It’s right outside of Detroit.”

“In high school, I bet you were a cheerleader,” Isaiah guessed.

Without answering, Sally knocked on the door. When no one answered, they moved on toward the next house.

“What makes you think I was a cheerleader?” Her smile announced that she had in fact been one.

“You’re perky and beautiful.” The instant the last word came out of his mouth, Isaiah blushed. During their time together, he came to find her attractive despite the Mormon notions regarding non-whites.

“Thanks, but I’ve never thought of myself as beautiful.”

With thighs a little too large, breasts a touch small, a face she found unremarkable, and a father constantly reminding her of all of the above, she had failed to develop a positive self-image.

“My dad always told me to be a lawyer because I could talk to people, but I’d never win a beauty contest,” she told Isaiah.

“That’s mean,” Isaiah angrily snapped, climbing the front steps of another house.

Sally knocked on the door.

An elderly lady answered.

“Good morning,” Sally cheerfully said. “We’d like to talk to you about Jesus Christ.”

“Oh, Lordy, come on in,” the woman hollered.

Sally followed the lady into her house, watching as she slid one foot, gently placed weight on it, and then slid the other foot in a very slow walk to her couch.

“My bones ache today,” she informed them as she plopped down on the couch.

“Sorry to hear that,” Isaiah replied also sitting on the couch.

“Would you like us to pray with you for healing?” Sally inquired.

“Naw, I’m old. I hurt. That’s the way it is. I want to find out about your religion. Lord knows I’ve seen so many of them.”

“We’re with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, also known as Mormons,” Isaiah said as if his words explained every aspect of their religion.

With an expression of great surprise, the woman asked, “Was that the group that followed that man to the jungle?!”

Isaiah and Sally blankly stare at her.

“Was that your group that went into the jungle and committed mass suicide with that man?”

The two missionaries had studied Mormon history for a few years before this mission, and neither of them had heard anything about a mass Mormon suicide.

“He came from San Francisco, I think. He was big in politics.”

“Ma’am, that’s not one of our people that did that,” Isaiah assured her.

“Some people escaped. Some went down to the jungle with him. The people that went down to the jungle all killed themselves.”

“That’s terrible,” Sally said to break the woman's momentum. “We’d rather talk about what Jesus means to you, and how *The Book of Mormon* shows us the path Jesus wants us to follow.”

“Those people that followed that crazy man into the jungle had to recruit new members. He told them to drink poison, and they did.”

Sally and Isaiah glanced at one another simultaneously, realizing this elderly woman only wanted an audience to hear her ramble.

“That leader made those people write letters for some politicians, and they had to give him their paychecks. He told them he planned to use them for the common good, but it never turned out that way. He spent it all on himself.”

“We have to get going,” Isaiah blurted out.

“Be careful who you follow. In San Francisco a man convinced lots of people he was Jesus. They followed him into the jungle. He made them...”

Isaiah and Sally said goodbye and headed for the door. They heard her talking to herself as they walked off the porch.

“I hope she’s ok,” Sally said on the way to the next house.

“We should pray for her tonight,” Isaiah suggested.

“Should she be there all alone? This looks like a safe neighborhood, but she let us in without even hesitating. I’m worried about her.” She stopped walking and looked back at the woman’s house.

“Sally, what could we do for her?”

“I don’t know. We could call somebody.”

“Who?”

“I don’t know.” Sally pointed at the house. “I hate to leave her there all alone.”

“So do I, but we can’t help that woman. We can’t stay with her. We can’t force her to go someplace else.”

“I know.” She turned back toward the next house. “Seeing old people all alone makes me sad. I wish she had someone to stay with her.”

“We don’t know the situation. Maybe she has visiting nurses, or maybe someone stays with her at night.”

“We don’t know, do we?”

Isaiah gave her a quick, one-arm hug as they stepped onto the porch of the next house.

Solomon Hyden entered the main house where his first wife lived. In her younger days Sherry had been quite the looker. Being middle-aged brought the beginnings of wrinkles and a bit of flab as the muscle tone from her prime disappeared. All in all she still looked good and kept herself prepared for spontaneous visits from her husband. Seeing Solomon enter the living room she quickly put down her book and stood. “Dearie,” she addressed him with confusion, “tonight you eat with Helen. It’s Tuesday.”

“I know what day it is,” he snapped. “Fix my dinner.”

