

A SECOND CHANCE – Unleashing The Power of Good

Heaven did not want them
Hell could not keep them
So they sent them back...!

...with **A Vengeance!**

A SECOND CHANCE

Unleashing The Power of Good

Horatio M & Natasha Bennett

The poster features a large, central figure of an angel with white wings and a halo, holding a megaphone. The background is a vibrant blue and purple gradient. Several smaller portraits are overlaid: a man in a tan hat and sunglasses holding a gun, a woman in a white cowboy hat and sunglasses, a man in a black hat and glasses pointing, and a man in a white shirt and tie. At the bottom, there is a stylized flame graphic in red and yellow.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

HORATIO MELBOURNE BENNETT is a native of Jamaica, W.I. He migrated to the United States in 1967 as an exchange student. He lived in Detroit, Michigan, where he worked with National Public Radio as a broadcaster. In 1971 he created the then-annual Detroit Caribbean Carnival, an event bringing thousands into the city each year.

Horatio was awarded the *“Spirit of Detroit” Award*. He was honored by the Detroit City Council, and received several awards from other government, social and civic entities, including recognition from two governors of Michigan. Horatio was inducted into Detroit Music Hall of Fame (1984). Alongside his late wife, Natasha, he was given the Civic Service Award, 2019, and were later inducted into 'Who's Who in Black America.' Horatio, a Minister of the Gospel, is a Cancer and West Nile virus survivor.

NATASHA BEARDEN-BENNETT – was a native of Detroit, Michigan. As an elementary school teacher for 26 years, she hosted of her own web-based classroom instructional media site for elementary students.

Natasha had two music CDs, and have performed as a vocalist with several local bands around the Detroit. As an actress, Natasha appeared on the *Tyler Perry's House of Payne* television show, and on other television shows as extra. She was a gifted musician and plays the flute.

On January 7, 2020, Natasha made her transition after a year-long bout with Liver Cancer. Just a week before she passed she was given the Civic Service Award, and two weeks later she was inducted into the 'Who's Who in Black America.' She was unaware of both recognition, being semi-comatose and in hospice. Also, neither of the awardees were ever aware of her medical condition...

The Bennetts are directors of the Horatio and Natasha Bennett Foundation, a nonprofit entity dedicated service the homeless and destitute. They have written several books, including *“How to become a Good Person – without being religious.”*

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Artists: Minister Chevelle Franklyn, Rev. James Cleveland, Candi Staton, CeCe Wynans, Gladys Knight, Ernie Smith, Bob Marley, Beyoncé, Jennifer Hudson and Neil Diamond

Actors: Denzel Washington, Michael Douglas, Halle Berry, Madam Cicely Tyson, Nicholas Cage and Samuel Jackson

Most Admired: President Barak Obama and First Lady Michelle, Rev. Louis Farrakhan, Rev. Al Sharpton, Madam Cicely Tyson, Ms. Oprah Winfrey, Harry Belafonte, Sheryl Lee Ralph, Mohammed Ali, Steve Harvey and Michael Baisden.

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PRELUDE

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The number of scars resulting from his years of physical abuse would have eliminated him from her will, if she had anything to will. But Jerry was Jerry, and that was all he could ever be...

Sarah listened closely as the steps softly approached. Maybe someone was going to one of the other apartments on the floor. She knew it was not the wayward caretaker. No, he would walk

A SECOND CHANCE – Unleashing The Power of Good

boldly and banged on the door as if he had rights. Sarah waited curiously as the footsteps lightly padded along the bare floors. The steps were hesitant, but obviously belonging to someone with above average weight.

From the way the sound followed the footsteps, Sarah was sure the walker was a man, and big one at that. Certainly, not the skinny caretaker. The floor creaked as the person moved forward. As the sound drew near her door it stopped. The air carried an atmosphere of imminent danger.

The dog growled softly, as if to maintain a low profile. Jerry was attacked and killed in this very apartment. She had to be careful. She could feel Jo's body trembling, much as it felt a year ago when it faced the horde of hungry rats...

Sarah glanced towards the side table, standing to the left, just a few feet from the rundown coach she was sitting on. Her little silver .22 pistol lay on its side, against a tray with scattered remains of marijuana seeds and other telltale residue from the now empty bag she got off a client, for payment for a few minutes of 'social service.' She made a mental note to get a replacement bag, but this time making sure she was not stuck with seeds, stems and added leaves from someone's bush garden.

Instinctively she moved softly towards the table, keeping her eyes, both on the door and on the little .22, just as the door flew open with a loud crash. She dropped the dog and lounged towards the table, restraining a scream of fear. Out of the corner of her eyes she saw the huge, masculine figure moving swiftly across the room, heading her off from the table.

Both bodies slammed into each other, both hands grappling for the pistol. Sarah winced as the large frame slammed into her back. She felt her breath whooshing from her lungs. The shoulder that slammed against the table hurts like hell, but she knew she had to keep a clear mind. She didn't trust her strength to continue fighting, but her resolute not to go like Jerry was enough to keep her from falling apart.

With a silent prayer and renewed strength, her hands gripped the small pistol, and as she struggled to turn, she felt the warm

A SECOND CHANCE – Unleashing The Power of Good

breath of the person almost enveloping her. She would have gagged at the obnoxious odor of stale, cheap liquor emanating from the open mouth, had she not engaged in a fight for her life.

Sarah's finger curled over the trigger of the little gun, and in practiced fear and desperation; things she used to survive the challenges of daily life in the big city, she turned the nozzle up towards the face and squeezed the trigger. The sound was thunderous. Blood splattered on the table and floor.

The smell of death was strong...

A SECOND CHANCE

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CHAPTER

1 It was the day after Thanksgiving and Sarah Jones and her little poodle were enjoying the unusually warm sunshine, casting its yellow beam through the curtain less windows. What Sarah did not know was that she was about to experience a tragic occurrence; an event that would change her life forever and that of many others around her.

Sarah Jones was about to become a major figure in eventual episodes that would sweep the city...

A SECOND CHANCE – *Unleashing The Power of Good*

There was a light wind blowing outside across the field surrounding the unkempt yard that snaked its way around, and in and out the apartment complex. Although the wind was not intense enough to move loose objects from their moorings, it was enough to carelessly toss a leaf or two across the yard. Some of the taller grass was slightly ruffled while others remain listlessly motionless. Everything seems to adopt an individualistically comical character. The grass grew at its own pace, not conforming with nature's plan to keep the field at an even keel. There were places where little rough patches of shrubs segregated themselves from the rest of the field, and the uneven heights of the landscape had the appearance of a group of unruly kids pushing and shoving, trying to find their own places in a crowd.

There were five apartment buildings in the complex, as nondescript as you can get, yet memorable in their own right. The designs were peculiarly different, with no form of uniformity; as if built by different contractors, at different times, in different era,' and each took on its own persona. The records downtown would show that the five buildings were erected within a few months of each other, but could not justify why each was so distinctive of the others. If there was to be any semblance of a common denominator, it would be the evenly unkempt landscape that encased the entire overall complex. One half of each building was rebuilt with cheap, overused discarded bricks while the rest was a combination of wood, shingles and paste boards. Some years ago astute leasing agents justified the absurdity by claiming that it was easier for tenants to direct their guests to apartment in the building; showing how compassionate the building owner was to plights of the tenants. Of course, no one really believed the story and rented the shabby ones among the few that would allow tenants to 'do their own thing,' as long as the rent was paid, and on time.

A SECOND CHANCE – *Unleashing The Power of Good*

Sarah's own world within the confines of the apartment, housed in building #5, was restricted to a one room unit. Most of the apartment suites were shrewdly broken up into one-room units with constricted space for a bed and whatever the tenants chose to input in order to create their own space in the vast universe. Sarah had her rickety bed upheld by three wooden orange crates and two cement blocks she found in the parking lot.

She designated one corner for a kitchen, placed an old worn couch flanked by a pair of metal chairs with screws missing, thus skewed legs and uneven seats- all complements of roaming other apartment buildings for usable discards. This served as the living/sitting area. She shared two bathrooms with seven other apartments within the building. All the bathrooms were previously removed from inside the remaining apartment suits and strategically-placed to accommodate tenants living on that floor. Each of the one-room unit averaged about six occupants, many joining forces to afford a place to live. The only reason no one shared Sarah's unit was because it was a small vacant storeroom transformed into a 'living quarters,' good only for transients; one-night stands,' so Sarah was able to hold on to the little unit as her own domain...

The room was badly in need of painting, and was unseasonably cool, in spite of the sunny day, and the presence of the sun, forcing its way against the window directly adjacent to the bare wall that serves as the fourth leg of the all-purpose dining table. Sarah had pledged just last week she was going to nail a sheet of light plywood across the window, in an effort to keep in the little warmth that the broken-down steam pipes below in the musty basement were producing. Over the past month she had made unsuccessful efforts to put masking tapes over the broken panes, but the

A SECOND CHANCE – *Unleashing The Power of Good*

years of accumulative dust and grime would not allow the adhesive to stay stuck. Not that she was overly interested in ever looking through the window onto the world outside. Duck-tape was definitely not the answer to her problems.

Just below the window was an old rustic fridge, its door hanging propitiously on one hinge. Sarah considered living on the first floor a blessing, if only the garbage wouldn't pile so high that the stench eked its way through the poorly insulated walls and numerous broken windows. She had observed neighbors on the floors above, on many occasions, dropping bags containing God-knows-what onto the ever-rising pile. With three floors above, who knew what was coming from where?

Sometimes the tenants gave way to their passions and threw out things that meant so much to them at one time; memories, clothes too small, a broken shoe, one earring. Other times they threw away stuff that told what pigs they could really be, like food wrappings, or the food itself, and the garbage strewn all over the yard only made you wonder why the trash containers were not good enough to hold their waste.

What did they conceal that should not be revealed in a dirty, bent-up metal container? Could people throw their secrets away and start over? Sarah wondered; could she start over? For her to start over she would have to discard her own past, a task she finds loaded with uncertainty. She was not really certain where her past ends, and where the present begins. Her past was pained, and the future had very little to offer. Here she was, stuck in a run-down, one-room hell hole, doing questionable things to survive, with four dirty walls keeping her captive and a roof that seemed to be pressing her further down, into the abyss...

A SECOND CHANCE – *Unleashing The Power of Good*

The rundown four-wall abode, located smack on the east corner of building number five was the only security life afforded her. This was her castle, or was it her confinement? Only too often young would boys climb the rising pile of throw-outs to peep in her window while she was ‘doing her business’ with her male customers. Sarah knew the neighborhood was not safe. Her on-and-off boyfriend, Jerry, who dropped by only when lust called for brief companionship, was killed just two months ago, and she was planning on moving to a safer neighborhood, but for the time being, this little room was all she had...

Building Number Five hosted a wide variety of occupants. Among many other things, it was a haven for parole-dodgers, migrant workers and mostly out-of-work characters. There was supposed to be some sort of caretaker, but he was never around, and whenever he came around, was to complain that the owner was not paying him enough to attend to our concerns, yet the bastard would stop by Sarah’s apartment for her to attend to his concern; blackmailing her into giving him the excitement he never knew- again and again. He knew she hated her work but needed the business. This was why he never boarded her with a roommate.

The more she led him through her door, the more he would not leave when his time was up. He was an odd sort who only whispered hoarsely when he thought he needed to be saying something dirty, which was often, during his flurries of hikes and stutters. Sarah had to endure all this until his non-appointment; drop-by visit was complete. This was the price she had to pay for the sanctity of her sphere.

As Sarah basks in the warmth of the sunlight, she is proud of herself for not putting up the plywood Gus, the wino from the alley across her apartment, offered her in return for a joint. She wouldn’t have known how to install the warped piece of wood anyway, and although the little heat would be

A SECOND CHANCE – *Unleashing The Power of Good*

kept inside, this golden blessing from the Good Lord would be locked out. Sarah tries not to notice the peeling tape against the dirty windowpane, but only to absorb the streaking rays of the morning sun, fighting its way through layers of obscene particles...

Still, the landlord needs to get the heater system fixed. The old, overused and overworked steam boiler in the basement is located immediately below her apartment. The thin plywood used for flooring did little to offer any resistance against the rumbling sounds below as the boiler chugged on, but supplying very little heat. She was sure the old, ancient contraption was condemned, but you were not likely to see a city engineer climbing down the rat-infested basement to inspect it.

Following the incoming blistering heat, a freezing cold front was predicted, and early. Sarah and several other tenants made calls to the owner to deal with the heating problem, but got no results. Sometime ago, the owner referred the tenants to a 'manager,' someone who would take care of their concerns, but when they finally get to meet him one rainy day, all he did was give them a phone number scribbled on the back of an old dry cleaning ticket. The phone number the man supplied, she was sure it was for a telephone booth. Sarah remembers several times someone answering and cussing at her for interrupting calls. The usually absent manager held off complaints by telling occupants he had no way of contacting the owner. He said the owner contacts him when he needs him, especially when he wants a message relayed to the tenants about a rent increase, or notice of water and electric interruptions...

The landlord, with his posh apartments and condos in the suburbs, did not visit the city often, and was not about to. He only makes his appearance near the end of the month when

A SECOND CHANCE – *Unleashing The Power of Good*

it was time to collect his rent. He was due this month. Knowing full well that the new month starts just a week away; he would be down to get their monies. He didn't really understand, or cared, where they would find money because at any given time of the day, or night, they could be seen standing, or leaning on the side of a rusted-out automobile, or sitting on the rail of their rundown porches, doing absolutely nothing.

These people never seem to work, yet they were getting monies from the government. Good hard-earned monies from the taxes he was paying. It was his monies the damn government was using to pay these worthless people. For the likes of him, he just couldn't figure out how they could live, day by day, simply awaiting a handout they didn't deserve, and from a government they didn't trust.

Well, he wasn't in the business of interpreting other people's lives; all he cared about was that he gets whatever's coming to him, and that means his monthly rent, and he wants his first. Hell, if he didn't get his fast, the dope man would beat him out and he didn't want to play seconds to the dregs of the city. After all, most of them would spend their checks even before they get them. The monies were spent, or rationed out the month before. These people were just surviving from day to day. He had found out early that he was not just competing with the dope man for his share of the monthly checks, but the liquor store, the number's man, then him, if any was left.

The landlord knows about the boiler and the heating problems, and he was maybe planning on a visit, but why makes these trips, when the one at the end of the month would do just fine? Not that he would have made the trip even if it were a week in the month. He was just not going into that neighborhood more than he had to; and that was just to collect the rent and pacify some key tenants, and a

A SECOND CHANCE – Unleashing The Power of Good

lazy ‘manager’ who saw to it that overzealous complainers are evicted. The tenants all know the lumbering boiler in the basement is on the blink and many have already bought space heaters to supplement warmth, even though their electric bills will reflect the added luxury. The landlord was aware of the impending freezing winter but he assured himself that a little cold period wasn’t going to kill anyone.

For months on end Sarah ponders these things. She’s barely making enough these days since Jerry’s gone. She never makes enough for anything else but pays the rent, and that’s only if you ain’t got to pay no pimp. This time the landlord would have to wait. Why should I give him all my hard earned money when I can’t make no money in this cold place, and a horny caretaker taking up all my time?

Sarah cuddled Jo, her poodle. Its once matted brown air was now hair was now silky smooth. A year ago she had wrestled the skinny canine from a pack of marauding rodents in the basement where the wandering dog had gone in search for heat during a blistering winter storm. The hungry beasts, readying themselves for the attack when she came down the stairs, cornered the dog. She had heard peculiar noises, unrecognizable, and taking her little pistol, she went down to investigate. Sarah was by no means a courageous person but something was telling her that someone, or something needed her help. That was when she saw the rats with blaring fangs at the trembling dog that was whimpering in the corner under the steps. With equally trembling hands, Sarah managed to set off two shots in rapid successions before the rats fled, minus their meal. Sarah stooped and got the grateful puppy and took it up to her apartment, where it lived ever since...

A SECOND CHANCE – Unleashing The Power of Good

Sarah softly stroked the golden hair on the poodle back as she hummed a familiar gospel song to herself. She was far from being a singer, but lately music seems to be a vivid part of her semi-consciousness. Like a forgotten name trying to be remembered...

What was that song called?

Her mind raced.

Yes, “Lord, lead me... something.”

She could not remember the words, but the tune was unusually familiar to her.

Where did I hear this?

On the radio?

No! That was broken.

Maybe the TV...

Nay, she didn't have one.

Yes, it came from the little church down the block. She remembered. Just three days ago while she was out walking, the sound came from through the open windows of the little Baptist church. The church building itself was made of numerous styles of plywood, like someone got them from a rummage sale or from a pile of discards you sometime see on the sidewalk. Someone, possible one of the more creative members, nailed the odd-shaped boards on the building, not bothering to size up angles. If the view of the finished work was painted on a canvas, possibly one could get thousands of dollars for what could be categorized as ‘abstract art,’ unrecognizable, undefined.

No one bothered to add paint though, but kids from the adjoining neighborhoods have field days trying to find a flat enough surface to paint their graffiti. None were successful, but efforts were definitely made, and with passion.

Because of the thin insulation, and the well-vented structure, sounds inside the little church were also sounds

outside the little church. Plus, they always leave the windows open during services, even though every two feet, or less, you could legally classify the presence of a ‘window.’ No one really thought it would make any difference if there were windows to be closed...

Actually, there were two windows with panes and stained glass, just like a real old fashion church, only that the ‘stained’ glass was really stained because of years of never being washed and basic neglect, and doors with knobs and locks that didn’t work well when the weather gets cold. Maybe because no one goes in the building anyway. The pastor or someone inside would simply open the available windows and doors and blast away. The neighbors used to complain to the police about the noise, but that drew very little result. Really, only a few of the neighbors would even talk to a policeman, so the complaints were few and very far between, so everyone just gave up and learned to live with the little “noisy church down the block.”

"Oh Lord, lead me home to..." her memory once again failed to recall the words, but she continued humming, and periodically inserting a word or two, as she recalled them. Smiling to herself, Sarah figured that if she keeps adding words and improvising on the melody of the song she could not remember, she would eventually have a whole new song, and possible go into song writing.

Much safer than her present occupation...

CHAPTER

2

. Sarah felt little Jo’s body grow tense, and she instinctively looked towards the door. It was only a faint, scattening sound, but recognizable. Footsteps were approaching. She was not expecting anyone. She had not turned a trick in weeks, not since Jerry died. She

A SECOND CHANCE – *Unleashing The Power of Good*

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Sarah listened closely as the steps softly approached. Maybe someone was going to one of the other apartments on the floor. She knew it was not the wayward caretaker. No, he would walk boldly and banged on the door as if he had rights. Sarah waited curiously as the footsteps lightly padded along the bare floors. The steps were hesitant, but obviously belonging to someone with above average weight.

From the way the sound followed the footsteps, Sarah was sure the walker was a man, and big one at that. Certainly not the skinny caretaker. The floor creaked as the person moved forward. As the sound drew near her door it stopped. The air carried an atmosphere of imminent danger.

The dog growled softly, as if to maintain a low profile. Jerry was attacked and killed in this very apartment. She had to be careful. She could feel Jo's body trembling, much as it felt a year ago when it faced the horde of hungry rats...

Sarah glanced towards the side table, standing to the left, just a few feet from the rundown couch she was sitting on. Her little silver .22 pistol lay on its side, against a tray with scattered remains of marijuana seeds and other telltale residue from the now empty bag she got off a client, for payment for a few minutes of 'social service.' She made a mental note to get a replacement bag, but this time making

sure she was not stuck with seeds, stems and added leaves from someone's bush garden.

Instinctively she moved softly towards the table, keeping her eyes, both on the door and on the little .22, just as the door flew open with a loud crash. She dropped the dog and lounged towards the table, restraining a scream of fear. Out of the corner of her eyes she saw the huge, masculine figure moving swiftly across the room, heading her off from the table.

Both bodies slammed into each other, both hands grappling for the pistol. Sarah winced as the large frame slammed into her back. She felt her breath whooshing from her lungs. The shoulder that slammed against the table hurts like hell, but she knew she had to keep a clear mind. She didn't trust her strength to continue fighting, but her resolute not to go like Jerry was enough to keep her from falling apart.

With a silent prayer and renewed strength, her hands gripped the small pistol, and as she struggled to turn, she felt the warm breath of the person almost enveloping her. She would have gagged at the obnoxious odor of stale, cheap liquor emanating from the open mouth, had she not engaged in a fight for her life.

Sarah's finger curled over the trigger of the little gun, and in practiced fear and desperation; things she used to survive the challenges of daily life in the big city, she turned the nozzle up towards the face and squeezed the trigger. The sound was thunderous. Blood splattered on the table and floor.

The smell of death was strong...

CHAPTER

3. Reverend Jonathon Levin smiled softly as he handed the man the bag. He was a big man, dark complexion, reflective of his African race, and to the casual observer he could be perceived as intimidating. Any black man, 240 pounds and six-two, was considered a threat in rural America. Indeed, the reverend poses a dominating posture, and although during his usually fiery sermons he capitalizes on his eminent physique, he was a gentle man at heart.

During his boyhood days Jonathon Levin was always the one to volunteer for unpopular projects, and would readily come to the defense of a classmate who was being roughed up by the school bully. Because of his kind disposition and gentle demeanor Jonathon was often perceived to be soft; a ‘sissy,’ but not many dared to challenge him on such assumption.

Of course, the young boy was not one to back down from a confrontation, but he would never initiate a fight. After high school he had decided to bypass the offer of working in his father’s lumberyard, and opted for the Ministry instead. This did not surprise his friends and family, and those who knew him. Everyone thinks young Jonathan Levin was a ‘good boy.’

When Jonathon Levin turned 23, he started attending bible classes at the local Baptist church, and that was the extent of his formal religious education. He was promoted to deacon in just two years, mostly because of his dedication to the church, and not for his biblical knowledge. When the pastor of an affiliate church in the next town left hurriedly, with a grieving and angry husband dodging his footsteps, Jonathan Levin was asked to fill in until another leader could

A SECOND CHANCE – *Unleashing The Power of Good*

be decided, or trusted. That was twenty-eight years ago, and Reverend Levin is still filling in as ‘pastor.’

The congregation rapidly grew to 68 members in the earlier days, but has since dwindled to a mere eighteen, with most of them casual stragglers; only coming to church if a loved one dies, or food was being distributed. His was the only place of worship in the town for twenty years until someone else from the Bible belt decided to build a combination church and social center, and soon reverend Jonathon Levin was losing members to the more elaborate institution. He did not mind, as long as his former members were attending ‘some kind of church.’ The few faithful who remained continued to help and feed the needy while he continued to hold his fiery sermons, though often to almost empty pews...

The reverend could not help but noticed the man’s futile attempt to hide the telltale needle marks on his arm. His heavy jacket was torn and soiled, not out of character with the many such apparent homeless people who regularly visit the church for handouts, but there was something different about this man. His shoe was not rundown, as you would expect from a homeless person. In fact, they were classy, and made of snakeskin and appeared in very good condition, almost new, and although his jacket has seen its better days, his pants and shirt also appeared new. This man was not a destitute, but someone putting on an appearance of a person in need. Of course, all this was not immediately apparent to the reverend, and it would not have mattered to him much why a person was seeking help. His only concern is that he was able to provide a needed assistance.

It was the day after Thanksgiving, and leftovers from the unsuccessful Thanksgiving dinner at the church became welcomed avenues of ministry, and the neighborhood’s

A SECOND CHANCE – Unleashing The Power of Good

disadvantaged came to help themselves to what food the little church has to offer. The mothers and other women in the church were the best cooks in town, and the men were hearty providers, and pots and pans were usually emptied.

The turkey, ham and potatoes were cold, for the gas in the church was turned off, and the electricity was restricted to just heating the main sanctuary and providing lights; lights meaning the five 60 watt incandescent bulbs; one hanging precipitously above the dinner table, two in the main sanctuary, one in the pastor's office and the other in the unisex toilet; shared by both male and female...

The church was falling into harder times. Unemployment in the community and surrounding areas was at all-time highs. Contributions to the church were non-existent. The support of the church came from meager offerings from diehard members, and from bake sales and occasional car washes. Yet, in spite of the hardships, the little Baptist church was still in the business of caring...

The six-foot metal table on which the containers of food were displayed was stubbornly holding up its own, in spite of its shaky disposition. One leg was slightly bent, and the top warped, thanks to the recent rain that fell, making its way through the leaky roof and onto the imitation Formica top. The table itself was covered with old newspapers because the donated table cloths were removed when its donor left for the evening, not wishing to have them disappear like the two pots and the cracked flower vase brought to last week's dinner...

The man looked furtively around the room. He was a big man; about ten pounds lighter than the reverend, but just as tall. He had a thin scar running across his lower left jaw, and one could actually visualize the bulging muscle flexing nervously under his silk shirt. His eyes were cold and stark, peering through unkempt brows. His pupil dilated, scanning

his surroundings without moving his head. He could see no one else in the immediate vicinity, other than this big man approaching him, a silly smile on his face...

