

THE FIGHT

By
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A Story of Unrequited Love

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THE FIGHT

CHAPTER ONE

ANTICIPATION

The bacon spattered noisily in the iron skillet. The smell of breakfast had already replaced the chill of the morning air throughout the house, luring everyone from their sleep. Mrs. Janson was the first one up to bring the house to life. Her early duties included measuring the coffee to perk a hearty brew for herself and her husband as well as preparing a batch of buttermilk biscuits which were presently rising to a golden brown in the hot oven. She retrieved a carton of eggs from the refrigerator as her husband came in the kitchen door carrying the morning paper.

“What’s the news this morning, Dave?” asked Mrs. Janson as she clattered some bowls together in retrieving one from the cupboard.

“The same thing. The fight coming up next month is still in the headlines. Not much else,” answered Mr. Janson as he seated himself at the table to read the paper and sip the coffee his wife had prepared. As was habit during his 15 years of marriage, Mr. Janson got up with his wife to help her with the morning chores. He set the table for breakfast and prepared the morning juice before fetching the paper from the front lawn.

“They are expecting a sell-out at the Coliseum,” commented Mr. Janson from behind the paper.

“Aren’t you going?” asked Mrs. Janson as she cracked several eggs into a large bowl.

“I don’t know. The tickets are outrageous.”

“I think you ought to go and take Stevie.” Mrs. Janson turned the bacon over in the frying pan.

“Does he even want to go?” asked Dave folding the paper and taking a sip of coffee.

“You can ask him. I heard him up a moment ago. He should be in here soon.” Mrs. Janson took the biscuits out of the oven and turned them out onto a plate. She then set the plate of steaming bread on the table. “Besides, if Stevie

doesn't want to go, I would love to."

Mr. Janson chuckled and caught his wife's arm as she turned back to the stove. He pulled her close to his side and hugged her around the waist. "You and about a million other women."

"Dave!"

"Hi, Dad – Mom," mumbled Stevie. He slowly made his way to the kitchen table and pulled out his chair to seat himself, his actions still very much dictated by sleepiness.

"Good morning, Steven," said Mom racing over to the smoking bacon. Her quick action saved the breakfast meat from being burned.

Mr. Janson smiled at his son as he took another sip of coffee from his cup. Mrs. Janson refreshed her husband's coffee as soon as he set the cup down. Stevie nodded with one eye open and a smile on his face, trying to be sociable despite the grip sleep still had upon him.

"Good morning, son. I'm surprised to see you up so early since today is a school holiday." Mr. Janson smiled at his wife to thank her for the fresh coffee.

"That's 'cisely why I'm up so early. Today is the last holiday of the summer and I want to make the best of it!" exclaimed Stevie stirring a bit more to life.

"The Fight is coming up at the Coliseum next month, would you like to go?" questioned Mr. Janson reaching for a biscuit.

"WOW, would I!!" shouted Stevie. "Everybody is talking about it. 'The Fight of All Time.' Some of my buddies say that it's for sissies only, but I don't think so. They're saying that because their dads can't afford to take them. MAN, I'd love to go! Can we afford it?" quipped Stevie, losing all thoughts as to plans for the day in exchange for the sheer excitement in anticipating The Fight.

"I don't know yet. We'll see." Mr. Janson spread butter on his steaming biscuit halves. Mrs. Janson poured the scrambled eggs from the iron skillet into a bowl.

"Wow, The Fight! Wait until Tom hears about this!"

remarked Stevie rising from his chair.

“Wait a minute, young man,” ordered Mrs. Janson stepping toward the table, “Tom can wait until after breakfast. We’ll say the blessing as soon as your sister gets here.” Mrs. Janson seated herself next to her husband, across from Stevie.

“Yes’m,” murmured Stevie sinking back into his chair.

Mr. Janson leaned back in his seat and turned his head away from the table. “Cissey! Breakfast is ready!” He turned back to see his wife and son exchange a wink and a smile.

* * * * *

“Good afternoon, you great big beautiful city. Welcome to the first day of September. Summer is almost over, so all you guys and dolls get out there and soak up all the sun you can on this Labor Day weekend. This is your favorite D.J., Miracle Man coming to ya’ with the greatest hits of rock and rooolllll! Stay with me all day ‘cause I’ll be pumping this music to you until midnight. In a moment, your chance to win two tickets to The Fight! But for now, the newest hit single by James McCord, *Cry Away the Pain...*”

Cissey reached to turn down the radio. Mary turned over in her chaise to sun her back loosening the straps of her halter top and allowing them to fall from her shoulders. The sun beamed relentlessly down upon the girls as it had all summer, saturating the neighborhood with unusually warm weather for Labor Day.

“Are you going to The Fight, Cissey?” asked Mary shading her eyes with a corner of her towel.

“I don’t think so. Dad will probably take Stevie, but Mom and I will more than likely stay at home and watch it on the television. What about you? As if I need to ask!” commented Cissey sipping on a glass full of soda.

“Is the sun shining? Is the sky blue? Did you see the picture of the challenger in the paper the other day? He’s a dream!” cooed Mary. “He calls himself ‘The Persuader.’ He can persuade me anytime...”

“Mary!” scolded Cissey.

“Besides, I plan to get a seat ringside,” boasted Mary.

“What? They are a \$1000 apiece!” exclaimed Cissey.

“And well worth every penny! Anyway, I hear that they are having a special ringside section for single women called ‘The Wings.’ I’m going to try to sit there. Death will be the only reason for me not going,” stated Mary.

“What makes this Fight any different from the others?” asked Cissey rubbing lotion on her shoulder.

“Haven’t you heard?” asked Mary, stunned. “It’s been in the papers and on the television for weeks. My word, you would have thought the President himself was fighting. This Fight is to be unique in all the history of mankind because it is the first time that a major fight has been fought between a man and a woman....”

“How sick!” said Cissey wrinkling her nose.

“How sexy, you mean,” giggled Mary. “They are airing this Fight worldwide expecting a viewing audience of a half billion people. The greatest names in sports casting are being flown in as commentators. Professors and scholars of contact sports have written special rules for this Fight only and the most skilled referees are being hired to monitor the event.”

“All that for a silly fight?” teased Cissey.

“Cissey, it’s more than just a silly fight. You need to read the biographies of the participants to understand what is at stake here. The outcome of this Fight could very well determine the future of this planet. Listen, take my advice. If you can go – GO! If you can’t – don’t miss it on the television.” Mary stared icily at Cissey.

Cissey turned the volume of the radio up again. “It’s 97 skin-peeling degrees out there this afternoon. Stay COOL! We’ll just rock right on through the day with this next hit....”

CHAPTER TWO

**SUNDAY, OCTOBER 26, 1986
THE WORLD IS WATCHING**

Cissey sat immobile on the living room couch, her hands clamped firmly on the Sunday paper, her inner self pouring over the newsprint absorbing every word, every emotion. Tears came to her eyes as she read the biographies of the contestants of The Fight. Her heart ached for both contestants to win, but that was impossible, unless God intervened.

The entire world was swept into the passion that The Fight had created months before the sun rose on that fateful October morning, the Lord's Day. Many chose their favorite to win while others, like Cissey, had a hopeful longing that perhaps both could win The Fight.

Christian organizations all over the world had joined together for weeks to pray for divine leadership concerning the outcome of the contest. Depending on the outcome of The Fight, the ecumenical influence on world evangelism could either be greatly hindered or boosted beyond mortal expectations. The sheer powers of the universe stood still this very hour as moments transcended themselves to reveal the victor of this great match. The true victor would either possess these universal powers, molding them to benefit the world or scatter them across the cosmic light years, bringing about the swift destruction of nature as we know it.

Cissey's arms collapsed bringing down the newspaper with a rustle into her lap. A cold chill rushed up her legs, through her body and out the back of her neck as beads of sweat appeared on her forehead. Her skin became a pale milky white despite the deep tan she had acquired through the summer. She thought of Mary entering the Coliseum in the midst of a sea of humanity and being ushered to a special section called 'The Wings.'

'What could 'The Wings' possibly mean?' thought Cissey. 'Surely it has some significance.' A familiar smell filled

the living room by way of the kitchen as the sound of exploding corn kernels excited Cissey's senses once again. She glanced at the wall clock above the television and realized that it was only minutes before the telecast of The Fight would begin. Looking down at the paper in her lap, Cissey saw the photographs of the two contestants staring back at her. The woman appeared to have the expression 'what am I doing here?' yet her short auburn hair enhanced her fair features to the point of unrelenting confidence. The man's features appeared to have been carved in stone and like a rock, he exuded the confidence, 'I shall not be moved.'

Cissey shook her head in disbelief as she laid the paper aside. "Surely God will intervene," she whispered as she rose to turn on the television. Mrs. Janson entered the living room with a bowl of popcorn and joined Cissey on the couch to watch The Fight.

"I hope Dave and Stevie got through the traffic in time," commented Mrs. Janson setting the popcorn on the cocktail table and blousing her skirt as she sat down.

"I'm sure they did," reassured Cissey. "We'll probably see them on TV. Here we go...."

"Good afternoon America and the world. Welcome to Garden Coliseum here in Central City, USA. ABN is proud to bring you the Event of All Time, The Fight the world has been waiting for since the dawn of civilization. My name is Bill Warner of the ABN News team. This afternoon you will witness the most stirring event ever to be attempted on international television. You will witness a Fight between this man and this woman. Two contestants, equally matched, will attempt to cast aside all physical, emotional and mental differences and do battle in strict accordance to rules developed exclusively for this Fight. Before we go to ringside to meet our special commentators and the contestants themselves, let us look into the planning and development of this event. Here with me in our broadcast booth is Professor Thomas Byrd from the American Institute of Sports. Good afternoon, Professor."

"Good afternoon, Bill."

“Professor, for the benefit of those watching today that may not know the background of this event, could you briefly explain how this Fight was first conceived?”

“Gladly, Bill. The male challenger of this event today, known as The Persuader, had been defeated by this same female contestant twice before the challenger sought a world forum for a final contest. It was after the second defeat on a local level that The Persuader contacted us at the American Institute of Sports and convinced our staff of the feasibility of an international event. We, in turn, took up the cause and presented the idea to national television networks. They accepted the idea readily and decided to work together on this event. As word of the impending Fight spread throughout the world, monetary donations poured in from all facets of society, even major religious denominations. For months now, the world’s attention has been focused not on its problems, but on these two contestants and The Fight that is about to begin. Whatever the outcome, this event has truly become the balm that has eased the pain of today’s world.”

“That statement is so true, Professor. In a few minutes, when we take our audience to ringside, we will see Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev seated with President Reagan in an unprotected area just three rows back from ringside. They agreed to be a part of the opening ceremonies, but both must leave for their respective offices before The Fight is over. Much has been written since the announcement of this Fight that special concessions have been made to see that this Fight will be fair. What part has the A.I.S. played in making these concessions?”

“That is a very delicate question, Bill, and I must be careful not to offend any particular organization. We at the American Institute of Sports felt that The Persuader was at a great disadvantage having been defeated twice by the female contestant, yet we had to consider the fact that the international forum may prove to be the strength the challenger needs to gain victory over the woman. Not wanting this contest to be sexually biased for either contestant, the institute, at the sug-

gestion of The Persuader, created new and special rules for this Fight only.”

“That’s interesting. The Persuader, in his sincere desire to be fair, could have caused the inception of new rules that could result in his third and final defeat.”

“This would be his fourth defeat, actually. Last month while the institute was schooling the referees on the new rules, we received word that The Persuader had suffered his third defeat on August 7.”

Bill smiled. Professor Byrd shook his head, shrugged his shoulders and returned the smile.

“This should prove to be a very interesting and perhaps short match. Thank you, Professor Byrd, for being here and many thanks to the American Institute of Sports for making this event possible.”

“Thank you, Bill. My pleasure.”

“In a few moments, we will be going to ringside with our special commentators to actually meet and speak with the two contestants in this Fight, but first, let’s talk with one of the referees for this match, Kyle Richardson from New York. Welcome to Garden Coliseum, Kyle, and to Central City.”

“Thank you, Bill. Good to be here.”

“Is this your first time here at Garden Coliseum?”

“Yes, as a referee, Bill. I attended a fight several years ago as a spectator. I’ll have a different view of things today, though.”

“You are one of literally thousands of professional referees in this country. How did you come to be chosen to monitor this Fight today?”

“A combination of many reasons, Bill. First, my seniority. I have refereed amateur as well as professional matches for over 30 years. These matches include five different Olympics as well as title world championships at Madison Square Gardens. As a result of my experience, I have acquired the reputation of being an honest referee. Once that reputation is tarnished, it is difficult to fight back, so to speak, to win the confidence of the public.”

“A total of six referees were chosen for this Fight. Why so many when only one will be used?” asked Bill.

“All six will be used, even though only one will be in the ring during the match. The other five will watch The Fight from special monitors at ringside and call the match also. Their decisions will be included in the final decision of the outcome of this event. The reason that six were chosen and sent to the A.I.S. to be schooled on the rules of The Fight was a precautionary measure. Sickness or injury could have prevented any one of these men from attending today. The other five were merely backups or understudies.”

“Some of the viewers are probably wondering why three women were not chosen to serve on the panel of referees. Would you care to answer this?”

“Yes, and may I say, without hesitation. There are about twelve women referees in this country with the required experience to qualify for consideration. The staff at the American Institute of Sports decided to go with the best referees in the nation without regard to sex. The six best referees did not include any women. However, a panel of six men and six women were used to create the rules for this Fight. This equality of opinion has resulted in rules that are sexually fair for both contestants. The decision of the referees, whether men or women, shall be fair, since it is the job for any referee to interpret the rules and not create them.”

“Excellent answer, Kyle. One last question. Who was chosen to be in the ring during The Fight today?”

Kyle smiled. “The honor fell upon me.”

“Congratulations. I see we have a couple of minutes left before we go to ringside. May I ask your opinion of the contestants? Have you met them?”

“Yes, the panel of referees had the pleasure last evening. They’re equally matched, more so than any fight that I have ever presided over. It’s a shame that they had to go public to resolve their differences. The woman is a trooper. She’s won the hearts of all the refs. At times you would think that she will kill The Persuader, but then she backs off and every-

thing is fine. The Persuader? Poor kid. I know that he has bitten off more than he can chew. Three defeats already and still he is after her. He should be called The Persuaded because no one can change his mind. He is bull-headed and stubborn as a mule. God help us all in this Fight today.”

“Thank you, Kyle Richardson, the official referee for today’s Fight. When we return, we will be at ringside for the opening ceremonies and round one of The Fight, but we pause momentarily for a station break. This is Bill Warner with ABN News.”