She bowed her head and went into the kitchen. While heating some soup in the microwave, she spoke softly into the phone. “Solomon will not be at your house for dinner. He’s decided to eat with me tonight... No, he didn’t give a reason why, but don’t be ashamed. Sometimes a man needs to be with the wife that’s been with him the longest. You’ll understand better after you’ve been married to him for as many years as I have.” The first wife hung up the phone with a smile.

“You should be nicer to her,” Solomon said, standing a few feet behind her.

“Yes, Dearie,” she replied with her head bowed. “You want to eat at the table or in front of the tv?”

“Sit, talk to me,” he commanded.

Knowing he must have something he wanted to say, she waited.

“How are the boys?”

“Toby likes his job at the hospital in Independence.”

“Thank the Lord you talked him out of being a photographer.” Solomon sipped steamy soup off the spoon.

“He still is a photographer, in a sense. Now he takes pictures of people’s bones and things with an x-ray.”

Her husband nodded, eating a spoonful of soup in spite of its heat.

“Colin likes Saint Louis. He changed jobs last week. It’s the same position; he simply changed call centers and works for a different computer company.”

Stirring his soup, Solomon said, “I couldn’t stand to sit there and answer questions about people’s computers all day.”

She laughed. “That’s because you don’t know anything about computers. And, uhh...” She debated whether to say the next sentence. “Cindy’s going to finish her degree in Communications semester after next.”

“We don’t talk about her,” he reminded her.

Whispering, she said, “She’s your daughter.”

Calmly swallowing another spoonful, and then looking his wife in the eye, Solomon firmly declared, “She brought shame and humiliation to this family when she took off her clothes for money.”

“I have to agree with that, but, uuhhhh, I still love her even if you don’t.”

“That child was a stripper. Our bodies are temples to be used to worship the Lord; Cindy defiled herself and made a mockery of how we raised her. Furthermore, she hasn’t asked God for forgiveness. We can’t associate with her.”

“Did you really come over here to go through this again?”

“No, I have a question for you.” He let the unasked question hang in the air as he casually ate the remainder of his soup. When he finished, she carried away the dishes.

“Sherry, in your capacity as an administrative assistant for Channel Four, you hear a lot of news from around the world, right?”

She nodded expecting more.

“Have you heard, or read, about- this has to be kept secret.” He stared at her.

“I promise.”

“I’m serious. You’ve failed me before.”

“I won’t tell anyone anything. I learned my lesson.” The scar on her inner thigh from the leather belt served as a constant reminder never to violate his trust again.

“Well, I trust you, but understand that repeating any of this will be much more serious than my having to confess in front of the entire congregation.” His face turned red with anger remembering the scene when he stood before his friends and neighbors to admit he never saw the vision he told the Sunday Bible study he had.

Sherry lowered her head. “I’ve never repeated anything you told me was confidential since that slipup.”

He patted her head. “You haven’t.”

After waiting for what seemed like an eternity, she inquired, “What was your question?”

“Have you noticed any increase in violence against Mormons?”

“No, I feel safe here.”

“I don’t mean in Utah - yes, in Utah. I mean, anywhere. Have you noticed more violence against us anywhere? You have access to lots of news from all over the world. Have any attacks against us stuck out in your mind?”

She felt a chill down her spine. “No. Have I missed something? Are we in danger?”

“I’m not sure.”

“What have you heard?”

“Nothing.” Solomon closed his eyes for a moment. “I can’t tell you why I asked, but don’t tell anyone about this conversation.”

“I won’t, and I assume you want to know if I do hear something happening against us.”

“Tell me immediately.” He stood and pulled her up by the front of her shirt.

“This isn’t my night. It’s Helen’s night with you.”

He pinched her nipples painfully hard. “You like being the most important wife.”

She reflexively grabbed his wrists but stopped herself from fighting back. That only made it worse. “I thought you hated having me. Last time you said that I wasn’t good enough to fuck a dog.”

He twisted her nipples. “It’s been months. I’m ready to give you another try.”

“Helen will be hurt if you choose me over her on her night.”

“Tonight I’ll have you both.” With his hands on her breasts, he pushed her toward the bedroom.

“Helen’s young. She’ll enjoy pleasing you,” Sherry suggested, keeping her voice level in spite of her fear. Obediently, she meekly backed toward the bedroom.