Beside the table holding the left over dinner pots was a crudely built storage bin standing next to discarded boxes from past delivery of soda and other bottled containers. There was a chair propped against the wall, which upon further scrutiny revealed only three legs, with the wall serving as the fourth. The wall itself was covered with bible verses and prophetic messages, crudely handwritten, possibly by the ten year olds in the congregation. Someone had later corrected some of the misspelled words by crossing them out and adding what were supposed to be the correct spelling, only to add their versions of the word that were not necessarily the pride of the English language either.

The man slowly perused the room with practiced eyes. He was used to operating in dark, or dimly lit places, and he felt quite at home in this setting. The reverend was just a few feet ahead of him and he contemplated his move...

With slumped shoulders and alert eyes, the man hastened his steps, just a few feet behind the preacher who had turned and was leading the two-man procession through an adjoined room towards to table. He quietly padded across the worn floors, coming abreast an open door. Someone might possibly be in the kitchen area, he surmised. He peeped around the corner, into the next room but saw no one. It was just he and the reverend in the hallway. Actually, most of the locals had already left, and the reverend was just about to close the doors when the man hurried up the wooden steps, a look of desperation in his eyes.

The reverend walked up to the rickety table and carefully removed one of the prepackaged dinners. He turned to hand the man the package, and at the same time reached for a bottle of water to accompany the man's meal. As he turned

away from the man who was just a few steps behind him, he felt his nape tightened.

Something was amiss.

The reverend turned quickly, just as the man lounged towards him. Everything became a flurry of activity. With a quick flick of his wrist, the man produced a wicked looking long, thin blade scalpel. With practiced precision he turned the blade upward and trusted forward. The reverend did not see the knife, but felt the sharp pain as the blade sank deep in his chest.

“Lord, have mercy...” cried the reverend, as the man swiftly plunged the knife twice into his stomach. The pain was not as intense as the reverend thought it might be. There was no searing pain, no moment of anguish, just a dull, unexplained feeling brought about, mostly by the fact that he knew he was stabbed.

He felt strange warmth as the blood oozed from his open wounds. He reached for his wounded chest with curious hesitance. The dull pain was subsiding slowly. He was feeling very little pain. His eyes were closed, but he could see the forms of three persons running towards him...

No, there were four shapes.

No, there were more.

What were all these people doing in the hallway?

Reverend Levin knew the deacon and two sisters were in the kitchen, along with this evil man. That makes four persons, but he was seeing several, maybe ten.

I must be delirious, he thought as a peaceful aura settled over him...

The man grappled feverishly as the reverend toppled to the floor. His hands reached for the man, as they both fell on the table, sending everything on the floor with a loud crash.

A SECOND CHANCE – Unleashing The Power of Good

The man swore softly, as the noise echoed across the room. The platter of hurried footsteps could be heard in the distance. Someone was coming, and fast.

The door of the kitchen flew open as two women; one was a middle-aged white woman wearing a soiled green apron tied securely around her thick waist. She had on a checkered head scarf which makes her look like a white version of Aunt Jemima. The other woman was a thin, graying black woman of about seventy. She also was thick about the waist and was wielding a large wooden spoon.

The women, joined by the deacon, raced into the room. The big man quickly untangled himself from the fallen preacher and dashed for the open door. The deacon, himself a man in his late sixties, rushed in from the kitchen, and raced after the man who was now freed from the big pastor. The ladies kneeling were now trying to get a physical response from their fallen leader.

With deft and desperate efforts the man pulled the door open, leaped out and instinctively slammed it behind him, just as the deacon was heading through the doorway. The heavy wooden door caught the deacon squarely in the face, knocking him backwards. He swore as he fell awkwardly on the floor, his legs twisting under him. A sharp pain told him he had broken his ankle.

The man with the knife had made good his escape.

CHAPTER

4 Patrolman James Bergman and his partner glanced appraisingly at the huge crowd in the church parking lot. Somehow, the phrase ‘huge crowd’ and ‘church parking lot,’ when referring to the little Baptist church did not seem to fit in the same scenario- of course- unless there was a funeral, which in this situation, was almost true. Another group of onlookers was congregating in front of the rundown apartment building on the next block, possibly keeping a safe distance from whatever attracted the policemen.

There was a low, crumbling brick wall with most of the bricks missing, possibly turning up on someone’s new building project. The winding concrete walkway around the building was cracked and uneven. Patches of grass could be seen at intervals, growing through the broken concrete. Residents usually used the grassy field instead of risking a broken shoe or broken ankle walking on the rough, stony surface. The weed was high, and would possibly be higher if residents did not so frequently walk across the field, cutting through to their respective apartments.

There was an assortment of chis-crass pathways leading to just about every doorway on the ground floor. There were several abandoned automobiles and discarded broken bikes and strollers. Empty food wrappers, an assortment of used plastic shopping bags were strewn around the doorway of each apartment. The two large garbage bins in evidence contained just about every imaginable discard the neighborhood could afford.

Dozens of people were milling idly, in several small groups. The older men were in one group while the ladies kept their distance, looking suspiciously at groups of young men as they played and laughed, jostling each other and faking fist fights.

A SECOND CHANCE – *Unleashing The Power of Good*

A few parents with young children held firmly at arm's length stared at the sights, saying nothing, and missing nothing. Another group stood silently on the side, obviously from an adjoining neighborhood, not wishing to advertise their impedance on another's turf...

Sinister looking men stood with stoned vigilance, observing the scene, mentally registering each face in the crowd around them. Expensive cars and SUVs with chrome magnesium wheels spinning silently on stationary vehicles parked against the curb. Darkened windows rolled up defiantly against casual observers. Cars were cruising the blocks around the apartment, necks straining to see what others were trying to see...

“What is this, a crime convention?”

Patrolman James Bergman muttered aloud as he tucked his thumbs in the front of his belt. He assumed this will give him a 'macho' appearance. His partner, Phillip Lowe who was ten years his junior and a good hundred pounds lighter, idly tossed his half-finished blueberry doughnut out the window. He gazed absent-mindedly out the window at the trash in the parking lot, and his own new contribution to the deterioration of the environment. He mentally cursed the neighborhood, and its lack of effort in keeping the place clean.

The patrolman wiped speckles of doughnut sugar from his soiled shirtfront and tugged at his belt. He was gaining weight across the middle. His resolve to ease up on the free donuts at the corner shack was losing out to his pants waist, and the nagging of his wife to exercise more was losing out to everything else he chose to do, and that included his frequent half dozen donuts and two cups of coffee by noontime, every day. His weight was his concern, and nobody else's...

A SECOND CHANCE – Unleashing The Power of Good

“Man, it’s twenty minutes before quitting, we ought to slide by this one and let the next shift pick it up,” he suggested to his partner.

“Nay, we ain’t that lucky. The chief knows where we are, and we’d catch no ends of hell for that. Let’s make the best of it,” replied Lowe. He was the senior partner, and already he had to explain the twelve tickets his partner issued without license plate numbers last month. He wasn’t going to let Bergman pissed on his good record.

The crowd was slowly increasing as each moment went by. Bergman could see the officer in charge; a local patrolman’s head above the crowd. He always secretly admired the height of Officer McGuire. His towering frame gave him an air of control and authority. Everyone was looking up to him, figuratively speaking. The big Irishman walked over to the patrol car, leaned against it and addressed the two men.

“Well, if it’s not Big Bergman and his demure partner. The two stooges of the force,” he said, smiling. Phillip Lowe smiled broadly and replied, “What are you doing here McGuire. Pub closed already?”

Lowe ignored the remarks, returned to the squad car, opened the door, reached in and pulled his notebook and pencil from the glove compartment. As the senior officer at the scene, he was expected to take charge. Bergman groaned silently as he hoisted his own frame into an upright position and followed his partner into the crowd.

As they approached the out landing of the little church, Lowe turned to the big Irishman. “What have we here McGuire?” he inquired.

“Triple homicide, it seemed, three people killed at two different locations.”

A SECOND CHANCE – *Unleashing The Power of Good*

The big patrolman headed for the open church door to join the crowd that was pressing to see inside the building. Two young officers were barring the doors as he approached.

“Have the Detectives arrived yet?” Lowe inquired.

“No sir, they are on their way. The EMS is in trying to revive the Reverend,” replied one of the officers. Lowe stood on the top step, looking across the parking lot. Both crowds would merge within a short time. The apartment building across the lot where the other incident took place was also attracting its share of spectators.

“Exactly what happened here officer?” he asked the eldest of the two youthful looking policemen at the door.

“Well sir, seemed as if someone knifed the local preacher of the church down the street, then went over to the apartment building and got himself shot while trying to mess with a local drug addict,” answered the officer, flipping through a notebook he held.

The crowd was getting unruly as the officers desperately tried to keep them from going into the church. By then, both Officers Bergman and McGuire joined Lowe in the main sanctuary of the church where two medical attendants were leaning over a big man lying on the floor near a fallen table with three legs and a warped Formica top. .

“How’s he doing?” asked Bergman. One of the white-coated attendants looked up and shook his head. He could not have been any more than twenty; a youthful look across a face still awaiting a growth of facial hair to trim, or shave. It was obvious that the state colleges were churning out med students to experiment on the ills of the lower class. This one smelled of baby lotion, mixed with anesthetic and some sort of antiseptic lotion. In spite of his tender age, he had an air of confidence about him. He was at home playing doctor in this poor neighborhood...

“It’s no use. He has lost too much blood. He’s tried to hold on, but couldn’t. We can’t save him,” the youthful medical student said, in a matter-of-fact attitude as he slowly closed his medical bag.

They were giving up...

CHAPTER

5 Sarah yelled loudly as the body of the man slammed across her chest. The gun flew from her fingers, sliding across the wooden floor. She tugged feverishly at the big man as his weight pressed her to the hard floor. She felt his warm breath on her face.

The sums-a-bitch is still alive, she thought. With renewed efforts she pushed him away, reaching for the fallen gun. The man, sensing her intention, reached into his coat for his knife. In the too-quick turn of events, he had forgotten to pull his knife. He never thought he would need it initially because of the frail frame of the woman. He did not know she had a gun. Three major mistakes in one fleeting moment was not a good sign. In his line of business mistakes were costly...

“Damn,” the big man cursed to himself for his carelessness. He should have guessed that after the attack a couple months ago, the woman would have at least armed herself. Jerry, her boyfriend was stupid enough not to be armed. He thought about him several times over the past months whenever he saw Sarah on his corner doing her thing. She had looked so helpless and vulnerable without Jerry looking out for her. He just never thought the whore bitch would get herself a gun...

The big man’s fingers curled around the handle of the knife, just as the woman made another desperate pull away from his grasp and broke free. She lunged for the gun at the same time the man brought his knife into play. As she turned, bringing the gun to bear, his muscular hand arched upward.

A SECOND CHANCE – Unleashing The Power of Good

Her finger tightened on the trigger.

She fired and the little gun exploded, causing a bright flash across the darkened room.

His hand came down.

She saw the gush of blood from where the bullet pierced the man's chest, but the knife was well on its way downward. The blade sank deep into her neck. She fired again. This time she closed her eyes against the expected flash of the explosion. The gun shook in her already trembling grasp. She heard a grunt as the bullet tore into soft tissues. The smell of blood stifled her, as she rolled over on her back. Through half-closed eyes she saw the man. He seemed to be suspended in midair. She saw the knife rise and descend again.

This time she felt no pain. The knife plunged into her chest. A warm feeling of relief overshadowed her. There was no pain. She could feel the blood, like a living thing creeping from her body. She stared stupendously at the scene in front of her.

She saw her inert body lying on the floor.

The man was lying beside her, a little distance away, blood oozing from his side. The bullet apparently entered his chest, but failed to exit from his side. She stared absently at her marijuana tray, and the remains of her 'faked' bag on the dirty floor. She saw her faithful poodle nudging her head.

She saw her closed eyes.

She saw her peaceful face...

She saw a Light....

CHAPTER

6 The man cursed under his breath, with what little he had left. His chest heaved as he tried to control his temper. It was not that he realized he was mortally wounded; it was just that this two bit Hoe' has taken his life, using a chicken shit .22 pistol. The man had been shot several times before, once with a Colt .45, a police-issued magnum .44, and a Uzi, but managed to survived all incidents, and now he grimaced in disgust, not even noticing the pain as the little .22 bullet toppled itself over, making its way among what soft tissues it could penetrate in his gut, then eventually settled itself near his lower left rib.

This didn't sit right with him. In his line of business he knew there was no longevity, although he hoped for a long fruitful life. Yet, he had always envisioned himself like a Bonnie-less Clyde, going out in a hail of bullets, not lying on the floor of some cheap apartment, shot by a stinky low budget hoe...

He remembered some years ago when the off-duty police officer finally caught up with him in the alley, and they exchanged shots. Two of the officer's bullets caught him in the right shoulder, spinning him around before crashing him against the trash container.

He had managed to get off two shots himself, grazing the 21-year-old rookie who took off down the street like a scared jackrabbit. By the time they found the officer hiding behind the Chinese laundry, the big man's friends had already picked him up and carted him away. He had survived that ordeal, and two others, but not this. The bitch hoe scored a home run...

Somehow there was more pain when the cop shot him. Of course, it was by a real gun, but Sarah's bullet was in his chest so he expected more pain. He remembered the pain he felt when the policeman's bullet pierced his shoulder. He had

almost passed out when his friends came for him, but as this little .22 slug explored his innards he felt absolutely no pain. In fact, if he wasn't so aware of the numb feeling of the roving bullet in his body he would not have even noticed.

The big man momentarily looked across the floor and saw the broken woman lying lifeless by the upturned table, just a few feet away from a half spent marijuana joint. There was some satisfaction that he had taken her with him. She wasn't going to tell anyone she took out big Willie Hearn with a piss ass .22.

Somehow Big Willie Hearn found himself standing by the bedside of his grandmother, and as she lay dying of a complication of untreated medical ailments. She turned her jaundiced eyes at him and spoke in halting, short breaths...

"Willie, wid de kinda life yuh be livin,' yuh be dead affo' ole age get a chance to rot yuh gut likea me. Boy, when dat time come, ah hope yuh member wha' yuh ole granny ah tole yuh. Yuh mek sure yuh las' breath be 'Lawd ah mercy on me poor soul.'" Her bed rocked as she coughed, but Willie was not really listening because his eyes were transfixed on the brown rheumatoid liquid dribbling from the corner of her toothless mouth, down to her wrinkled chest...

Willie Hearn glanced at the lifeless body of Sarah Jones lying across from him' It was then he noticed a bright white Light moving towards him. He looked up but could see nothing at first because of the intensity of the Light. It was strange that although it now settled on his upturned face, it was not blinding him. He could now see through the Light. He saw the doors, the windows, the ceiling, the floor. It was a strange kind of Light.

Nothing he had ever seen before. It had a cool, caressing effect, and a driving impulse beckoning one into action. Willie

could not rationalize how he was able to be following this Light when he was lying on the floor, and dead.

Willie Hearn had seen the pale mask of death overshadow him, heard the sigh and saw his head lolled against his big chest. He saw his hand still gripping the bloody knife, then it relaxed and the knife fell from lifeless fingers...

Nothing was moving now. The girl was obviously dead. He made sure of that by the pent-up rage in which he repeatedly plunged the knife in her small, frail body.

Then he saw his own body and the limped arms at his side and across his chest. His eyes were closed tight. He remembered when he closed them, not wanting to see the blood oozing from his chest wound.

He could not avoid the Light, and it was leading him across the room towards the extremities of his consciousness...

CHAPTER

7 It was more than a mild irritation to Samuel Kukas the phone beside his bed rang incessantly. He closed his eyes tightly, as if to will the annoyance away, but the ringing continued, each time seemingly getting louder and louder. He growled at the phone, but that didn't work either, so he reached over and knocked it off the hook. The awesomeness of the instant quietness slammed against his tired brains with the force of a runaway locomotive. He could hear his name being called through the fallen phone. The line was open and voices could be heard.

Resigning himself to his fate, he picked up the hand-piece and growled again...

“What the hell you want?” He didn't care who was on the other end. He owed no obligation to any man. Just his luck though, it was the voice of a woman.

“Mr. Lukas?” the voice inquired.

“Naw, you got the wrong number lady. No Lukas lives here!” The lady’s voice seemed to ignore his denial and continued.

“This is Patrolwoman Henry, calling from the Sixth Precinct. There has been an accident at your apartment building on Loire Street, and we want you to come on down...”

“Lady, my name ain’t Lukas. It’s Kukas, and if something happened at one of my buildings, there’s a manager always there. You call them,” he barked into the mouthpiece, then paused,

“...how the hell did you get my number anyhow?” he asked, momentarily forgetting that he was talking to the police, and was not surprised when the voice calmly answered,

“We have our ways Mr. LUKAS,” the voice informed him, with overemphasis on ‘Lukas.’

“Why didn’t you call the building manager? He’s supposed to take care of things like that. Accidents happen every day... and you don’t expect me to run down there in that God-forsaken ghetto every time some drunk slips and fall, do you?”

“This is no slip and fall accident Mr. Lukas. There are at least two murders. Three people are dead in your God-forsaken ghetto buildings, and I must insist that you get your fat ass down there, now!”

Click! The phone went dead.

Samuel stared at the instrument in his hand, anger mounting. He didn’t think his ass was that fat. And his name was Kukas. Dumb broad.

He swore softly.

The covers on the next bed beside him rustled.

He glanced over to where his wife laid. He was overjoyed when she decided to get her own bed, away from his sweaty,

olive oil-smelling body... Now if only she would move the bed to the Middle east where she came from fifty years ago.

She rolled over, stared at him through mascara-smudged eyes, mumbled something about “Fat slob” and went back to sleep.

He looked over with mounting disgust, cursing himself that he had to wake up with her lying next to him every morning. He had tried repeatedly to get her to go visit her family in Sudan, but she insisted that she owed him no favors, and decided that he deserved no relief by her absence. He tried to get her to leave him, so he could claim desertion, but her thirty-two years of being married to him taught her that she owned an equal share of his eleven million dollar per year empire, and she was not about to walk off and leave that.

So the mutual sufferings continued....

Samuel Kukas replaced the phone receiver on the bedside table, tossed the covers off his bulky frame, and stepped out on the thickly carpeted floor. He looked at his watch. It was ten minutes after eight. The morning air rustled the silky curtains, bringing in a gust of warm late summer breeze.

“It must be 80° outside,” he thought, as he headed for the bathroom.

“Damn those...”

CHAPTER

8

The ride through the downtown district was like a gauntlet. Two times an old pickup truck came out of nowhere, apparently trying to broadside his Cadillac. He gained very little consolation by giving the one-finger salute, chorused by his own version of verbal salutations. Several times he had to break hard to avoid hitting pedestrians, as they nonchalantly floated across the

busy morning streets. He was certain that someone, or something, was out to get him, and he was determined to be the victor.

It was no more than thirteen years ago when Samuel Kukas decided that the urban setting was not for him. He closed his chain of clothing and furniture store businesses and settled down in his suburban home, oblivious of everything in the city, except his ten apartment buildings and fifteen town houses, from which he amassed his fortune. His only concern with the inner city was that at the end of the month he gets his rent payments. That was the passion of his existence.

No one messes with his money!

Samuel Kukas grimaced inwardly as he recalled last month how the judge reprimanded him because he had refused to allow one of his tenants to 'slide' with her rent payments until some legal matters were settled between her and her ex-husband. The woman had not paid him for two months, and experience taught him that when they get that far behind, it was hard for them to catch up, so he was not about to soften.

His money was due, and he wanted it. It was not his fault that her ex-husband was jailed for nonsupport. Although the judge assured him that he would get his back rent, plus late charges, if any, after he garnished the ex-husband's accounts, which were substantial, and would personally forward the payments to him. But he refused... and the judge had no recourse but to order the woman and her two babies evicted.

Kukas swung the big Cadillac into the parking lot of the apartment building. His eyes listlessly noted the deterioration of the place. Abandoned cars and wheel-less pickup trucks dotted the trash-leavened parking lot. He gingerly eased the big car into the only available parking space, nestled between

A SECOND CHANCE – *Unleashing The Power of Good*

a rusted Plymouth with front end mounted on concrete blocks and an equally old Ford step van, used as storage for a variety of odd metal pieces and other unidentified objects. Junk!

The apartment itself was ten stories high and occupied the entire block. The lower floors all had metal bars on some of the windows and doors. Some of the bars were bent out of shape, as if someone tried prying them loose. Others have the bars hanging precariously, indicating that some of the efforts to pry the bars loose were partially successful.

The building badly needed repairs; the dark red bricks needed cleaning, and the wooden frames of the windows and doors needed fixing and fresh coats of paint. Most of the windows do have ply boards in place of glass, and someone did try painting through the protective bars with a brush that was obviously not long enough the work its way through the bars to reach the boards beneath...

The drab-looking lower overall structure was covered with graffiti and off-colored paint. Apparently someone started to paint the bricks, but ran out of paint. Crude brush strokes appeared suspended into nothingness on the dirty walls. Someone simply stopped painting! When they did get around resuming painting, possibly months later, the paint was different. The technique was different. The passion was different.

Everything was very different. The contrast in images and colors made the building looked more like a storybook reject.

CHAPTER

9

It was 10:56 am, and the morning temperature had risen from a mild 68° to a humid 86° summer heat. There were a few people milling around, something one comes to expect on such a day, in such a place. Samuel Kukas looked suspiciously around him before

attempting to exit the safety of his automobile. He could feel the eyes of the neighborhood riveted on him.

They knew who he was, and what he represented: added oppression to their already heavy burdens. He was the rent man! He could feel their disgust emanating through the closed doors of each apartment, seeping through the crevices of the boarded windows, making its way into the closed doors and windows of his shiny automobile. He mentally cursed everyone as he tucked his big pistol under his coat and furtively peeped over his shoulders, and made a sigh of relief.

There was a police cruiser parked in the lot opposite the side entrance, about six parking spaces from him. He could see one person sitting in the passenger seat of the blue and white cruiser. Another was sitting in the back seat.

Samuel stepped out of his car and locked the doors, pocketed the keys and walked over to the squad car. His Rockport's making crunching noises as he worked his way through the debris and loose concrete in the parking lot. No one bothered to clean the lot, and the years of neglect showed. He covered the distance between his car and the police cruiser in exactly thirty-seven seconds. He was counting every millisecond of his journey. He was not really expecting anyone to jump from the black SUV with its stationary chrome wheels spinning and attack him, but it could happen.

The person sitting in the passenger seat of the cruiser looked up as he approached. Samuel felt hostile eyes on him as he stopped by the car.

"Hello Mr. Lukas, nice day to be out walking the neighborhood," said the passenger side occupant.

"My name is not Lukas, it's KUKAS, and it's not a nice day for anything, and being in this neighborhood is not my choice," retorted the overweight landlord.

“What the hell do you want with me?” he added, with mounting irritation seeping into his system.

“My, are we not hostile this morning? You need to learn to control your emotions Mr. Lukas,” said the back-seat passenger. They were messing with him, needling him...

“I don’t know about you, but yes, I am hostile. And I wanna be...”

“...Mr. Lukas...”

“...the name is KUKAS!” he interrupted.

The officer in the front slowly opened the door and stepped out. He was a big black man. He stood about six inches from where Samuel was. The man was about five inches taller, and although Samuel’s 320-pound body topped his by about 75 pounds, he was intimidating, and made every effort to remain so.

“Listen, Lukas, or whatever your name is. We don’t like smart mouth suburban slum lords, and we really don’t care how hostile you want to be, we would like nothing better than to shut this rat hole down, so you can stay on your side of the railroad. BUT in the meantime, you are the owner of a building that two people were killed in, and we are investigating that incident. Does that explain what the hell we want?”

The face of the officer contorted in anger as he shoved his badge under the eyes of the now cowered landlord. The rear door of the car opened and the other officer stepped out. He had his notebook ready.

A pencil poised in midair.

CHAPTER

10

Samuel was not what you would call a popular boy in school. He attended a Catholic boarding school, and although all the families that have kids at St. Luke Academy were wealthy, the Kukas were struggling workers. The family scraped and saved every available penny to afford their son's education, something of which they were denied by their own parents.

Caleb had very little to show after years of hard work at the lumber mill in neighboring San Jose. He ran the rip saw for thirty years before he was eventually promoted to foreman, and three weeks later when his son Samuel celebrated his 14th birthday, Papa died of lung cancer. They said it was some family disease, but Samuel and his family knew it was the sawdust that finally choked him up.

Samuel's mother who also worked at the mill as a bookkeeper was given \$25,000; his dad's life insurance benefit, a pension of \$410 per month and a letter of appreciation from the company for his 'years of loyal service.' His mother retired the following year, and died in her sleep. Sam knew she was broken hearted over her inability to support the family, and the loss of her lifelong companion.

This did not sit well with young Samuel. He had seen his parents making sacrifices to be at that job, even in the harshest of winter, or through the broiling of summers. Faithful to the company that was feeding the family, his father said, and while Sam and his two sisters never knew hunger, they were sure that the other families were eating much better than they were. From his youthful years Samuel loved nice things. His mother gave each sibling their own allowance from which they are to clothe and feed themselves. She was preparing them for the time she would not be around to care for them.