“Mom, who do you think will win?” asked Cissey reaching for a handful of popcorn.

“Both, I hope,” stated Mrs. Janson smiling at Cissey. “I hate to see either one lose.”

“Good! It’s nice to know that someone shares my prayers. The story behind The Fight is so sad. My heart goes out to both of them. Let’s hope that God does intervene today,” urged Cissey.

“Yes, let’s hope!”

They turned back to the television just as the fanfare announced the network’s return to The Fight....

CHAPTER THREE

LET THE CONTEST BEGIN!

“From Garden Coliseum in Central City, USA, ABN Sports in association with the American Institute of Sports presents the event of all time: THE FIGHT! Man against Woman. This show is brought to you in part by H.S. Ready-to-Spread Frosting, Garden of Eden Soup, and by Central City Stables, where horse breeding is not a hobby, it’s an investment. We’re only moments away from opening ceremonies, so let’s go ringside and meet our ABN commentators.”

“Hello everybody and welcome to The Fight. I’m Howard Carter and this is Frank Gibson.” Frank nodded at the camera. “Well, Frank, after six months, we’re finally here.”

“That’s right, Howard, it was an announcement that shocked the world when back in February, the American Institute of Sports went public with the news that a man had challenged a woman to a fight on international television. As the story unfolded, the world became enamored, if that is the correct word, with the passion that surrounded the circumstances of this event. And now, with all the world focusing their eyes, ears, hearts, and, yes, souls on Garden Coliseum here in Central City, we are only a few electrifying minutes away from the opening ceremonies and round one.”

“And electrifying is an excellent choice of words, Frank. The air is so charged here, one almost expects a bolt of lightning to strike the ring. We here at the Coliseum hope that you can feel the mounting excitement in your homes or from wherever you are watching or listening to this broadcast. Frank, I see the announcer approaching the house address system. Let’s listen....”

“Ladies and Gentlemen, may I have your attention! Please, may I have your attention! It is with great honor that I welcome the world to Garden Coliseum here in Central City, USA. I now introduce you to the challenger in

this Fight – The Persuader!” The crowd roared, a mixture of boos and cheers, as The Persuader made his way to the ring.

“In just a moment,” stated Howard raising his voice above the noise, “The Persuader will be passing by our cameras on his way to the ring. We will stop him for a comment before he enters the ring. It is times like these where minutes seem to pass like hours. The roar of the crowd is deafening. Imagine what it will be like once The Fight has begun. Here he comes, now! Persuader, Persuader! Do you have a word for our viewing audience?” Howard pressed the microphone close to the challenger’s mouth.

“Yes, Frank, what I have told the press since the challenge was made: To God Be the Glory!” stated the Persuader waving at the cheering fans nearby.

“Oh, mother, he is as nice as the paper says he is!” exclaimed Cissey.

“Yes, a devout Christian, a minister of the Word of God,” replied Mrs. Janson.

The Persuader left the two sports commentators to begin his ascent into the ring. The announcer raised his hand to silence the crowd, “**and I present to you the Defending Champion...**” a shrill of excitement swept across the crowd in anticipation of the entry of the woman already given the title of Champion, “**The Forbidden Fruit!**”

“Sheer pandemonium, Frank. The crowd, especially the women, is very proud of this contestant.”

“And rightfully so, Howard. This woman has handled the media attention very well and has come across to the public as a level-headed, intelligent American woman. She knows what it takes to win the public’s favor and gauging from the noise, one would think that the Equal Rights Amendment just passed in all fifty states.”

“All Americans, women as well as men, should be proud of this lady. Here she comes now. We’ll try to get a comment from her. Forbidden Fruit, Forbidden Fruit! Do you have a word for the fans here and across the world before you enter the ring?”

“I just want to say that my challenger has lost his mind. He’s crazy! You will have to scrape him off the mat. I’ll kill him!” laughed the Forbidden Fruit as she turned toward the ring with both arms raised above her head. She smiled at the crowd showing the beauty that had charmed the world for six months. Seemingly intoxicated by the cheers of the crowd, The Forbidden Fruit took only two leaps to enter the ring.

Shocked by the candidness of The Forbidden Fruit’s comments, Frank stood perfectly still in the pose he took as he held the microphone for the contestant. Howard, realizing the need for media continuity, stepped into the picture.

“Now that both contestants are in the ring, it will take a few minutes to review the rules with them so that they will fully understand the scope of The Fight.” Howard looked at Frank who was beginning to thaw from his pose. “While they are doing that, let’s take a look at the background of these contestants. ABN News has prepared a short biography of The Persuader and The Forbidden Fruit.” The scene faded to a photograph of The Persuader.

“The Persuader, the 5 ft. 10 in., 165 pound challenger in today’s Fight is known by almost everyone in Upton, Georgia, where he was born and raised. Daniel Warner Flynn was born June 3, 1956, to parents who worked in a local textile plant. Raised in a simple, country home, Dan attended Watson Elementary School and Leere High School. After graduation, he enrolled in Southern Technical Institute in Marietta, Georgia, where he received a BS in architecture in 1978. It was during his senior year at STI that Dan entered the Christian faith and later accepted the call into the ministry. Today, Dan works as a draftsman for the government in Macon, Georgia.”

“The Forbidden Fruit, the 5 ft. 8 in., 128 pound defending champion in today’s Fight was also born and raised in Upton, Georgia. Karen Elaine Mills, also known as Kem, was born May 9, 1964, to farming parents. Kem quit school before graduating to enter the work force in the community. After working several years, she returned to night school to earn an equivalency diploma. One week prior to her 21st birthday,

Kem entered the Christian faith when she met the challenger and expressed a desire to enter the ministry. Today, Miss Mills has just completed eight months of a three year stint with the United States Navy at Norfolk, Virginia, as a sonar specialist.”

“Excellent biographies on the contestants, Howard. We would like to thank the staff at ABN News for those reports.”

“Yes, Frank, they were super. According to our technical advisor who is presently monitoring activity in the ring, we still have a few minutes before the general rules are read publicly and The Fight begins. Let’s take this time to review the last twelve months leading up to today.”

“Excellent, Howard. From what the news media was given, the friendship between The Persuader and The Forbidden Fruit has been a tempestuous one. They met in the Spring of 1985, yet they did not begin dating until August 7 when The Persuader called The Forbidden Fruit and invited her out for lunch. It was during that luncheon that The Persuader tried to convince The Forbidden Fruit that they should be married, perhaps a hint of the turmoil that followed. Undaunted by The Forbidden Fruit’s coolness, The Persuader continued to see her and on October 18, suffered his first defeat when The Forbidden Fruit turned down his first proposal of marriage. Two months of total silence followed which discouraged but didn’t destroy The Persuader’s hope. He managed to woo The Forbidden Fruit into accepting some Christmas gifts in December and they renewed their friendship over a New Year’s Eve bonfire. Howard, would you like to take it from there?”

“Thank you, Frank. It was at that bonfire when The Persuader invited The Forbidden Fruit to go with him to Rome, Italy, the following spring. She accepted but later backed out following The Persuader’s second defeat on February 14. This defeat came two weeks after The Forbidden Fruit told The Persuader that she would never get married. She then accused The Persuader of not loving her on February 14. It was after this defeat that The Persuader amassed all the strength he had to win The Forbidden Fruit as his wife. Yet it seemed too little too late. The Forbidden Fruit enlisted for three years into the

United States Navy; she would leave on March 7. Almost ready to concede defeat, The Persuader backed off and decided to wait. His patience paid off when The Forbidden Fruit wrote him from basic training at Jacksonville, Florida, begging for letters. So he wrote her every day except Sundays for almost seven weeks, a total of 40 letters. In these letters, The Persuader included both subtle and not so subtle hints concerning marriage. There were times that he felt he had her convinced only to have The Forbidden Fruit become more forbidden. What was he to do? He almost exhausted his finances trying to convince her. He did exhaust his emotions, crying himself to sleep many nights. His prayers were fervent and sincere. The date of The Fight loomed closer as The Persuader suffered his third defeat on August 7, the anniversary of their first date. On that night, The Forbidden Fruit stated once again that she would never get married. Her vow became his vow. Her pulse became his pulse, her mind his mind. All he could do was to turn her completely over to God and he did just that. Today, they come together to fight the final battle to see who will win whom, to see if love does indeed conquer all! Let us watch, let us pray, let us hope for the best! Frank?"

"Let us go to the ring, Howard."

"Ladies and Gentlemen! This Fight will consist of ten rounds and a fifty minute total time limit! The rules of The Fight are as follows: Each five minute round will begin and end at the sound of the bell."

"This has got to be the most foolish thing that you have ever done," whispered The Forbidden Fruit.

"I had no choice. I love you so much I couldn't bear to lose you."

"All activity must commence after the opening bell and cease immediately when the closing bell is sounded."

"If you ever get out of this alive, you can kiss me good-bye for ever!" steamed The Forbidden Fruit.

"Promise?" quizzed The Persuader smiling at her.

"Shut up! You make me sick!"

"Topics of discussion have been selected for each

round and they must be adhered to.”

“Sex, sex, sex! Is that all you ever think about?” asked The Forbidden Fruit.

“No, I think about you sometimes,” quipped The Persuader still smiling.

“What is that suppose to mean?”

“Any contestant who chooses not to discuss a particular topic may forfeit the round.”

“Come to your senses, Dan! Forfeit this Fight before it even begins,” begged The Forbidden Fruit.

“What? We would have a major riot on our hands,” stated The Persuader sweeping his left hand out over the audience.

“Once a forfeit has been made, the opponent may choose to discuss the topic uncontested for the duration of the round.”

“Will you marry me?” asked The Persuader.

“Never!” shouted The Forbidden Fruit, “never, Never, NEVER!”

The announcer turned to look at the contestants.

“Please wait until The Fight begins. That is what these people have paid to see,” whispered the announcer covering his microphone. Turning back to the rules, he continued to read, **“There will be absolutely no physical contact during the fight.”** The crowd boomed and hissed.

“This world is sick!” commented The Forbidden Fruit, “Such filthy minds!”

“It’s not their fault. Satan is in a frenzy during these last days. Everyone is under attack,” stated The Persuader.

“Not me!” added The Forbidden Fruit proudly, “I don’t think about such trash!”

“During the course of The Fight, The Persuader may not quote the Word of God.”

“Good!” snubbed The Forbidden Fruit, “An excellent rule! It takes away your greatest weapon!”

“At least you see it as a great weapon. And I only use it to show you God’s will,” countered The Persuader.

“God’s will or your will?” quizzed The Forbidden Fruit.

“It doesn’t matter. They’re both the same. God’s will is my will.”

“Hah!”

“During the course of The Fight, The Forbidden Fruit may not mention anything relating to lust.”

The Persuader smiled. “They have covered all bases,” he said proudly.

The Forbidden Fruit looked upon The Persuader narrowly, being angry at the rule, yet she remained silent.

“Penalties will be given when any rule is broken.”

“You think you are so smart,” snarled The Forbidden Fruit, “I can’t stand the sight of you! I wish you had never called me last year!”

The Persuader smiled.

“Warnings in lieu of penalties will be issued at the discretion of the referee.”

“For the last time, Dan, forfeit this fight,” begged The Forbidden Fruit.

“Only if you will marry me.”

“NO!” screamed The Forbidden Fruit. The announcer glanced back at the pair. The Forbidden Fruit lowered her voice and raised her finger. “Stick it in your ear.”

“The contestants with the fewest penalties in each round will be declared the winner of that round. The winner of the most rounds will be declared the Champpiiioon! Let The Fight begin!” A deafening roar rose once again from the crowd silenced by the reading of the rules.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE FIGHT!

The announcer left the ring as the referee motioned for the two contestants to approach a table at the center of the ring.

“You have just been read the official rules twice. Are there any questions?” asked the referee.

“Yes,” began The Persuader. The Forbidden Fruit glared at him. “Will you marry me?”

The referee turned to The Forbidden Fruit.

“Ring the bell, ref! I’ll kill him!” shouted The Forbidden Fruit.

“Remember the rules. No physical contact,” informed the referee.

“Don’t worry, I have other ways,” smirked The Forbidden Fruit, staring ominously at The Persuader.

“Please be seated,” stated the referee.

The Persuader pulled a chair out and held it for The Forbidden Fruit to be seated. She arrogantly overlooked his gesture and went and seated herself in the opposite chair. Laughter rose from the crowd. The Persuader smiled and then seated himself in the remaining chair.

The referee bent over the table. “In just a few moments these microphones will be turned on and will remain on until the bell sounds to end the round. An international audience is watching and listening, so please watch your language.”

“He’s talking to you, FRUIT!” snapped The Persuader with a glint of mischief in his eyes.

“RING THE BELL, REF!” shouted The Forbidden Fruit.

The referee took the spare microphone on the table and raised up to address the audience as the spirit of competition sparked a blazing fire of determination in the eyes of the champion. She stared coldly at the downcast face of The Persuader determined not to be swayed at his attempts to weaken her with sad expressions of pity and humbleness. She did rec-

ognize the fact that she once loved him in a way that was difficult to explain. She enjoyed his company, his humor, and his boyish innocence, but that was all swept away now by this hideous act. Imagine being brought before the world as if he was judging her decision never to marry. No one has the right to tell anyone else what to do with their life. What did he hope to gain by bringing her before the world? Surely not her hand in marriage, for such extreme embarrassment would cause her to grasp her convictions more firmly. It was as if he wanted to tie the noose by which he would eventually be hanged. She stared at him more intently. Perhaps he was expecting something from The Fight that she had failed to see, something that would eventually give him the final victory. She shuddered at the thought of marriage.

The Persuader raised his head until their eyes met. He stared deeply into her green eyes, recalling happier times in the past. His chest trembled as his heart fluttered within. A tear surged forth from his left eye and spilled down his cheek.

“I love you,” he whispered, smiling. He reached to touch her hand, which she quickly withdrew from the table.

“Oh, Mama! It’s so sad!” cried Cissey.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, The Fight will now begin. The topic for the first round is Sex!”

“FORFEIT!” shouted The Forbidden Fruit. The audience thundered with applause. Catcalls were heard from many sections.

“We have a forfeit on round one!” proclaimed the referee in a shocked, shrill voice. **“The challenger wins the first round and may comment on the subject uncontested! Do you wish to do so?”**

The Persuader nodded as the bell rang to signal the beginning of the round.