“I don’t do this with her or any of the others.”

The fact that only she had to suffer made her mad, frustrated, and sad all at once.

He swung his hand way back for a big windup to spank her with all his might.

“Ow-” She cut off the scream as quick as she could. “Helen might like this. She comes from a different generation. You should try this on her.”

Standing next to the bed they disrobed.

“Lay on your stomach.”

“Dearie, please don’t do this without the KY jelly. My butt bled for days after the last time.” Tears began to form in her eyes.

Someone knocked on the front door. Solomon breathed deep, suppressed his rage, put on a robe, and answered the door.

Helen followed him back into the bedroom. Seeing the first wife standing next to the bed naked, she blushed. Sometimes she acted far more mature than her age, but this unusual situation caused her to sound like a typical seventeen-year-old. She spoke so fast her words ran together, “I’m so sorry. I had no idea what was going on. I only came over to bring the chocolate cake I made because I know you don’t like to make dessert.”

“Helen,” Sherry said in a motherly tone. “You can calm down. You know I’ve had Solomon’s children.”

Solomon took off his robe. To Helen he said, “Get the KY jelly out of the nightstand. You make me good and hard, and then I’m going to show you how Sherry likes to have sex.”

The elder wife lay on her stomach. When he slid into Sherry’s anus, Helen gasped and clenched in surprise, feeling a sympathy pain.

“Don’t look away. This is her duty,” Solomon told his newest wife. Helen flinched every time her husband thrust into his first wife. As Sherry groaned in pain, Helen worried it would be her turn next.

Jeremiah met Shawna on the second floor of the main library. “Since we’re going to be talking, we should find an open study room so we don’t disturb anybody else,” she whispered.

In the room to the side of the stacks, Jeremiah took the seat across the table from her. “What’s your report focusing on?”

“I’m trying to delve into the type of person who would join a cult. Who’s susceptible? Who’s not? Why is or isn’t someone likely to join a cult? Those kinds of questions are what I’m trying to find out.”

“That sounds pretty ambitious to me. I have stuff about Mormons. Most of my research dealt with the eighteen hundreds. Will that help you?”

“I think so,” Shawna answered with a smile. “That will give me a historical perspective, which might show how times change but people don’t. I want to see if...”

Jeremiah quit listening when she smiled. Her smile lit the room and made her so beautiful he could barely think.

“...But I’ll try to keep to the decisions made on the individual level. This class doesn’t really cover group psychology, so the professor won’t want to hear my opinion on a cult’s thought process as it relates to the group.”

“However my research can help, I’m happy to share it with you.”

“Give me a general idea of what your research covered.”

Jeremiah briefly recapped the conclusions he stated to his class and waited for her questions.

“So these people called in to kill the members of the wagon train, did they know they were going to kill people?”

“Yes,” Jeremiah declared, fighting to keep his anger in check. “One man showed up with a shovel because the word had gone out that all the men needed to come to Mountain Meadows to bury bodies as a cover story. Everyone knew they were really going to get even with the Gentiles; that’s the Mormon term for any non-Mormon. The one guy with the shovel is told to go home and get his gun like everybody else. He said he didn’t need a gun to bury people. Rather than admit what the gun would be used for, the Mormon leader walked away, which allowed the leader to deny he ever told anyone to gather for a killing.”

“Wow,” a completely captivated Shawna said. “I want to know what the people who showed up with guns thought. What thought process justified in their minds killing over a hundred strangers who hadn’t done anything to them?”

“I don’t know the answer to that question, but I can tell you what they said afterwards. Some of the killers claimed they didn’t have a choice because they acted on orders from Brigham Young.”

“That’s what the Nazis said! Nobody wants to take responsibility for their actions,” she concluded.

“Maybe that’s what your paper should be about?” Jeremiah suggested.

“Hey, you might be right.” Her smile filled the room again. “Something about denying responsibility is part of being human.”

“Huh?” He only half-heard her words as he studied every beautiful feature on her face.

“Psychologists debate how much of our personality is determined by environment and how much is determined by genetics. The fact that people living in Utah Territory in 1857 and the Germans tried for war crimes in 1945 all used the same excuse tells me some characteristics are common to all humans regardless of the environment.”

“Maybe they were scared they’d be killed for what they had done, and that was the only defense they could think of?”

Shawna considered his words, trying to find a deeper hidden meaning in the actions of the accused.