A SECOND CHANCE – *Unleashing The Power of Good*

After his mother died, Samuel was left with the awesome responsibility of caring for his two sisters. After years of sibling rivalries, he was now required to be a big brother, a father, a mother and a family adviser. It was tedious responsibility, but he was determined to carry on where his parents had left off. It was not an easy task dealing with two girls, three years younger than he was, and resented his authority at every opportunity, but Samuel was bent on his task. It was not too long before the girls realized that their big brother was acting in their best interest, and eventually came to appreciate his efforts. In spite of the lull in contentions with his sisters, Samuel still longed for his independence. He reached out to other relatives, and soon one of his uncles took the sisters in, and Sam was left to his own dreams, pursuits and devices.

With his meager allowance Sam would buy the best clothes. Sometimes he would spurge on the food allotment to get the fancy shoes and clothes he craved. While the sisters and other family members shopped at local surplus stores to make ends meet, Sam would frequent the upscale shops where the rich and famous do business.

Amidst all the expensive purchases, Sam learned at early how to save. By the time he was in junior college he had thousands of dollars in a personal bank account. He was determined not to be reliant on anyone's beck and call for his survival. Samuel was going to be his own boss.

At twenty-three young saved enough, plus his share of both parent pension and insurance monies and bought his first investment property. It was an old rundown two-family flat on the dreaded east side. He knew that people would try to con him out of his rent but he stayed his course, and soon his renters learned Samuel Kukas was nobody's fool.

After owning the flat for three years, and four tenants later, Sam began leasing the rooms out to local prostitutes.

A SECOND CHANCE – *Unleashing The Power of Good*

He discovered that the ‘pay-as-you-go’ method was more profitable, and more easily managed than having to deal with families who are ‘on hard times’ and needed a break on the rent.

With enough equity in his little two-family flat, Sam had enough to make a down payment on an apartment building on the same side of town. This time he employed a local to manage the building. Actually, the man’s service was in return for a basement apartment, rent-free. The man and his girlfriend and two kids all share the little two bedroom basement apartment. The young landlord surmised that these people who rented from him would not mistreat their own, and he was right, but to an extent.

Over the past four years he had to replace two managers. One was shot by an irate tenant; the other was canned for stealing deposits. Samuel Kukas was an astute landlord, and he kept a tight rein on his tenants, and his money. He had no qualms in putting anyone out for lack of rent payment. Several times he had even put out senior citizens, pregnant women (wed or unwed) tenants for arrears in rent.

Samuel Kukas knew the rent laws and the court system, so very few went by him. Of course, more often than he would like, judges would bypass the law and administer mercy-ruling on behalf of delinquent tenants, but even then he found ways to recoup his losses, sometimes by raising rents or cutting back on the meager services he is already providing.

CHAPTER

11

This trip was a bother to him, and he had already designed ways to pass the responsibility on to his thieving attorney. He did not know for sure how he was being

A SECOND CHANCE – Unleashing The Power of Good

skimmed by his attorney, but he was sure he would find out, somehow, someday. The attorney was good, and he covered his trail expertly, but no one was that good that Samuel Kukas could not bring down...

The drive back home was one of the longest Samuel had ever experienced. He did not see the reason why he was questioned about the murders.

Yes, it was his building, but he was nowhere near when the incidents happened.

No, there was no security on the building.

Why? These people all knew each other.

Why should they be secured against one another?

Sure, he has security on his home.

Why?

Why not?

He can afford it.

If these people need security, then let them get their own. They were not paying enough anyhow. He will remember that patrolman when he sees Chief McNaughton at the golf course next week. That officer will be reprimanded. He will make sure of that. That's what 'wash the hand that feeds you' meant.

As Samuel's big Cadillac slowed near the turn onto his driveway; he did not notice that the car behind him also slowed. The car's windows were rolled up, either against the humid summer heat, or in the case of that particular vehicle, to keep out the humid summer heat, because the vehicle had no air-conditioning.

The driver slithered down on the seat as Samuel glanced around to make sure that the traffic was clear to complete his turn. He did not notice the car or its occupants because his mind was on how he was going to collect his rent from the people living in the building.

They were not going to be very cooperative. It has happened before. When that girl's boyfriend died some months ago, the tenants decided that it was his fault for not providing stronger doors, so they were not going to pay him. They say they were going to take the rent money and fix their doors and windows.

Well, they did keep the money, but if they did fix the doors and windows, it certainly didn't help the girl in that apartment, or the dead man who killed her. He didn't think much, or even cared about the local preacher man who got it in the church...

CHAPTER

12

Samuel parked next to his wife's Benz. He muttered an oath of defeat for allowing her to force him to purchase the little foreign sports model for almost forty-eight grand. His mind wandered and raced frantically back on plans to force the tenants in building #5 and #7 to pay.

As he entered the doorway from the garage, he kicked the door shut behind him without looking back; something he had done dozens of times before, deliberately, to annoy his nagging wife. His personal payback for her years of mental abuse.

"Can't you shut the door properly, like any decent person?" She would say through clinched teeth. She cherished the day he would not come in at all...

Well, he wasn't a decent person, and he can kick his door if he feels like it, he would grumble silently. The door, and the house, her car, her mother's dental work, and her brother's drug habit all were costing him several thousand dollars a month and they were all his to kick and do whatever he wants.

A SECOND CHANCE – Unleashing The Power of Good

By force of habit he listened for the door to slam against the jam, thus adding to the irritation of his wife, one pleasure he looked forward to... but the sound of solid wood against the metal plate jam did not come. Instead, he heard a yelp of pain as the door smashed onto the booted foot that was quickly thrust between the door and the jam.

Samuel spun around swiftly, his stumpy hand reaching for the .45 stuck in his waistband. He felt the warm handle nested in the sweaty palm of his hand, and he pulled while his finger sought the trigger. Everything was done on pure reflex.

The three men who burst into the room were not clearly visible to him. They were blurs of motions. He felt a balled fist smashed against his nose, and he knew, by experiences that it was broken. This must be the fourth time his nose was broken by a fist. Seemed like his prominent Jewish nose was the involuntary target for every balled flesh and bones called a fist. How he wished for one of those flattened Negroid noses, instead of the overly protruding Jewish nozzle he inherited from a long line of very ugly Israeli.

He tasted the blood, as he always does in cases like this.

“Grab the...hand!”

“He’s got a gun!”

“Hit him, Dimmit!”

“I already did...!”

“Then hit him again, fool!”

“Man, my hand hurts like a...”

“Hit him harder!”

“Damn, my hand musta broken on his nose!”

“Kick him then!”

“Damm, I’m wearing my new shoes...”

“Who gives a shit about them roach crushers...?”

“Well I ain’t gonna use...”

“The knife, the knife. Use the damn knife!”

“Good Lord, he’s reaching...”

“Grab his hand, fool. Grab his hand!”

“Punch him again...!”

“The knife! The knife!”

“Oh, Lord...!”

The unmistakable sound of the discharge of the heavy .45 magnum shattered the quiet morning. The broken-fisted man was slammed back by the force of the impact as Samuel brought the gun to bear, and fired again at pointblank. The big gun bucked in his hand. Out of the corner of his eyes he saw the blade of a knife slithering its way towards him like a serpent. He felt a sharp pain that he would willingly substitute for a broken nose. He yelled in pain as the knife was again thrust into his side.

A much-delayed booted foot caught him squarely on the side of his head, and he toppled over, his body slumping on the carpeted floor. The still-smoking gun flew from his grasp, skidding across the floor.

“Damn, the whole damn neighborhood goin’ come arunnin.’ What a noise that damn gun made!”

“You fool, you shoulda hit him harder!”

“I tole you he’s always packin’!”

“The fat slob broke Gus’ hand with his nose. What a face!”

“He cap the shit outta Gus. He ain’t breathin’!”

“What we gonna do ‘bout Gus?”

“Jus’ take his I.D. and let him be, and stop complainin’, you fool. Look an’ see if anybody comin’. Get his wallet. I’m going upstairs,” barked one of the men, as he dashed up the stairs, two steps at a time.

The man downstairs slowly removed a wallet from the pocket of his dead companion, walked quickly to the big window and peered through the parted curtains. The street was empty.

A SECOND CHANCE – *Unleashing The Power of Good*

The house across the street looked deserted. He looked next door, but there was no activity. It seemed as if no one heard the shot. He stayed his post. He tensed and watched as the front door of the house across the street opened and a man dressed in robe stepped out, retrieved his morning newspaper and disappeared back inside. Two kids a couple doors down came out of the garage with their bikes, and laughingly rode off down the street.

There was the occasional dog barking, a horn sporadically sounding, and the usual rumbling of heavy trucks across the highway, but the general neighborhood was otherwise quiet.

No one had heard anything. Thanks to Sam's instructions to the builders to reduce the noise levels that may seep into his house from the nearby highway, and yelling of rotten kids in the neighborhood. It also prevented the neighbors from hearing the constant arguing with his wife. Privacy was all-important to Samuel Kukas; the same quest for privacy that very well added to his demise...

The man waited a few more minutes before he turned his attention back to the inert figure of his landlord. Samuel Kukas lay awkwardly on the floor, a stupid, peaceful look across his face, now showing the results of repeated kicks and punches. His eyes were puffed and closed. He looked very much dead. The man stared at the fat form lying on the floor and concluded he was dead. He made sure of that. Years of pent-up emotions were transferred to the thrust of the knife as he plunged it repeatedly into the man's fat gut.

Samuel Kukas glanced around him without moving his head, or even opening his eyes. He did not wonder about this, but was concentrating steadfast on the Light.

The Light that he saw was unlike any other.

After a few moments he became acutely aware of his surroundings.

He heard men talking.

He actually saw them moving about.

One was going upstairs.

My God, his wife was up there.

For the first time in many years he feared for her life. He wanted to yell out to her, but somehow no words formed. No sound came. The Light passed over his face, and although the morning was warm, the Light was cool, almost cold, but with warmth. It didn't bother his eyes, although it was shining directly into them.

Were his eyes opened?

How could he have seen those men just now? The one upstairs crept towards the sleeping form of his wife.

My goodness. How could she still be sleeping? Did she not hear the gunfire, the men, the commotion? He must talk with her about sleeping on separate beds. It would be much safer if she resumed her occupancy on the family bed...

The man looked at the woman laying on one of two the beds in the very large bedroom. This must be the master bedroom, he thought. The bedroom was larger than the apartment he shared with Gus and big Willie. His evil eyes scanned the room for a quick moment, and then returned his gaze onto the figure lying on the bed.

The bed profile reflected that of a stout female. Her back was turned to him, and he could barely see her face. Her head was wrapped in some sort of night clothing that rich people use to protect their expensive hairdo while they sleep. The bed itself was a big double canopy, but it was evident that only one person slept in it. The other half of the big bed was unruffled. The dude downstairs musta sleep inna that other bed, the man surmised. He was skilled in sizing up a scene; a skill that was valuable in his kind of profession. His mind-eye saw the naked figure under the blanket, but as the woman stirred restlessly under the covers, one meaty,

wrinkled leg protruded, and disgust replaced lust in the man's heart. He gingerly stepped over to the bedside table and picked up the heavy purse he saw lying by the alarm clock. The man stared at the clock for a minute, his eyes fixed on the little second hand as it swept across the face of the dial. The clock clicked ceremoniously, passing from one moment into another...

He unclasped the latch of the heavy purse and spilled its contents on the bed. A big wad of bills tumbled out.

"What the hell...?" muttered the man, "...must be thousands of dollars here," he thought. The bank deposit slip confirmed that there were eleven thousand dollars in the bag, plus about five hundred dollars more in small bills.

"Spending money for the rich old broad!" the man reasoned. He picked up the money, looked once more at the sleeping figure, but lust did not reappear, so he stepped out of the room to join the other man downstairs.

Samuel felt a wave of relief as he saw the man stepping away from his wife. I must warn her about sleeping so heavily, and why did she not make her deposit like he told her to yesterday? He felt a guilt wave overshadowed him as he realized that it was the presence of the money that possibly saved her life. He must talk to her about being more careful with monies. Some things were more important than money, and he winced at the thought. Did he just think that? He wondered.

He saw one of the men bending over him, their faces inches apart, feeling for a pulse on his apparent lifeless arm...

"Hey, he's dead! No pulse here."

Stupid jerk, I am not dead. I can see you. What do you mean no pulse? I am alive, see?

Then he noticed... No motion, no words, no feeling. Samuel did not feel the man's hand on his as he felt for his pulse.

What's happening here?

How can I be lying down here, yet I can still see upstairs?

There's my wife on the bed, still sleeping.

I can see. I don't know why I can't move, but I can see in every room, the thoughts came to Samuel like a flood.

Then there's the Light.

What a bright Light!

Feel so nice on my face.

Never felt anything like this before.

That Light!

Seem to be beckoning me to follow it.

I wonder where it's going?

I must follow it.

I can't seem to resist it.

It's taking me up...up...up...up to somewhere I don't know, but desperately want to go...

The Light!!!!

CHAPTER

13

The tunnel was dark, but the Light at the end was inviting. Sarah Jones glanced next to her, and seemed mildly surprised at the man walking beside her...

No, he was not walking. Neither was she, or the two other figures beside her. The face was familiar.

Yes, it was Willie, the dope pusher. She remembered fighting him off in her apartment. She's always fighting off people, though. Somehow she was not afraid of the big man gliding beside her.

Reverend Levin also glided by her as they came closer to the Light. Samuel Kukas' complexion was chalky white, and the 320 pounds of flesh did not seem to hamper the landlord's deft movement.

A SECOND CHANCE – Unleashing The Power of Good

Sarah noticed that although she saw these three other persons beside and behind her, her eyes were still fixed on the Light!

“Hello Miss Jones, Mr. Hearn, Reverend Levin, Mr. Kukas,” a voice echoed through their individual minds. There was something about the salutation that did not implore them to reply.

After a few moments of silence. Reverend Levin was the first to speak...

“What is this? Where are we? Who are you?”

Encouraged by the break of silence, Samuel blurted out, “Where is my wife? Is she all right?”

“Your wife Mr. Kukas? Why are you concerned about her? You don’t care too much for her, do you?” the voice inquired without the edge of reprimand.

“What are you saying? Of course I care for her. Where are we?” asked Samuel.

“Look around you, all of you. Where do you think you are?” the voice instructed. All four people, for the first time noticed their environment.

Everything was bright. Everything was white; not in the sense of color but as in purity.

There were people moving about, mindful of their presence. Some even smiled and nodded. One little boy was chasing a little dog that was playfully pulling on the skirt of a little girl. There were other animals. Birds, flowers. Bright, beautiful buildings. There was music in the air. The sounds of rippling streams on stony beds

“What is this?” asked the reverend.

“You reverend? You should recognize this place. You have been talking about it most of your life,” the voice replied.

“You mean? You mean this is...” the reverend blurted.

“Yes, reverend. You got it! This is the place,” the voice said. For the first time the reverend noticed his companions.

A SECOND CHANCE – Unleashing The Power of Good

He recognized Sarah. She stopped by a few times to con him out of money to buy dope, and possibly lure away a few of his male congregation acts into unspeakable, he was sure.

Then there was Willie Hearn. How could he forget him? The reverend instinctively felt his chest to feel for the spot where Willie had plunged the knife some time ago; long time ago, but he felt no wound. No pain. No regrets.

Samuel Kukas, the owner of the apartment buildings down the street from his church, was no stranger to the reverend. Several times he had to accompany parishioners in court against Kukas. The man was a heartless person.

Yes, he knew them well.

The reverend turned his attention to the direction of the voice, and for the first time a person accompanied the voice.

It was a tall man, about the reverend's height, but somewhat more muscular. His hair was snowy white, and he had a trumpet in one hand. Before the reverend could speak, the man answered his unasked question.

"Yes, reverend. They are here too. I am sure that you did not expect to end up in the same place as these other people. But you are indeed in the right place.

As for them? Well, a lot will depend on what happens during the next moment..." the voice trailed off as the man turned and walk away. Although he did not call them, but everyone seems to know that they were required to follow him. The action was involuntary for everyone except Samuel. There was something kept tugging at him, from the insides, yet he had no unanswered questions, no demands...

"No need to worry about your wife Sam, she's all right. But I must inform you that you will never see any of those eleven thousand and five hundred dollars again..." the voice cut through his thoughts.

A SECOND CHANCE – Unleashing The Power of Good

They walked tirelessly until they came to a big gate. Two men dressed in similar white clothing as their host, looked up at them. As if to read their thoughts, the big man with them said,

“No, Peter, they are not ready to enter. I just want them to see what their options are.”

The reverend spoke first.

“Why can’t I go in? I am ready!”

The man smiled at him.

“Are you indeed ready reverend?”

“Yes, sir, I am ready. I have been waiting for this almost all my life,” replied the reverend, proudly.

“Yes, reverend, you have been waiting since the age of thirteen, but are you really ready?” the man asked.

“You seemed to be implying that I am not...” started the reverend.

“No reverend, I am not implying anything. You are implying.”

The man turned to Willie Hearn who was staring at the gate and the men guarding it. All they have is a sword. Some guard, he thought. Bet I could storm that gate, take that sword and be gone before anyone noticed!

The tall man in the white robe man turned back to the reverend.

“Would you want Willie to go with you, reverend?” the man asked

“...you know what he was just thinking.”

It was true that the reverend could discern Willie’s thoughts.

He glanced at the dope pusher in disgust.

“Of course not! He’s a sinner, and needs to repent!” replied the reverend.

“Yes, reverend, he’s a sinner and did need repentance. But although he may not qualify to make it through the Gate, it is

your duty to have empathy instead of condemnation.” The reverend understood exactly what the man meant.

“Yes, it is true. I am not ready,” confessed the reverend.

“Oh, no! Quite to the contrary, you are ready reverend. You could enter right now, if you want to. But you would be leaving these others to a fate you know very well. Do you still want to go in reverend?” the man asked softly.

Before the reverend could answer, Sarah Jones spoke up. Her defiant, confrontational spirit overcoming her awe of the scene before her...

“There must be some reason you brought us here. What’s your game, man?”

“Game, Sarah? There’s no game here. You are all in a plateau of the beginning and the end, the beginning of the end, the beginning or the end...”

“What are you saying...?” replied Sarah, “I don’t understand.”

The man turned to the reverend.

“Do you understand reverend?”

Reverend Levin turned to his companions.

“We are being brought here to make amends....”

“Yes, you are right, reverend. There are certain conditions that you all will be required to follow. This could be your beginning of the end, or your beginning, or the end. It will be up to you what course you wish to take.”

The man turned away from the gate and retraced his steps back to the tunnel. Reluctantly the group followed, with the reverend taking backward glances at the happy faces on the other side of the Gate...

The man stopped and faced his guests

“My name is Gabriel, the Archangel,” he announced. His words slammed against the conscience of each listener. All of a sudden each of them felt the aura of incompleteness. They felt naked, so shameful, and so insignificant.

“Gabriel? You mean this here place is...?” started Willie, speaking for the first time.

“Yes, but it is not for you. Not for any of you. There are things that need to be done, and you were chosen to do them,” Gabriel answered.

“But look at me! You know who I am! What can I be chosen to do? I failed at everything else. I am a failure...” sobbed Sarah, reflecting on her soiled past.

“This could be your beginning, or the end, Sarah. What will it be?” Gabriel inquired.

Sarah understood for the first time what he meant. It was as if the very first someone was actually depending on her to make a meaningful change... the change that eluded her all her turbulent life.

“I will do what you ask,” she replied firmly.

Gabriel turned to Willie. The big man cowered in the gaze of the Archangel.

“Willie, what about you?”

“Me? Well, sir, I ain’t no saint, but I don’t want to go to that other place I hear the reverend talk about sometimes. I want to come here. I will do what you want sir,” Willie answered.

“Man, I woulda never believed this if someone yells it at me...” Samuel started. “You are right Mr. Kukas. I have yelled it at you a couple of times, and you did not believe it,” interrupted the reverend.

On several occasions when the big man came into the neighborhood to collect his rent, the reverend would be on hand to point out to him his evil ways.

“Yeah, I guess so. I will do whatever you want, sir. This is something else, you wait till’ I tell my wife...”

“I am glad that you all have decided to work with us, even though you have no idea what we want. That is faith, and we up here admire you down there who exercises faith...”

A SECOND CHANCE – *Unleashing The Power of Good*

Gabriel said with a smile. Reverend Levin stepped forward, held up a hand, and facing the big man dressed in astonishing white meekly said, “Hold on there, sir. Down there on earth we are led and directed by the words written in the Holy Bible. That is what we come to believe in. The words written there we have accepted as the voice of God... and as a scholar of the scriptures, as I understands it, death is the final destination for everyone; both good and bad...,” the reverend struggled to keep his voice under control. It was as if he was defending the things he knew, and accepted as the truth; the final word. Gabriel held back a smile and encouraged the reverend to continue.

“We are listening reverend...” he said softly.

“Well sir. It is written in the scriptures that it is appointed unto man once to die... there was nothing about a ‘second chance...’”

“So what are you saying reverend?” Gabriel asked, but not as one who needs an answer, but rather to encourage the speaker to express his thoughts. Encouraged by the arch angel’s prompt, reverend Levin continued.

“Is this not a contradiction to His word? Has he changed His plans in the middle of the game?”

“Reverend, you do have a valid point, but you see through a glass darkly. Not everything you know and will understand. Something will remain a mystery. That is why we, as angels here admire your human faith. The angel adjusted his robe and continued speaking.

“You have no idea how many times He had to make adjustments so as to enhance, and sometimes, hastens His return.”

Willie was listening closely to the exchange between the reverend and this holy man, Gabriel. He was beginning to more firmly understand things he had never even bother to think about.

“You mean all this has to do with His return to earth?” Gabriel nodded in the landlord’s direction.

“Yes, Sam. His whole purpose for mankind is to have fellowship with them...” Sarah, also getting better understanding, spoke softly. “And we always find ways to mess that up!”

“Now we are expected to find ways to fix it?” asked Willie Hearn.

Sarah cleared her throat softly to get attention again.

“Em, huh? Say Mr. Gabriel, exactly what do you want us to do? I mean, how do we know if we can do what you want?”

Gabriel looked at her, then to Reverend Levin.

“Did you not teach her that there’s no temptation that is uncommon to man, and that she would never be given a task she cannot accomplish?”

The reprimand was evident.

“She was never in church. She just wouldn’t come. She would just loiter outside and try to lure my male members into sinful acts,” replied the reverend. His voice was almost pleading for understanding.

“How many others do you know that did not come, reverend?” asked Gabriel.

“There were many sir, many,” he replied.

“...too many,” he slowly added. It was then that the reverend realized that his work was far from being complete.

“Yes reverend, too many people are going through life without really knowing the good in them. They believe that the way they are is the way they should be, and that they cannot do anything about it. You must teach them differently. That will be your responsibility,” said Gabriel, looking at a scroll he held.

A puzzled look overshadowed the reverend. “You mean that I’m to go back and do this thing?” asked the reverend.

Are you satisfied with the way things are reverend?” asked Gabriel.

“No sir. There is trouble everywhere. Why can’t you do something about it? People are killing each other every day. My church has only a few people who turn up each week, but I try to tell them that they should love their neighbors as themselves, and that they must love God. But do they? No! They keep doing each other in...”

“...over 40% of the black population has been to jail, and another 30% are on drugs,” said the reverend.

“They must begin to love and respect each other, reverend,” agreed Gabriel.

“Society has them fighting and killing each other. That was because of the way they brought us into this country as slaves. We had to fight for our survival,” continued the reverend.

“Reverend, all nations were in slavery sometime or other. But these senseless killings must stop,” said Gabriel. “I can understand your passion for your fellow black brothers and sisters, reverend, but every nation, race and kindred are heading for a sure fall if something is not done soon.”

“But how?” asked the reverend.

“Things don’t just happen. You make them happen reverend” replied Gabriel.

Sarah Jones stepped forward.

“I have heard the reverend trying to get these people to do right, but they just don’t listen to him sir. He’s just one man...”

“No Sarah, he’s no longer just one man. You will be helping him, and so will Willie and Samuel. Plus, he will be given certain powers to help him along,” said Gabriel.

“Hey, what powers? You mean that the reverend will be able to part sea, and do all that miracle stuff he’s been yelling about every Sunday?” asked Sarah.

A SECOND CHANCE – Unleashing The Power of Good

“Yes Sarah, those and much more. Reverend, you have two years to rebuild your church. It must make a great difference in your community. If you should do this in the two years, you will live a happy life until we call you home...” explained Gabriel.

“But what if I don’t? What if I can’t?” asked the reverend.

“You will lose your powers, and will be called back here at the end of the two years,” Gabriel answered.

“But sir, what about that big church, the one down by the lake? They have lots of members, and the pastors are highly trained to deal with people’s problems a lot better than I can...” protested the reverend.

“You would think that reverend, but you have seen the condition of your city, and the rapid deterioration. Were they really that effective?” Gabriel asked.