PER: **“I am fully aware of both the subject of this round and the fact that I am addressing a woman.”** The catcalls increased. **“There are a few facts that must be stressed before this contest can successfully continue. My opponent has accused me in the past of possessing lust in**

my heart. I cannot lie. It is true. Yet the possession is like the accusation – in the past. What Satan has thought for evil, God has meant for good. God has transformed that lust into an unconditional love for her. Surely my action of the past few months proves that love. Such love would certainly linger into marriage and intensify. We are both Christians and are bound by God’s Word to flee ungodliness. I will gladly adhere to this bondage in any form to make this woman happy. Later in this contest, I will question the value of this woman’s decision never to marry based on future happiness. In closing, let the fact be carved in stone that sex is no longer an issue in this relationship.”

The bell rang.

“Excellent round one, Frank. The Persuader really conducted himself well.”

“Yes, Howard, and as a result of the forfeiture by The Forbidden Fruit, The Persuader has won round one. This is Frank Gibson along with Howard Carter. ABN Sports will return with round two of The Fight in just a moment.”

“Congratulations, Dan,” offered The Forbidden Fruit, “You did good.”

“Have I convinced you yet?” asked The Persuader reaching once again for the elusive hand.

“No,” came the sharp response. “You don’t seem to understand, Dan. I have my reasons for not marrying you or anyone else. I don’t want to.”

“That’s not a reason,” countered The Persuader, “that’s a fact based on a decision. WHY have you decided not to marry ever?” The Forbidden Fruit smiled. “Perhaps it’s not meant for me to know your reasons,” added The Persuader.

“Perhaps,” mocked The Forbidden Fruit. “If you did, you may hate yourself.”

“What do you mean by that?” questioned The Persuader. “Then it is because of something I’ve said or done.”

“Perhaps,” repeated The Forbidden Fruit.

“Oh, God, then I’ve poisoned my own rose garden,” sobbed The Persuader. He slumped over the table as if the

breath of life had been knocked out of him. He could hear The Forbidden Fruit breathing heavily as if she was a bull snorting at its adversary. He rose up and looked into her eyes. They appeared much calmer than before. ‘There is still hope. She is changing,’ thought The Persuader to his delight.

The referee approached the table. **“This is round two of a ten round match. The subject is God.”** Moments passed as the referee backed away giving ample time for a forfeit. The bell rang as the noise in the coliseum peaked once again and diminished.

PER: **“Are you as close to God as you want to be?”**

FF: **“Are you?”**

PER: **“No.”**

FF: **“None of us are, from the greatest to the least.”**

Cheers rose in response to the verbal punch.

PER: **“You once expressed a desire to enter the ministry. Do you still wish to do so?”**

FF: **“Yes, I would like to serve God by winning souls into the kingdom and preaching the gospel.”**

PER: **“That is why I asked you to marry me, so we could win souls together.”**

FF: **“But you have gone so deep into the Word, I was concerned that maybe I would hinder rather than help you. I was beginning to feel as if I wasn’t good enough to be an Evangelist or even the wife of an Evangelist.”**

PER: **“There is therefore no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus. Satan....”**

The referee blew his whistle. **“PENALTY!”** The audience cheered. **“Quoting the Word of God.”**

PER: **“Satan is the only one who accuses us. Don’t listen to him. He has only one mission: destroy the works of God. If he can get you to change your mind about entering the ministry, he has gained a great victory. If he can convince you not to marry me, he has gained yet another victory by hindering you in your life and me in my life. Two people agreeing together on God’s Kingdom can turn this world upside down. Look at Peter and Paul in the**

book of Acts....”

FF: **“Why don’t you marry a man, then?”** Laughter rose from the crowd.

PER: **“I can’t. Your brother, Bradley, turned me down.”** More laughter is heard. **“O.K., what about Aquila and Priscilla?”**

FF: **“Were they actually married?”**

PER: **“No, but...wait a minute! Do you want to be an Evangelist?”**

FF: **“Perhaps.”**

PER: **“Yes or no!”**

FF: **“Yes.”**

PER: **“You will need someone to encourage you, to give you support – to always be there through good and bad times.”**

FF: **“So I’ll buy a dog!”** The sound of laughter spilled into the ring to encourage The Forbidden Fruit. The expression on The Persuader’s face turned sour.

PER: **“Be serious, now!”** A tone of helplessness was noted in The Persuader’s voice. The Forbidden Fruit confidently moved in for the kill.

FF: **“I don’t need anyone to encourage me. God is my encouragement. God is my support. He’s my rock, my fortress, my deliverer. He will never forsake me. He’s with me through good times and bad times. I shall stand alone! I shall live alone! I will never need a man! I will never get married!”** A wave of applause began early and grew to a deafening crescendo; many spectators rising to their feet.

PER: **“But....”** The bell sounded ending the round and unleashing a victory cry throughout the coliseum bringing the world to its feet. The Forbidden Fruit stood to receive the cheers and pranced around the ring with arms raised like a bantam rooster marking its territory.

“Another great round, Howard. There is no question who won that one. The victor is still basking in the glory bestowed upon her by this enthusiastic audience. Meanwhile the competitor seems to be in deep thought, perhaps binding up his

emotional wounds.”

“Yes, Frank. The Persuader does seem visually shaken. It is interesting to note that maybe the challenger thought he would win the second round and go into the third round with a two to zero margin. After all, the subject of the second round was God.”

“Yes, Howard, but that subject was the very reason for his defeat. He drew a penalty when he quoted the Word of God. He was caught in his own trap. We’ll return to Garden Coliseum for round three of The Fight following this good word from one of our sponsors.”

Betty and Sue are standing next to the dessert table at a church social.

“Betty, I was just told that you brought the chocolate cake here. It’s delicious! What’s your secret?”

“It’s no secret, Sue! I just use my favorite cake recipe along with HS Ready-to-Spread Frosting.”

“This is store-bought frosting? It’s so rich, so smooth, sooo goood!”

“That’s HS!” The scene fades to a picture-perfect chocolate cake next to a can of HS frosting as a voice wraps up the commercial.

“Yes, HS Ready-to-Spread Frosting uses only the freshest, purest, simplest ingredients consisting of love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness and temperance. So the next time you decide on a special dessert, try Holy Spirit Ready-to-Spread Frosting. Yours will be the best cake at the social.”

“You are tuned to WCCA, channel 2, ABN for Central City, America!”

“Welcome back to The Fight! I have with me Mr. Yu from Upton, Georgia. Mr. Yu owns a Chinese restaurant in Upton. Welcome to Central City.”

“Thank you, Frank.”

“What do you think about The Fight so far?”

“It’s great, great. The last round was very exciting!”

“The contestants are tied at one round each. Whom

would you like to see win this contest?”

“If it were possible, I would like to see both of them win. However, if I must choose, I’d choose The Persuader. There would be great hope for this world, especially America if The Persuader can convince The Forbidden Fruit to marry him. His ministry would then skyrocket to unprecedented heights. And, believe it or not, she would win, too! He’s a terrific person and would make her a good husband.”

“I understand that you was invited here as an honored guest by the task force of the American Institute of Sports. How are you associated with the contestants?”

“They spent their first date lunching at my restaurant and also dined there in December when Mr. Flynn gave Miss Mills her Christmas gifts.”

“I see. That’s very romantic. Thank you, Mr. Yu, for being with us here on ABN Sports. Now let’s return to the ring for round three.”

“This is the third of ten rounds. The subject for this round is ministry!” The bell rang.

FF: **“You really think that you are some hot-shot preacher, don’t you!”** The Forbidden Fruit was quick to start the round as a horse out of the starting gate after such a decisive victory in the previous round, which still tasted sweet in her mouth. She was going after the jugular vein for the quick kill!

PER: **“No, just the opposite. I seek only to humbly serve God by serving others.”**

FF: **“How can you possibly proclaim the name of Jesus Christ with so much lust in your heart?”**

A shrill sound of a whistle is heard. **“Penalty!”** shouted the referee. The crowd hooted.

FF: **“Damn!”** She gritted her teeth in a smile.

“Warning, foul language!” wailed the referee.

The Persuader smiled as if he was about to pick up a lump of clay and mold it to his will. The Forbidden Fruit stared in steely horror and contempt. The Persuader cleared his throat.

PER: **“Let’s stick with the subject, shall we?”**

FF: **“Subject, my foot! I would tell you to take this damn fight and stick it where the sun don’t shine and walk away, but I will not give you the satisfaction of winning.”**

The referee blew the whistle again as The Forbidden Fruit reached and grabbed The Persuader by the shirt collar.

FF: **“I’ll fight you tooth and nail to the bitter end!!”**
The audience stirred and responded.

“Warning and another penalty!” cried the referee, **“Foul language and physical contact!”**

FF: **“Physical contact? I’ll show you physical contact!”** The Forbidden Fruit slapped The Persuader, knocking his glasses off. A mixture of cheers and boos echoed from the audience. The referee retrieved the glasses and handed them to The Persuader.

PER: **“I have come very close to forfeiting the remainder of this fight, but I won’t. Despite what has just happened, I feel that there is still hope.”**

FF: **“How can you say that? Haven’t I given you enough reasons to hate me? What is wrong with you?”**

PER: **“As long as there is breath in my body, I will not give up on you. I love you. That love for you was placed within my heart by a holy God. Someday, I hope to be a part of evangelizing the world. I want to help you to achieve your dream of preaching the gospel. I will not hurt you, but uphold you in prayer. I will not hinder you, but will hand over to you anything that you need, physically, spiritually, emotionally and financially. Together we will harvest souls for the kingdom; and for ourselves, we will harvest great joy and peace in our lives. That will be unprecedented in this tumultuous world today. Of all women created by God, I choose you. I love you. Give me a chance.”** The bell signaled the end of the round. The Persuader smiled at The Forbidden Fruit as he noticed the sparkle of tears in her eyes.

“That completes the third round and what an exciting match this has become. Already there has been some physical

contact and with seven more rounds to go, there is no telling what may happen. I have been just informed by Professor Byrd from the American Institute of Sports that the subject of the final round, the tenth, is not specified. That is to say any topic may be discussed. Along with the open topic, both contestants have agreed to allow all the rules governing The Fight to be waived during the tenth round. If The Forbidden Fruit's temper continues to peak in the following rounds, we may indeed scrape The Persuader up from the ring." Howard smiled and chuckled under his breath. "Speaking of tempers, Frank is now waiting in The Wings in the midst of a sea of adoring fans. Frank?"

"Thank you, Howard!"

"Mom, look, it's Mary!" shouted Cissey pointing at the television. "She's standing behind Frank, waving at the camera!"

"It certainly is!" remarked Mrs. Janson. "Why didn't you go with her? Then you both would have been on television."

"I didn't have the money. Besides, I wasn't interested in The Fight until now and I would give my left arm to be there." Cissey sighed as she watched Mary vigorously waving.

"Howard, this section I'm in now is indeed called The Wings where only single women were allowed to purchase seats. It was a tool of persuasion dreamed up by The Persuader and implemented by the excellent staff here at the Garden Coliseum. At some point during The Fight The Persuader will call The Forbidden Fruit's attention to the thousands of single women waiting in The Wings willing to marry him."

"Sounds like an excellent idea, Frank. Have you had a chance to talk with some of the women? Are they indeed willing to marry The Persuader?"

"You won't believe this, Howard, but out of all the women I have spoken to, only a few refused to marry The Persuader. In fact, an usher here at the coliseum said that they received over five thousand requests for seats in The Wings, but were only able to accommodate three thousand."

“Unbelievable. The Persuader has quite a following of fans. Do you have any there that you can speak with? We have a few more minutes before round four.”

“Yes, Howard.” Frank turned to the girl behind him.

“Oh, gosh! He’s interviewing Mary!” squealed Ciskey.

“Hello. I spoke with you earlier. Your name is?”

“Mary Wilson.”

“From?”

“Central City.”

“What brings you here to The Fight?”

“The Persuader,” cooed Mary dreamily. Several women swooned nearby and giggled.

“Do you like him?”

“He’s a dream,” stated Mary pressing her hand over her heart as if to calm it. More giggles are heard.

“Would you be willing to marry him?” asked Frank.

“In a heartbeat.”

“Are you a Christian?” asked Frank. Mary nervously nodded her answer. “As a woman, do you have any words of advice for The Forbidden Fruit?”

“Yes, as a Christian friend. Wake up and smell the coffee. A chance like this only comes once in a lifetime. Come down off of your high horse of pride and self-sufficiency. You need him as much as he needs you. Quit kidding yourself. He loves you and you love him. What more do you want? If you are looking for more, you won’t find it and when you look back, he’ll be gone and you will have lost everything, including happiness, forever.”

“Great advice. Let’s hope she heard you. Thank you. One more. Your name and where are you from?”

“Kate Rutledge from Macon, Georgia.”

“Would you marry The Persuader?”

“No.”

“Such a quick and decisive answer. Why not?”

“We dated once this past spring and he’s not my type. We don’t have the same interests. If he’s not The Forbidden Fruit’s type, then she shouldn’t give him a second thought.

She should forget him, send him packing and get on with her life, plain and simple. But if he is her type, then she is just plain stupid to refuse his proposal.”

“You are a lady of choice words. How did you get a seat in this section?”

“It was a gift from The Persuader. He wanted me to be here.”

“Then he still has eyes for you, perhaps?”

“If he does, that’s his problem, not mine.”

“Thank you. That’s it, Howard, but before we go back into the ring, the girls here in The Wings have a special message for The Persuader. Ready? On the count of three: one, two, three....”

“We love you, Persuader! You have persuaded us!”

A chorus of giggles and shrills followed.

“Thank you, Frank. If we have time later during The Fight, we’ll send you back into The Wings to interview more young women. Before going back into the ring for round four, let’s recap the first three rounds. The Persuader leads the match two rounds to one, having won the first round on a forfeiture and the third round when The Forbidden Fruit drew two penalties and two warnings. The Forbidden Fruit took round two when The Persuader received a penalty for quoting the Word of God. In the event of a tie at the end of The Fight, the penalties and warnings will be tallied to determine the winner. I see the referee approaching the center of the ring.”

“This is the fourth round of a ten round match. The subject of this round is finances.” The bell rang.

PER: **“I understand that you made excellent grades when you were in school.”**

The Forbidden Fruit looked puzzled at the statement.

FF: **“Maybe not excellent but good grades.”** The Forbidden Fruit struggled for his motive.

PER: **“Yet you quit school before graduating. Why?”**

FF: **“Several reasons. I considered myself to be an adult and I wanted adult things – a car, clothes, and other**

stuff. My parents couldn't afford to buy these things for me. Also, I wanted to help them financially."

PER: "So you dropped out of school to seek financial security."

FF: "Yes. Others had done it so I figured I could, too."

PER: "Yet you learned that the only way to get a good job is to get a high school diploma. So you went back to night school to earn your diploma."

FF: "Yes."

PER: "But even after you received your diploma, you found out that the choices of employment were severely limited. You would either work in textiles or construction."

FF: "Yes, or either flip hamburgers."