“This might help. The Mormons felt, well, not all the Mormons, mainly Brigham Young felt, that people wanted to kill him and all his followers. They had faced some serious persecution in Missouri, Illinois, New York, and Ohio. In Utah, they were pretty safe. When I

read about Brigham's reaction to the groups moving through his territory, it reminded me of the way David Koresh reacted every time someone questioned one of his beliefs."

"That might be a good way to go. I could analyze the siege mentality. Even the Nazis tried to promote it. They claimed all the problems with the economy and the restrictions placed on them after World War One stemmed from the Jews."

"This paper of yours could end up being ten thousand pages." Jeremiah wanted to steer the conversation toward her. He desperately wanted to know where she grew up, what kind of music she liked, what she wanted to do with her life, but he didn't know how to get her talking without coming on too strong.

"Too much information is ok. I can always pare my paper down to fifteen pages. What made you do a report on the Mormons?"

Had Nate asked the same question, Jeremiah would have launched into a ten minute tirade on the diabolical bent of the Mormon religion. In this situation, he wanted to come across as a likeable guy, so he meekly offered, "It seemed interesting."

"How did you know about this Mormon killing?"

"My dad told me about it. What made you interested in psychology?"

"I enjoy knowing what makes people tick. The way people interact with one another fascinates me. I guess I want to see inside other people."

"Basically, you're nosy," he quipped.

"Ha, ha, Mr. Smarty-Pants, not nosy, curious," Shawna teased back.

"I was kidding." Jeremiah found his opening. "What makes you tick?"

"Gosh, I don't know. Puppies, kittens, raindrops on roses, those are a few of my favorite things." She sang the last part.

"You can really sing!"

"Oh, thanks, I like to sing."

"Ever thought about doing it professionally?"

"No, lots of people can sing, and that business is really competitive. I don't have the stomach for it."

They stayed in the study room for another hour getting to know one another better.

Isaiah and Sally began to feel more comfortable approaching houses and knocking on doors. Without fear, they threw themselves into the Lord's work of spreading Mormonism to the world.

The first hour in the lower-middle class neighborhood of Nashville earned them variously worded "No thank you's". Undaunted Sally rang the next door bell, firmly believing someone who needed their help would answer.

A young white male with a white Underarmor skull cap answered the door.

"Good afternoon, we'd like to talk to you about accepting Jesus Christ into your life," Sally pleasantly announced.

The kid laughed. "You're for real?"

"Absolutely," Isaiah told him. "Have you been waiting for the opportunity to find Jesus?"

"I need to find someone." The kid stepped out of the doorway and looked both ways before sitting on the top step of the porch.

Sally and Isaiah sat on either side of him.

"What are y'all sellin'?" he asked lighting a cigarette.

“We’re not selling anything,” Sally replied. “Let’s talk about what’s going on in your life and how Jesus can help you with your problems.”

The kid repeatedly looked down the street one way, and then the other. His knee rapidly bounced.

“You worried about something?” Isaiah asked.

“No, everything’s fine. I’m cool.” Despite his words, he never looked at Isaiah or Sally for more than a moment or two.

She placed her hand on his jittery knee. “What’s up with you?”

As he stared into her eyes, he felt the tension drain from his body. “Don’t let this get out or nothing, but I got some problems with a gang.”

“How serious are these problems?” Isaiah queried in hopes of encouraging the kid to share the reason for his nervousness.

“Pretty bad. I can’t believe you came by today of all days.”

When he failed to elaborate, Sally asked, “Why? What’s special about today?”

“This morning, my momma had our preacher come by. He told me I gotta change my ways, or I’ll be dead. He’s pretty well connected on the street an’ he knows what’s up. He told me to get out of this neighborhood before it’s too late.”

“Sounds like turning to Jesus might be the only option left for you,” Sally suggested.

With a shocked expression, he responded, “That’s what he said.”

“God’s trying to tell you something,” Isaiah added.

“I guess so.” The kid’s expression hardened, and his voice took on a sharp edge. “Jesus ain’t gonna save me in this neighborhood. Being here means I’m dead.”

“We can help you leave, but you’ll need to be serious about turning over your life to God and accepting Jesus Christ into your life.” Sally’s words flowed out. “You can stay here and die, or you can do what you know in your heart is right and give yourself to God.”