“But I’m not that effective either...” insisted the reverend.

“Your heart is in the right place reverend. Your intentions are good, your ability is limited, but in spite of all your shortcomings, you were chosen for this task.” There was finality in the archangel’s last statement. He didn’t wait for an answer, he turned instead to Sarah.

The little drug addict and prostitute was looking nervously across the open space. Her mind racing across the eons of time, accentuating her inadequacy and sinful nature. She was not about to be chosen for anything but the torment she knew she deserved.

“Sarah, you will return drug-free. You must gain the confidence of the young people, and teach them to forsake drugs and be obedient to their parents and to those who have authority over them. You also will be given powers, and you must help Reverend Levin with his church too.”

“But, sir. I cannot do this. I stole, I do drugs, and I do ungodly things with other people. Sir, I lie, I commit all kinda wrong things. I am not fit to do any of this...” she protested.

A SECOND CHANCE – *Unleashing The Power of Good*

The big man turned his eyes to the others in the group, paused as if to choose his words more carefully. He returned his gaze to Sarah.

“Sarah, we know who and what you are, but you must understand that each and every one were created for a purpose. A purpose of good deeds. It was sin that diverted you and others, but now you are being given a ‘second chance’ to be what you were created for. Sarah, you can do most anything you want, if the desire is there.”

Gabriel’s eyes were fixed steadfast on her.

“Sarah, this is your moment of decision. Seize it!”

As Sarah looked back into the eyes of the man standing before her, she saw her reflection emanating. She saw herself as a little girl playing quietly in an unfenced yard, amidst broken toys and discarded debris. She saw herself gathering those discards and trying to properly arrange them into something beautiful. She saw herself trying to make a difference with the limited intelligence and ability she had. She knew the big man was right. She wanted to make a difference. She always wanted to make a difference. It was only that she ran out of desires and options as she grew older and became caught up in the trials and challenges of everyday survival.

“I now fully understand what you are saying, and will do what you ask, sir,” announced Sarah, with all the conviction she could muster.

“What about me, sir?” asked Willie Hearn, anxiously. He was most excited about the part where special powers will be given. This will be so neat, he thought. He realized then that his past had little to do with what the man in the white sheet was proposing. Like Sarah, he was not the ideal candidate for doing anything good, but if he was being given a ‘second chance’ to make amends, and a difference to someone, he was all game. Gabriel ignored him and turned to Samuel.

A SECOND CHANCE – Unleashing The Power of Good

“Sam, you have a lot of money, but the people around you starve, and are homeless. You cannot just shut up your bowels of compassion. You must help others...”

Samuel, who was listening to the exchange between Gabriel and Sarah, was convinced he also could do a lot more than he had done.

“I understand sir, but what can I do that will affect so many people? In spite of my wealth, my circle of influence is only among other rich people like myself, and most of them are guilty of the very thing that is wrong with society. They are always beyond my reach. How can I ever get to them...?”

“You will begin by also help the reverend to build a bigger church.”

The tall man smiled inwardly as the landlord quickly nodded his big head. Samuel Kukas can now do the very thing he cared about; helping people, even though life had diverted him from that path. He had never taken the opportunity to practice what his God-faring mother had taught him years earlier. Now he has the ‘chance.’

Gabriel then turned to Willie.

“Willie, you have a problem with your self-image. You are too satisfied with your situation. You are a much better person than you think you are. Because you have this problem, and the majority of such problems stemmed from people not having a good self-image of them, you will be required to help these people...” outlined Gabriel.

But, but, sir, how am I ever gonna get anyone to listen to me?”

“You already know how to influence people. You had over eleven young women working for you, doing things that they know they shouldn’t be doing, but you get them to do it anyway. Yes, Willie, you can get others to listen, if you want them to,” said the man dressed in white. Willie Hearn knew it

was the truth. He also knew his method of convincing was based on pure fear. Gabriel interrupted his thoughts.

“Willie, given the right motivation you will see that the transformation from bad to good can be as easy as the one from good to bad...” Gabriel saw the look of comprehension in the eyes of the once-feared drug dealer.

“Also will be given special powers too...” Gabriel added, and then returned his attention to all four.

“Remember, you all have two years to accomplish these tasks. At the end of two years your powers will then be taken from each one of you.” A slight wind ruffled his long white hair as Gabriel continued addressing the quartet. All four sets of eyes were riveted on him, as if to make sure every word was heard, and understood.

“If any of you failed to complete your task, you will be right where you are today, without powers, and awaiting the judgment of God. If you should complete satisfactorily, you will be allowed to live a long and happy life, with a guarantee that you will join us here at the end of your lives,” concluded Gabriel.

The Reverend Levin stepped forward. “Sir, about how we were brought here. Were we really killed? I mean, did we die? Were we really dead?”

“Dead as you knew it reverend,” Gabriel replied. He tucked his scrolls under his robe, palmed his trumpet, and smiled at the group. There were expectations on every face.

“There’s one more thing I want to show you all. This should make you understand the importance of what we ask,” said the archangel, and with a slight wave of his hand, the group was engulfed in a cloud. In a split second they were taken on a high mountain and Gabriel pointed to scenery below.

It was a big city, densely populated, and very much alive with activities.

They instantly recognized the city.

It was their own.

They could clearly see every street, every house, every person... and what they saw was not pleasant. A crowd of people were fighting and rioting. They were burning buildings and looting stores. Many others were converging on a line of armed men dressed in riot gear. They could see the police firing on the group. There were running and screaming everywhere. People were falling down under the onslaught of rapid machine guns fired by the police. Another group of men were firing back at the police and into the crowd of people as they ran for shelter in burning buildings. Tear gas and water hoses were being used to quell the crowd. Men, women, boys, girls, babies, young and old were being slaughtered.

In another scene, two young men were robbing a bank, and another was sitting in a darkened ally shooting dope in his arm. It was a maddening crowd and violence everywhere...

Reverend Levin was the first to speak.

“What is going on...?” he asked.

“That is life, my friend,” replied Gabriel.

“That is chaotic!” blurted Willie.

“Can’t you do something about it?” asked Sarah. Gabriel turned to her.

“That is a very hard question, even for me to answer, Sarah.”

“How come,” she asked?

“Yeah, you guys supposed to be able to do anything. That’s what the reverend been telling us...” blurted Samuel, his voice shaking in anger.

“Yes, Sam, we can do anything and everything, but what we can’t do is go back on our word,” replied Gabriel.

“What do you mean?” asked Sarah.

Reverend Levin interjected.

“What he meant, Sarah, is that we, people of the world, are given the freedom to do anything we chose.....”

“Yes, Sarah, that choice cannot be taken away. What you are looking at is the people’s choice. That is what they chose to do. They may not like it. They may not even want to do it, but they are the ones that will have to do differently. It’s their choice,” added Gabriel.

The group looked on in disgust as people were murdered, women raped, children victimized, police brutalizing citizens, people being victimized because of the color of their skins, for their cultural heredity, for their religion. Firebombs were being thrown at policemen as they tried desperately to bring order. Many were shot down in the streets from snipers on roofs. Fire trucks were overturned; firemen stoned as occupied buildings burned.

“How long will this go on? I mean the killing and things like that?” asked Willie.

“What you are seeing has been going on for centuries. Many, many centuries. In fact, since the fall of Adam and Eve man has chosen to lead his own destiny and these are the results!” answered Gabriel. It was then something clicked in Samuel Kukas’ head.

“Wait! Wait! Hold on there. You mean that is what we have to change? Stop all that mess?” asked Samuel, hoping he will not get the answer he expected. He was wrong.

“No Sam, you cannot stop all that, but you can make a difference in some people’s lives. It will depend on how many lives you will touch with that difference, during the time we allot you. It will be up to each of you to do as much good as you can, to as many as you can.”

Suddenly the little group understood their task. They were aware of their limited abilities, but their desire to become a part of the solution overcame what reservations they had.

Each resigned upon themselves to make that difference. Gabriel's searching look on each face revealed that his task of impressing upon them their duties and responsibilities was finished. He marveled at how these simple people would take on a task so insurmountable, but with the hope of making a difference for their fellowmen; people who will hate and resent them. In spite of his own powers and closeness with his Maker, Gabriel could not fully understand what goes on in the minds and hearts of these humans, and their own relationship with his Master. He held back a smile.

"Well, goodbye Reverend Levin, Willie Hearn, Sarah Jones and Samuel Kukas. Good speed, and remember that thousands of people are looking forward to you to make a difference in their lives. Good-bye and God Spirit go with you!"

Gabriel turned, and a mist of white smoke overcomes him. The next moment the four were alone.

"What now...?" started Samuel, and the next moment they also were gone...

CHAPTER

14 The doctor turned off the monitoring machine over Reverend Levin's bed. The green and black screen was blinking intermittently, and then went into a steady beep.

It was no use. That was over twelve hours ago, and although the doctor knew the reverend was clinically dead, there was something kept gnawing at his insides. Something kept telling him the reverend was not dead. Keep trying, you can bring him back.

Just keep trying... But he was a man of studied medical science, and whatever he thought, or felt, could not go

against his learned and practiced profession. The man was dead. Gone...

The doctor removed his surgical gloves, walked slowly across the room to the waste basket and threw them in. He returned to the table, took one last look at the big man, shook his head in defeat and took up his satchel. His work was done. Thirty-four years as a professional Medical Examiner told him it was over for the reverend. He pulled the sheet over the dead man's face.

As the doctor turned off the lights and was closing the doors, he heard the unmistakable rustling sound of clothes being moved. He stared through the darkness. He could barely see the inert clothed figure of the reverend on the bed. Something was wrong. He reached for the lights and flipped the switch.

Light flooded the room. He stared dumbfounded at the scene before him. The reverend was sitting up.

"What on earth! You are alive... but how could you be?" blurted the doctor, dropping his medicine bag on the cold concrete floor. A cold chill crosses his body; like something he had never experienced before in all his over 33 years of medical practice. The good doctor was simply scared out of his wits.

The reverend ignored the question as he gently removed his hospital gown which was soiled with dark bloody spots; evidence of his wounds.

"It's a long and strange story, doc. I'll tell you about it sometime..." and with that, Reverend Levin reached for his clothes, put them on and calmly walked out of the room.

CHAPTER

15 About the same time while the reverend was walking out of the morgue, two miles away at the hospital where Sarah’s body was taken, doctors and nurses stared in amazement as she sat up, slowly reached for her clothes, dressed and walked out.

Willie was being transported to the local morgue when he got up from the stretcher, pulled at the hospital gown, making it more secured around his muscular torso, then stepped out of the fast-moving ambulance. The driver and his companion tried explaining Willie’s absence, but their superiors did not believe them.

They were fired for losing a body.

When Reverend Levin stepped through the doors of the church, a meeting was in progress. The church board was meeting to find a replacement for the dead pastor. It was many years ago they decided on Reverend Levin to lead them, now they were about to select another leader.

There were much yelling and arguing. The reverend stood silently by the far corner, listening. No one saw him although he was standing not more than two feet away from one of ushers.

“I think the reverend would have liked Deacon Jay to take his place,” said Mrs. Porter. Deacon Jay was her future son-in-law, and everyone knows it, except Deacon Jay.

“Of course you would like that, Mrs. Porter,” snapped Sister Henry, and everyone laughed.

“...You know fully well that Deacon Jay don’t want the job. Why don’t you quit and leave that man alone? Your daughter will find someone just right for her, all by herself,” added Sister Henry.

“You leave my business out of this Sister Henry. You are sitting pretty high with Mr. Jones at the bakery. You shut your mouth, and your doors!” Mrs. Porter snapped back. Some

members of the group looked from one to the next, obviously not knowing of Sister Henry amorous shortcoming.

“Will every one shut up? We are trying to get a suitable replacement for Pastor Levin. Not a mate for the female population of this congregation...” yelled Mr. Garner, who was head deacon of the little church. His shirt was unbuttoned at the top and the veins in his neck were as tight as guitar strings. He was having a hard time controlling the meeting. His Adam’s apple bobbed as he spoke, desperately trying to hold back the anger that was rapidly overcoming him. He was expected to be in command, and he was determined to regain control of the proceedings, just as if the reverend was standing by.

“...this is a religious gathering of leaders of the church. We may not have many members, but we must try to control ourselves and prepare ourselves for the occasion when people will be coming to us for spiritual guidance.”

The group became silent. They have never heard Deacon Gardner talked this way. He was a reserved man, with few opinions, which was one of the reasons he was chosen as head deacon. He would not ruffle feathers, but always go along with the majority. He had never expressed such open emotion.

“We must not argue among ourselves over trifle matters when the future of this little church lies in balance. It has now become apparent that Reverend Levin’s leadership was what held this little broken down building intact. Yet, in spite of the condition of the building, it is still the House of God!” The deacon’s big fist crashed against the table, shaking the water jug off its holder, sending it crashing to the floor. The room burst in an uproar. Everyone blaming each other for their conduct. It was then that the reverend made his move.

“Well said Brother Gardner,” said the reverend, and he stepped into view. The entire room grew silent. Deadly quiet.

You could hear a pin drop. All eyes were upon the reverend. Sister Henry spoke first.

“Reverend? Reverend Levin? Is that you? Really you?”

“Yes, Sister Henry. It is me,” he replied softly.

“But reverend. You were dead. Dead...!”

“I saw you myself. I felt your pulse. You were gone,” insisted Sister Henry, trying to convince herself she wasn’t going crazy...

The reverend walked around the big table and sat on the first empty chair he saw. He bent, picking up broken pieces of the water jug and placing them in a neat pile on the table. He lifted his eyes to the group.

“Well, as you can see, I am very much alive, and as I can see, there has to be some changes around here...”

“What kind of changes reverend,” asked Mrs. Porter? She kept her hands below the table so no one could see them shaking nervously.

“Big changes, Mrs. Porter. Big changes,” the reverend answered, reseating his huge body in the little chair.

Deacon Jay pushed his chair back and dramatically stepped forward, holding up his hands. He was also a big man and also did pose an imposing figure.

“Wait! Hold on here!” he shouted. All eyes turned in his direction. He was supposed to be the rational one in the group. He turned to Reverend Levin, who looked back at him expressionless.

“No offense here reverend, but I myself was there when the doctors declared you dead. That was over twenty hours ago. The police have you listed as a homicide case. Reverend, you were dead. Dead!”

The deacon paused to look at the effect of his statement on the church officers. They just sat bewildered, not knowing which way to go, what to believe, what to say. Deacon Jay continued, “Now here you are. You walked in saying that you

A SECOND CHANCE – Unleashing The Power of Good

are going to be making changes. Sir, don't you think we deserve an explanation?" he asked.

Reverend Levin slowly stood up, walked over and rested his hands on the deacon's shoulders.

"Yes, Deacon Jay. I was dead. Here..." he lifted his shirt which was still stained with the now dried blood.

"...you can see the wounds. It's all healed now, but the scars are there to bear witness. My wife is not here, but if she was, she would tell you that I had no such scars. I really don't know how to explain just now what happened, but I can assure you that it is me. I will, in due time explain what happened, but today I want your trust and support." He turned to the entire group.

Everyone stirred indecisively in their seats. No one knew what to say. There were many questions, but none seem prepared for the answers. Mr. Gardner, the head deacon spoke first.

"Reverend, I have known you for many years, and I have the world of confidence in you. I too, am confused, as is everyone here, but you are our leader, and we will stand with you... I don't know what has happened, but I trust you will explain it eventually, and I speak for everyone here!"

"Amen," chorused the group, glad for the opportunity to show some kind of unity.

"Thank you. Thank you everyone, I need your support, and your strength, because I too, am somewhat confused, but also like you, I have placed my trust in my Leader, who is Jesus Christ. I have been to the mountain top, so to speak, and I am back!" He stared at his officers, appreciating their trust and faith in him.

"There will be a great change here, because of what has happened to me, and not only me, but as you will see very soon, that miracles are being manifested in your midst. Let us pray."

CHAPTER

16 Samuel Kukas directed the cab driver to pull up behind his wife’s Mercedes Benz. There were two other luxury automobiles parked along the cul-de-sac. He recognized his two sons’ sporty cars.

It was a little over eighteen hours ago that they wheeled Samuel Kukas from the emergency room. He remembered going towards the Light. He had no idea how or when he got to the morgue. After he had left the tunnel with the rest; the reverend, that girl and that big guy, he opened his eyes to find himself on a metal table, covered with a white sheet. He had on no clothes, and he smiled as he removed the little red tag tied to his big toe.

The place was cold! He shivered as he reached for a green gown in the linen cabinet.

“This will have to do,” he thought.

The doors of the morgue were locked on the outside, and there were no windows in the room. He walked over and pulled on the heavy metal doors, but they were secured.

“I guess no one from in here has ever wanted out before...” he reasoned to himself. Then for no known reason, he gently pushed the door again, and it came opened. He stared in surprise. Then he remembered someone’s promise of special powers...

The cab driver eyed the plumb white man suspiciously. His hospital gown was unbecoming for the neighborhood. On his passenger’s instruction, he had pulled his cab over and parked in the driveway of a sprawling mansion. The place occupied a city block with a white building sitting behind a

well-manicured lawn and groomed pine trees. This place smelled money, and this guy smelled hospital fumes...

“That will be twenty-seven fifty, buddy,” he said, making no move to open the door until he collected his fare. He had noticed that the man’s gown was a hospital issue, and therefore had no pockets. And he saw no purse, or bag, or anything where this guy could keep his cash, so he was prepared for the man’s reply.

“I have no cash on me, but as soon as I get inside the house, I will pay you...”

“Oh, no, me friend. Me be in business much too long to fall for line. Once you get in house, if you do get in, me no see you again. Me want my money now fella, or me just drive you to nearest cop station...,” the cab driver replied, his turban bobbing in punctuation of every word he spoke. He hurriedly secured the safety door latch, which prevents nonpaying occupants from leaving the vehicle.

“Well, you can drive to the station if you feel like it, but I am not going with you,” said Samuel.

The driver stared stupendously as he watched the man in the green hospital gown reached for the door handle. He heard the unmistakably sound of the door latch being disengaged. He did not see how this could be, but he was prepared.

“Oh no, you not,” yelled the driver, and hurriedly stepped on the gas pedal. The engine roared, but the wheels just stood. He gunned the big car, but it remained motionless.

“What the...?” exclaimed the driver.

Samuel just smiled and calmly reached for the door handle. He didn’t even bother to turn the handle. He just pushed and the door came open. The driver was still gunning his engine. Samuel came up to his window and peered in.

“Well my friend, since you will not be going anywhere in a hurry, you might as well just wait for your fare.” He turned

and walked up the brick-tiled path towards the garage door on the left side of the big house. He was beat and had no intention of walking up three flights of brown marbled stone stairs to the main entrance. He had chosen the garage side door instead.

As he walked along the path, lined with late blooming flowers and roses of various types, he paused to savor their sweet fragrance; something he was always too busy to do. He made a mental note to thank the gardener.

CHAPTER

17 The sound of the car's engine shattered the quiet neighborhood. Neighbors peeped through slightly drawn curtains and closed screened doors. There was no mistaken Samuel Kukas' bulky figure.

Marcus McBeasley, who lived across the street, recognized the bulk and the gait, but could not accept the person to be his dead neighbor. He was there when they declared Samuel dead.

"What on earth is going on over at the Kukas?"

McNealy raced for the phone, at the same time as Jim Khan from next door, and Helen Shoal from two doors down the street. Something was going on, and the police needed to know.

The noise outside had also alerted the occupants in the Kukas' house. Samuel's two sons, their wives and their parents were inside with Sam's wife. Not to be caught off-guard twice in the same day, Sam's wife thrust the loaded .45 Magnum lying by her elbow, into her elder son's hand.

"Go see what's happening Steven, but be careful... Remember what happened to your dear Pop," she instructed. Steve grabbed the gun and raced towards the door.

A SECOND CHANCE – Unleashing The Power of Good

“This time let them come. They will not find me as easy victim as Dad,” he thought to himself. He heard footsteps approaching the side door. He cocked the gun as the doorknob started to turn.

“These guys are sure determined. They are coming back. They must believe everyone is at the hospital. Or something... Well you just come on in buddy. This time I am waiting.” Anger mounted as his finger tightened on the trigger of the big gun.

The feel of the big gun in his hand was not a unique experience for him. Steven Kukas was a former four-year Marine and saw plenty actions in Vietnam and Kuwait. Sam pushed the door and stepped in, just as the .45 Magnum exploded in his face. The sound was deafening.

“What the hell is this?” he asked as he turned and closed the door. He turned back to face a wide-eyed young man holding a smoking gun.

“Steven, what the hell are you doing with that gun? You almost shot me!” he barked at his stunned son.

Dad! Is that you? Dad?”

“Of course it’s me. You almost shot me boy!” he answered.

“Almost? I did shoot you Dad. You were no more than two feet away when I fired. No way could I have missed. I shot you right in the face!” exclaimed his son. Footsteps pounded from upstairs. Dale, the youngest son burst into the room, rifle in hand.

“Steve, Dad, what’s happening?” he shouted. Then he noticed that it was indeed his father, who was proclaimed dead hours ago, and he fainted.

CHAPTER

18

William Lee Hearn walked boldly through the hotel lobby. The lobby was empty. The indoor/outdoor dark green carpet was tread-bare, evidence of years of use and misused. Earlier it looked as if someone vacuumed the path leading from the front door to the reception counter.

Small debris dotted the floors; half-smoked cigarette butts, gum wrappers, straws from the nearby coffee table and chewed gum. Overly-read newspapers were scattered across the little table sitting a few feet from a well-worn coach and easy chair. It was a little before eleven in the morning and the hotel early risers had already left for work, or whatever they do to pass the time of the day.

A single desk clerk was sitting behind the counter, pretending to be writing on a desk pad. He was a young man with long unkempt hair. He had one of his nostrils pierced with a silver looking object dangling. His soiled white shirt was opened at the collar, thanks to the three missing top buttons. A red scarf was tucked under the collar of his shirt, protecting his greasy hair from the already grubby collar. The young man, sensing the presence of another person in the lobby, looked up wide-eyed at his new entrant. Willie Hearn expected the reception he received.

“Hey man, where the hell you thinks you going?” yelled the clerk, as he hurried around from behind the counter. Willie turned to face the man.

“Hello Jim,” he said softly. The desk clerk stared staggeringly at the big man dressed in hospital garments. He blinked a few times, as if to clear cobwebs from his bloodshot eyes. This was his second year on the job, and he experienced lowlife drifters sneaking into a room without paying. He was on the watch...

“Willie? What the hell you doing here? We heard you killed by some broad down at the Loire’s apartment...” he said.

“Do you always believe everything you hear Jim?” asked Willie, as he stepped towards the elevator.

“But... but, hey, why you dressed in hospital clothes for then Willie?” inquired Jim, but the big man had already closed the elevator’s door and were on his way up to his sixth-floor room. Jim raced to the phone. His nervous finger dialed furiously.

“Hello!” A voice at the other end bellowed.

“Hey Kelly, you gotta get outa there, fast. Willie on his way up!” blurted Jim.

“Who?”

“Willie! Man you gotta get outa there!”

“What the hell you talking ‘bout? You smoking that cheap shit Jody sell?” Kelly asked.

“No foolin’ man. I just saw Willie, and he looked kinda funny. I don’t like it man...” insisted Jim.

“Willie? Man, you foolin’ aw’right. Willie’s dead. That broad over in Loire’s blew him away. Don’t mess with me man....”

Jim interrupted, “I told you man. You gotta go, fast!”

“I know what you be doin’ Jim. You want his stash for yourself, but it ain’t gonna work man. It was my idea to clean his place out affore the cops get around to it. The deal is for me an’ you to share man, but you wanna cut me out...” said Kelly, as he began to search the little nightstand for Willie’s dope. He hung the phone on the hook, cutting off Jim’s protest.

The word was out that Willie had scored big, and had hidden a sizable amount of dope and cash in his apartment. No one dared attempt to rip off Willie Hearn while he was alive, but the fearful Willie Hearn was not alive. He was dead,

and there's nothing he can do to anyone. These thoughts justified Kelly's effort to find the spoils of the late dope pusher.

Kelly cursed loudly as he searched from place to place, throwing chairs and furniture, and other objects that impeded his frantic search of the small apartment. The mattress from the bed was thrown to the floor, its sides slit and the white stuffing coming out at the seams. Cushions were also strewn about the room, their stuffing pulled out in desperate search for the hidden cache. Drawers were broken and scattered across the room. Kelly then began working feverishly on a big cabinet standing by the door.

As he slammed the doors and drawers he did not hear the front door softly opened, nor did he see the heavy bulk of Willie Hearn standing in the doorway.

"Lost something Kelly?" Willie asked, in an unusually soft voice, not characteristic of his past reputation as a pusher and local enforcer for the drug mob. Kelly whirled to face a smiling Hearn.

"Wha...?" he managed to blurt as he recognized the big man.