PER: "Did you ever dream of marrying someone with a lot of money?"

FF: "Of course. All girls do when they are young."

PER: "Did you ever think that I had plenty of money?"

FF: "At first I did, but then I learned that most of your money was talk. Your bank account was much smaller than what you liked people to think you had." A rumble of laughter rose from the audience.

PER: "After you quit your job back in February, you decided to join the Navy to secure your future financially. Did you ever consider marriage as a way to secure your future?"

FF: "No. I did not want to get married then and I do not want to get married now. There is no way I can make money by getting married."

PER: "If you stop to think about it, perhaps you could make money through marriage. You would be fulfilling God's will...."

FF: "Your will!" The crowd applauded.

PER: "O.K., my will." The forbidden Fruit looked puzzled at The Persuader's concession of wills. "I am a preacher of the gospel.... God is a rewarder of them that

diligently seek....” The Persuader leaned back and covered his mouth, but it was too late.

The referee blew the whistle. **“Penalty! Quoting God’s Word.”**

PER: **“God has blessed me immeasurably since I have met you. He will continue to do so. You are looking at someone who has tapped God’s source of unlimited resources.”**

FF: **“I wish I could believe that.”** The Forbidden Fruit’s eyes softened at the words. The Persuader caught his breath in disbelief. This was the first time since they entered the ring that she showed a promising and visible sign of changing her mind. He bit his lower lip to keep the tears of joy back. Perhaps he could indeed persuade her and emerge the victor in this contest. He reached for the most spiritual thing he could think of to say without drawing another penalty. **“If you don’t have faith for me, then have faith for God. He has promised to provide.”** His face pruned up to cry.

The bell rang as The Persuader collapsed in tears on the table. The Forbidden Fruit is stunned at his actions. She mentally reviewed the round to see if she said anything to warrant such emotion. The crowd burst into tremendous applause.

“Dan?” whispered Kem, lightly touching his arm, “What is wrong? Why are you acting this way?” The Persuader continued to cry, his head resting on his forearm. The Forbidden Fruit moved her hand from The Persuader’s arm and after much thought, gently placed her open palm upon his head and patted it a few times. Soon The Persuader raised his head, showing his flushed face and tear-filled eyes.

“Oh, Kem,” he began, his voice quivering, but becoming stronger as he talked, “If only you loved me as much as I love you, you would not hesitate to say yes to my kind offer. We would not be here at this silly coliseum. We would be happily planning our future.”

“Perhaps I do love you as much as you love me,” stated Kem. “Perhaps it is because I love you so much that I must say no to marriage.”

“I don’t understand,” questioned Dan. “How can that be? You must say no because you love me so much?”

“Must I explain to you everything? I pray that God will open your eyes to this truth. If not, I promise to tell you later,” consoled Kem reaching her hand to smooth Dan’s hair.

“Promise?” whispered Dan taking her hand in his and kissing it.

“I promise,” she said smiling. “Once you know the truth, then perhaps it will be easier for you to accept our future. Trust me.”

“Ah, I have more care to stay than will to go. Come death and welcome it, Juliet wills it so,” quoted Dan in his best Shakespearean voice, “Oh this is but a dream, too flatteringly sweet to be substantial. Did my heart love till now? Forswear in sight, for I never saw true beauty till this night. Oh, Kem, your green eyes, your auburn hair, your fair face; they all breathe the passion of rare beauty. To admire such features is to trust your heart. I await the words from you scarlet lips that will either chain me forever to sadness or liberate me totally to euphoric freedom.”

“Shhhh!” breathed Kem. “It’s time for round five. Good luck.” She smiled. Returning The Forbidden Fruit’s smile, The Persuader straightened up in his chair as the referee approached them from the side.

“This is the fifth of ten rounds. The subject for this round is security.” The referee backed away as the bell rang.

PER: **“Do you have any fears?”**

FF: **“Not really.”**

PER: **“You mean that there is absolutely nothing that you fear?”**

FF: **“Perhaps. Besides, perfect love casts out all fear.”**

PER: **“Then you do love me.”**

FF: **“That’s not the love I am talking about. I mean God. The love of God casts out all fear.”**

PER: **“Just the other week you were telling me about an incident that happened at your sister’s where you be-**

came afraid. Do you fear danger?"

FF: "Yes, particularly when I am alone."

PER: "Then you do have a fear of someone attacking you when you are alone?"

FF: "Yes, most women do."

PER: "You consider yourself a loner in that you like to spend time by yourself?"

FF: "Yes."

PER: "Do you ever think about being attacked while you are alone?"

FF: "Sometimes. Usually I don't think about it until I've had a close call."

PER: "Do you realize that your chances of being attacked are increased the more you are alone?"

FF: "Forfeit!"

The referee approached the table blowing the whistle. "For what reason?"

FF: "He is dwelling on my vulnerability as a woman. I know that I run the risk every day of being raped and murdered, but that has absolutely nothing to do with marriage. Just as many married women are attacked as single women. I refuse to let him frighten me where I am most vulnerable." The crowd applauded. Shrills and whistles are heard from staunch feminists throughout the coliseum.

"Forfeit allowed. Round five goes to The Persuader." The referee's voice softened in awe.

"Interesting tactics, Frank."

"Yes, Howard, the round was almost halfway over and The Forbidden Fruit had an excellent chance of winning if The Persuader could draw a penalty, yet being rattled by his mode of questioning, she decided to forfeit the round to her opponent giving him a 3 to 2 lead in this contest."

"Perhaps because of the calmness of the contestants, the round could have gone either way, even ending in a technical tie and The Forbidden Fruit wanted to give The Persuader a false hope of victory going into the final half of this Fight!"

"Good reason, Howard, but The Forbidden Fruit must

be careful now how she caters to The Persuader's actions. It could easily backfire, spelling defeat for her and causing her to accept The Persuader's proposal of marriage...."

"Mama, if The Persuader wins and The Forbidden Fruit decides to marry him, will she win also?" asked Cissey.

"According to Mr. Yu, she would," observed Mrs. Janson. "The Persuader seems like a very nice man with his heart in the right place."

"Then God would have His way and both would win," laughed Cissey. Turning back to the television, she observed, "Oh, my favorite commercial."

In the commercial a man is driving a small car through a heavy rain and pulling into a residential driveway. Inside the home, the man enters the front door, takes off his coat and hat and proceeds through the living area into the kitchen.

"Hon, I'm home! MMMmmm, what's for dinner? It smells wonderful!" He welcomes his wife into his arms.

"Only your favorite – soup."

"And cornbread?" he asks. She nods. He lifts the lid of the simmering pot as the aroma billows out and fills the air.

The announcer speaks, "Yes, Garden of Eden Soup; made from only the freshest and tenderest vegetables. For the love of your life, prepare Garden of Eden tonight."

"Is it soup, yet?" asks the husband.

"Almost," the wife responds.

"MMMmmm, this has got to be the start of something good!" They giggle in a warm embrace.

The announcer returns, "Try Garden of Eden. It's paradise."

Cissey smiled as the couple in the commercial hugged each other. She turned to the bowl of popcorn and chose several morsels.

"There have been some good commercials on today," observed Cissey. "I wonder if The Persuader had a hand in choosing them."

"I don't know," answered Mrs. Janson. "He's a very shrewd yet sensitive person. I wouldn't be surprised if he did."

CHAPTER FIVE

HALFWAY HOME!

“Welcome back to the second half of The Fight between The Persuader and the champion, The Forbidden Fruit. I’m Howard Carter with ABN Sports along with Frank Gibson. Frank, we have just witnessed an unusual round where The Forbidden Fruit forfeited the round halfway through when she had an excellent chance of winning. We mentioned earlier the possibility that she did this in order to give The Persuader a false hope of victory going into the last five rounds.”

“If this is the case, Howard, she’s taking a terrible chance of losing this fight entirely. Not only does The Persuader lead three rounds to two, but he also leads with less warnings than the champion. She has two warnings; he has none. They are presently tied with two penalties each. Through personal observation, for which we are so handsomely paid, I see The Forbidden Fruit weakening to the words of The Persuader. Perhaps she is beginning to see his worth and the honorable methods he is using to benefit her through matrimony. She will soon realize that if she is defeated in this Fight, she will win and if she wins this Fight, she will lose everything.”

“Very astute observation, Frank. I see The Forbidden is glaring over here. Perhaps she heard what you just said, yet judging from the look on her face, she strongly disagrees. The referee is approaching the table. Round six is about to begin....”

“Ladies and Gentlemen, this is the sixth round of a ten round match. The subject for this round is happiness.” The bell rang immediately.

PER: **“Are you happy?”**

FF: **“Yes.”**

PER: **“I ask you again, are you happy?”**

FF: **“Yes.”**

PER: **“I believe you.”** The expression on The Forbid-

den Fruit's face changed as she was thinking that her opponent was trying to convince her that she was not happy. **"I will tell you why you are happy."** The Persuader paused to give emphasis and drama like a great orator. **"You are happy because you are where you want to be doing what you want to do...."**

FF: **"I don't want to get married."** Laughter rose from the crowd.

PER: **"Of course not! And I don't blame you!"** The Forbidden Fruit recoiled as if staggering from a severe blow. **"You don't need to get married because you are so happy. If I was as happy as you, I wouldn't want to get married either. You are deliriously happy. When you are at Fort St. Leon, you are satisfied with your work. When you are in Upton, you are satisfied with your family. You have a wonderful, large, loving family. You do not need anyone or anything else. You lack of nothing. God has richly blessed you...."**

FF: **"Penalty!"** The referee stepped forward. No whistle is blown.

"What are you talking about?" asked the referee puzzled at her call.

FF: **"He quoted the Word of God. 'You lack of nothing' is found in First Thessalonians 4:12."** The Persuader's mouth dropped open in disbelief. He shuddered at the penalty that he just drew which would be confirmed by the search of the scriptures. The referee looked over at the technical referee for a confirmation. The referee then blew the whistle which shattered The Persuader's confidence. The Forbidden Fruit smiled.

PER: **"You think you are so damn smart!"**

"Warning! Foul language!" shouted the referee.

A moment of silence followed as The Persuader quenched his anger.

FF: **"Better hurry before the bell rings. I don't need to say one word. I'm happy, deliriously happy!"** The audience rumbled with laughter.

PER: **“Yes, you are happy now. In Louisiana, the Navy takes care of you. In Georgia, your family takes care of you. But what will happen when you get out of the Navy and perhaps move to Atlanta to work. Will you be happy then?”**

FF: **“Deliriously happy!”** More laughter is heard.

PER: **“Will you? Think about it. Who will cook for you? Who will be there to talk to you when you need someone? Who will be there when you are lonely?”**

FF: **“I can cook. I can live alone without getting lonely. It’ll be great being an independent woman!”** A feminine wave of cheers is heard throughout the coliseum.

PER: **“And one night when you are home alone in bed and you hear a noise outside your window, who will be there to protect you, to comfort your fears?”**

FF: **“I am not helpless! I can survive! And God help the person that made that noise outside my window!”** Another wave of cheers is heard much louder than the first.

PER: **“Living alone is a novelty at first. It’s exciting and adventurous. But soon the novelty wears off and you begin to long for someone to share your thoughts, your love, your life with – someone who will return these things back to you, sharing their thoughts, their love, and their life. I have reached this point and believe me, living alone is no longer fun.”**

FF: **“Please let me learn that for myself.”**

PER: **“I will.”** The Forbidden Fruit recoiled again, shocked at her opponent’s generosity. **“But please promise me that ten years from today, when you are home alone on a Friday night with nothing to do, nowhere to go, and the phone doesn’t ring, remember this wisdom that I just shared with you.”**

FF: **“What you are saying then is if I don’t marry, I’ll be miserable, but if I do get married, then I will be happy. All of my sisters are married and they are not particularly happy. Why?”**

PER: **“The only answer I can give is to say that they**

did not marry me.” Hoots and catcalls rose from the crowd. **“I have studied marriage as a single man for eleven years, nine as a Christian. Happiness does not always come with marriage. Marriage is the pursuit of happiness. If one does not pursue happiness through marriage then happiness will never be a part of marriage. Happiness is an elusive emotion. It must be pursued and secured. It will not come to you automatically. When I get married, or should I say when we get married....”** The Forbidden Fruit glared at The Persuader. **“We will submit ourselves completely as servants to seek out and possess happiness through commitment to our Lord Jesus Christ, each other, and our church, in that order. Forbidden Fruit, what can I do for you to make you happy?”**

FF: **“Leave me alone. That will make me happy.”**

Laughter is heard again.

PER: **“Marry me and I will leave you alone. I promise.”** The bell rang signaling the end of the round. “Whew! That was a long round. The clock must have stopped.”

“I think they stopped the clock when I called the penalty earlier,” stated The Forbidden Fruit. “I really shocked you with that one!”

“Yes you did,” confessed The Persuader, “How did you know that verse?”

“I went through the epistles of Paul and chose about a dozen verses that I thought you might use and memorized them,” stated The Forbidden Fruit.

“I’m impressed,” said The Persuader.

“Thank you,” blushed The Forbidden Fruit, “But tell me, what did you mean when you said that if I marry you, you will leave me alone? How can that be?”

The Persuader smiled, “Promise not to penalize me? In First Corinthians 1:27, it says that God has chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise. To answer your question, all I can say is that you may find more freedom in marriage than you ever will being single. Think about that.”

“I will,” said The Forbidden Fruit smiling.

“Just remember that eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither hath entered into the heart of man the things God has prepared for them that love him. We love God. Our bounty is waiting for us.” The Persuader reached to clasp The Forbidden Fruit’s hands. She did not refuse him this time. They sat staring into each other’s eyes, lost in their own world as the coliseum rumbled with conversation, many eyes still upon them and all wondering what was going on in the ring.

“Dan,” whispered The Forbidden Fruit, casting her glance down to their hands, “You chose an excellent name for this Fight, for you have almost persuaded me to marry you.” The Persuader’s eyes began to sparkle as the first hint of tears appeared. The Forbidden Fruit raised her green eyes to reunite with his. “You’re so sweet to do all of this just for me. Please believe me when I tell you that I love you but I cannot be your wife...” The Persuader leaned forward to speak but is cut off by The Forbidden Fruit, “I am not worthy to be your wife. God has someone better for you, someone more beautiful, more caring. Someone who is worthy enough to accept your love and give of her love abundantly.” Tears streamed down The Persuader’s face. “I’m sorry. Please don’t cry.” She reached to dry The Persuader’s tears with her hand.

“Please forgive me for my emotions,” said The Persuader apologetically.

“Don’t apologize. I understand. You have a wonderful, tender heart,” soothed The Forbidden Fruit.