The kid stared at his feet. When he finally spoke, fear made his voice tremble. “I can’t leave. I don’t want to leave.”

“What’s holding you back?” Isaiah asked.

“I like being a part of my gang. They might take me back. If they let me back in, I ain’t got no use for religion.”

Sally stood up and pulled a generic LDS missionary business card out of her purse. After writing on the back of it, she handed it to the kid. “My name’s Sally; that’s Isaiah. My cell number is on the back of this card. When you change your mind, we’ll be there to listen. We want to help you. Call me any time day or night. Our church has a safe house you can go to. Your mother can come, too. In order for us to help you, you have to let Jesus into your life. The safe place we have for you is a peaceful, prayerful place where you’ll have time to take religion seriously.”

“Religion don’t mean shit on the street,” the kid grumbled without any real meaning behind the words.

Isaiah stood. “What’s your name?”

“Chilly V, I mean Vince Conner.”

“You call me if things change. We’ll be willing to help,” Sally reiterated.

“Ok.” Vince scanned the street again.

“Vince,” Isaiah said to be sure he had the young man’s attention. “Choosing a life of prayer and peace will be better than watching your back every second. Buddy, you’re looking over your shoulder every few seconds. You CAN’T keep doing that.”

Vince nodded, but he wouldn't meet their eyes.

"I'm serious; you can call, any time, day or night. We'll be willing to help," Sally promised. "And think about this. Coming with us wouldn't leave any way for the people who are after you to find you."

That night over dinner Sally and Isaiah told Thomas every detail of their experience.

"You two did exactly the right thing," Thomas praised.

"I really felt like we almost had him. If you had been there, you'd have found a way to convince him to leave," Isaiah lamented.

"I doubt that. Leaving one's home, no matter what the level of danger is around you, can be incredibly hard. Some people find leaving so hard they stay as the flood waters come in. We've all seen that on tv."

"I feel good about the experience." After the men finished speaking, an upbeat Sally chimed in. "We offered him another choice. Whether or not he takes it is his free will decision."

Jeremiah walked into his apartment to find Nate on the couch with a beer in his hand. "So, Jer, wasn't tonight the night you were meeting the lovely Ms. Shawna at the library?"

"It was," Jeremiah confirmed on his way to the refrigerator.

"How did things go between the two of you?"

"Fine." Jeremiah sat down with his beer in the recliner.

"I trust you behaved in an appropriate fashion for a gentleman caller?" Nate smiled, obviously pleased with himself for being irritating in a new, formal manner.

"It went well."

"Whence did you take the fine young lassie?"

"Would you stop talking like that?"

"Hark, I hear-ith ye sound irritate-ith."

"Other than you, who finds you funny?" Jeremiah snatched the remote from the old beat-up coffee table in front of the couch.

"My humorous wit draw-eth from many a quarter." Nate cracked up. "Damn, that was good."

"You need to keep your job moving boxes, 'cause you'd starve as a comic."

"Well?"

"Well, what?" a confused Jeremiah replied.

"Did you do the deed with Shawna in the stacks at the library?"

"No." Jeremiah added a roll of his eyes to show how preposterous he found the question.

"Did you bone her anywhere?"

On the verge of getting angry, Jeremiah caught himself. "Are you asking for a particular orifice, or are you asking for geographic location?"

Nate laughed. "That was pretty good. You're usually not that snappy with the zingers."

"I've got this roommate who's teaching me."

"Did you line up the second date?"

"Gawd, Nate, the Spanish Inquisition asked fewer questions."

"I'll take that as a no. Seriously, how far did you get with her?"

Jeremiah flipped through the television channels.

"Did you drop your pen and try to look up her skirt?"

"Yeah, but she was wearing pants."

Nate burst out laughing. "I've made that mistake, too. Did she ever lean forward so you could see down her shirt?"

"You are the biggest pervert."

"She didn't have on a button down shirt, did she? If she had, you'd have been lookin', right?"

"She had a t-shirt on," Jeremiah confirmed, understanding the futility of trying to ignore him.

"Did you get to check out her ass?"

"Only for a second when she walked into the study room in front of me."

"What happened when you left? Any goodbye lip-lock?"

Jeremiah left the tv on a college football game airing on Classic Sports. "Who won the nineteen ninety-seven Rose Bowl? It looks like, umm, Ohio State, and I'm guessing Arizona State, since no other Pac-10 school wears that nasty maroon."