"I see you have been redecorating my place Kelly. Looking for something in particular?" His voice was icy calm. This was more unsettling to Kelly than the prospect of being beaten to a pulp by the notorious drug pusher. There was something about Willie's voice. It lacked the cynical, rough edge that was not unlike a street-wise artist like Hearn. His ten years in Federal prisons shaped both his disposition and vocabulary. He was displaying neither trait. Willie was not a portrayal of that person. He was very different, almost gentle.

If the temperature of the day was not in the 90's Kelly would have sworn that his outburst of perspiration was attributed to this present confrontation.

A SECOND CHANCE – Unleashing The Power of Good

Gathering his wits, he stepped forward. Being street-wise himself he knew the show of fear in the eyes of an adversary was paramount to signing a death warrant. He was not about to let big Willie Hearn get the best of him...

“Willie! What the hell you doin’ here?” he asked. He eyed the big man as he reached for his coat pocket. His fingers curled around the .38 he carried for moments like this. Willie seemed not to have noticed the subtle move.

“This is my place Kelly, yet from the looks of it, I can hardly say I recognize it. What are you doing in here?” he asked in that unsettling, calm tone of voice.

“You dead Willie. I hears it on the news. What the hell goin’ on here? This some kinda sick joke?” asked Kelly, as each moment added to his confidence. Willie might be big, with a reputation and all that, but he Kelly himself was no easy game either. Six years in all sorts of prisons, and two stiffs in the cemetery say that he can hold his own.

Willie seemed to read his thoughts.

“No Kelly, I don’t think so. You were never the man I was, and certainly not the man I am now. Get out of here!” The elusive hard edge had crept back into his voice. This motivated Kelly. He was sure that he could take Willie out. His roving eyes detected no telltale bulge of him carrying a weapon. His fingers tightened on the bone-handled pistol.

“Damn you Willie Hearn, I comes to get that dope you hidden here, and I ain’t leavin’ without it.” Kelly’s mind was already resolved to his task, and no one was going to stop him. He had already taken a loan from Perry, the numbers man, with the intention of getting this stash to repay him. Everyone knows Perry did not appreciate anyone holding out on him, and Kelly was already a day late. He was bent on his task.

Again Willie perceived, “Give it up Kelly. Perry will have to do without.”

A SECOND CHANCE – Unleashing The Power of Good

This blew Kelly's mind. No one knew of his transaction with Perry. Something just isn't right.

"What you talkin' 'bout, man?" Kelly asked.

"Listen here Kelly; I'm kinda tired of this conversation. You gonna do something, or you gonna get out of here?" Willie asked, as he stepped aside for the bewildered man to leave.

"Hell, no! I ain't leavin' without the dope, and you ain't gonna stop me either...." bellowed Kelly. He moved menacingly towards Willie.

"Well, I am sorry you decided to take that route Kelly, because I was prepared to let you off, but now I see that this world would be a much better place without the likes of you." He reached out and snatched the man by the neck, his fingers closing slowly. Kelly's eyes bulged as the oxygen gently receded. He pulled the gun from his pocket and pressed it against the big man's belly. He felt his finger tightened on the trigger.

Click!

The unmistakably sound of the hammer hitting an empty chamber. What the hell, he thought, as he pulled the trigger again.

Click!

Another empty chamber.

"No!" he heard his voice bellowed. He had made sure that the gun was loaded just moments before he came up to Willie's room. There was no empty chamber. He, himself had injected all six cartridges into the chambers. He had even removed the safety lock, knowing fully well that any sudden jolt might set off the gun. He was prepared to act quick and decisively if the need arises. Like now!

He had fired twice without making contact. He pulled the trigger rapidly several more times, as he felt Willie's big hands around his neck tightened, but no welcome explosion reached his ears.

Kelly Sanders tasted the blood from his nose, as it flowed into his opened mouth, amidst his broken, rotten teeth, and onto his protruding tongue. Then his eyes drew blank. The last thing he saw was Willie's face close to his. He was sure that Willie Hearn had no eyes. Only the empty spaces where they were supposed to be....

The dull snap he heard, rather than felt, was his neck yielding to maximum pressure...

This was the last life big Willie Hearn was to take.

CHAPTER

19 Sarah Jones' bet was an even 10 to 3 that she was the most likely to get pregnant before the age of 13; and the odds was right on the money. Just before entering the 10th grade at Taft Junior High in Brooksdale, Pennsylvania, and little Sarah Jones joined the too-many teenagers experiencing womanhood within a year of their first menstrual cycle.

What the odd makers at Taft didn't know was that little Sarah Jones was being prepared years before the event by an overly protective uncle whose middle finger proceeds years of sexual abuse of his little niece, Sarah.

The young girl tried unsuccessfully to tell her mother what her aunt's son was doing, but it was dismissed as childhood fibbing, and so Uncle Gabby was allowed to let his fingers do the walking until he promoted himself to the more gratifying deed, and two years later Sarah became pregnant. Her aunt's defense of her son, and her mother's belief in a virgin birth, confused Sarah to the extent that she sought solace in the arms of yet another relative who continued the abuse, punctuated with frequent beatings and ridicule. Sarah had her second child within 18 months.

This was too much for the little girl and the disgrace to the family because her repeat pregnancies earned a quick trip to

her bigger sister in faraway North Carolina, minus her two young babies; Russell, age 12 and Sunder, age three months.

News of Sarah's promiscuity preceded her, and immediately upon arrival at a little bus depot in a remote suburb in North Carolina, her sister's boyfriend singled her out. After months of abuse by an even more zealous adult male, Sarah packed her meager belongings and hit the road, but not before she took matters in her left hand, and in her right she took the dulled kitchen knife, and sister Gabriella a North Carolina suburb would soon be looking for a more total boyfriend.

Sarah Jones hitched a ride on the first truck heading out of town, and with an assault charge hanging over her head; she practiced her newly-found skills as a sexual partner with every truck driver until she went through five states and numerous truck stops, finally stopping in sun-drenched California. With only thirteen dollars and loose change, a tattered dress and rarely used underpants left to her name, Sarah, at age sixteen became a street statistic. She worked the streets at nights and slept in abandoned cars during the days. This was where Mary Lou found her. Herself, a streetwise worker, Mary Lou took the now equally streetwise prostitute under her wings, introducing her to Walter Perry, her pimp and protector.

CHAPTER

20 Mary Lou and Sandra listened attentively as Sarah outlined her activities for the month. They were sitting in Mary Lou's small apartment. It was two o'clock in the afternoon and Sarah had invited herself over to talk with the girls. These were her closest friends, and questioned very little to what she was saying.

A SECOND CHANCE – Unleashing The Power of Good

There was a whole lot they did not understand; especially how the police had Sarah listed as dead, now she was sitting here before them. They even saw the visible scars that proved big Willie Hearn had really knifed her. Sarah was sitting as relaxed and as radiant as she could be. In fact, her radiance was another thing. They had known Sarah Jones for years, and her reputation as a hard case was no secret. She rarely smiled, although she did show some kinder disposition than her counterparts. Now the new Sarah was pleasant as pleasant could be, and had an air of confidence they had never seen before ...not in Sarah, or anyone else. These girls were all from the darker side of life.

Sarah spoke about how the other girls on the streets were heading for a life of no return, and the need to get them off the streets and teach them to be more accountable of their lives. Sandra finally overcame the awe of her friend, inquired, “Girl, you got me. How you goin’ to bring ‘bout them changes you be talkin’ ‘bout?”

“It won’t be easy Sandra, but it’s gotta be done. You have been around the East side Junction for years. We have to reach the young girls in our city before rats like Perry and Cut-throat and them. You know just about every young person there in the project...” Sarah started.

“...And they knows me too Sarah. They knows I push dope and walks the streets too. How can I ever get them to lissen to me?” she interrupted.

“Believe me Sandra, they will listen,” Sarah replied.

Mary Lou stared at her friend. Something told her that if Sarah says they will listen, they will, but she just had to know how Sarah was so sure.

“Lissen Sarah, I don’t mean to doubt you or anything like that, but it seems kinda strange to me that them people be lissen to anything Sandra says. She’s ain’t no saint in that part a town, and her scams is well known. “

”...an' power we ain't got...” added Sandra.

“Power Mary Lou? Sandra, what kind of power would you like to see?” asked Sarah, looking from one face to the other.

“Hell, I don't know? I ain't mean no real power Sarah. I know you ain't got no power and thing, but these people be so skeptical...”

“Oh, no, if it's power you girls want to see, let me show you power...” and with that Sarah reached for the little table lamp. As her finger brushed against its base, the lamp suddenly lit up, brightening the whole room. It was early midday and the room was mutely lighted from the outside through the dirty curtains, but the illumination was incredible.

The glare was overwhelming. The light was unusually bright. Everything seemed stark naked. It appeared as if the very souls of the two girls were exposed. They cowered in their seats as the light penetrated the dim, drab room.

Mary Lou knew instantly that something was strange. The little soft blue-lighted bedside lamp she kept for her male clients was never supposed to be bright enough for the men to see the hard lines on her face. They were not supposed to see her sparsely furnished apartment, nor the worn and torn upholstery and dirty linen she had thrown everywhere.

Mary Lou was not the tidiest person in the neighborhood, but she wanted no one else to know that, so her selection of lighting in the apartment was subdued for that very purpose.

She staggered back, toppling the chair on which she was sitting.

“Good Lawd A' mighty!” she exclaimed.

Sandra also was taken back in amazement. She knew of Mary Lou's need to be inconspicuous about the condition of her room. She also was aware that the little table lamp had never given off such bright light. She, herself had used the room in the past. It was just two nights ago when a certain

high profile client did not want to go to the East side Junction, so she borrowed Mary Lou's place, something she had done many times before.

"Hot dang!" exclaimed Sandra, her eyes popping under the illumination.

"Cut that off Sarah, please," wailed Mary Lou, as the light depicted in stark detail, every object in the room. Sarah reached out and gingerly brushed the lamp and the light went out. In just that brief moment the dark room seemed to engulf the light, and somehow Mary Lou seemed relieved. It was obvious she preferred the dark to the light...

"How'd you do that? Is that some kinda trick?" asked Sandra when her eyes became readjusted to the room...

"No trick Sandra. You try it yourself," invited Sarah. Sandra grudgingly reached out and touched the lamp. Nothing happened. She put her finger on the little bulb. It was cold. Curiously, she turned the switch and the little pale blue light brightened the corner, barely visible in the early afternoon sun shining through the window.

Both girls turned simultaneously and stared at their friend. Sarah stared back, as if nothing unusual had happened. Her hands were neatly folded in her lap like a subordinate patiently awaiting her children. Mary Lou's mind raced furiously, contemplating the series of events that brought her and her friends to this very moment...

"What's happenin' here Sarah? You 'posed be dead. You turned up here dressed in hospital clothing, tellin' us how we gonna change the world..." started Mary Lou, her voice straining under the pressure of curiosity and doubts. "...and now this. You wrapped up in some kinda devil stuff...?" she asked timidly.

"Devil stuff, Mary Lou? Girl, this is no devil stuff, as you call it. This is for real. I cannot explain it all to you now, but I was

dead. This is my second chance, and I need you both to trust me,” she said, her own voice bounding with sincerity.

Sandra looked at Mary Lou, as if to reprimand her for asking the very same questions that were going through her own mind. She knew she should inquiry more about her friend’s ‘return,’ but she was dreading the answers she might receive. Something was telling her she knew much more than she already was capable of handling. Something was telling her, ‘your life is about to change...’ and change was what she needed. She turned and glanced at Mary Lou who sensed Sandra was seeking her concurrence. Mary Lou slightly nodded in her direction. She knew that Sandra was thinking the very thing that was going through her mind.

Sandra turned her gaze from Mary Lou and leaned over to Sarah, her hand resting softly on her friend’s shoulder.

“We with you Sarah. I be truthful girl, I don’t really think we coulda handle any explanation for all this. This be heavy...!”

Sarah glanced briefly over to where Mary Lou was sitting, a glazed look on her face. Sarah knew her friend would be alright. She also knew Sandra was expressing both women’s sentiments. She was satisfied with her choice of compatriots for the awesome tasks ahead. Sarah stood up, opened her bag and took out two large brown envelopes. She handing one to each girl.

“You both go get some new clothes, and pay off everybody you owe. And make sure that you let Perry know that you are not going to work for him no more...,” she instructed.

Sandra was the first to speak. She ignored the package in front of her.

“Tell Perry? Sarah, you know Perry. He be kilt us. He make his living off of us. We can’t never leave!”

“Oh, yes you can. You both can. Perry will have to make his living off someone else....,” replied Sarah, her voice mounting

in anger, as she recalled her own experiences with the part-time pimp and numbers man. Not only did the girls served as runners for his numbers game, but they were also required to service his customers with sexual favors when payoffs were short, which were frequent.

“Sarah, jus’ last week he slashed Jo’s face ‘cause she be too sick to go to bed with this guy Willie sent. I tell you Sarah, the man’s crazy,” said Mary Lou, fear edging her voice.

“I know Perry, remember I used to work the same routes months ago. Don’t you worry. I will take care of him,” replied Sarah. She looked at the faces of her two friends and saw the mixture of fear, doubt and hope. She knows the girls were really grasping at any straw of hope anyone could possibly provide, and somehow she had instilled that providence in them. She was confident they would do fine. The girls hesitantly took the envelopes, their eyes fixed on their friend, not understanding, not doubting, but hoping... Blindly trusting!

“Well girls, there’s places to go, people to see...” and with that, she was gone. Neither girl saw her leave. She just disappeared.

Somehow it seems just natural for their friend to just vanish. They weren’t going to be very surprised at what their friend does anymore. Sandra dismissed this new occurrence as typical and hurriedly tore open the envelope Sarah gave her. There was something about Sarah’s voice that assured her that Perry will no longer be a threat to them. Sandra nervously tore open the envelope and emptied its contents on the bed beside her. Wads of green US currency spilled out.

“Oh, my God! Mary Lou, look at this. This must be over \$10,000. Look at all this money...” Sandra exclaimed, as she pulled out more of the contents from the envelope. Mary Lou was already staring astoundingly at her own opened

envelope. In her haste, the bills were scattered on the bed, some falling on to the floor.

“I never sees so much money, ‘cept on Perry’s table when he be opening’ the numbers bags. I think I better sit down...” and with that she placed herself solidly in the nearest chair. Sandra was staring at the dirty curtains, the worn sofa, the soiled carpet. She knew her change had come...

“Sarah said we to gets new clothes and stuff with this money. Wonder where she gets this? Do you think it’s real Mary Lou?” asked Sandra. Mary Lou, with expert eyes, was already eying the bills. Perry had taught her well how to spot counterfeit bills. Too many of them were turning up in his bags. Mary Lou was the expert in the group.

“Yes, they be good alright. Lissen Sandra. Let’s stop questioning’ them things. My head’s ‘bout to explode, just thinkin’ of all this. Sarah seem to be on top of things. Let’s just trust her, like she ask, and not bother ourselves over this. It will drive us crazy,” replied Mary Lou.

“I agrees with you child, and I can’t wait to see them people’s face who be after me for what I owes them. Let’s make a list of the people we owe, and do as Sarah say,” said Sandra.

“That’s a whole lot a people, Sandra...” said May Lou as she reached for her notebook.

“...and a whole lot a money!” added Sandra.

CHAPTER

21

The church hall was filled to capacity this Sunday morning. People from miles around were coming to hear Reverend Levin speak. The word had gotten out that he was some kind of miracle case. The newspaper said he was dead. The police said he was dead. The hospital said he was dead, and

A SECOND CHANCE – *Unleashing The Power of Good*

his wife said he was dead, but the goodly reverend was alive and well, preaching like he had never preached before.

Last week the church was partly filled, which was twice as many people who regularly attended the morning services. No one had ever heard Reverend Levin speak the way he did that Sunday. His general mannerisms were totally different. His command of the knowledge of the Bible was vastly multiplied, and his convincing sermons were enough for everyone present, not only to return the following Sunday, but to bring someone with them.

Many of his former members from the church by the lake were in attendance, including some of the deacons and junior pastors. Someone even spotted the pastor's wife, but couldn't be sure because the person disguised herself and chooses not to be recognized.

Today the church was in high expectation. The walls of the rear of the little building were torn out and a large tarp was erected. Chairs were brought in and placed in neat rows, making accommodation for an extra seventy-five persons. The podium was elevated so everyone, even those in the rear under the tarp, could see the reverend.

It was time for Reverend Levin, and all eyes were riveted to him as he stepped forward to the pulpit. The thirteen-member choir had just finished singing its series of old gospel hymns. Usually, there were two or three members of the choir that would bother to show up for rehearsals, which is why many members faked the performances because they did not know the songs.

During the meeting earlier in the week Reverend Levin assigned Elton Jones, the choir director, to make sure that every member of the choir turn up for regular rehearsals, or faced being replaced. When the word got out that Reverend

Levin was alive and meant business, everyone turned up at every rehearsal that week.

“It’s good to see the choir in full force again. You can expect to see them here every Sunday, and Wednesday to bless our hearts.” Reverend Levin turned to look at their reaction. He had not mentioned anything about Wednesday services, which was not a popular day for his congregation, or choir members. He was fully aware of the Wednesday specials at the movie theater, and the bingo games that have lured his sheep from Wednesday services, but all that was about to change. He did not expect the overwhelming ‘ah’mens’ he received from his impromptu announcement. The choir seemed enthused about the added responsibility and sacrifices for Wednesday meetings.

CHAPTER

22

The congregation was much unprepared for Reverend Levin’s sermon onslaught that Sunday. Everyone was deadly quiet as he bombarded them with the ills of evil and the responsibilities as members of his congregation. He had given them an indictment. Every single member of this congregation was to begin evangelizing their neighborhoods, beginning with their homes. They were to bring their family members to church. Any member that did not bring their unsaved family to church, beginning next Sunday, could expect a visit from the reverend himself. They were to begin caring for the elderly, visiting the sick and shut-ins, and teach deliverance to the depressed.

Every member was to identify the drug dealers and turn their names over to the reverend. He did not say what he was going to be doing with the names, but the tone of his voice makes anyone who was not a drug dealer glad they weren’t.

A SECOND CHANCE – *Unleashing The Power of Good*

The most painful part of any service was usually the collection of tithes and offerings, but everyone seems to welcome the opportunity to contribute to the church. Something new and exciting was happening at the little Baptist church, and everyone wanted to be a part, everyone except Detective Roger Rattan.

Roger Rattan was the one who drew the assignment to investigate Reverend Levin. The man was stabbed to death two weeks ago. All the records showed that he was pronounced dead. No one seemed to be able to explain how he survived from that traumatic experience. The doctors who attended to him were totally convinced that he was clinically dead. Yet he just got up, reached for his clothes and was gone.

The attending physician was too embarrassed to explain how the Reverend had walked out of the morgue, through the closed steel doors. He was not about to tell anyone about that. It was enough that the man was classified as dead and now he was walking about. The doctor was going on a very long vacation as soon as his three remaining weeks in the trauma ward were finished.

Detective Rattan was not present last week when Reverend Levin made his first public appearance. Patrolman O'Meara was on his regular beat when he noticed the extra activity around and about the church. Several church members were coming and going at regular intervals all through the day. O'Meara's twelve years on this very same beat gave him certain familiarity with controlled activities. Anything out of the ordinary he instantly noticed.

The patrolman was very aware of the poorly attended little Baptist church. He never had to bother about crowd control on Sunday mornings, because very few people

bothered to turn up. He was even familiar with the songs the church would play over its outside speakers. Because of the constant absence of the choir Reverend Levin had purchased musical tapes to play, and every day the same tapes would play throughout the entire day and evening. Patrolman O'Meara was even familiar with the songs, as they were constantly riveted in his subconscious mind. He personally resented the music, which he labeled as 'jungle music.'

The patrolman did not care too much for Reverend Levin or any of the people on his beat. He would rather be in his own neighborhood, among his own people, but he was thankful to be still on the force, ever since he shot and killed that boy on Folk Street, and then planted the knife on him. He knew that no one at the station believed his story of the boy attacking him with the knife, but no one was going to turn in one of their own for a kid that was known for running numbers.

Wanting to get back in good favor with his superiors, Patrolman O'Meara reported the change of activities at the church to his watch commander. At first they concluded that the church was running numbers, or selling dope, and the police had planted an undercover agent in the next service to see what was going on.

Police headquarters could not accept the report that Reverend Levin was alive and well. The man was listed in their books as dead. They even identified the man, Willie Hearn, as the assailant. The knife that was used was identified also. The case was closed, now this...

Detective Rattan's reputation for conclusive investigations against inner-city residents of a darker complexion was no secret among his peers. It was also no secret of his membership in the local Klu Klux Klan chapter. His assignment on this case would reveal even the slightest irregularity at the church. He was a detailed man. No stone would be left

untuned. He was not about to forget that his wife of two weeks was murdered in this very same neighborhood twenty years ago. He is convinced that the persons responsible were still living here.

He would have drawn this assignment for free!

CHAPTER

23 The real estate agent glanced at the attorney sitting next to him in Samuel Kukas' office. Jerry Burks had responded to Sam's request to meet him at nine o'clock this morning. It was unusual for Sam to be doing anything at nine in the morning. Jerry knew Sam for over twenty years and had never known him to be up before noon, especially on a Monday morning. Even Sam's fishing expeditions started well after noon.

When attorney Philip Liles drove up in the parking lot of Sam's office, he was surprised to see Jerry's car parked beside Sam's Cadillac. Jerry Burks was a late riser, just as Sam. They were two of a kind. In fact, so was he. He was a little disturbed that Sam would request to meet him at his office so early, but he was handling the affairs of one of the wealthiest men in the area. Sam's millions in real estate holdings was no secret to anyone, and his accounts were worth thousands to whomever was handling them, and Liles was one of such handlers.

Samuel Kukas straightened his bow tie and smiled at the two men sitting before him. They both looked uncomfortable. It was no mistake that this was a formal meeting. Samuel was dressed in a white suit, buttoned down white silk shirt and wearing his famous red bow tie. He looked like a bad version of the famous restaurant baron. There was something about his smile. His eyes were as if they were looking straight

through them. It was then that they both simultaneously came to the conclusion that they were in trouble.

For years they each individually withheld selected monetary information from Sam, making them beneficiary of hundreds of thousands of dollars. Neither knew what the other had done, but there seemed to have been an accepted rule for stealing from Samuel Kukas. He had too much money to notice, but this morning their sins were to be found out.

Over the years both men had become more comfortable in their skimming from the real estate baron's coffers, thus becoming more astute in covering their tracks. But today they were certain that Sam called this meeting both to dismiss and prosecute them.

Then there was the story of Sam's recovery from fatal stab wounds. How on earth can someone recovery from something fatal? Liles reasoned in his mind. He had seen Sam's body on the kitchen floor. He was there when the physician ordered him taken away. Sam was very dead.

Yesterday Jerry Burks was in the process of closing on four of Sam's apartment buildings after he had heard that the man was killed when his phone rang. You can imagine his surprise when the caller said he was Samuel Kukas. Jerry was suspicious at first. The caller identified himself as Samuel Kukas, not Sam, as he usually did whenever he talked to Jerry. They were longtime acquaintances. It was 'Jerry' and 'Sam', not 'attorney Jerry Burks.' The caller did not waste time in explaining his identity. All he said was that this is Mr. Samuel Kukas, and he was requesting Mr. Burke presence at his office at 9 o'clock the next morning, and hung up.

Jerry immediately called Sam's home. Yes, it was Sam. He sounded formal, but polite when Jerry asked about his request. Jerry had asked him how he was feeling, and how come he was alive when everyone heard that he was dead,

but Sam offered very little explanation, other than he was alright, in fine health, and was looking forward to seeing him the next morning, then hung up the phone.

It was a weird experience. Jerry was sure that his days of living off Samuel Kukas' wealth were over. He could see himself in prison clothing, replacing his fine silk suits and patent leather shoes. His wife and three children, two of which were in college, and dependent on his enormous bank accounts, were going to hate his guts. His neighbors were not going to be too pleased, knowing that he was going to jail. They would consider him too dumb to have himself got caught.

Samuel's smile did very little to dispel the men's fear of reprisals for their dark deeds against the big man sitting in front of the highly polished oak desk. Sam spent very little time in his office. Most of his business dealings were conducted over his cellular phones. He did not care for formal settings such as this, but things were different now.

Times are different now.

He was different now.

Samuel Kukas knew that Jerry's biggest concern was for his wife and kids. That revealed a degree of decency in the man. He did not know that Jerry was stealing from him until two days ago when the revelation was made to him by his wandering thoughts. He then knew exactly how much Jerry had taken over the years, and also Philip Liles' account of his activities with his personal finances. Both men were thieves, amongst the many others of his associates he had discovered in the past few days.

It was time to make changes. It was time that people begin to think about others. It was time he began his task.

"Mr. Burks, I am very disappointed in you. You have been stealing from..." he began. Jerry hurriedly stood up.

“Sam..., Mr. Kukas, could we discuss this in private?” he asked, glancing at the attorney sitting beside him. This was why attorney Liles was present, he thought. He was to offer legal advice against him.