“Which is now broken,” added The Persuader. “In the midst of hopelessness, God gives hope. I will not give up on you. There are still four more rounds.” The Persuader’s voice echoed with great confidence.

“You might win me yet,” encouraged The Forbidden Fruit, “Let’s have fun with this next round.”

“This is round seven of a ten round match. The subject is children.” The referee stepped away from the table.

FF: **“Children!”** The bell finally rang to start the round. **“We are not even married yet and you want to talk about children!?”** The audience laughed.

PER: **“Do you want children?”**

FF: **“Dozens of them! I have a pair of breasts. We’ll have them two at a time. Mama did!”** The roar of laughter increased. **“Children? Dozens of them! Dirty diapers everywhere, sour milk, midnight feedings! Children? I love them! Let’s have dozens of them! Hundreds! Thousands!”**

PER: **“Be serious now. Do you want children?”**

FF: **“I can’t.”** The laughter ceased immediately at this statement as everyone awaited the reason.

PER: **“Why?”**

FF: **“I’m not getting married.”** The laughter returned.

PER: **“If you did get married, would you want to have any children?”**

FF: **“Are children a necessary ingredient in the pursuit of happiness?”**

PER: **“Definitely.”**

FF: **“Then if I get married, I would want to have children – at least two.”**

PER: **“What you are saying then is that you want to be truly happy. Correct?”**

FF: **“Of course. Who doesn’t?”**

PER: **“Then if true happiness includes marriage, you would be willing to get married?”**

FF: **“Yes, I suppose. But what is true happiness?”**

PER: **“True happiness is being in God’s perfect will.”**

FF: **“And what is God’s perfect will?”**

PER: **“It is simply His Word.”**

FF: **“Which says....”**

PER: **“Ah, nice try, but I was about to forfeit this round earlier when things got out of hand, so I will draw a penalty in order to quote some of God’s Word.”** The referee nodded his head. **“God saw that it was not good for man to be alone. God later commanded man to be fruitful and replenish the earth.”**

FF: **“What about the woman? Was it good for the woman to be alone?”**

PER: **“The woman was made for the man.”** The sound of feminine boos came from the audience.

FF: **“So what you are saying is that it is God’s perfect will for man to get married even though the woman he chooses to marry may be miserable in that marriage.”** The boos turned to laughter.

PER: **“Yes, uh, no, uh, I mean....wait! If man or woman is able to live alone, then they should do so. If they are not able to live alone, then they should get married.”**

FF: **“I am able to live alone. If you are not, that is your problem.”**

PER: **“If man is not able to live alone, then God allows him to choose a wife under the leadership of the Holy Spirit. Once the woman is chosen, then it is up to the man to convince the woman, or persuade her to marry him. Will you marry me?”**

FF: **“No! But I do want children! Dozens of them!”** The laughter returned. The bell rang to end the round.

“What a wonderful round that was, Howard. The Forbidden Fruit has an excellent sense of humor. The crowd loved it.”

“Yes, Frank, it seems that the diversity of emotions we have seen today was planned, as if the entire Fight was following a script. Already we have witnessed heart-rending pathos, fist-clenching anger, speechless frustration, and spell-binding humor.”

“If there is indeed a script, Howard, it was written and implemented by the Holy One above.”

“Amen,” said Frank in agreement.

“Amen,” whispered Cissey.

“ABN Sports will return with the exciting concluding rounds of The Fight following a brief word from our sponsors.”

“Howdy, folks. My name is Brent Tanner. I’m a professional cowboy and horse breeder. Let me take a moment of your time to talk with you about something very important to all of us – money and the future. All of our life, we have been told that money plus time equals more money. That’s right!

But by conventional investments, it takes a lot of time to make a little money. Well, not any more. Let me introduce you to a new, low-risk investment where you can realize a minimum of a one hundred percent profit in just five years. That's right, only five years. Sounds impossible? It's not. Just put your money in horse breeding. That's right, horse breeding. Why this fine filly that I'm riding now was purchased at birth for \$2,000. Today, just three years later she's worth over 5 grand. Say hello to Sweet Sue. (kik, kik. Here girl.) Notice her beautiful brown mane and chestnut eyes. She's a bit skittish but with the right touch, she settles down. At a 150 grand, she's mighty sweet! For more details, call us out here at Central City Stables. We have a good selection of fillies, stallions, and even some gentle mares of breeding quality just waiting for your investment. So call right after The Fight. That's Central City Stables, where horse breeding is not just a hobby, it's an investment."

"This is WCCA, channel 2, ABN for Central City, America!"

"Welcome back to Garden Coliseum. I'm here with a very special lady from Rome, Italy. Her name is Señora Rozetti. Welcome to the United States."

"Thank you, Frank."

"You speak English very well. Is this your first time visiting the United States?"

"Yes. I have heard wonderful things about your country. We have lots of Americans to visit us in Rome."

"I understand that you own a hotel in Rome."

"That's right, Frank. My husband and I own and run Piazza de Bella Donna on Via Emanuele. The Persuader had booked a week's stay at Piazza de Bella Donna last March but cancelled prior to his departure from America."

"Is that what brings you to The Fight?"

"Yes. I read the names of the contestants in the Rome newspaper and I told my husband that they sounded familiar. When I checked my records, I found their reservations and cancellation. We were saddened by their cancellation, so I de-

cided to come personally and wish them well with their future.”

“I understand that you spoke with The Persuader just before The Fight and presented him with a special gesture of international goodwill.”

“That’s right, Frank. My husband and I have decided to offer the couple a week of free lodging at the Piazza de Bella Donna in the event that they decide to get married.”

“Having met The Persuader, do you have any words of wisdom for The Forbidden Fruit?”

“I only wish that I was thirty years younger and single. Ha, ha!”

“Thank you, Señora Rozetti. Enjoy your stay here and have a safe flight back to Rome. I see that the eighth round is about to begin.”

“This is round eight of ten rounds. The subject is unity.” The referee backed away from the table and signaled for the bell to ring, which does to start the round.

FF: **“What do you mean by unity?”** The question was directed at the referee but The Persuader chose to answer.

PER: **“Becoming one flesh.”** The Persuader clasped his hands tightly together and entwined his fingers.

FF: **“All you ever think about is my body! This is a....”**

“Penalty!” shouted the referee, **“You cannot refer to lust!”**

FF: **“Well, dammit, he quoted the Word! Becoming one flesh is from the Word of God!”**

“Warning! Foul language!” continued the referee. **“Penalty also against The Persuader for quoting the Word of God! Proceed.”**

FF: **“Unity! Unity? That’s a stupid subject! Why didn’t you go ahead and use the other word that you are thinking right now. I would say it, but I’ll get another warning for filthy language. You will not win this contest. I’ll fight you tooth and nail until the last drop of blood falls from your body!”** The temper of the champion was reflected

in the noise of the audience.

PER: **“Let’s stick with the subject....”**

FF: **“Unity! So you want my body? I’d die first before you would even kiss me! I don’t want you or anybody pawing on me! I hate it! It turns my stomach just to think about it!”**

PER: **“Wait! Stop! Don’t you realize what you are doing? You are taking the act of unity out of the context of love. You hate the carnal act of unity. One would never hate the act of unity as an expression of love.”**

FF: **“I do!”**

PER: **“Do you? Honestly?”**

FF: **“Yes!”**

PER: **“Remember Robert?”**

FF: **“Shut up! Don’t mention him again!”**

PER: **“I won’t. But take a moment and evaluate your commitment to him. Was it an expression of emotional or carnal love? What about his commitment to you? How was it expressed? Emotionally or carnally? I beg of you not to confuse the two. A carnal act never bears any fruit such as joy, peace and so forth. But an expression of deep emotional love will bear fruit abundantly and seal the fate of that which you seek the most – happiness. Don’t take my word for it. Try it yourself. Express the love you have for someone in an act of kindness. Be it either kind words, a thoughtful deed, or just a simple hug to let someone know that you love them. As a result you will find happiness that you seek and it will never depart from you.”**

The audience became spell-bound by the deep words of love expressed by The Persuader. **“As far as your body is concerned, I am not ashamed to say that I desire to express the deep, gentle, kind and thoughtful love I have for you beyond vocal or poetic words. This communication can only come through the emotional act of unity!”** The bell sounded to end the round.

“That was a dirty trick,” commented The Forbidden Fruit.

“What?” questioned The Persuader smiling.

“Slipping that subject in. I thought it meant something else,” argued The Forbidden Fruit.

“Like what?” asked The Persuader.

“Like ‘uniting’ in marriage or something.”

“The scriptural definition of marriage is to become one flesh. Remember the phrases ‘wife of thy youth’ and ‘wife of thy covenant’ I wrote you about recently?” quizzed The Persuader.

“Yes, but I still think it was sneaky of you to slip in a second round concerning sex when I justifiably forfeited the first one.”

“I’m sorry. Are you mad at me?”

“No, just upset with myself. I should have never told you about Robert. You will never let me forget him,” commented The Forbidden Fruit.

“Do you want to? Besides, we don’t have a future together. How can I never let you forget him? We’re never getting married,” stated The Persuader.

“We aren’t?” teased The Forbidden Fruit.

“Kem, don’t tease me like that! You have all but destroyed me emotionally. I have feelings, too! I only wanted you to be happy. That is the only reason why I have been nice to you. If you are thinking that I had other reasons, you’re wrong.”

“Don’t you want me to marry you?” asked The Forbidden Fruit.

“No! Not if it will make you unhappy.”

The Forbidden Fruit bowed her head at the statement, her mind entering into deep thought. All this time she had misjudged The Persuader. The Bible explicitly warns not to judge anyone lest the judgment with which one is judged turns and judges the other. Her judgment with which she had judged The Persuader was now judging her. The Persuader was honest in his intention toward her. He does want her to be happy. That is the reason why he gave her money moments after she coldly rejected the trip to Rome and then he bought her another gift

days later. Her happiness was why he bought her a gold watch, sent her more money on her birthday and then bought her some new clothes. Her happiness was his ultimate priority in giving her other things that she needed. If only he realized that things would not make her happy. The Forbidden Fruit was desperately seeking someone to appreciate her and love her for whom she was. Every person needs someone special to treat them in a unique and special way. The Forbidden Fruit was unconsciously seeking for that individual. Had she found him? Was The Persuader the one she was looking for? If he was, then he must not know – at least for now.

“Look, it’s your mother,” observed The Persuader. The words shattered The Forbidden Fruit’s deep thoughts. She looked up bewildered into the eyes of The Persuader. “Your mother is over there,” repeated The Persuader pointing to the left. “She’s being interviewed by Howard Carter of ABN Sports.”

“I have with me the mother of The Forbidden Fruit, Mrs. Helen Mills of Upton, Georgia. Welcome to Central City, Mrs. Mills. How does it feel to have a daughter of such international importance today?”

“Great! I’m very proud of my daughter today. She has done well so far and I believe she will continue to do so.”

“What do you think about her challenger, The Persuader?”

“He’s a good boy, a nice young man. I’ve known him and his family since he was a baby. His intentions are honest. He just does things differently from most folks.”

“Would you like to see your daughter marry The Persuader?”

“Yes, but it’s not my decision to make. Whatever my daughter decides, I will support her.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Mills,” stated Howard turning from his interview to the camera. “We now return you to the ring for round nine.”

“This is round nine of a ten round match. The subject is love.” The referee looked at the two contestants, then

turned and stepped away as the bell sounded.

PER: **“Do you love me?”**

FF: **“As a friend.”**

PER: **“No, deeper than friendship. Do you have a deeper love for me?”**

FF: **“You’ve asked me that before. Remember?”**

PER: **“Yes, but you never gave me an answer. Remember?”** The audience laughed.

FF: **“For good reason. I wasn’t sure.”**

PER: **“Are you sure now?”**

FF: **“Perhaps.”**

PER: **“Well?”**

FF: **“In light of all that you have done for me and my family and the way that you treat me in trying to be nice to me, I would say that I love you more than my own brother.”** The Persuader smiled. **“But don’t get your hopes up. I don’t love you enough to commit myself to you for the rest of my life.”**

PER: **“Marriage is a lifetime commitment, isn’t it?”**

FF: **“In my book it is.”**

PER: **“Have you ever tried to allow your love for me to grow, to develop naturally?”**

FF: **“Yes, but every time I do, you say something or write something that destroys my confidence in everything that you stand for.”**

PER: **“You must realize that I do not do these things intentionally. Besides, if you truly love me then what I say or do should not matter. According to....damn!”** The Persuader paused as The Forbidden Fruit stared in bewilderment.

“Warning! Foul language!” stated the referee.

PER: **“I started to quote from the Bible. Since I love you so much and have given my all to win you, I will draw the penalty and quote from Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians. Referring to love in chapter 13, Paul writes that love beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things and endureth all things. Love never fails. If my actions upset you then perhaps you never loved me at all.**

Forgiveness is the balm that restores all things and strengthens the bond of love. Your coolness towards me in the past has grieved me at times but nothing will ever destroy the love that I have for you. Nothing! Will you marry me?"

FF: "Do you truly know what you are asking?"

Think about it. You are asking me to make a commitment that will last the rest of my life based on a feeling that we are not certain is love. I say that I love you, but saying it is not enough. I must show you that I love you. Have I shown my love for you recently?"

PER: "Yes. I wrote you before my birthday and asked you to either send me a card, send me a gift, write me a letter, call me or pray for me. I added that whatever you decided to do would show me just how much you loved me. Do you remember what you did?" The Forbidden Fruit shook her head. **"You did all five requests. If that is not love, I don't know what is! I do not measure your love by your actions. To me a smile is an expression of love. A kind word, a visit is the same. What may seem insignificant to you, means the world to me. It doesn't take much to make me happy. That's why I want you to marry me!"** The Forbidden Fruit stood up quickly. **"Just kidding! I was just kidding!"** The Persuader ducked, covering his head with his arms.

FF: "I'm not mad! I just want to show you just how much I still love you." The Persuader raised his head, perplexed at The Forbidden Fruit's actions. She slowly walked around the ring, looking at her opponent. Oohs and aahs began rising from the crowd. **"Back in February, I accused you of lust instead of love."**

"Penalty!" shouted the referee. The Forbidden Fruit smiled at the referee and nodded.

FF: "I was wrong, damn wrong!"

"Warning, foul language!" added the referee. The Forbidden Fruit smiled again and encouraged the referee to back away.

FF: **“I did not realize that I was wrong until today. It did not matter what you gave me – money, gifts – it would not change my mind concerning that false accusation I had made against you. I love you very much, but that love is not yet strong enough for marriage. If you wait, I will be honored, but I can make no promises.”** The Forbidden Fruit extended her hand. The Persuader balked at the offer fearful of drawing a penalty for bodily contact. He glanced at the referee, who smiled and nodded an approval.