"The Buckeyes win twenty to seventeen."

"How do you remember that?"

"That one's easy to remember. My mom was hoping my dad's bet on the game would pay off so she could use the money for my school clothes."

"How'd that turn out for her?"

"Not good. The point spread was three, and the Buckeyes won by three, so my dad's bookie called it a push. My mom considered it a sign from God that my dad shouldn't bet. He promised to never bet again, and as far as I know he never did."

"Nate, you'd have been like six years old. You can't remember all that."

"Oh, hell no, my mom's told me that story a thousand times so I won't gamble. BUT, don't try to change the topic. Did you, or did you not kiss lovely Shawna before leaving the library?"

"I did not."

"You were too busy trying to hide your chubby, weren't you?"

"Nate, don't talk about my chubby. That ain't right."

President Michael's office in the Joseph Smith Memorial Building featured floor to ceiling windows offering a view of the Salt Lake Temple in the foreground with the Tabernacle's silver dome acting as the backdrop. Standing behind the President's desk looking out the window, Governor Leavitt could see the spire with the U.S. flag above Utah's flag flying over the state building in the background. The arrangement inside the room displayed its own grandeur. A large pine desk dominated the area in front of the windows with a highly polished shine reflecting a great deal of light giving the office a feel of being more open and spacious than it actually was. The book cases lining the walls matched the pine of the desk. The exquisite sparkling leather covers of the books on the shelves broadcast the investment that went into filling the cases. The Governor couldn't help but notice the desk, and the book cases appeared so perfectly tidy that they must not be used for actual work. It all seemed more like a movie set staged to impress visitors.

"I hope I haven't kept you waiting too long?" President Michael said, entering the office from a hidden door in the wall.

"Not long at all." Governor Leavitt suspected the President ran out of his office once the President knew he arrived in the building. By forcing the Governor to wait, the President showed his power over the state's highest official.

Standing at Leavitt's side, the President pointed toward the Temple. "Interesting to me that the flags of the country and the state look like they are above the Temple from here. We know what's most important though, don't we?"

"Religion is the center of most people's lives, but as Americans we have to remember that the church and the state are not in competition with one another."

"Spoken like the polished politician that you are." The President gestured for the Governor to take the seat in front of his desk. "Thank you for coming by on such short notice."

"What did you wish to see me about?"

"Several sources have suggested that Mormon persecution might be on the rise. Have you heard anything about that?"

"President Michael, I have not heard any such thing," Leavitt gasped. "What have you heard?"

"Nothing too specific. We have members from all around the world report to us when they hear something they think we might find interesting. Lately, several people have called us about their growing concern that Mormons will once again be the target of violent persecution."

"Once again?" the Governor asked for clarification.

"You know our history. Prophet Joseph Smith died at the hands of our enemies."

"Yes, of course," Leavitt replied, wondering how a wound, well over one hundred years old, could still be so fresh in the mind of the man before him.

"Since the Gentiles have a history of attacking us for our beliefs, we keep tabs on who might be ready to launch an assault against us."

"Are any of these hate groups located in Utah?"

"Not that we know of."

"President Michael, you know I am a devout Mormon, but my authority does not extend beyond the borders of Utah."

"Understood. I completely understand. I wanted to inform you because you are Mormon, and in the event something does happen in Utah. I would never ask you to violate the laws of the United States. However, please do be on the alert for anyone who might look to persecute us for following the law of God. That's all I ask."

"You know I will."

President Michael rose. "I won't keep you from your busy schedule any longer. You were very kind to stop by in spite of all the pressing matters required by your position."

Governor Leavitt shook hands. "I always look forward to seeing you. Hopefully, the next time we meet will for a less ominous reason." With that said in hopes of assuring the Prophet they remained a unified force, he left.

The leader of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, holding the titles of President for the Gentiles and Prophet for the Faithful, called the Secretary of the Church into his office.

"Yes, Prophet Michael?"

"Solomon, I have asked the Governor to share with us any information regarding our enemies."

"I am not questioning your judgment, but I am surprised you trust him. Politicians always look out for themselves first."

"He is the most ambitious politician Utah has ever had as Governor. He won't do anything that might be seen as offensive to us."

"You know him better than I," Solomon replied.

“Speaking of trust, you know that I trust your opinion more than anyone else’s.”