“That’s not necessary Mr. Burks. You see, Mr. Liles is in the very same boat as you. You both have been stealing from me,” said Samuel.

“Listen here...,” started Liles.

“Shut up Mr. Liles. It’s best that you listen to me first before you declare your alleged innocence,” snapped Samuel, his voice cutting through, and directed to both men at the same time.

They were going to deny any wrong doings, and leave it up to Samuel to prove his claim, but there was something about the big man’s voice that told them that their days were numbered, and that he was in control. Liles opened his mouth again to say something, but it was Burks who cut him off this time.

“Be quiet Liles! I don’t know about you, but if Sam accused me of stealing, he is right. I have been stealing from him, and if he wants to talk about it, I am more than willing to listen. So just shut the hell up!” he snapped. He was not about to deny anything. If Sam wants his money back, he would gladly repay. He just didn’t want to go to anybody’s prison.

Samuel looked at his attorney and mentally complemented himself for seeing the basic good in his long-time friend. He pulled out a sheet of paper from his desk drawer and studied it before raising his eyes to the two men. Liles was scared, and Burks was mentally prepared to accept his just reward. There was something about the landlord’s eyes that worried them. The man seemed to be actually looking through them.

“Mr. Burks, you owe me exactly seven hundred and fifty-seven thousand dollars. I have not counted the twenty-two

thousand dollars you kept for yourself on the Gamal Building because I did get the price I asked for. You charged the city more than I wanted, to the tune of twenty-two thousand dollars. But that is between you and the city. You owe me seven hundred and fifty-seven thousand dollars. How are you going to repay me?”

Jerry Burks’ face turned pale pink. Sam was right about the exact figure. Just before he came over he went over his books, and that was the exact figure he owed the man.

“I am sorry about this Sam... Mr. Kukas. I will repay you sir.”

“Your total wealth, including your two accounts in Swiss banks, and the cottages in the Bahamas, in your uncle’s name, is all worth four million, ten thousand dollars. Yes, Mr. Burks, you will repay me.”

Philip Liles glanced over at the subdued real estate broker. The look on his face revealed that Samuel Kukas was right about the figures. How could he know exactly how much someone has in Swiss accounts? Not even the great United States Government could find that out. Sam had some very reliable sources.

How much does he know about me?

His unasked questions were immediately answered.

“You, Mr. Liles? Let’s see...” started Samuel. He did not look down on his papers. He kept his eyes steadfast on the attorney. He had known Philip for twenty-six years, and fifteen of those were financially rewarding for the real estate mogul. Several times Philip bailed him out of sticky legal situations, without charging him a fee. He had not paid him for one hundred and eighty thousand, four hundred and forty dollars of services he had rendered. Philip had done him many favors, so in spite of the hundreds of thousands of dollars Philip Liles stole from him over the last twenty-five

years, was enough to view the little attorney in a favorable light.

“Your worth is seven million, eight hundred thousand and thirty dollars. Six million and fifty thousand of that is in five different Swiss banks. Your wife’s family accounts for an extra two million and ten dollars. You are a very rich man, Mr. Liles,” said Samuel, not taking his eyes off his friend.

Jerry Burks saw the silent acceptance of Samuel’s financial appraisal of the attorney’s worth in Philip’s eyes.

Samuel was right again.

This was amazing.

Liles also had checked on his running accounts with Samuel. The man was right, down to the last dollar. How he could possibly know was beyond him. Even his information on his wife’s family was accurate. The internal revenue had audited him three times, and not once were they aware of his extra worth. Yet Sam knew!

“What are you going to do sir? Obviously, you have done enough homework to send us to prison. We can repay you, as you also know, but you have not yet mentioned your intentions. Are you going to persecute us?” asked Liles.

“That would depend on you both...” answered Samuel. His answer gave hope to the men.

“What do you want from us?” asked Burks, sitting on the edge of his chair, his knuckles turning dead white from gripping the arm of the chair.

“Relax, Mr. Burks. What I will be asking is be a golden opportunity for you both to use your talents and experiences to do some good for the people around you...” stated Samuel.

Oh, God. He’s going to ask us to do community service, thought Philip. Sam read his thoughts.

“Don’t consider this as ‘community service’ Mr. Liles. Let’s call this ‘humanity service.’ It has a much broader spectrum,”

answered Samuel. It was then that both men realized that the big man sitting in front of them is not only anticipating their questions, but was reading into their very thoughts.

Philip's eyes popped. "How did you know what I was thinking?" he asked, not really wanting to know the answer

"I know a lot of things Mr. Liles. I also know that Mr. Burks was contemplating taking his sons out of college in order to repay his debts.

"Right Mr. Burks?" asked Samuel. Jerry Burks just nodded, astounded.

"I want you, Mr. Liles, to call Reverend Levin at the little Baptist church on Loire Street, and make an appointment with him to legally transfer those two buildings next to him, to his church. Then I want you to act as the legal representative for him and all the members of his church staff. You are also required to make a monthly donation of five thousand dollars to his church. That will be your religious contribution, which is deductible. You cannot charge for these services."

Sam continued staring at the attorney. He could count the beads of sweat popping out on his bald forehead.

"You can assign some of your junior partners to service the reverend's affairs, unless there is something that is too big for them to handle, then you will give it your own personal attention. My calculations show that this service rendered for two years would just about even out your financial obligations to me. Should you choose to shortchange me during this period, I would advise that you do not!"

The edge of his voice sank in at the end of his statement.

Philip Liles nodded. He did not think it would be his smartest intention of crossing his friend again. No, he would gladly do what Sam asked. Again Sam read his thoughts.

"Thank you, Phil." said Sam, calling Philip by his first name, as he had always done before this meeting. That drew a

mental bond of friendship between them that were not as strong as before.

Jerry Burks, his knuckles relaxed from their firm grip on the chair, looked up expectantly.

“Mr. Burks, the two buildings that will be transferred to Reverend Levin’s church will be your managerial responsibilities. You will also act as the church’s real estate adviser. From time to time the reverend will be requiring you to look at real estate deals for his church and community. You will be on the lookout for any good deals in the community, and you will inform the reverend, who will be depending on you to do the best for his people. The building on Hale Street that you have listed in your nephew’s name will be turned over to the reverend to be used as a center for unwed mothers, and like Philip, you will be making a monthly religious financial contribution to the church. Your monthly amount will be two thousand dollars. In two years you also will be just about paid up to me.”

Samuel stood up.

“Any questions gentlemen?” he asked.

“Are you kidding us Sam? Of course we have questions. Thousands of them....” answered Philip

Samuel regained his seat. He was expecting this.

“What questions might those be Phil?” he asked. These men would serve his purpose well. They were talented and basically good people who got caught up in materialistic fervor. They could now be trusted.

“Firstly, you were supposed to be dead. Liles here saw when the Medical Examiner wheeled out. We all were there when the doctors pronounced you dead. You were dead Sam! Now here you are, revealing all these things about us that no one else could conceivably know about our affairs. Then the things you are asking us to do. It’s like you are trying to

change the city...” blurted Burks, not wanting to stop before he was able to voice in all his concerns.

“Yeah, Samuel, you never were a religious man. Plus, you are supposed to be a Catholic, but here you are giving stuff to a Baptist church. What’s going on Sam?” Philip interrupted his associate.

“Phil, Jerry, I have something to tell you both. You must promise not to try and understand it all. Even I don’t understand a lot of it. What is required here is your trust in me, and your own desire to make a difference...”

“This is the story.....” and Samuel Kukas told the two men of his experiences, from the moment he was killed, to the time he spent with Gabriel. Even the story about his new powers will not convince the men to believe him, or even work with him willingly. They must want to do both themselves. It was important to his overall goal. After he had told his story, it was his turn to look up expectantly at the men.

“My God. I’ve heard of people having after-death experiences, but not ever have I heard of anyone actually meeting an archangel, and him requiring them to return and do as you said Gabriel wanted. This is weird Sam,” said Philip Liles. His years of anti-religion were fore-fronting this new information. It just didn’t make sense. It was just not believable.

It was Jerry Burks’ question that cemented the men’s final acceptance of Samuel Kukas’ story, and proposal.

“This special power that you say you have. Can you show it to us Sam?”

Samuel’s eyes scanned the room. The water cooler’s bottle was empty. The office was closed for the past week, and the supplier was not able to replenish the bottle.

“It’s a rather warm morning, do you fellows feel like a drink?” asked Sam. The two men’s eyes followed his to the

empty cooler bottle. “The bottle is empty Sam,” answered Philip. Samuel ignored him and walked over to bottle.

The men watched him attentively as he reached out and placed his index finger on the empty cooler.

Whoosh! Water came bubbling up in the bottle.

“Oh my!” exclaimed Philip. He almost fainted when Samuel took a cup, filled it with water and drank it. Samuel walked over with a cupful of the clear water and handed it to him.

“Here, drink this. It will do you good.” Philip took the cup and hesitantly put it to his lips. The water was ice-cold, and tasted refreshing. He emptied its contents in his mouth. Sam was right, he did feel better.

“How did you do that?” asked Jerry. He walked over and was inspecting the bottle. There were no hidden hoses or any contraption to lead the liquid into the bottle.

“Maybe you want something to drink too Jerry. Here, help yourself,” invited Samuel. Jerry turned to look at his friend. There was no telltale smugness on his face. This man was for real. He declined the cup that the man held.

“I believe you Samuel. I don’t understand, but I certainly will go along with what you said. This is fantastic!”

Samuel Kukas smiled openly at the two bewildered-looking men sitting before him. He returned to his chair, leaned back and folded his arms behind his head.

“Go and do what you have to do fellows. Meet me back here in two weeks and let’s see what we have going. Remember that a lot of people are depending on you both. These are hard times, and hard measures are going to be required to institute any favorable changes,” said Samuel. He closed the drawer on his desk, slowly got up from the chair and led the men to the door.

Philip Liles looked at his friend as he shook his hand on the front landing of the office complex. He has changed. Even his

general disposition has changed. He was talking as if he has stumbled on a new lease on life. As a matter of fact, that was the explanation for his change.

A new lease on life.

A Second Chance.

CHAPTER

24 Willie Hearn, Sarah Jones and Samuel Kukas sat attentively as Reverend Levin outlined his latest program for the church. He was elated that Samuel had donated the buildings to his church, and just last week Jerry Burks closed negotiated the transfer of an abandoned government building for a new center for his young people in the East side Junction.

Attorney Liles assisted in creating a new organization to help local companies train and find jobs for both unemployed and underemployed adults and young people in the tri-community area. There was also an extensive senior citizen activities program in place.

Special groups were organized to assist young unmarried mothers to find jobs and affordable day care centers and baby-sitters. Other community-enhancement organizations like block clubs, religious organizations and civic groups were being solicited to assist in the many programs sponsored by the church. Sports celebrities and other visible individuals were pledged to serve as role models and foster partners for school-aged kids.

Willie Hearn, Sarah Jones, Samuel Kukas and Reverend Levin pledged to meet every month at Reverend Levin's church. The group was very enthused with the progress being made. Actually, they were not the only ones that were deeply interested in their activities.

A SECOND CHANCE – *Unleashing The Power of Good*

Detective Rattan's investigation was reaching out to many in the community. He was not for want of information on Reverend Levin. The preacher was declared dead, and no one can explain how he was up and about, more effective than he was ever before. What the detective was hearing was not what he wanted to hear. He was sure that Reverend Levin was up to no good, but everyone was talking about the reverend's many benevolent programs.

The detective pondered the many ways and means to get the dirt on the reverend's activities. Maybe he could prove a rip-off scheme, but financial records of the church were in top condition. Rattan's call to the local Internal Revenue's office showed that the little Baptist church was receiving thousands of dollars each month from wealthy suburbanites, including high-profile attorney Phillip Liles, Jerry Burks, a real estate broker, and real estate investor, Samuel Kukas. To top off the report was the mention of a local drug pusher and a prostitute, both declared dead, but was up and about, just like the reverend and the real estate baron...

Why would two wealthy, well-known white men be associated with a known drug pusher and a low-grade prostitute? Where did the attorney and the real estate broker fit in all this? What was the connection there?

In fact, he also learned through his inside contact; a local church member he was bribing to pass on information to him, that all the seven people were actively involved in the operation of various programs in the church.

This prompted the wily detective to conduct an internal investigation on each of the men. Something fishy is going on in that church, and I am determined to find out what, he thought. The reports on the men brought wide smiles on his face. He had hit pay-dirt.

CHAPTER

25

Three of the men, Samuel Kukas, Philip Liles and Jerry Burks were associates, knowing each other from childhood. The attorney represented Kukas on various occasions, and Burks, the real estate man, was an insider for Kukas. All three men seemed to be pulling some sort of scam at the church. There was a long arrest record on both Willie Hearn and Sarah Jones, but nothing outstanding. The detective considered the last two to be ‘go-getters,’ and did not warrant too much attention, for the time being. He wanted the big fish...

Within the past five weeks, the little insignificant Baptist church amassed a fortune of nine hundred and thirty-five thousand dollars, which includes two apartment buildings, two community centers, two recreation facilities and a warehouse. A million-buck empire in five weeks!

Although none of the three principal men had any criminal record, Kukas was brought before local judges on numerous occasions for misdemeanor offenses, namely through confrontations with tenants in his buildings. He was never jailed, but was fined thousands of dollars over the past five years in various small claims courts and through out-of-court settlements, and he did seem to be the leader of the trio.

The detective was sure he was on to something big. Three rich suburban white men, a local preacher, a washed-up prostitute and a drug dealer, all bounded together by some common thread. There was more than what meets the eye, and Detective Rattan was adding an extra eye...

For the past few days Detective Rattan sat in his unmarked car at the corner of Loire and watched as members of the pastor’s council made frequent visits to and from the church. The determined detective followed Kukas from the building

A SECOND CHANCE – Unleashing The Power of Good

twice, and twice the man's big Cadillac seemed to have disappeared into thin air, right before his eyes. He had promised himself to have his eyes checked as soon as possible. This clandestine vigil was taking its toll.

Today Detective Rattan was prepared for a confrontation with the group. There was too much he did not know, and there was no indication his inside contact was going to shed any more light on his ignorance, in spite of the over one thousand dollars he was paying from his own pocket. This was his fight, and since his 'Judas' was not about to turn over his 'lord'; he would have to do his own thing, his own way.

He made sure headquarters did not know of his tactics, because most of them were borderline illegal, and with his pension just three years away, he preferred to keep certain of his legal idiosyncrasies to himself. Before the apparent association with Liles, the attorney, Rattan planned to muscle in on the reverend with threats, and possibly, some mild, but deliberate physical manipulations, often classified in his reports as 'accidents,' but all that went down the drain. He did not want a legal opinion from Liles on his actions.

Detective Rattan tossed his tenth half-smoked cigar out the window of his car, and for the eleventh time, lit another. The windows were partly rolled up against casual detection. It was not unusual for a car to be parked where his was, but like most occurrences in this neighborhood, his attracted a certain amount of curiosity from leery residents. The glasses on his windows were tinted dark, thus preventing anyone from seeing its occupants, yet would attract attention for that very same reason. It is like someone peering in a tinted limousine, hoping to recognize the person who does not want to be recognized. The thrill of the unknown.

CHAPTER

26

Detective Rattan eased further down in his seat as three men emerged from the church. They were Kukas, Burks and Liles. The detective was hoping Kukas would leave by himself. This was the day he was planning to confront the man. Now they were all going somewhere in the same car. He watched as Jerry Burks opened the driver's door on his 450-SL Mercedes Benz, and snapped the lock to open the other doors. Kukas sat beside him in the front passenger seat, and Liles went to the rear seat. They all fastened their seat belts. In a moment the big engine of the luxury automobile purred to life, and drove off.

Detective Rattan waited until the car turned the corner before he started his own car. The police vehicle roared into action as he slowly inched forward around the bend. He could see the Benz going down the street at a normal pace. The car turned onto Main and proceeded down the Highway 43. Rattan gunned his own car forward, closing the gap between the two cars, but staying behind far enough to avoid detection. He figured that since the men were obviously up to no good, they might be taking precautions against being followed, so he reacted accordingly.

The procession continued for about ten miles before the Benz turned off the highway and into a service plaza. Stopping for gas, reasoned Rattan. They must be going on a far journey. He pulled his own car around the side of the building, and waited until the Benz gassed up and pulled off again. He checked his fuel gauge.

As expected, it was full. Just this morning he had it filled at the station, as he did every morning before he left for the road. Standard procedure.

The police cruiser followed the Benz for another five miles down the highway. The car was traveling 40 miles per hour,

A SECOND CHANCE – Unleashing The Power of Good

five miles below the limit. They did not seem to be in a hurry. Then Rattan noticed that the Benz was slowly pulling away from him. He had maintained a steady pace of two car lengths, now he had falling three cars behind the Benz. The cars in front of him were also pulling away. He glanced down at his gauges. He was still doing 40. Why was everyone pulling away at the same time?

Something was wrong!

He glanced at his gauges again, and then took a second look. His speedometer showed he was doing 30. He was slowing, not the cars. He put his foot down on the pedal, and listened as the big motor responded to the extra flow of fuel, but he felt no added motional thrust. He was not going any faster. By this time the cars ahead were slowly fading in the distance. He was now going 20, then 15...

“What the hell...?” he exclaimed, as the car rolled to a stop, its engine still running. He gunned the gas pedal, and the engine only roared, but offered no pulling power. By then the cars in front have disappeared from sight. He reached for his radio and called for assistance. The service station he passed picked up his call and promised to send a tow truck over. He was not going anywhere.

He calmly lit a cigar and waited, his mind racing furiously. There were no logical explanations why the car acted like it did. It was his personal, assigned vehicle. No one else had ever driven it. The car was regularly-maintained by reliable mechanics. The year-old automobile had never failed him before.

Until now!

CHAPTER

27

Allan looked listlessly out the window. The morning air was humid and the promised breeze did not materialized. He had listened to the forecaster predicting a humid 87° Fahrenheit for the mid-morn, but did mention the slight gust of wind that should be passing through the area. Well, so far no ‘gust of wind’ came through, and he was pissed at everybody lying to him.

The young woman was curled up on the broken sofa, snoring softly. Her clothes were in disarray, partly due to Allan’s amorous actions, and her wild erotic responses. Her clothes looked as if they were slept on. He tried remembering the last time she has ever done anything to her hair, not since she drifted into his life.

Her once curly locks flowing down her back had now turned into matted twists and turns like a vine crawling up a tree.

As Allan watched her, anger mounted within him. His big fists clenched and unfolded in unison to her breathing. He wanted to snatch her off the sofa and toss her out the window. Maybe the outside air will do her good. He got up from the chair and went into the bathroom. Much like the rest of the house, it was dirty, with female undergarments hanging on every protruding object. Even the tap handle of the commode served as a hangar. He brushed a pair of bras from the edge of the sink and turned on the water. The liquid came gushing out in full force, splashing warm water on the front of his bare chest and soiled underpants.

“Damn,” he muttered, jumping back against the wall. The sudden action threw his head back, catching it squarely against the mental edge of the utility cabinet. He felt a sharp

pain shoot up his forehead, and then the room became blurred.

“What the hell...!” he exclaimed, and pitched forward on his face. On his way down, the side of his head caught the side of the sink, registering a sickening thud, and then all went black.

Lisa stared intently, as the muffled cry came from the bathroom. She was not sleeping, but was watching Allan through half-closed eyes. She had seen the look of disgust in his eyes as he watched her feigned sleeping form.

“Oh, hell!” she thought. Another one ready to ditch her. How many was it this time? The seventh for the month? She had shitty luck in keeping lovers. After they got what they wanted, out she goes...

There has to be a better life than this, she thought as the sound from the bathroom stopped. He must be in there washing his face, because the tap was still running. Obviously absent was the usual splashing of water. Allan was one messy washer. The entire bathroom showed liquidy evidence whenever he used it. The dude must like the feel and sound of splashing water.

The air was getting warmer in the little room. Lisa slowly got up and went to the window. There was absolutely no wind. The leaves on the trees by the window stood perfectly still. Everything stood perfectly still. For her, even life stood perfectly still.

At twenty-two with two kids and no fathers, no job, no home, and no one to care if she lives or dies, life was Lisa’s worst enemy. It would not be so bad if she had some sort of profession, some sort of education, but dropping out of school in the eleventh grade did not offer her much of a chance of survival in this competitive world. Pregnant at fourteen, and again at sixteen sealed her fate to a life of hardship. She was fortunate that her sisters took her two

daughters off her hand, swearing she would never see them again.

Big deal! She didn't want to see neither the kids nor her sisters again either. They all thought they were better than she was.

It was their fault why she got pregnant the first time. It was their idea to hide their boyfriends in her room that night when their father came home early from his night job. Both boys were already sexually 'worked up,' and there were no way they were going to leave the room without being seen, so they opted to stay in her room until her father was asleep.

Well, that was five hours later, during which both boys introduced her to a swirling world she could not get off. Three months later she was pregnant. Only her sisters knew what happened, and to save their own skins, they hushed up everything, making little Lisa took all the blame.

After Fera was born, Lisa went back to school, but with a baby she was ripe picking for every testosterone-enhanced boy in the neighborhood. Soon baby Sherry came, and down went her life. Her parents and her sisters took both girls and evicted the seventeen-year-old high school dropout from their home.

Lisa was a disgrace to the fine family!

CHAPTER

28

Lisa Stubbs had a job at the club to 'entertain guests,' but the demands on her young body were too much, so she quit. She wanted to return to school to become a beautician, but no one would invest in her future. She was alone. After trying unsuccessfully to get a decent job, she gave up and returned to the club, but this time she was working for herself. She was 'entertaining' her own guests. The club owner allowed her to

‘operate’ at the club, but was taking a share of whatever she earned.

When Allan came into the club one night and spoke to her, she was hoping that he did not just want a ‘one nighter,’ but a meaningful relationship. This is what she told herself each time someone approached her for her services, but Allan was different. It was the first time she had spent so much time with one person. She really liked him, and whether it was wishful thinking, or some in-depth perception, she felt he liked her too.

Wrong again!

All Allan wanted was someone to spend some time with, and that sometime was over. She hated herself all over again, just as she always did after these kinds of encounters.

CHAPTER

29

There was an unmistakable gurgling sound coming from the bathroom that caught Lisa’s full attention.

Something was not right!

Allan was never so quiet in the bathroom. In fact, he firmly believed he could sing, trying to get into the local band at the club as a singer, but somehow the title as a singer constantly eluded him. Determined and convinced that he was the not-yet-discovered singing superstar of the ages, he bellowed in the confinement of the bathroom. At first it was comical to Lisa, and armed her with witty put-me-downers to throw at him, but to her amazement, the guy really thought he could sing, so she stopped teasing, preferring to live a ripe old age.

She walked cautiously over to the door and pressed her ear against it and listened. At first she could hear nothing, and then the soft moaning sound filtered through the door.

“What the hell is that...? Is he trying some sexy lines for his renditions?”

The sound came again, but this time with renewed efforts, as if someone was calling out against forced restrictions.

Without thinking about her actions, Lisa quickly pushed the door open, not knowing what to expect. The door stopped short of completely open, hitting against the inert form of Allan. With a glance, Lisa could see the pool of blood lying on the floor, under the side of his face.

“Allan!” she called, kneeling on the warm floor. His eyes were open looking at her, but no sound, except for shallow, muffled grunts escaping his lips. The side of his face was as big as a small melon. His long blond hair was soaked in the now-cached blood.

“Allan, what happened?” asked Lisa. She looked in his eyes, and instantly realized that although they were opened, he was not seeing anything. The telltale rise and fall of his chest indicated he was breathing, but barely.

“Allan,” Lisa called again, not expecting a reply. In spite of the warm morning air his skin was cold and clammy. Panic came over her. He must have been bleeding for some time, because the blood was all caked on the open wound.

“What am I to do? I ain’t never in this situation before, what am I to do?” she whimpered. Call somebody. Call Reverend Levin. Call 911, call anybody, but do something! Her inner-self was prompting her into action. She gently laid Allan’s head on the floor and rushed from the room.

“Got to get Reverend Levin,” she thought.

She grabbed the telephone and started dialing.

“Damn, no dial tone!”

The phone was disconnected.

The damn fool didn’t pay his bill,” she cursed, and bolted for the door. There is a phone down the street. She must get

to that. As she headed for the door she realized she had no money for the phone. Not remembering emergency calls were free, she dashed back into the bathroom and pulled Allan’s wallet from his pocket.

“I must get help!” she said to herself, and once again dashed for the hallway.

The human force slammed her back into the room. She fell sprawling across the sofa.

“What the he....?” she started, and felt the force pummeled her again.

“Oh, my God...,” she screamed through closed lips. She managed to raise herself, without seeing anybody. The pain in her stomach was overwhelming. She heard footsteps coming over to her, and instinctively flinched, expecting another blow. She got it, this time squarely in her face. She heard, rather than felt the bone structure supporting her neck shattered.

She went limp, rolling from the sofa to the floor with a crash.

“Get the wallet! Get the wallet!” whispered someone.