The Persuader turned back to The Forbidden Fruit eagerly reaching for her hand. They did not shake hands but stood opposite each other, their hands clasped firmly in each other’s, quietly posing as immortal statues. As firmly as their hands were clasped, their gaze gripped each other strongly. The piercing green eyes of The Forbidden Fruit pondered deeply the blue pools of The Persuader and the soul of the man that lay beyond them. The crowd was stirred to complete silence at this emotional display of harmony between the once divergent souls.

The seconds flew swiftly into millennia as the message of the moment grew more powerful with time. The silence hung heavily throughout the world and grew to a seemingly deafening crescendo. Surely the Messiah was about to return. Hushed by a ‘spiritual will’ not to speak, every ear of every creature strained to hear the distant winnow of a white stallion or the blast of a jubilant trumpet. Weak hearts grew strong with every beat, blind eyes were opened, deaf ears were unstopped, mute tongues were loosed yet in reverence for the moment remained silent, missing limbs were restored and crippled limbs were made functional. All sicknesses and diseases were vanquished by a greater power as if the burden of sin was finally lifted from the world. All eyes turned and were focused upon the two as the silence finally relinquished its dominion to a contrite voice:

FF: **“I’m sorry for all that I have done to hurt you.”** Her voice trailed off emotionally.

PER: **“I graciously accept these kind words, yet all**

has been forgiven as you have forgiven me.” The bell rang to end the round as the silence quickly returned. Soon the coliseum erupted with applause, cheers, shouts of approval, and a literal storm of humanity rising to its feet to show a tear-stained approval of the reconciliation.

“Fantastic,” commented Howard wiping a tear from his eye. “This is not a time for words. Let’s enjoy the moment for what it is worth.”

Cissey bowed her head into the palms of her hands, weeping uncontrollably. Mrs. Janson reached for her and pulled her close, comforting her in an embrace. Resting her chin on Cissey’s head, Mrs. Janson gazed intently at the television, which showed close-up shots of people weeping, yet cheering the stirring harmony displayed by the contestants. The emotions being displayed reflected the heart of a city, nay state, nay nation, nay even the world that truly believed in God. The decree of our forefathers was one nation under God. The word ‘nation’ went beyond the colonies, beyond the sea coasts, river borders and mountain ranges to include all of humanity from the farthest reaches of the earth, for the creation of man is the glory of God. Mrs. Janson, stunned by the simple token of truth being displayed in such an awesome manner, closed her eyes, and in the midst of repentant tears prayed silently.

“Howard,” whispered Frank, “I’ve never seen anything like this. People all over the coliseum are falling on their knees and praying. Even the contestants are joined together in prayer. A spirit of worship and praise has entered the arena.”

“Surely the presence of the Lord is in this place. Hearts are being touched. Lives are being changed. Let us continue to reverence this moment in silence.” Howard’s voice weakened as his emotions overcame him. He dropped to his knees and wept deeply, confessing his faults to God in prayer.

The applause and cheers continued, more so now in praise to the Holy One that had graced the coliseum with a great outpouring of the Holy Spirit. An hour earlier, the people had gathered within the confines of the coliseum to witness a victory, only to realize a greater victory in their own life. Even

though The Fight was not over, the crowd gazed intently at the contestants, still praying in the ring, and wondered who, if any, would win.

After the contestants finished praying, The Forbidden Fruit raised her head and looked intently at The Persuader, who showed no expression despite the tears that filled The Forbidden Fruit's eyes. She slowly moved closer to him as he opened his arms to welcome her in a close embrace. The Forbidden Fruit stared out across the coliseum, oblivious to the crowd, her mind lost in deep thought.

"Why did you name me The Forbidden Fruit?" whispered Kem, turning her face inward toward The Persuader's ear.

"Because you, among others, have discouraged me about dating you and seeking you for my wife," soothed The Persuader.

"But the name sounds like I am abandoned and I do not want to lose you as a friend." Kem bit her lip as her voice trailed off weakly.

"And I do not want to lose you, yet it seems that despite my efforts, I am..."

CHAPTER SIX

AND THE WINNER IS....

The referee quickly approached the two standing, still embraced, in the middle of the ring.

“We wish to start round ten during this solemn moment. May we?” quizzed the referee. The Persuader nodded approval. The referee swung his microphone up and said, **“This is the tenth and final round. All rules are forfeited. The contestants may discuss any subject.”** The bell rang immediately. The contestants released their embrace and moved away from each other yet remained standing.

PER: **“Do you realize what just happened?”**

FF: **“Not entirely. All I know is that a great burden was lifted and I began to see things differently.”** A chorus of amens rose from the crowd.

PER: **“Would you say that God had a hand in what just happened?”**

FF: **“I suppose.”**

PER: **“He definitely did. In fact, what just happened was exactly what I thought would happen if we came into one mind and one accord.”**

FF: **“What do you mean?”**

PER: **“Do you remember one of my letters in which I quoted the Bible that if two people shall agree as to touching anything, and also that if one could put one thousand to flight, then two could put ten thousand to flight? I was trying to convince you to be my wife by showing you what would happen if we did get married. Well, what happened today is only a sample of what would take place in our lives if we were married.”**

FF: **“I don’t understand.”**

PER: **“When we clasped hands, we came into a mutual agreement thus setting to flight ten thousand demons. If that can happen when we just hold hands, imagine what would happen if we....”**

FF: **“Don’t say it!”**

PER: **“What? I was only going to say, ‘If we got married.’”**

FF: **“Oh.”**

PER: **“Will you marry me?”**

FF: **“Not now.”**

PER: **“You mean that you will marry me later?”**

FF: **“No. I mean don’t ask me that question now.”**

PER: **“Do you not realize that I love you enough to ask you to marry me?”**

FF: **“Painfully so! It seems that you won’t let me forget it.”**

PER: **“I’m sorry. Yet, if you will, pause for a moment and realize that there are thousands of women waiting in The Wings willing to marry me.”** The Persuader gestured by sweeping his arm and hand over the section of the coliseum designated as ‘The Wings.’ **“Look at them. Thousands of them willing to be my wife and yet I do not love them as much as I love you. There is no one in this world that can compare with you. God sent you to be a special blessing in my life and a special blessing you have been.”**

FF: **“Be honest now, before the world. Do you truly, truly love me?”**

PER: **“If I say yes, you would not believe me. Perhaps my tears would say it best, for they speak the true contents of my heart.”** The Persuader bowed his head as several tears flowed forth. **“May I ask you an important question?”**

FF: **“I suppose.”**

PER: **“If you so desired to get married, would you marry me?”**

FF: **“Must I answer this?”**

PER: **“Yes. As I was honest before you and the world, you must likewise be honest.”**

FF: **“Well....”** The Forbidden Fruit hesitated and turned her head away. The Persuader reached for her chin and pulled her gaze back toward him. **“If I were getting married,**

I would...yes, I would marry you. You have proved yourself honest and honorable with your emotions. I could not find anyone better than you. Nicer looking, maybe....” The audience laughed. **“But where it truly counts, none better. Thank you so much for everything you have done for me. God will truly bless you for your generosity.”**

PER: “This is the last round of The Fight. Is there anything else that you would like to ask me in these final seconds?”

FF: “Yes. If we did marry, what could I have expected from you as a husband?”

PER: “Your heart’s desire. Whatever you liked, that would I do and whatever you disliked, that would I not do. I would treat you like an equal. I would not overshadow you; neither would I allow you to rule over me. We would co-exist together in Christ to the extent that when I look up, there you will be and when you look up, there shall I be.”

FF: “How would I know that you would keep these promises after we were married?”

PER: “I would write them into our marriage vows. We would bind them in our hearts as well as bind them in heaven before a holy God. These vows, once sealed by the marriage covenant, would never be broken....ever!”

FF: “Is that a promise?”

PER: “I promise! For the last time, will you marry me?” The bell rang startling The Persuader. He jumped up from his chair and nervously paced around the ring as the crowd cheered in anticipation of the announcement of the winner. The Forbidden Fruit stared quietly at the empty chair across from her while she pondered the impact of the final question. How easy it would be for her to say ‘yes.’ All she would have to do is smile and the word would roll out effortlessly unleashing an anxiety that has been chained to her heart these many years. She wondered if marriage would bring her true happiness for which she has longed for. Certainly it would be a change from her daily life from which recently she has been overburdened.

The Forbidden Fruit realized that something had to change. Recently she has experienced a certain emptiness to life as if she was running from something. Was it God? Marriage? Her own life? She no longer found joy in doing things. Of course she would laugh at times, but that laughter was empty and short-lived. It did not flow from her inner being as it once did. The Persuader passed in front of her as he circled the ring. She stared at him harshly. Did he steal her joy? Did she ever know true joy? At one time she was independent, or so she thought, working every day and buying her own automobile. She could go where and when she wanted, do things she wanted to do, say things and live as she chose. Then she met Jesus, a divine man, a loving man, who required more from her than she was willing to give at times. Did joy come with Jesus, or did he just cause more problems in her life? The Bible says that Jesus comes not to bring peace but a sword.

The Forbidden Fruit glared at The Persuader as he passed before her again. Soon after she had become comfortable with Jesus in her life, she met The Persuader. Was he sent to her from God? Surely not, for God was a loving God and He would never send someone to inflict such pain. Why did this man, who obviously meant well, bring such pain and heartache into her life? Could it be that she had not completely come out of this world? Could it be that she was still clinging to some things of the world that she no longer had need of? To do so would surely cause the flesh to war against the spirit. Was this the answer to her problem? Truly her flesh despised the thought of marriage to any man. Her spirit, in its desire to possess the fruit of the Holy Spirit, yearned for the unknown and trembled at the thought of the blessed gift of marriage from God. Was The Persuader the one God would have her to marry? How easy it would be for her to smile, say 'yes' and bring great joy to both of them. Yet how cruel and thankless it would be for her to frown, say 'no,' and quench the fruitful spirit in both their lives.

A solitary tear slowly streamed down the face of The Forbidden Fruit as she bowed her head, clasped her hands

tightly together and prayed silently. ‘Dear Father,’ she thought, ‘Please speak to me in some way to show me what Your will is. I do not know what to do, what to say, or where to go. I beg of You to help me in this decision, in Jesus’ name, Amen.’

The Forbidden Fruit remained in her prayerful state as the glory of God descended and overshadowed her. The voice she heard was as gentle as a dove and came to her from within. ‘You have received wisdom from My Son. Use it, for with it you can do no wrong. I know your needs before you even ask Me and I stand ready to supply those needs as you continue to serve Me long after you have made your decision. Do not fret, my daughter, I am with you always.’

The announcer walked hurriedly from the table where the six referees had conferred to the edge of the ring where he climbed up awkwardly and stepped through the ropes into the ring. The Forbidden Fruit withdrew from her meditation and watched the announcer stop and speak briefly with The Persuader. As he spoke, he glanced wildly toward The Forbidden Fruit. The Persuader smiled and turned to look at his opponent. Did he win? An odd feeling came over her at the thought of The Persuader’s victory. Her flesh tore against her spirit which leapt for joy. ‘Marriage won’t be so bad after all. Besides, he’s kind of cute,’ she thought as she returned the smile to The Persuader. The two men approached the center of the ring as the audience hushed in anticipation of the announcement.

“Ladies and Gentlemen!”

“Who won?” whispered The Forbidden Fruit. The Persuader answered only with a smile.

“In light of the fact that this contest was to convince The Forbidden Fruit to accept The Persuader’s offer of marriage, a technical decision had to be made concerning the outcome.”

“Congratulations are in order, Kem,” commented The Persuader still smiling.

“The winner....and still champion....” An instant-

neous roar of cheers burst forth from the audience as people stood and rushed up to the ring. The Forbidden Fruit, shocked by the noise and announcement, violently exploded in ecstasy from her chair, knocking it to the mat. **“The Forbidden Fruit!!”** She rode the crest of enthusiasm as a skillful equestrian upon a prancing steed, herself prancing about the ring, arms raised, with a glorious expression of great joy that reached deep into her soul. Was the great burden lifted or was this to be the beginning of sorrows?

The persuader watched with a shallow smile upon his face as deep inside he felt the intense pain of defeat. The great words of faith that he had spoken for nearly a year was now crumbling before him. The dreams that he had so carefully created through prayers were fading into the dark shadows created by the intense illumination of the champion. The infamous words from the scriptures echoed in his mind, “Curse God and die!” The light of Jesus within him had dimmed to only a small ember and would surely be quenched if the demons had their way. His spirit was critically crushed by the tremendous defeat and revived only to cheer the victory of the one he loved so much. Tears came to his eyes as his heart sank briefly into the sea of bitterness. Rising above his emotions, he encouraged himself to continue living if only for Christ’s sake.

The noise of the crowd subsided as the announcer raised his hand. **“To end this event, we will now accept closing statements from the contestants. The persuader will be first.”** Hoots and catcalls are heard as the persuader approached the microphone. Emotional bursts of devotion came from several women.

PER: **“Kem, I still love you. Nothing will ever change that. I have tried everything to convince you to be my wife. Your mind is made up. You have chosen to forsake me. You have chosen to leave me. I have not left you. I will always be there should you have a change of heart. I shall always love you until I breathe my last mortal breath. Goodbye.”** Overcome by tears, the persuader turned, quickly exiting the ring and making his way through the crowd to the

exit. The Forbidden Fruit stood immobile, shocked by the passionate words of the persuader. The cheers returned encouraging her to speak.

FF: **“There is no cause to celebrate. The prophecy has been fulfilled. Your champion has lost....everything. I thought that I was being wise not to marry him. He does truly love me, yet I was too blind to see it. I became the fool and as a result, I have lost everything. The only winner here today is foolish pride and I am wearing it. Yet I would gladly trade it for a second chance. Thank you so much for your support and encouragement. You have been wonderful. Please pray for me.”** With those words, The Forbidden Fruit left the ring and quietly and unobtrusively made her way to her dressing room. The crowd became less noisy after such an unusual victory speech that all but conceded true defeat.

“Well, Frank, with those heart-rending words by The Forbidden Fruit, we come to the end of this excit....”

Cissey turned the television off, engulfing the living room in total silence. What she was hoping to be a joyful moment turned out to be perhaps the saddest that she has ever experienced, far exceeding the death of her grandmother.

“Mama, why?” asked Cissey.

“I don’t know,” answered Mrs. Janson. “Just remember The Persuader’s words before The Fight: ‘To God Be the Glory.’ There is a reason why this has happened. We may not ever know, but God will receive the glory for it.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

A SAD ENDING!