Not knowing what to say, Solomon bowed his head in thanks for the compliment.

“I need you to consider something. We have kept my title as God’s Most Holy Prophet known to only the most select group. I’m thinking we need to share it with the masses. I want you to consider if we should announce that I am not only the President of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, but also the latest Prophet appointed by God, not simply a Prophet because I lead the church of Mormon. As we all know, no one has held this title since Brigham Young. If we should reveal that I am closer to God than any other person, how should we do it? Do I lead a special service at the Temple? Should someone else announce my position?”

“I see your concern. Announcing the title of God’s Most Holy Prophet must be handled with care. We don’t want you to be seen as a glory hound when you are serving Jesus.”

“Exactly,” a smiling Prophet Michael said. “You always understand what needs to be done.”

“I will pray about it. From purely human emotion, I want to shout it to the world. You are a great Prophet. So far, every revelation you have seen has come true. Hiding you and your ability to communicate with God contradicts the way I learned to glorify God.”

“We have to be cognizant of the world we live in. By announcing this news, we might be putting members of our faith in danger. Some people won’t accept the fact that we are closer to God than they are, regardless of the evidence. That inferiority often makes those people lose control and attack us out of jealousy,” Prophet Michael lamented.

Solomon nodded thoughtfully. “The Lord will show us how to handle this news.”

The sun had nearly dipped below the horizon and the missionaries hadn’t had a nibble fishing for converts. Thomas insisted they walk the neighborhood until dark in hopes of changing their luck. Sally’s phone rang as she and Isaiah forced themselves up another walk toward another front door. “Hello,” Sally answered after not recognizing the incoming number.

“Were you serious about helping me?” an out-of-breath young man asked.

“Is this Vince?”

“Yeah.” His volume changed to a whisper. “I gotta get outta here. Somebody’s after me.”

“I don’t have a car, but I can get one pretty quick. Where can I meet you?”

He gave directions to a convenience store on Nolensville Pike next to a railroad overpass as she scribbled on the back of a Latter-day Saints magazine.

By the time Thomas arrived in the car to drive them to Vince’s location, Sally and Isaiah felt joy, excitement, and an overwhelming sense of responsibility.

The missionaries pulled into the parking lot and saw no one resembling Vince. The dark of night had fully arrived by the time they arrived at the rendezvous. “I’ll go into the store. He might’ve wanted to stay off the street,” Sally suggested.

A steady stream of traffic zipped by on Nolensville Pike, a main artery for southeastern Nashville. The headlights from cars threw shadows in odd directions making it difficult as Isaiah and Thomas continually scanned the parking lot for Vince. Sally returned from the store and sat in the car. “Not inside.”

“Call him back,” Isaiah said.

Sally selected the most recent number from her in-coming call log. “We’re here,” she informed him without preamble when he answered.

“Great. Sit tight. The guys that’re lookin’ for me drove by, an’ I had to hide. I’m behind the building across the street from you.”

“The Stem Preparatory Academy?”

“I think so; I didn’t check it out. I just ran for cover.” Vince disconnected.

She informed the others in the car with her.

“This might be very serious. We have to find out if he’s committed a crime. If he has, we can’t hide him. That would be aiding and abetting,” Thomas definitively stated.

“He’s in a gang, or was. If he hasn’t committed a crime at some point in his life, I’d be surprised,” Isaiah said.

“We’ll have to ask him if the cops are looking for him. If he says no, we’ll take him at his word,” Thomas concluded.

“I think I see him.” Sally pointed to show them what she saw.

“He’s doing a pretty good job of staying out of the light,” Isaiah observed.

When traffic permitted, Vince bolted across the four-lane street. Sally jumped out and waved to be sure he knew which car to run to.

Vince got in the back seat behind Thomas who turned around to face his new passenger. “We have to ask if the police are looking for you. We won’t turn you in, but we don’t want to take you with us if they are looking for you. Are you wanted?”

“Not by the cops. My gang wants to kill me because I ran from the cops when I had a couple of bags of cocaine on me. Before the cops caught me, I threw the dope down a sewer. The cops let me go cuz they didn’t see me ditch it. So I’m cool with them. My gang wants my ass. Fuckin’ rained before I could go back to get the coke. I lost everything I was carrying.”

Thomas drove him back to their base house and called a transporter to come by for their charge.