“Hey, someone’s in the bathroom. Hey! He looks dead,” uttered another voice.

“Get that TV and let’s get outa here,” answered the first voice.

There was a rush of activity, and then quiet. It was over. In less than two minutes, it was all over. Lisa lay dead on the floor, and Allan likewise, was dead.

CHAPTER

30

There was no need to kill the po’ chile,” wailed Deana Stubbs, Lisa’s mother. She renewed her crying with vigor as the men wheeled the covered forms out of the room.

A young policeman approached her with a pencil and note pad.

“Miss, did you know the deceased?” he asked. Deana looked up at him. He was no more than twenty.

“Yes, I knew her. Where the hell is the detective? How come no one is trying to find the killer?” she snapped. The young officer, obviously used to such treatment, answered softly.

“Miss, I am doing the preliminary investigation. A senior officer will be by shortly. Now, what is your relation the young lady?” he asked again, firmly. Detecting the tone of authority, Deana replied. “I’m her mother,” again, unable to keep back the rising anger. She stormed out of the room.

It was twelve twenty when the phone rang. Reverend Levin looked at the instrument, then at his half-eaten lunch and sighed. He knew it was trouble.

“Hello? Reverend Levin here...” he answered. He listened intently while he slowly pushed away the plate. This was going to be a long day. His wife eyed him nervously, knowing he was about to leave. She knew that look in his eyes. Ever since he ‘came back,’ he has that concerned look whenever someone called or stopped by to see him. The look was there again.

“Who is it this time Jonathan?” she asked. Without looking up at her, he answered. “It’s Lisa Stubbs. She’s dead.”

“Oh, my Lord. Lisa’s dead? What happened?” His wife asked in disbelief.

“Don’t rightly know. That was her mother. Seemed the police are not taking her death seriously, and Mrs. Stubbs wants me to see what I can do,” the Reverend said softly. That stopped Mrs. Levin in her tracks.

“See what you can do? Why didn’t she think of that before she tossed the poor child out in the street? How did she expect her to end up?”

“Now, now Vera, don’t be judgmental. Everybody has their problems, and everybody deals with them their own way...,” consoled her husband.

“She treated the little girl like dirt while she sheltered the other two. She has her nerve...,” said Mrs. Levin.

“Mrs. Stubbs might have made a mistake, but we cannot hold it against her. It must be hell going through what she’s obviously experiencing now. The guilt she must have...,” said the reverend. He reached for his hat and headed for the door.

CHAPTER

31

The drive to the West Side was quiet and long. The late morning traffic was light, and this gave the reverend an aura of serenity to reflect on the past three months. It has been a totally new experience to him. His sense of purpose was motivational to his efforts to help not only his congregation, but the oppressed of the city. Whenever anyone needed help, they seem to find a path to his door. He had noticed that his wife was getting more irritable with each situation. He couldn’t entirely blame her, and he must have a serious talk with her soon.

Reverend Levin was never short of amazement at his attitude and dispositions when called upon to help. He seemed to glow at each opportunity. His entire staff was a reflection on his benevolence. Every single day the churchyard was filled of people with genuine concerns, and his well-trained staff worked feverishly to alleviate each concern. In spite of his tireless efforts, he seemed somewhat unfulfilled. There was so much more to be done.

Many times he asked himself where the purpose of Reverend Levin stops and the Almighty’s begins. He didn’t want to impose his desire to ‘do good’ on the will and

A SECOND CHANCE – *Unleashing The Power of Good*

purpose of his assigned tasks, so he carefully analyzed each situation, seeking the true objective of his actions. He did seem to have a keen sense of awareness whenever his pride mounts, as if he's being warned by some inner monitoring system.

Since his 'return,' his little church has grown three thousand strong. Thanks to Kukas, his broker friend and his lawyer he now has enough space to host ten thousand more if necessary. He marveled at Samuel Kukas. The overweight Jew was a blessing to the entire city. Many might not know it yet, but the once money-grabbing landlord was earnestly working for the betterment of the total community. What a change!

The Kukas family was now firm supporters of the church, and was welcomed and loved by everyone. Even his lawyer, who for some reason was genuinely involved in the various projects of the church. At first, it seemed as if he was only doing what Sam told him, but the reverend could discern the free spirit in the man as he busied himself to his tasks, and there were many.

There was a group of people standing around when the reverend's car pulled up. He was instantly recognized. He did not know many of the people, but they all seemed to know him.

"Noon' Rev..."

"Howdy Reverend Levin, sir..."

"Good to see you again reverend..." they greeted.

He acknowledged each greeting with a smile. It was so easy for him to smile these days. It gave him a good feeling knowing he was helping, making a difference....

Reverend Levin did not seem to notice the pale blue car sitting at the curb, with the equally pale white man sitting behind the wheel. As he stepped from his car, the man eased

down into the seat, as if to avoid detection. He knew that the reverend would show up. He did every time something like this happened.

“Why do these people always call him? It was as if he’s running for some office. He’s everywhere,” the detective muttered to himself.

Roger Rattan watched as the Baptist minister entered the apartment, just as he did when the Hall punked-out kid got shot, and when that slut Terri Megan was raped. He peeped over the edge of his door as the people gathered around the big man.

“The first person these people call is the damn preacher. Him first, then the police! Maybe they need to just call him for everything, and leave the police to attend to decent people’s affairs,” muttered the detective again. This guy could be dangerous. He’s got too much influence on these people. Maybe he’s dealing them drugs. Yes, that’s what it is. Some sort of mind-influencing drugs!”

Anger mounted as he silently watched as the crowd parted to allow the man entry into the apartment. Now what the hell does he think he’s going to do? Solve the case? The detective reached for his car phone and dialed.

“Yes, this is Rattan! Who’s on the Stubbs’ case? ...Yeah? Well listen, I just happen to be in the neighborhood, and since no one’s here yet, I’d like to take a look.

Have the Captain call me later...

No! I’ll report back... Yeah!” He put up the phone.

“Damn nosy dispatcher,” he said, as he opened the car door.

CHAPTER

32

Ever since the report came over the radio about the Stubbs' murder, detective Rattan knew just who would be turning up. That was not all he knew. The two culprits that knocked off the girl were his informants, and because of a certain case he was working on, he was not about to blow his prime leads. It had taken him months to cultivate the two into reliable snitches.

“What the hell, I think it is about time the preacher and me have a little talk,” said the detective. He locked his car door, checked the big gun in its side holster and tramped up the little stair, and into the apartment.

Reverend Levin was grim-faced when he entered the room. Another valuable life snuffed out. He never knew Lisa or her mother personally. He never knew ninety percent of the people he helped, but he knew that they were valuable people, and needed help. Lisa Stubbs was not the youngest, nor the oldest, nor the prettiest, nor the only female, nor the best, but Lisa Stubbs was a precious life, and someone ruthlessly took it. When will these people learn this is their world, and they must treat each other with mutual respect?

He recalled the scene that Gabriel showed him and the others. These people were simply acting it out, without remorse.

Reverend Levin listened attentively as each member of the group spoke of Lisa, and of the crime that was festering in the community. He wiped the tears of Lisa's mother, sympathizing with her in her grief. It was too late to bring Lisa back, but she could now turn her grief into a positive force to prevent this from happening to her other daughters, or to anyone else she knows. She could become a part of the solution. She could use her experiences in bringing up three

daughters to guide other parents in making the right decisions to prevent another Lisa Stubbs' statistic.

There were no police present. The last one left with the bodies. No one took statements, or questioned anyone. Just a few preliminary questions by the inexperienced beat patrolman, and they were gone. Reverend Levin knew fully well that was the last they would hear of Lisa's murder. It will be placed in an unsolved file and forgotten. That was the reality of life in this city!

"Not if I can help," thought Reverend Levin. He walked in the bathroom and saw the blood-soaked floor where Allan was. He was disgusted.

"Why hadn't someone cleaned this up?" he asked. Mrs. Stubbs answered, "The young man's mother wants to clean it up, but the officer said they need it for evidence."

"Evidence? The man is dead and taken away. It's been two hours now. The entire crime scene is already compromised. What are they doing?" snapped the Reverend. He was getting angry.

"None of your damn business reverend. This is not your pulpit. This is police business!"

The voice had a high ring of authority. All heads turned to view the tall man in gray suit standing by the door. There was no mistaking him. He was Detective Rattan.

He bowed his head slightly to avoid hitting the six-foot-four high door post. As he entered, his massive frame blocked everyone's view of the door. A confident smile plastered his face. He was in charge, and he knew it.

Reverend Rattan looked at him in outward amusement.

"Well, Detective Rattan. Good afternoon sir. Are you on this case?" he asked cynically. The detective could feel the contemptuous eyes of the reverend boring into him. He hated the man. This was his first confrontation with the

reverend since the stabbing three months ago. Although he was looking forward to this meeting, he didn't quite know how to handle it.

"In fact, yes, and I don't want you around..." his eyes swept the crowd,

"...nor these deadbeats around. There is a police investigation going on, and I need no interference from you...!" he snapped. It was obvious that he tremendously disliked the reverend.

Detective Rattan's reputation as a brutal enforcer is well-known all over the city, and even the most feared criminal harbored reservations before crossing paths with him. His two-forty frame, quick tempered, ruthless and vindictive attitude, plus a deadly accuracy with his magnum .44, were often touted and respected, even among his peers and his enemies alike.

"Deadbeat, Rattan? Dead, I understand, but deadbeat does not describe any of these people, SIR," said the Reverend softly. The tone of his voice was unmistakably condescending. It hits home.

"Why, you..., you. How dare you..." stammered the detective.

"Oh, oh, temper. Watch that temper, Rattan..." cautioned the reverend.

By this time the people in the room were getting uncomfortable, some of them afraid. Not too many black men have spoken to Detective Rattan and lived to tell about it. The man was dangerous, and the reverend was on dangerous ground.

Reverend Rattan slowly turned his back to the irate detective and walked out of the room. He was halfway across the hall when the detective caught up with him.

A SECOND CHANCE – Unleashing The Power of Good

“You... you... Hold on there. Stop right where you are!” he ordered. There was a chill in his voice. Reverend Rattan stopped.

“Are you talking to me, SIR?” he asked. He still did not turn around.

“Yes, I am talking to you!” bellowed Rattan. The Reverend then slowly turned, his eyes burning into the angry detective’s.

“Then I must insist that you address me by my name, which I hope you can pronounce.”

Anger took the best of the detective. He reached in his belt and pulled out his pistol.

“O.K. man, you’re asking for trouble. I gave you an order and you refused...” The detective’s finger tightened on the trigger, his hand shaking nervously. The reverend turned and walked off, leaving the man desperately trying to squeeze the trigger.

Nothing happened!

The crowd watched in horror as the detective pulled again and again on the trigger of his big magnum. He cursed loudly, and in a wild, uncontrolled rage rushed towards the departing clergyman. As he lunged forward, his feet tangled with each other, and he fell with a resounding force on the boarded floor. The gun discharged with a thunderous sound, followed with a cry of anguish as the flying bullet pierced the fallen man’s shoulder.

Reverend Levin did not look back, but kept walking to his car. He slowly reached in for his cellular and dialed emergency.

“Officer is down!”

He carefully gave the location to the operator and drove off to an appointment with Alvin Simms, the church’s gardener.

CHAPTER

33

The women in the large air-conditioned room eyed Sarah with open suspicion. Most have them have known her over the years, many still reeling with negative experiences.

Sarah always was the one to come up with new schemes to either get the best of the johns, or to hold out on their pimps. Not all the time her little programs worked in her favor, and she had the scars to prove it, but in most instances it was someone else who got the brunt of her ill-advised plots.

Sarah always seemed to be on the outskirts when things happened. She was not one in whom confidence could be extolled. Sarah Jones was never to be trusted, period!

Still, when the news hit the streets that Sarah Jones wanted to meet with the ladies of 3rd, 4th, Dukes Avenue, Molly Lane and Gutter’s Alley, they all responded. Although many had ulterior motives, there was an air of camaraderie among the “loose ladies” of the areas. Many had heard about her close friends, Mary Lou and Sandra, and wanted to meet this ‘new’ Sarah Jones.

Among those who wanted to hear Sarah Jones was Allan “Cut-throat” Harvey. He made sure that his three girls, Brenda, Kelly and Francis attended the affair. He had his motives too.

It was Sarah who had influenced Phyllis (the late Phyllis), to skim off Allan’s ‘royalty’ from her weekend activities because he did not know about the emergency stop-over of the ten members of the Fishermen’s Convention who were staying at The Buxton’s Center. Their bus blew an engine on their way to Los Angeles, and they were stuck in town for the evening, and looking for entertainment.

A SECOND CHANCE – Unleashing The Power of Good

Sarah had slipped away with Phyllis and four other girls to ‘work’ the Center. They had spent the evening with the men, and came away with seven hundred dollars each. Sarah told the girls to give their pimps a hundred bucks as their cut for the period they spent away from their assigned corners. They wouldn’t know the girls left their regular slow Wednesday evening street canvassing for the ‘bigger fish.’

Usually, they would net a few dollars for a couple ‘quickies in the alley,’ so a hundred bucks would put a smile on everyone’s face, or so they thought. Each girl had given Sarah her ‘finder’s fee’ of a hundred dollars.

It so happened that Sarah’s part-time pimp, Josh, got wind of the setup and confronted Sarah, who promptly told him that it was Phyllis’ idea, and that she had given the larger portion of her take for her to keep until she sees Josh the next day. Gullible Josh contacted Frankie, who was Phyllis’ ‘guardian,’ and they immediately took off in search of Phyllis, who denied everything. Phyllis was later found behind the ally, across from the barber shop with her neck broken.

No, Sarah Jones isn’t getting any trust votes!

Cut-throat” specifically warned his girls to be on the lookout for any new schemes Jones might be cooking up, and to report back to him. Other men also planted their ‘choice ladies’ to see what Sarah Jones was up to.

In spite of her reputation, many of the women genuinely wanted to hear what their counterpart had to say. These women would hold on to every thread of hope anyone had to offer in their degrading portals of life. Mary Lou and Sandra both planted some positive seeds on behalf of their friend. They had both given up their pimps, and without the regular repercussions. Mary Lou even convinced a few other girlfriends that with Sarah’s help, they too could do the same. Although many of the girls reasoned among themselves about what else would they do if they did give up their

professions, they still wanted to hear what Sarah Jones had to say.

The doors of the room were open wide, fully thrown back, as if to say,

“Come in!” The Women Center, consisting of four centers, each hosting about two hundred seated, was in full operation. There were numerous news stories and written articles about the unique center, and although many of the women had never set foot into the building, it was there as a silent reminder that should they ever want to make a life-change, the Center was their refuge.

In spite of the many things that Sarah Jones, Mary Lou Boswell, Sandra Hollis and several others from the church were doing, Sarah had managed to keep out of the limelight, allowing Mary Lou to be the spokesperson. Though barely finishing the fourth grade in elementary school, Mary Lou took on a whole new character, and handled herself with dignity in the company of television newsmen, city officials and business people. It was difficult to equate the former Mary Lou, the prostitute, with the present Mary Lou Boswell, the women’s advocate.

Like Mary Lou, Sandra also went through repentance and became very effective in giving counseling to other women, even though she, too, had no formal education. It was just five weeks ago that both women were walking the streets. Today, they were bent on changing the lives of challenged women, giving hope and security, one person at a time.

CHAPTER

34

Sarah counted forty-six women; some seated on metal chairs neatly placed in rows of three. Others chose to stand by the door, as if preparing to make a hasty exit. Sarah knew that by any standard, forty-six women in attendance were a tremendous encouragement and a major achievement.

No more than four to ten women would have ordinarily walked into the Center on any given day. The Center was well-supported by local churches, who brought in dozens of wayward females at a time, but for someone to simply walk in, even by invitation, it was unnatural.

At exactly five forty-five in the afternoon, Sarah motioned to the man standing by the door to close it and leave. By pre-arrangement, Glen Silas, former drug-pusher and common thief, smiled at Sarah, nodded at the women standing by the door. He softly closed the door and walked quietly across to the other building where Willie Hearn was meeting with a male group of former and practicing drug dealers.

Some of the women stirred uneasily as Sarah moved to the center of the room, behind a wooden podium. There was a small microphone attached, but she made no effort to use the instrument. Her voice reverberated across the room.

“Ladies, I ain’t gonna bother introduce ma’ self to you. Y’all know me from the streets. The same streets me an’ you use to work.”

There were sporadic acknowledgments, some groans, some snickering, but all listened attentively.

“Ya’ know that this here Center was built to give refuge to anyone wishing to give up the streets and start being mothers and sisters and aunts again...” She paused, looked across the

room, appraising the effect of her words. The room was quiet again, everyone hanging on to her words.

“I know how y’all feel ‘bout you making such a step and the repercussions from y’all pimps...”

“Yuh got that right Sarah!” someone shouted from the rear. There was nervous laughter.

“Yuh bet I got it right! ‘Member that I was doing the streets too, so was Mary Lou an’ Sandra, an’ Janie an’ Fannie Mae...”

“Fannie Mae ends up dead...” a voice reminded. Again grunts of endorsements, then quiet again.

Sandra knew now she had the women’s attention. She deliberately started out using the vernacular of the streets, not wishing to separate herself from the women who used the everyday street colloquialism. She knew she now had no need for pretense. She was a new person, and these women must now see that new person in her real qualities. She would never carry her past with her again.

Sarah Jones did not know when she began speaking differently. One day after an interview with the local television, she saw the story that evening and noticed her speech pattern had changed. She liked what she saw and heard. This was the new Sarah Jones.

“Yes, Fannie Mae died on her way home from the Center. But let me tell you about Fannie Mae, the Fannie Mae you did not get to know. Sandra Hollis convinced her to turn over her life to Christ two weeks before she died. She had the chance to visit her mother, and had the forgiveness of her entire family. Her niece, who was living in Toledo in a halfway house, heard about her aunt’s conversion, came here to the Center to share in her aunt’s new experience. Both she and her fourteen year old brother gave their lives to Christ. Fannie Mae died the next day.”

Once again the room became quiet.

“Oh Lord, we got ourselves a pooh ass prostitute preaching...” thought Lucie Burns, rifling through her purse nervously.

Mary Moses stirred uneasily in her seat. Her eyes met Sarah’s. Sarah knew Mary wanted to say something, but she saw the reluctance in her friend’s eyes. She smiled at her, and stretched her hand towards her and spoke gently.

“I believe our friend, Mary wants to say something. Come on up Mary,” Sarah beckoned. A horrified look came on Mary’s face. She had never spoke in a public setting like this before and she was scared stiff.

Mary Lou spoke audibly from the back.

“It is o.k. Mary. You tell your story the same way you told me. We are among friends here girl. There no need to be scared, or shy. Go on girl, do your thang.”

This seems to encourage Mary because she slowly rose from her seat, turned to her friends and spoke...

“We all was there that day at Fannie Mae funeral, an’ y’all was able to offer condolences to har family. Y’all knows what the preacher said ‘bout Fannie Mae. He says that Fannie Mae is gone on to a better place. Neither har daughter, har niece, or any of har family cried. Jus us ‘cause we not knows what better place Fannie Mae gone to, or where such better place is. I here today to fine out where that place is, an’ how I goin’ get there. That’s all I have to say. Thank you.” Mary Moses actually bowed slightly as she regained her seat.

Sarah’s eyes swept the room and pierced the crowd. There were moist eyes everywhere. It was time to zero in on these women. It was time to renew the camaraderie. She could not lose them now...

“How many of y’all can say the same about the person sitting next to y’all? Y’all will die someday, and there be

A SECOND CHANCE – Unleashing The Power of Good

crying,’ but will it be tears of joy over y’all life, or tears of regret?”

Quiet...

A few sobs...

Restlessness...

Sarah continued..

“I know of’ sure y’all not scared of dying. If y’all was scared you wouldn’t be in the business y’all in...”

Quiet...

“Y’all real fear is loneliness. The fear of rejection. The fear that no one really cares. That’s why y’all all gravitate to y’all pimps, these bloodsuckers who tell y’all they love y’all, yet abuse y’all at every chance they gets...”

“Yu’ got that right baby!”

“Yeah, them make us depends on them!”

“An’ then beat the shit outta us!”

“Ain’t that the truth...?”

Sarah’s eyes scanned the ladies sitting in front of her. Her eyes wandered to the doors, noticing that the women who were standing, awaiting the opportunity for the hasty exist was now cautiously slipping into empty seats.

“I know, because I was one of y’all. That’s why I’m able to stand here and tell y’all that there’s a better way. Y’all can make a difference in y’all own life. You don’t have to depend on no pimp-ass nigga to be lookout fo’ you. You can do that fo’ y’all self...” Sarah said.

“Like po’ Fannie Mae? Who did look out fo’ har?” It was one of Cut-throat’s plants, Brenda.

Sarah did not miss a beat. “Yes girl, like Fannie Mae. She made her decision, and now she don’t have to depend on Cut-throat or Joey Simms, nor any of y’all to cut her no slack. Fannie Mae is much better than y’all and I right now! No pain, no worry, no crooked cop cutting into her profits, no pimp

taking her away from her only daughter, and turning around beating her ass off. No 'chile, Fannie Mae has arrived!”

“You tell her Sarah!”

“Fannie Mae is better off without us...”

“Wish I was where she is...”

Sarah eyes flashed at the last speaker, Lottie Gardner.

“No Lottie, don’t you say that. We all want to go to heaven, but believe me 'chile; we don’t want to die, no, not in this condition...”

“Wha’ you talkin’ ‘bout girl? Now we confused...” It was Brenda again. All eyes were upon Sarah, but switching to and from each interjector. Sarah moved down from the podium, walking slowly towards the fifth row of seats where the Cut-throat women were sitting. They stirred uneasily as she approached. The other women sitting nearby sort of leaned away from the group, as if to let Sarah knew that they weren’t part of that clan.

There was compassion in Sarah’s voice when she looked Brenda in the eyes.

“Yes, Brenda, confusion is one of the weapons against us. Y’all so confused y’all don’t know who’s for y’all and who’s against y’all. Y’all don’t know if you to take a secret cut from the night’s take or just hand it all over and hope y’all gets a little extra, or even a smile, or a nod of appreciation. Sometime y’all get so confused y’all don’t even ‘member if the trick paid you before, or will he pay you after... Yes, girlfriend, y’all confused!” Sarah stopped abruptly, centered her steady gaze on the group, then turned suddenly and retraced her steps to the podium.

Quiet.

Lucie Burns squinted furiously, trying to hold back the tear that was threatening to soil her heavy mascara.

A SECOND CHANCE – Unleashing The Power of Good

“No one here wants to die now. Death to any of y’all now is a final destination someplace y’all don’t want to be. I know y’all know the choices. That place or the other...”

There were restless movements again.

This time it was Francis, from Brenda’s group who spoke.

“Y’all talkin’ ‘bout heaven and hell Sarah?”

“Yes Francis. I’m talking about the choice between heaven and hell. You see, the Book says that it be appointed unto y’all once to die, and when y’all die y’all have to face the judgment. Y’all have to give an account of everything y’all ever did to anyone, and even to ya’ll self. So we certainly don’t want to die, yet...”

Her gaze searching anxious faces.

“Wha’ you mean, yet?” A voice from the front seat.

Fixed gaze.

“Yes, Joan, YET! Y’all needs to take care of some business ah’fore y’all ready to face that judgment. It’s like going for that drug test to get y’all food stamp. Y’all know what I mean...”

“You mean like first getting’ Sammie to fix us that mixture to fool the test?” bellowed someone from the rear. Everyone laughed.

“Yes. It’s much like that. You see, y’all gotta be prepared to face this judgment thing. Only thing is that y’all ain’t gonna fool nobody but y’all self.”

Forced laughter.

Quiet.

Sarah continues...

“It ain’t worth dying and going to hell. Not because of what some pimp wants y’all to do...”

“How can we prepare for this judgment?” Brenda.

“The Good Book says that if y’all confess with y’all mouth and believe in y’all heart, the Lord Jesus, and that God raised

Him from the dead, and then y'all be ready for the judgment..."

That mean we be dead after that?" Brenda again.

Forced laughter.

Quiet.

"It's not that way Brenda. Life is good and precious, and y'all should cherish it until it's gone from us, but y'all shouldn't invite death."

Quiet.

"Brenda, there be lot of women who going through things, and they be need support. The kind of support y'all can give if y'all have a heart of compassion."

"Compassion baby? Like we care?" Brenda.

"Yes Brenda. Like y'all care about someone else other than y'all self. I know that some of y'all come from good families, while others didn't get the chance of any upbringing. But a heart of compassion is something that only God can put in y'all. No matter y'all background, there's only one heart of compassion, and that's from God."

"But I care about people, Sarah!" protested Brenda.

"I know Brenda, like when Kelli got beat up, I know it was you who paid for her hospital stay, and it was you who sent that money to Phyllis' son in Chicago. Yes, Brenda, you care about people, but y'all need to understand that it was the Good that was working in y'all when y'all do things like Brenda did. Not y'all own good, but a God-given Good."