WEDNESDAY, MAY 1, 1991

A violent thunderstorm of applause rose from the people throughout the coliseum. Many rose to their feet to show approval for the words of wisdom that the evangelist spoke; others shouted cheers while waving their Bibles in the air. The evangelist smiled while offering up a silent prayer to the Holy Father. Never before had he felt the sweep of the Holy Spirit like he felt Him this night. Many times he would abandon his notes and allow the unction to speak directly to the needs of the people which would bring a healing balm actually changing lives and lifting hearts. The people quieted down to allow the prophecy to continue.

“America needs to return to the Word of God. The church is too worldly today. The body of Christ is perverted and the Word is diluted by doctrine and denomination. A covenant bond needs to be re-established between us and God. Without this bond, we cannot endure. Without endurance, we cannot build faith. Without faith, we cannot please God. Without pleasing God, where is our hope of glory? Tonight, I have tried to establish faith within you. Those of you who do not know Jesus as Savior, it is only by grace through faith that you are saved. That is how important faith is before and after the born-again experience. Would you like to have more faith?” A chorus of amens and hallelujahs resounded throughout the arena. **“Then stand to your feet.”**

The Evangelist Daniel W. Flynn then prayed for the people to receive faith. The prayer was short, yet powerful, being Spirit-led and many people responded to the following invitation. Several hundred individuals came forward, some to confess Jesus Christ, others to re-dedicate their life to God, and still others to have a special need met. Dan explained the sig-

nificance of salvation before leading the lost in the sinner's prayer.

It had been almost five years since Dan stood in the Garden Coliseum in Central City and the memory of the emotions he dealt with then came swiftly back to him casting him into a sea of thought which seemed to help his preaching rather than hinder it. As he preached, he drew strength from the thought of the woman that he felt God had 'ordained' for him to marry. Despite the passage of time, Dan did not give up on God. He would remind himself of Jacob who worked 14 years for his true love, Rachel. With every soul that was brought into the kingdom, Dan felt that he was getting closer and closer to the day when God would restore Kem to him.

As Dan stepped off the stage, he was greeted by several members of his staff.

"Wonderful service, Dan. The best yet!" It was John, affectionately known as the encourager. "Bill tells me we had an excellent offering, over three hundred thousand dollars. Praise the Lord!"

"Praise the Lord," chimed Dan, "Don't forget to write a check to the Central City Ministerial Association for thirty percent of the amount."

"Right," winked John.

"Dan," interrupted Sarah, the secretary, visibly shaken, "you just received a personal message. It's bad news."

"What's wrong, Sarah?" Dan asked trying to calm her.

"A friend of yours is in the hospital in serious condition."

"Who?"

"They only said Kim. Do you know her?" Dan slowly nodded. "She's asking for you. The family wants you to come. They're not expecting her to live."

"I'll call her tonight from my hotel room. Thank you, Sarah." Dan smiled an empty smile trying to hide his emotions. He hugged Sarah for her thoughtfulness and urgency in telling him.

"She's in Atlanta's Georgia Baptist Hospital, room 518.

I pray that she will be alright,” consoled Sarah searching Dan’s face for a reaction.

“She’ll be fine.” Dan smiled. “Have faith in God.” With that, he turned and walked into a crowd of people waiting to greet him. He thought it would be best to fellowship and absorb strength from others before leaving for the hotel room.

* * * * *

“Room 518, please.” Dan paused as the operator connected him to Kem’s room. He looked over at the open Bible on the other bed, its pages saturated with tears. He had prayed to God for Kem’s healing before calling and the Holy Spirit revealed that she would die. He wrestled awhile trying to change God’s will but to no avail. It was only when God brought peace to Dan’s heart concerning the situation did he give up and call the hospital.

“Hello?” answered a soft feminine voice.

“Linda Sue?” questioned Dan after much thought.

“Yes.”

“This is Dan. I received the message. How is Kem doing?” asked Dan trying to sound confident yet not cheerful.

“She’s....she’s....” Linda Sue hesitated, not knowing how to describe a hopeless situation in the presence of the patient.

“I understand. She can still hear you, then?”

“Yes,” whispered Linda Sue.

“I’m not going to be able to come, so may I speak to her tonight?” Dan began to cry.

“I don’t know. Let me ask Mama.” Linda Sue covered the receiver of the phone as she talked with her mother. Dan tried to stop crying, but the more he realized what was truly happening, the more he cried.

“Hello?” It was Helen, Kem’s mother. “You can’t come?” she asked dejectedly.

“I’m sorry, but my schedule won’t allow it.”

“She’s asking for you. She wants to see you,” encour-

aged Mrs. Mills.

"I'm fifteen hundred miles away from Atlanta. I can't come. Please let me talk to her," begged Dan.

"All right. She knows it's you on the phone anyway. She's asking for you." Mrs. Mills took the telephone handset and laid it on the pillow beside Kem's ear.

"Dan," whispered Kem, gasping the one syllable name.

"Kem," cooed Dan biting his lips, tears rolling down his cheeks.

"Forgive me," she begged rasping hoarsely on the last word.

"Oh, you're forgiven. Many times over," encouraged Dan.

"I love you!" she gasped breathing heavily.

"I love you, too. I always have and I always will." Dan could feel the peace of God rising up within him again.

"Sing for me," she muttered, moaning in pain.

"Of course. You just listen. I'll sing to you for awhile." Dan paused a moment to collect his thoughts and somewhat soothe his breaking heart. He cleared his throat and began to sing softly: * "Tell me why the stars do shine. Tell me why the ivy twines. Tell me why the sky's so blue, then I will tell you just why I love you. Now I lay me down to sleep. I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take. Because God made the stars to shine, because God made the ivy twine, because God made the sky so blue, because God made you, that's why I love you." Dan's voice trailed off. "I'm sorry Kem. It's just that I love you so much, I can hardly bear to know that you are not well. If something ever happened to you, God forbid, I don't know what I would do." Dan began to cry. "I wish I could be there to cool your fevered brow, but I have three more nights to preach here at Central City."

"The Fight?" asked Kem with a tone of agitation in her voice.

* "Tell Me Why," Traditional American Folk song.

“Yes. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to stir up thoughts about The Fight. It must be....”

“Dan,” interrupted Kem. “I love you. Sing Red River Val....” The last word changed into a soft moan of pain. She began to breathe heavily as she waited for the song.

“Yes, of course I’ll sing Red River Valley. And I love you, too. Always!” Dan reached to dry his eyes as he recalled the sad words. * “From this valley they say you are going. I will miss your bright eyes and sweet smile. For they say you are taking the sunshine that has brightened my pathway awhile. Come and sit by my side if you love me. Do not hasten to bid me adieu. Just remember the Red River Valley and the one who loves you so true. Won’t you think of the valley you’re leaving. Oh, how lonely, how sad it will be. Won’t you think of the fond hearts you’re breaking and the grief you are causing to me. Come and sit by my side if you love me. Do not hasten to bid me adieu. Just remember the Red River Valley and the one who loves you so true. I have waited a long time my darling, for those sweet words you never would say. Now, alas all my fond hopes are vanished, for they say you are going away. Come and sit by my side if you love me. Do not hasten to bid me adieu. Just remember the Red River Valley and the one who loves you so true.” Dan paused for a moment. He could no longer hear any breathing. “Kem?” he questioned softly. There was no answer. He paused again straining his ear to hear a breath, a moan, a cry.

“Dan,” said Mrs. Mills, “she’s dead.”

“She can’t be!” protested Dan. “I was just singing to her.”

“She’s dead. She smiled a few seconds ago. One tear came to her eye and then she closed her eyes and quit breathing. She’s gone now. It’s over.”

“My prayers are with you and the family.”

“Will you be able to come to the funeral?” asked Mrs.

* “Red River Valley,” (1896), Traditional American Folk and Cowboy song.

Mills.

“No, I’m sorry but I have to stay here at Central City for three more days. Perhaps it is best.”

“Perhaps,” she echoed.

“May God give you strength to see you through this difficult time. I must go now. Give the family my love.”

“Thank you. We love you, too. Goodbye.”

Dan hung up the phone and stared at the empty bed. The cruel prophecy that it now proclaimed painfully pierced his heart. The only woman that he had ever loved was now dead. He conjured up the remorseful scene in the hospital room in Atlanta, Kem’s family weeping over her corpse. The thought of her body once warmed by coursing blood came to his mind. How he once longed to kiss the thin red lips, to caress the feminine form gently within his arms, to show her just how much he truly loved her. After all, he was a man and she, a woman, yet those facts never seemed to matter much to Kem. She was different, quite different, and it was this difference that lured him to dream about her, that one day she would be his wife. That dream was now shattered and it lay in a thousand pieces at his feet. Dan’s heart no longer knew life, for it was now held captive in a bosom that had relinquished life’s breath.

Dan’s love for Kem was so intense that he had once prayed to God to let him die along with her, if and when she died. A crushing pain came to his chest as he collapsed to the floor. As the muscles of her body began to stiffen fifteen hundred miles away, Dan’s heart cried out for liberty, but it was too late. He would never be free to love someone else because he had foolishly invested all that he had in a woman that never really loved him. Dan cried himself to sleep on the floor between the beds, the empty beds.

* * * * *

SATURDAY, MAY 11, 1991

Due to unforeseen circumstances, most of the day had slipped away from Evangelist Daniel W. Flynn as he sped to-

ward Upton, Georgia, the low evening sun appearing at times in his car's rear view mirror. He kept the speedometer on 55 and many times went over as his mind wandered to recent tragic events in his life as he negotiated the rolling hills of Meriwether County. The most tragic event was yet to come for he was on his way to visit Kem's grave.

The evening before was the final night of a scheduled ten-day crusade in Phenix City, Alabama. Following the crusade, a press conference was held to review the results of the meetings. The press showed a genuine interest in the moving of the Holy Spirit which resulted in thousands being healed and several hundred receiving the baptism of the Holy Ghost. The conference lasted until after midnight, after which Dan and his staff quickly retired to their rooms in order to be up early enough to reach the President at his retreat in Virginia Beach. It was imperative for Dan to meet with the President to discuss particulars in regard to a national crusade slated to begin on July 4. After several attempts to reach the President had failed since May 4, Dan realized that time was quickly running out and one last concerted effort by his staff was necessary.

The President agreed to meet with Dan on Sunday morning, May 12, and since Upton was somewhat on the way to Virginia Beach, Dan decided to face reality and visit Kem's grave. He called Linda Sue that morning to find out where Kem was buried and having received the general location of the grave, he decided to slip into Upton without visiting any of her family.

A bouquet of fresh roses lay in the car seat beside him. How he wished he could see the sparkle in her green eyes as he would present them to her. A tear briefly blurred his vision as he slowed to turn into the graveyard; the evening sun sat upon the tallest pine on the horizon.

A car was parked in the area where Kem's grave was located. A slender man stood quietly several yards from it and surveyed the solemn scene. Dan pulled in behind the parked automobile and switched off the engine to his car. Bowing his head, he prayed a brief prayer for strength before gathering up

the roses in his arms and exiting the car. The man glanced quickly toward the intruder and turned away not wishing to be sociable.

Dan pulled the brim of his hat low so as to accommodate the man's wishes for privacy and walked carefully over the many graves toward a large granite tombstone. Linda Sue had instructed that Kem's marker was the only granite tombstone in the area. Dan looked at several expecting the name MILLS to catch his attention when he realized that there was only one granite marker and it had a different name carved on it. Dan froze as the name THOMPSON leapt from the lifeless stone. Minutes passed as he stared dispassionately at the name. The knowledge that Karen Elaine, his only love, had died was grief enough, but to add to that the fact that she had married, was almost more than he could accept. Anger instructed him to turn and storm away, never to return, but the love that still tugged gently at his soul bade him to kneel at the grave and lay the roses over Kem in a gesture of forgiveness. As he went down, a hurt that he had never felt before swelled up within him and overflowed in tearful sobs. He recalled Kem's weak voice over the phone begging for forgiveness. Now he understood why she was begging to be forgiven.

Dan steadied himself by resting his hand upon the granite marker. He leaned forward to inspect the engraved name and dates. He wanted so much for the same to be etched upon his heart: KAREN ELAINE MILLS THOMPSON Born May 9, 1964 Died May 1, 1991. He kissed the name before standing to his feet. As he rose, he felt a great burden being lifted from his heart. Truly he had forgiven her and his great love for her was still there and would remain for all eternity.

"Reverend Flynn?" The voice shattered the calm evening air. Dan turned to see the tall, slender man standing several graves away, his back toward the setting sun.

"Yes," answered Dan, squinting his eyes at the man, "how did you know?"

The man hesitated a moment before approaching the grave. "I'm Robert Thompson." He extended his hand toward

Dan. Robert's face was thin and very pale with eyes that appeared as caged animals pacing nervously within their sockets. A three-day growth of beard added to the general weariness of his appearance.

"I'm glad to meet you," commented Dan, reaching to clasp his hand firmly. "I'm sorry to hear about Kem."

"Please, not as sorry as I am for you. Kem told me everything about you." Robert bowed his head and looked away. "Everything," he muttered again. Dan rubbed his chin, not knowing whether to be embarrassed or proud.

"She was a wonderful woman. I loved her very much and thought she would make me a good wife. You are very fortunate to get her to marry you," congratulated Dan forcing a smile.

"Not really. It was our marriage that eventually killed her," confessed Robert showing a face void of emotion and empty of any faith in God. Dan looked at him with confusion. "You see, I was at The Fight in Central City. I heard what you said about me." Dan made a gesture to explain. Robert waved him off, "No, you were right. I never loved her emotionally. My love always had to be expressed carnally. It was the only thing I knew then as a teenager. I thought love was having sex with a woman. I was selfish. I did not know that she truly loved me with an inner, emotional love." A tear came to Robert's eye as he continued, "Just before The Fight was over, I could see that Kem would never say yes to you so I thought that perhaps she would come back to me. I went and waited outside of her dressing room. When she came and saw me there she quickly informed me to leave her alone. I grabbed her arm to stop her as she went by. She flew into a rage, slapping me as hard as she could and spitting on me. She then accused me of causing her to lose you.

"I decided not to give up, so I followed her back to Upton, hoping that she would change her mind. I sent her several dozens of roses, always signing the card as 'your secret admirer.' I imagine she thought they were from you. One weekend, I got up enough courage to go see her. She apologized for

slapping me at the Coliseum. Everything was fine until I told her that it was me who sent the roses. She became angry and asked me to leave. I stayed away for several months allowing her to simmer in her own anger.

“One day, I saw her brother Harry and he told me that Kem was discharged from the Navy. He mentioned something about her being in the wrong place at the wrong time when she and some friends were arrested by civilian police. She received a dishonorable discharge and was blacklisted from getting a job for two years. I decided then that it was time to ask her to marry me.