After everyone settled in the living room with Cokes, Pepsis, or water, Isaiah frankly asked, “What changed your mind?”

“I called Turk – he’s the leader of my gang. He w-“

“Former gang,” Thomas corrected.

“Huh?”

“You said leader of *my gang*. As of this moment, you are out of that gang, and finding Jesus and accepting Him into your life is your new mission.”

“Right,” Vince replied. “Right, I’m out of that gang forever.” He paused, lost in thought for a moment. “So like, he wants to meet me. I said ok. I knew better than to come walking up, so I scoped out the area. Saw Turk by himself bein’ used as bait, an’ started to approach when I noticed one of the gang circling behind me. Sonofabitches knew I wouldn’t run up to him. They were waitin’ around, hidin’ hopin’ to find me while I was checkin’ things out ‘fore I found them. They serious ‘bout killin’ me.”

“Sounds like you were right to get out of there,” Sally said.

“I’d be dead if I stayed around the neighborhood. My momma kept telling me to call you. She said no one could protect me, ‘cept God. Today I realized she knew what she was talking about.”

“Jesus often has us hit rock bottom so we can turn to Him. I’m sure you’re nervous about changing your life. Change can be scary, but I hope you look at this as an exciting new beginning. This is the start of a whole new life for you,” Thomas counseled.

“Where am I going?” Vince’s tough guy façade fell away, and he finally appeared to be the frightened eighteen-year-old kid that he was.

Thomas fielded the question. “A man will come by and take you to a place like a peaceful, scenic college campus. There you’ll have time to reflect on your relationship with God. People will pray with you every day.”

Now he sounded terrified. “Will I have to attend class?”

The group chuckled.

“No, no classes. You will go to sharing sessions where people will share with you what they want to change about themselves. When you want to, you’ll be able to share with them, too.”

“I ain’t much on sharing.”

“That’s fine. All I ask is that you keep an open mind. Some people will want to share, and they may want your advice. At some point, you may want their advice.”

“I ain’t one for that sort of thing.”

“Yes, you are,” Thomas softly assured him. “Think of this as your new gang. The gang you came from and the one you’re going to share some qualities.”

Everyone’s mouths dropped open in surprise.

“Seriously, your gang required loyalty. Everyone where you’re going will expect your sincere effort; same as the street gang you left. The gang you came from demanded secrecy. The other people in the sharing group will expect you to keep secret what is said during the sessions. No different than keeping stuff from the cops. Lots of similarities.”

Vince thought that over for a minute.

“Have you said goodbye to your mother?” Sally asked.

“Yeah,” he mumbled.

A knock at the door snapped everyone’s eyes up to where the sound came from.

Vince jumped to his feet. “Think they followed us here?”

“No,” Thomas said firmly heading for the door. Despite his assurance, he checked the peephole before letting the transporter in.

Isaiah and Sally stood in front of the house and watched the car carrying Vince drive away. “This feels pretty good,” Isaiah said.

Sally looked at him, and they hugged one another. “We showed him the way to Jesus.”

Back inside Thomas informed them, “I took the liberty of ordering Chinese food; I’ll be back in a few.”

Isaiah and Sally sat on the couch smiling at one another. “We really did do good today,” she said.

They hugged again, and this time Isaiah kissed her black cheek, something he would have found unthinkable before meeting Sally.

Both of them excitedly recalled the day’s events. Retelling the story brought back all the emotion as if it was happening all over again. By the time Thomas returned with the food, they had wound down and were ready to eat. Isaiah offered the blessing and thanked the Lord for the day and opportunity to help someone.

“You two seem to have really taken to missionary work,” Thomas congratulated them.

“Today made all the preparation and studying worthwhile.” Sally referenced the class she had attended at her local church before being considered ready to travel with a missionary.

“This is only the beginning,” Thomas said. “You two are destined for great things.”

“Are we destined together? I’m not sure I can stand to be around her for much longer,” Isaiah kidded.

“Yes, you can. You adore me; you just don’t know it yet,” Sally jostled back.

Pretending to be serious, Isaiah asked Thomas, “How does the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints feel about mixed couples?”

Thomas smiled. “Normally, they don’t have any problem with it, but keeping the two of you together might result in more converts than the church could handle. We’ll have to keep the two of you separated.”

“Thank heavens!” Sally sarcastically shouted.