Kelli stood up quickly and turned to the young woman sitting two rows behind. She knew Brenda, but hardly ever spoke to her. Brenda's group worked the east side of town, she worked on the north. Brenda had heard about Kelli's plight from one of the other girls.

"Brenda, you pays for my hospital?"

A SECOND CHANCE – Unleashing The Power of Good

Brenda ignored her. It wasn't important that she knew. No one knew she had sent money to Chicago. She didn't know how Sarah knew. Not even Phyllis' son knew from whom it came.

"You mean God was working in me even then, when I was on the street and things?" Brenda asked Sarah.

"Yes. God sees only the good in us. In His eyes we be precious to him. That's why He sent His Son, Jesus to die for y'all."

Quiet.

"How did you feel when you did all those things, Brenda?" Sarah asked.

"It felt pretty good. It wasn't like I was getting praise or nothing. I just wants to do something for them poor girl family." Brenda responded.

"You see Brenda; it was God who gave you that compassion. That certainly didn't come from the devil. The devil only comes to y'all to kill and destroy y'all. That is what I mean when I say that y'all have a God-given Good in y'all. Everyone ah y'all."

"So then, why we have to be different and things?" asked Kelli.

"What do you mean Kelli?" asked Sarah.

"Well, since we already have this Good in us, why we have to confess and believe and all that...?"

"A lot of people do good things Kelli, but are they all good? No! Look at politicians? They pass good laws, and even do a favor for someone, but does that mean they are God-faring people? No, most are not! They gets rewards for the good they do from the community and the people who votes for them, but when we do good as God's children He rewards us."

Quiet.

A SECOND CHANCE – Unleashing The Power of Good

Somewhere in the crowd a cellular rang. Apparently its owner chose to ignore it because it rang incessantly. Everyone ignored the interruption until Frankie Bell from lower Dumas held up her hand and stood up.

“Jus’ a minute there Sarah. Hey, if y’all not want to hear what Sarah an them talkin’ ‘bout, you should leave, otherwise just shut off that damn phone so we can continue this here meeting. Thank you,” and she sat down heavily, scraping the metal chair against the hard concrete floor. Whoever had the noisy phone took the cue from Frankie and turned it off. The room became quiet for a moment, then someone near the front began applauding, and instantly everyone followed.

“Thank you Frankie...” said Sarah, laughing as everyone simultaneously reached for their cellular to shut them off. She returned her attention to Brenda who was showing signs of irritation. Sarah could not afford to lose her now. She knew that Brenda was under tremendous pressure from Cut-throat...

“Who would y’all like to reward you for the good things you do, Brenda? God or your friends?”

“Well Sarah, I’d prefer very much for God to reward me.”

“Why Brenda? Why would you prefer God’s reward over your friends?” asked Sarah.

“Well, God is be more powerful, and do lots more for me than common people,” answered Brenda, with a smile. She was regaining her confidence, momentarily forgetting about the consequences that might be awaiting her, if she did return to Cut-throat.

“You be right again Brenda. You see, the Good Book says that if God be for us, it doesn’t matter who’s against us. Y’all want God on y’all side...”

Sandra quietly walked up and stool beside Sarah. Mary Lou also took her position beside her two friends. Mary Lou

moved toward the center of the isle and spoke softly, but audible enough for everyone to hear.

“We here at this Center are inviting you all to join us in assisting you in making a change in yourselves, and in the many others who still believed that the streets is the answer. The Good Book says that if you hear His voice you must not turn away from Him. If you all will believe He spoke to you today, right here in this here meeting, then I ask for you to make that step of faith. Now!”

The room grew quiet. There was an air of indecision, uncertainty and fear. No one noticed the beam of Light that pierced the already lighted room. No one but the three women who stood, beckoning their friends to make a decision that would change their lives forever.

Francis Simpson was the first to make the move. She pushed her chair back, tucked her purse under her arm and stepped out onto the isle. All eyes were on her. She turned to her two companions and said.

“I don’t know about y’all, but I’m fed up with all this shit every day. I be wants to make a change. I’m going to join with Sarah...” she fixed her eyes on Brenda.

“Brenda, y’all know what Cut-throat fixing to do if y’all not come back with words about this here meeting. But I don’t care about what Cut-throat gonna do to me, but I ain’t gonna go back.” There were tears rolling down her painted face.

Sarah stepped down from behind the podium. Sandra and Mary Lou were scanning the crowd in expectancy of others following Francis’ footsteps.

“Come on Francis. You have just made the first step in getting your life back...”

There were movements, chairs being pushed back. Brenda was the second to step out to the isle.

A SECOND CHANCE – *Unleashing The Power of Good*

Kelli, Lottie, Danielle, Harriet, Luci, Mary, Melinda and all the other women stepped out behind Brenda who was making her way to stand beside her friend, Francis. Kelli reached over to hold Brenda's hand.

"I loves you girl."

Every single pair of eyes was in tears...

There was silent sobbing...

God had touched them!

Sarah had finally reached her friends.

CHAPTER

35

A year and three months had passed since the four came in contact with their prolonged destiny. Reverend Levin and his little Baptist church had since turned into a mega complex for the lost and discarded. Over seven thousand souls were converted to Christ, and were continuing to promote Good works.

Sarah Jones, now an evangelist and advocate for 'A women's place in the home,' a new organization she started with Mary Lou, Sandra and Kelly. Brenda moved to Chicago where she opened a shelter for abused women, and her son, David, a converted burglar, started a men's movement, recruiting young men from the projects to become chaperons for young people concerts and tour groups. The project became so successful that the city of Chicago gave the organization a contract to patrol the schools and many local civic infrastructures.

One balmy August afternoon last year, three masked men walked into the men's facilities at the Center, sought out Willie Hearn, donated \$230,000 in cash, three late model automobiles and a brand new mobile home. The men left no

names, but three days later Allan “Cut-throat” Harvey, Josh Buskins and an unnamed man walked into one of Reverend Levin’s services, gave their hearts and life to Christ and later became the pastor’s drivers and right hand men.

CHAPTER

36

The confrontations between Detective Rattan and Reverend Levin intensified to the extent that church members feared for their leader’s life. Everyone knew that the detective could never get over the incident at the Stubs’ apartment. Reverend Levin had no such concern, and would never back down from the overzealous, obnoxious police officer.

One day while on a trip to visit his friend, Mayor Billy Bob McPherson, Reverend Levin decided to drive himself that afternoon, something he rarely did, although he wished his congregation would not worry so much about him. They feared that if he left this time, he would not be coming back.

Reverend Levin knew he wouldn’t, but that information he kept to himself.

As his big SUV pulled up to the curb, next to the mayor’s parking space, Detective Rattan was just coming out of City Hall when he spotted the reverend’s vehicle. He feigned preoccupation while Reverend Levin exited his vehicle. The detective ignored the official ‘Clergy’ sticker on the sun visor of the vehicle. He waited until Reverend Levin was halfway across the court then yelled out.

“Hey, you there, come move that damn vehicle from that official spot!”

The reverend stopped, turned and looked at Rattan. Others also stopped and stared at the tall detective as he hurried his pace towards the waiting pastor.

“What can I do for you officer?” asked Reverend Levin softly. He pocketed his car keys and stared at the man standing just a few feet away. “Oh, and how’s the shoulder Rattan?” he asked.

That tone again; that irritating, condescending tone that cuts all the way through to the bones of the detective. The detective sensed it, and it annoyed him the more.

“You are illegally parked in an official parking place, so move it on out!” barked the detective, glancing around to make sure he had an audience. A few people who were near enough to hear the exchange between the two men, paused, while others who saw a confrontational prospect, drew nearer for further development.

“Yes, I see it is an official parking place Rattan, but I’m not illegally parked,” answered the Reverend. By now about ten people were inconspicuously milling around, waiting.

“Why don’t you let me decide what is legal or not, reverend?” asked the detective. He welcomed this confrontation, right in front of spectators. The goodly reverend was about to be the principal in a fatal ‘accident.’

Reverend Levin could sense the detective’s desire for a quarrel, but could not understand why he would want to make such a display in front of city hall, with so many people around. He was not going to fall for his ploy, whatever it was.

“Detective Rattan,” started the reverend, giving the lawman his due respect, considering it might defuse the impending situation, “I am a guest of the Mayor, with special instruction to park at that very same spot, so if you don’t mind I’d...”

“Guest? This is not where you pick up food stamps reverend, so why don’t you get that piece of shit out of here?” barked Rattan. A large crowd was now gathering to witness the incident. This seemed to please the detective.

A SECOND CHANCE – Unleashing The Power of Good

“This is my town, preacher, and I’ll decide who gets special privileges, and you certainly aren’t one of them!” he yelled. By then the assistant to the Mayor’s public relations office was passing when he noticed the gathering, and pushing his way through the throng, heard Rattan’s last statement.

“Wait, what the hell is going on here?” he asked, glancing at the reverend. He recognized the man and nodded in acknowledgment, then turn to face the detective. The assistant was now standing between the two men.

“ Who the fuck are you? Get the hell away from here before I bust you for interfering with police work,” Rattan ordered. There was a murmuring of uneasiness in the crowd. Obviously the detective did not know the Mayor’s public relations officer.

“No, you won’t Rattan, now calm down and be rational about all this. The reverend is scheduled for a meeting with the Mayor, so I’d suggest you apologize and step aside this instant...” The man was in mid-sentence when Rattan hits him. His big fist caught the smaller man squarely on the jaw, sending his sprawling on the pavement.

“Oh, my God!” someone yelled.

“Ohhh, he in trouble now...”

“He sucker punched the mayor’s aid cold...”

“The man gone plumb wacko...!”

Several of the spectators moved forward, hoping to restrain the irate policeman, and it was then that the detective pulled his gun and fired into the crowd. The volley was rapid and direct. Two men and a lady fell to the ground.

“Oh, my God!”

“He’s gone crazy!”

In this moment Reverend Levin acted. His voice was sharp and authoritative.

“Rattan!” he yelled.

The detective turned in response, bringing up the big gun.

A SECOND CHANCE – Unleashing The Power of Good

“Oh, I have not forgotten you reverend, I have something special for you,” he said. He reached into his belt and pulled out a pair of handcuffs.

“You are going for a long ride with me, before I haul your black ass to jail!”

There were sounds of an emergency vehicle rapidly approaching. Two squad cars roared onto the concourse. A team of ten members from the Special Security Detail assigned to City Hall rushed through the crowd, guns drawn. They were joined by the mayor’s own security force. There were about thirty armed personnel heading for the concourse. The police commissioner was the first to reach the circle of stunned spectators.

Detective Rattan’s .44 magnum was inches from Reverend Levin’s face. Apparently oblivious of the law enforcement officers’ presence, the detective held out the handcuffs to the reverend.

“O.k. boy, put these on!” he yelled, brandishing the gun, his finger on the trigger.

“O.k. Detective Rattan, that is enough, put that gun away!” ordered the police commissioner. Without taking his eyes off the Reverend, Rattan answered, “No way commissioner, you and the rest of these fuck-ups just allow these people to walk in and take things over. Now even the damn parking space they...”

“It’s O.K. detective. We’ll get our parking spaces back. Just lower that gun,” coaxed the commissioner, but the detective cuts him off.

“No! You shut the fuck up. This is my bust, and I’ll take care of it!”

By then the SWAT team was in place, their rifles pointed on the detective’s chest. The yellow homing lights on their weapons could be seen, in spite of the bright sunshine. They knew they could not risk firing because of the crowd. No one

else seemed to be overly concerned for safety. A drama was unfolding, and they wanted to see it through. Even the security forces, whose responsibility was to control the crowd, securing them in a safe area, were caught in awe of the unfolding spectacle.

CHAPTER

37 A medical team from Emergency Medical Unit scurried the fallen public relations officer to safety. The mayor's security was standing ready with guns drawn. A news crew from the local television station hurriedly began setting up cameras and microphones, feeding the event on television into the homes of thousands.

A call was placed in to the Army Reserve, and soon the sound of transport vehicles could be heard in the distance as platoons of soldiers converged on the scene.

It was obvious the detective had snapped, and no one really knew what he would do next. It was then that Reverend Levin spoke. His voice was calm and reassuring, almost a subtle beckoning.

"It's O.K. detective. You are in control. Just put your gun away..."

"No, you shut up. I don't want to hear you talk. I don't want to see you move. You shut up!" yelled the detective. He raised the gun to the reverend's face. You could hear the clicks of safety being removed from the guns of the security forces. The little yellow homing lights shifted to the detective's head. It would be just a moment before someone sends a bullet to his head.

Reverend Levin did not want that.

"Put your guns away," he ordered, "I'll handle this!"

A SECOND CHANCE – Unleashing The Power of Good

Somehow the men obeyed, not realizing that the local pastor was not in command, nor in any position to take care of anything, not with the irate detective's big gun just inches from his head. The men lowered their guns, and watched as the reverend slowly reached out and pushed the detective's gun from his face.

"You have had your fun Rattan, now it's my turn!" Reverend Levin held out his left hand, and the big gun seemed to glow in the detective's hand. There was a hissing sound as the gun, now almost bright yellow emitted scorching heat, burning the detective's hand.

"Owwwww!" yelled Rattan, and he tried to toss the gun away, but his fingers were firmly curled around the handle. He could not let go.

There were gasps of surprise from the crowd. The moment the detective's gun was diverted from the reverend's head the SWAT team brought their own guns to bare, fingers tightly on the triggers.

"Stop!" yelled the reverend, and the men froze. Everyone had lost the will to squeeze the trigger.

Detective Rattan was still frantically trying to let the heated weapon go, but was having no success. Reverend Levin reached out once more, waved his hand in an upward motion, and the 240-pound detective flew from the ground, up to about ten feet in the air, and came crashing to the hard pavement. His big body bounced, and instantly ascended back into the air. This time the reverend held his hand still, and the detective was suspended in mid-air. It was like the Reverend was directing a symphony, and with every wave of his baton, the detective was whirled around.

"I don't believe what I'm seeing!" said someone in the crowd.

"Oh my gosh, the reverend got...!" one bystander observed aloud.

A SECOND CHANCE – *Unleashing The Power of Good*

Detective Rattan was now being swirled around like an ingredient in a mixing bowl. He was making unnatural sounds as his body contorted in the air above the concourse. The television cameras followed the spectacular event, the microphones picking up the sound of the screaming law enforcement officer. The gun was still fused to his hand, and those that were close enough could detect the smell of burning flesh. There was also an aroma of burning sulfur permeating the atmosphere. Several people were coughing, some vomiting.

Reverend Levin lowered the wailing detective to the ground. The gun had now fallen from his hand. He sat on the ground staring wide-eyed, but not seeing anything. He whimpered softly, and then balled himself in a fetal position, his thumb in his mouth like a new born baby. He was gently rocking to and fro, making small baby-like sounds, his eyes staring at nothing.

The police commissioner was the first to move forward. He peered down at the fallen man, and then turned his attention to the reverend.

“What’s wrong with him Pastor?”

Reverend Levin removed an imaginary speck from his coat and answered.

“You are going to need a replacement because Detective Rattan will never regain his adulthood. He will remain a baby in man’s body for the rest of his life...” answered the reverend, and he slowly turned and walked through the crowd and was gone. He simply disappeared from sight. No one saw where he went, and although they saw him walked into the crowd, no one saw him came out. The various news crews that were filming the event spent hours reviewing their films, but none were able to come up with anything showing

where the big Baptist preacher went after walking into that crowd...

CHAPTER

38 It was a rainy Thursday evening, the clock on the wall showing 10 minutes after 9. The rain was sporadic and there were intermittent flashes of lightening across the pale California skyline.

It was not a dark evening, and distinct buildings serving as landmarks were visible as people began closing off the day, and preparing for another day. Their successes would be repeated the next day, and those who did not fare well would get another chance to impact their goals, aspirations, or personal pursuits.

This was the anniversary of the Second Chance for the four people sitting in the little office. The anticipation was high, and although no one actually asked the question, it was obvious that the subject was foremost on each person's mind. Had they satisfactorily performed their assigned duties?

Reverend Levin, who was seated across from Samuel Kukas, smiled at the big man. He had not lost much weight since that fateful day in the afterlife. Samuel Kukas was not wearing his trademark white suit and red tie. Instead, he was casually dressed, not seeming prepared to go anywhere. To the reverend, Sam had done what was required of him, and more. His influence with other business people, and his own expertise in management were invaluable to the overall project.

The Center, now valued well over five million dollars was the brainchild of Sam, and the holdings of Loire Street Baptist

Church were valued at eighteen million dollars, thanks to Samuel and his negotiation skills. Samuel Kukas should be preparing himself for a long eternal journey, instead, he sat as if the evening was an intrusion on his schedule for the week.

As the foursome sat quietly in the church's office, no one daring to speak for fear of interrupting the quietness that seemed to consume everyone. On several occasions Willie Hearn wanted to say something, but he sensed that Sandra was about to speak, so each anticipating the other's desire to speak, all refrained from uttering the first word, and so it went for about an hour until Reverend Levin spoke. His voice seemed to shatter the quiet.

"Sam, Willie, Sarah, we have all done what was humanly required of us, plus what incentive afforded us by the Holy Spirit. I cannot speak for anyone else, but I believe that these past two years have been a life-changing experience for me. Humanity will have known that there was been a period of Divine Intervention."

The little group nodded, but still not saying anything.

The reverend continued, "Just last week I was watching the World News report, and mentioned was made on the work we have been doing in this city. Other cities are following our example and are making some very positive moves. Even some of the churches are making drastic changes within their spiritual and civic activities."

"And I must add that even government is getting into the act," interrupted Willie, "they have instituted a program that will allow more frequent visits by families whose spouses are incarcerated."

"It was such a relief to see so many young women enrolling in social programs, and beginning to believe in themselves more," added Sarah Jones.

A SECOND CHANCE – Unleashing The Power of Good

“Yes, I must admit that we have made one heck of an impact,” beamed Sam, “...even though we could not have done it ourselves, or even if we had the resources, we certainly could not have mustered up so much energy...”

“...and with so much enthusiasm!” Willie added.

The reverend’s gaze fixed on each one, spoke softly, “I think we might be missing the essence of our Second Chance...”

“What do you mean pastor?” asked Sarah.

“Well, I believe that God would not have given us this Second Chance if He felt that we could not have done it ourselves...”

“Done it ourselves? Pastor, no way could we have succeeded without the powers He gave us. He knew that, that’s why He gave us powers!” exclaimed Samuel.

“I have to disagree with you pastor, and side with Sam. It was the power that made the difference,” said Willie.

“Yes Willie, it was the Power that made the difference...” started the reverend.

“But you just said that we could have done it ourselves,” interrupted Sarah.

The reverend turned to Sarah. “Sarah, what was the deciding factor in all this? What was most important to succeed?”

“As Willie and Sam said, reverend, it was the Power,” Sarah answered.

“I agree with you, but where did the Power come from?” asked the reverend.

“Where? You were there pastor...” Willie answered.

“Where Willie?” the reverend asked.

“You know, heaven, where we saw the angel...” answered Willie, but with apprehension, as if sensing reprimand.

“You are very wrong Willie; the Power was already given to us, even before we died that day...”

“What?” exclaimed Sarah.

“Surprised Sarah? Let me explain...” said the reverend. The trio leaned forward; wanting to get every single word as the pastor began.

“You see, when one first comes to Christ, they are endowed with the Power of His Holy Spirit. I don’t know when each of you first accepted Him, could be the very moment life was exiting your mortal bodies. It could have been sometime during your childhood, I don’t know, but I do know that you were chosen, we all were chosen, and given this Second Chance because of something that was in us that distinguished us from so many others...”

“You might be right reverend, I remembered now, when I saw Willie raising that knife, I cried out in my heart, “Jesus have mercy on me!”

“Yes, the same thing happened to me, only it was the Holy Mother I cried out for...!” started Sam.

“I knew that I was dying when Sarah pulled that trigger the second time, but I didn’t call for Jesus or Holy Mother, I simply said, “Whoever you are, don’t let me go like this. You see, I never did learn to pray,” said Willie, apologetically.

“Me?” Reverend Levin bowed his head as he spoke, “I was a Called-out person, with responsibility to give hope to the lost, but I was far from doing what I really needed to be doing. I was so caught up with holding church and giving fiery sermons that I didn’t even realize that the Willies and the Sams and the Sarahs of this world were dying and going to a Dark Eternity. So I also was given a Second Chance to do the right thing.”

Sarah stood up, looked at her companions and said softly, “Now we understand reverend. If we had used what we already had, we could have made the same difference to humanity.”

A SECOND CHANCE – Unleashing The Power of Good

“Yes, we didn’t have to be given special powers, our love and concerns for our fellowmen were enough to move any obstacle that hindered us,” added Sam.

“We were only made to realize the basic goodness each of us has, and to extend that goodness to our less-fortunate...”

“The special powers were only to booster our enthusiasm,” concluded Sarah.

“We have learned a good lesson, only too bad that humanity might never realize the impact each has on each other and how to turn it to positive...” began Sam.

Immediately there was a loud burst of thunder, and a flash of bright Light. The office seemed to vibrate; though not a single piece of object moved from its place. Involuntarily, each of the foursome closed their eyes against the whiteness of the Light. The room echoed within itself for several minutes, then the Light dissipated, and the four opened their eyes to see a tall man standing by the door.

“It’s an angel!” exclaimed Sam.

“Yes, but it’s not the same one,” remarked Sarah.

“No, Sarah, I am not the same angel that you saw two years ago. You see, there are many of us, each with particular duties, just like there are many of you with your own unique divine responsibilities,” answered the angel.

The angel turned to Reverend Levin. “Are you ready to return home Reverend Levin?” he asked. His eyes roamed over the other three, each knowing that the question was also directed to them.

It was Willie who spoke first.

“No, sir, not me. There’s still work to be done here!” he exclaimed. The other nodded their heads in agreement.

“But your powers will be taken away Willie,” reminded the angel.

“I don’t think so sir, my new-found love for my people, and my desire to save a lost world is power enough to withstand

anything,” answered Willie, remembering what the reverend had just stated.

Reverend Levin smiled broadly. “Give our regards to our Gracious Host, but we do have work to do,” he said, turning his gaze to his three friends.

Sam sat down heavily, turned again to the still-glowing figure. “Yes, we have learned to love and depend on each other, and just knowing that He is there when we really need Him, it’s enough to keep us going for many, many years,” he said, beaming with pride.

“I still need to see some sisters I heard starting a new home for unwed mothers. They might need my help, so I’ll think I’ll hang around for a while yet!” said Sarah.

“So you see, sir, what was started in heaven, must continue here on earth, and our work will never be done until every last creature has heard the message of Hope for a Better Eternity!” the reverend said, bringing the conversation to a close. The angel once again searched the hearts of each person present, and spoke softly.

“You have made a wise choice. You have no idea what was in store for this earth, the moment you leave...”

“What are you talking about?” asked Sarah.

“There was going to be a major earthquake in five of your biggest cities, followed by huge tidal waves across the Atlantic. Hundreds of thousands, possible millions, were destined to be lost...”

Reverend Levin leaned forward, “Oh my God! Why?”

“God is angry reverend. He is very upset with humanity’s attitude towards Him, but in the end man would realize that God is not pleased with him, and many would repent because of the catastrophes!”

“Are you saying that if men turn to God there will not be any catastrophes?” asked Sam. The angel looked at him.

“No Sam, that is not what I’m saying. It’s just that the wrath of God will be tempered with mercy when humanity seeks His face. God does not bring catastrophes on mankind anymore, like He used to in the olden days. He simply allows the Prince of the Air, the devil, to have his way.”

Reverend Levin began gathering his papers and other items strewn around his desk.

“We have heard enough, we will continue our work,” he said, neatly folding the papers and stuffing them into an envelope, and putting them in his desk drawer.

“With Powers or not, through our faith in the Almighty, and His Son, Jesus Christ, we will do our part in trying to save humanity from themselves, one soul at a time!” added Willie.

“You have spoken wisely, every one of you, and with no selfish thought for yourselves,” answered the angel.

“And we mean every single word of it too!” said Sarah.

“I know Sarah, and it’s with that knowledge that I’m giving you all another two years of Special Powers to continue, then you all will be taken away, forever,” said the angel. He reached into his white cloak and removed a small vial. He poured some liquid into his hands and began anointing the four. When he was finished, he replaced the vial and turned to leave.

“I’m leaving you now. You will not be seeing me or any others from heaven until you join us.”

As he turned to leave he muttered under his breath with a thin smile, “Faith? I could never understand these humans...”

There was a soft rustle of silk, and immediately a cloud overshadowed the room. A sweet fragrance saturated the office, and with a soft, “Goodbye, God be with you!” he was gone.

The four people were abruptly brought back to realization by the ringing of the phone on the reverend’s desk. It was

A SECOND CHANCE – Unleashing The Power of Good

Willie who picked it up. He listened silently for about a minute, nodded and turned to Reverend Levin.

“It’s for you reverend. Someone just held up the bank and is holding people hostage. The mayor is calling for you...!”

THE END

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