“After six months, she finally, yet reluctantly agreed to marry me. It wasn’t much of a wedding; a few family members at the house with a preacher. They served Kool-Aid and store-bought pound cake at the reception. It wasn’t the type wedding that a woman of Kem’s beauty deserved and she wasn’t too thrilled about the whole idea. I knew that she married only for a source of income, yet I kept hoping that she still loved me and that our marriage would work out.

“It didn’t. We were miserable. We fought every day. It was six months before she would even sleep with me and then only because I forced her to.” Dan turned away not wishing to hear such intimate details. Robert saw the embarrassment on Dan’s face and quickly apologized. “I’m sorry preacher, but this is the only way you will understand why she died.” Dan closed his eyes and quietly consented, a tear streaming down his cheek. Robert returned to where he left off, “she then became pregnant which didn’t help matters much. She cursed me every day and kept saying that she wished the baby would die. She didn’t want it. She didn’t want me. Our life was hell. She was stuck with me, not having any place to go, anything to do.

“Several months before the baby was due, your television program began to come on every Sunday morning. She would sit for hours after it was over and cry, saying how she could have been married to you. She really tortured herself for turning you down. As a result, I began to drink heavily which

only drove us deeper into debt. Our world, which could have been so wonderful, was slowly crumbling around us.”

Robert coughed and then cleared his throat to go on. Dan heaved a great moan from his chest and began to sob. He had spotted the small grave next to Kem’s and nervously pointed to it.

“Yes, the baby lived three days. He never left the hospital. Kem asked for a divorce but I begged her to change her mind with the promise that I would be different. I should have let her go. Perhaps she would not have died. She began to grieve over the child and believe that it was a judgment from God. Her health began to fail and another tragedy within her family sent her to the hospital with cerebral hemorrhages causing convulsions which resulted in her untimely death.”

Dan flinched at the thought before being brave enough to ask, “What happened?”

“The car you gave her, she loved it and treated it like a child. At times it seemed that she was married to it rather than to me. She would sleep in it during the nights after we argued, which was often. Well, Jessica, Linda Sue’s daughter turned sixteen. Kem loved Jessie almost as much as she loved the car and would do anything for her except give her the car, which Jessie wanted very much. Kem finally gave in to Jessie and gave her the car. Several weeks later, Jessie stopped by the house for a few minutes and something was said that started a silly argument. It went on for half an hour before Jessie left in a rage and went speeding off like a maniac in the car. Two miles down the road, she lost control and ran off the road into a cluster of trees completely destroying the car.”

“Did Jessie....?” asked Dan afraid to say ‘die.’

“Die?” added Robert, “no, but it would have been a blessing if she had. It took them two hours to get her out of the car. When we got to the scene, Kem collapsed in shock and was rushed to the hospital. Jessie is confined to a wheelchair for the rest of her life, paralyzed from the neck down. She blamed Kem for giving her the car.”

Dan turned and stepped a few paces away from the

grave and scanned the eastern horizon, viewing the stars that were beginning to appear in the twilight. He looked up and saw a half moon hovering in the center of the sky. Looking back at Robert, he saw only the form of his thin frame outlined in the glowing embers of the remaining sunlight.

“What will you do?” asked Dan showing concern for the man’s future.

“I don’t know,” said Robert, shaking his head. “Recently I have been thinking about suicide but I wanted to see you first so I could tell you what happened and how much Kem really loved you until her dying breath. I was there at the hospital when you called. She was so thrilled to hear your voice. It seemed that she willed herself to live until she saw you or heard from you.” Robert began to cry as the memories salted the emotional wounds.

“Do you know Jesus?” questioned Dan.

“Yes. That was a requirement for marriage. She wouldn’t marry me until I accepted Jesus as my Savior.” Robert wiped the tears from his eyes. “I must be going. You two will want to be alone.” Robert turned to leave.

“Wait!” Dan stepped toward Robert with open arms. They hugged briefly. “You are my brother in Christ. I love you. Wherever you go, whatever you do, just remember that ‘greater is He that is in you than he that is in the world.’” Robert smiled weakly as he thought of The Fight and the penalty that would have been called for quoting God’s Word. Dan reached for his billfold and pulled out several hundred-dollar bills. “Here.”

“I can’t,” objected Robert.

“Please, you must. I have every reason in the world to hate you, but the Spirit of God within me will not allow it. We are bound together by the blood of Jesus. It is my duty to love you, to bless you. Take it and give God the praise.”

“I can’t,” repeated Robert.

“You can and you must. To turn this down is to deny Christ before me.” Robert slowly reached for the bills as Dan crushed them firmly in his hand. “There is more to come as

you have need. Just trust in God.”

“Thank you,” whispered Robert. He turned and quickly departed.

Dan stood and watched as Robert awkwardly entered the car, turned the engine over and pulled away. As the fullness of the night wrapped its dark cloak about the lonely figure in the graveyard, Dan turned back to the grave and knelt down next to the roses. He began to cry as he thought of the horrible events that brought about the death of the woman he cared so much about. He prayed for God to give him a peaceful understanding as to why it all happened. He looked into the western horizon as the glow of evening faded into darkness. The moon above gave some light bringing into focus the sharp edges of the granite quickly gathering the night’s dew. The smell of roses perfumed the air with the sweet scent of love.

Because of the overbearing presence of grief and sadness, Dan decided to recall some precious moments he had shared with the woman now lying beneath the earth. He thought of the time that she had agreed to let him teach her to sing. She was so excited she announced in church her intentions of singing a solo within a month from that Wednesday night. He recalled one winter night when she came by the house after work ‘just to talk.’ Her cheeks were a crimson red from the cold and her eyes sparkled with joy. They talked for six hours about their planned trip to Rome and about her plans to open a new business with her sister. All was right with their world then.

Dan then remembered the evening that he drove to Jacksonville to pick up Kem in her new car. She was very proud of the car and his generosity, having bragged on both for weeks before he arrived. Perhaps she felt an obligation to reward him in some way: a sincere thank-you, a hand-shake, an affectionate hug, or a passionate kiss. Not knowing which, she gave nothing. He understood and required nothing, only that she would be happy and give God the praise.

Above everything, even the stars in heaven, he wanted her to be happy. Even if it meant that they would never marry,

her happiness meant more to him than his own. Yet from what he had just heard from Robert, she did not die happy. He reached and laid the palm of his hand against the cold concrete slab. It no longer mattered what her life was like before she died for she was now in the midst of sweet joy and peace for she now rested in the arms of Jesus.

Dan lifted his eyes toward the heavens and began to sing softly, * “I’m going away to leave you love, I’m going away for awhile. But I’ll return to you some day, if I go ten thousand miles. The storms are on the ocean, the heavens may cease to be, this world may lose its motion, love, if I prove false to thee.

“Oh, have you seen those mournful doves, flying from pine to pine. They’re longing for their own true love just like I long for mine. My own true love is far away, ten thousand miles from here. I think about her every day, my darling and my dear.

“My love is like a red, red rose that’s newly sprung in June. My love is like a melody that’s sweetly played in tune. And yet I know of no red rose, I know no melody. No work of art can lift my heart as when your face I see.

“So fare thee well my own true love, so fair thee well awhile and I’ll come back to you some day if I go ten thousand miles. Under the sun, the moon, the stars, love is all that’s true. Love has brought us safe thus far and love will take us through.”

Dan looked down, his hand still upon the grave. “I must go now. We shall meet again someday on that beautiful, heavenly shore. I love you very much. Good night.” Dan lifted himself to a standing position yet he found it difficult to leave. He turned his tear-stained face back to the roses and once again began to sing, ** “What a beautiful rose did bloom at my doorstep, it grew and became so fair. How I wanted to

* “I’m Going Away,” taken from Robert Burns’ “My Love is Like a Red, Red Rose.”

** “What a Beautiful Rose,” (1986), Dan W. Flynn.

pick this rose at my doorstep but God said, 'leave it there, for the world will pass and see that rose growing, they'll pause and gaze at it there. They'll view its green stem and red petals showing and smell its fragrance so fair.' What a beautiful rose, what a beautiful rose. It blooms all day and it blesses souls, what a beautiful rose. I prayed to God to send me someone to stay and never depart. So that beautiful rose became a young woman, her beauty stole my heart. Like a precious rose, she bloomed before me, her beauty mine eyes did behold. Yet despite her fair face, I found her true beauty hidden deep in her soul. What a beautiful rose, what a beautiful rose. It blooms all day and it blesses souls, what a beautiful rose."

"Kem," began Dan refusing to hold back his emotions, "I do not understand why this has happened. I feel that it all could have been avoided somehow. I am now a sad, lonely man because your beauty no longer graces this world. If only you had said yes, you would be in my arms right now in a state of great joy and immense happiness. Even though I will soon depart from this grave of yours, I firmly believe that the love we share will burn in our presence forever. Good night." Singing, * "Good night my someone, good night, my love. Sleep tight my someone, sleep tight my love. A star is shining, its brightest light. For good night, my love, for good night. Sweet dreams be yours dear if dreams there be. Sweet dreams to carry you close to me. I wish they may and I wish they might, for good night, my someone, good night."

A dove cooed softly in the darkness as Dan wept at the lonely sound.

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. Thou pre-

* "Goodnight My Someone," (1957), Lyrics by Meredith Willson.

parest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou
anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. Surely
goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life:
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever. Amen.

CHAPTER EIGHT

A NEW BEGINNING

SATURDAY, MAY 11, 1991

The sunlight flickered across the empty passenger seat as The Persuader drove his car along the highway beside a stand of pine trees which draped the road in patches of shadow and light. It had been five years since the fateful Fight which thrilled the world yet with the passage of time, the contestants withdrew from the public's eye and soon were lost in social anonymity. Only occasionally would the names of the contestants be mentioned and the memories of the event recalled only to be quickly abandoned for more current topics. The tragic results of the event left an emotional scar upon most of the world and they chose to redeem such sorrowful memories for more joyful ones.

The Persuader had found his life to be most difficult immediately following The Fight. He wrestled several weeks with the angel of death as he pondered several plans for suicide. As best he could determine, none of them would be socially or spiritually acceptable. Having defeated this desire to die, he plunged wholeheartedly into the Word of God, determined to create a God-inspired ministry. His efforts were rewarded, for within six months, he had received dozens of invitations to lead revivals throughout the southeast. Realizing that perhaps most of these invitations came because of his association with The Fight, The Persuader fervently prayed for deliverance from this kinship. Soon he felt led of God to refuse invitations that included a reference to The Fight. God honored The Persuader's sincerity and soon allowed him to reclaim his old name in the eyes of society.

The Reverend Daniel W. Flynn steered his car into downtown Upton, Georgia, and turned north for his destination. Reaching into the breast pocket of his coat, he pulled out a small envelope addressed to him in care of the office of his

ministry. An assistant had received the piece of mail in his absence and upon noting who it was from quickly forward it to him at the revival he was conducting in Phenix City, Alabama. The handwriting was very familiar spelling out his name and address in very small block letters. The return address was more hastily written yet legible. The name of Karen E. Mills leapt from the corner of the envelope and showered his soul with feelings that were long buried and believed to be forgotten. He wrestled with those feelings, not wishing to cast them away so quickly if they were truly ordained by God.

Dan laid the letter at his side as his mind reviewed his life since he told Kem goodbye at the Garden Coliseum in Central City. Was it he or God that quenched his love for her? Should he have even then refused to accept 'no' for an answer and continued to pursue her as his wife? Would his circumstances have changed from what they were today? God only knew the answers to these questions and yet it was possible to depart from the permissive will of God and still be blessed by keeping the commandment to preach the gospel.

It was indeed God's permissive will for Dan and Kem to be married, but Dan, having grown weary of the task, gave her up to her wishes yet retained the vision God had given him to preach the gospel. As a result, hundreds of souls were won into the Kingdom and the preacher was blessed financially, finding it necessary to operate constantly in the kingdom principle of giving and receiving in order to give again.

Despite the obvious anointing in the life of the preacher, the ultimate question remained and constantly loomed over the present as a cloud refusing to rain. What would have happened if they had married? Would thousands of souls have been saved by the joint ministry? Would millions of dollars have been garnered only to be sown back into a lost and dying world all because two souls agreed together in the name of Jesus for all things and came together in sacred and holy unity to be blessed by God according to His vast riches in glory?

Dan began to weep at the thought of what could have

been and yet he was careful not to allow those words of faith spoken five years ago to spring up again as a root of bitterness. He turned his thoughts to the wonderful reunion that was only moments away and assured himself that Kem would certainly greet him with a hug. How he longed to see her beauty once again, to gaze into her green eyes and to hear her tender voice and sparkling laughter. It seemed a thousand years since he saw her last yet his pounding heart testified to a different story. Truly he loved her with a love that time could not quench.

As joy swelled within him at every beat of his heart, Dan wondered how much and if Kem had changed in five years. Surely she was more beautiful, if that was possible, for women had a unique talent to age gracefully using the years to enhance their inner beauty which would bloom and overshadow any outer beauty ravaged by time. Kem's beauty was equally balanced yet at times the inner person would surge forth with a kind gesture or thoughtful word and steal the heart of its intended suitor. How often that had happened to Dan. At times he would find himself longing for the inner Kem with little or no regard to the outer woman. How sacred, divine and splendid it was to be able to love a woman for her thoughts and intents of the heart and not for the shape and fashion of the body. To do so was to establish an everlasting love that proved true and sincere.

Rubbing his chest to subdue the all-too-familiar love-sick pain, Dan tried to convince himself not to propose to Kem today. After all, she had invited him there out of good faith and friendship and surely she didn't want old wounds, now scarred by time, to be reopened. Reaching into his coat pocket, he brought out a plastic pouch containing an engagement ring, the one he had purchased five years ago. Refusing to give up on God's promise, Dan had kept the ring awaiting the day that Kem would accept it. Was today to be the day? Dan trembled at the thought of such joy. Only God knew, and perhaps Kem, too!

With less than a mile to go before reaching his destination, Dan slowed the car in order to collect his thoughts and

plan his strategy. The words of a dear friend, Mary Braddock, came to mind: "Kem is like a spirited horse. You have to approach her carefully and treat her gently. If you don't, she will bolt and run away."

As Dan peered off into the distance, and hopefully the future, a young girl on a horse galloped out from among the underbrush alongside the road. Dan steered the car onto the shoulder of the road and waited for the horse and rider to approach. The girl pulled the horse to a trot when she saw the car stopping and hesitated to proceed. The horse rocked sideways on its front legs unsure of the rider's command to stop, turn around or proceed on. Dan rolled down his car window and leaned out the opening.

"Good morning," he shouted, "I'm looking for the Mills' residence."

The girl pressed her heels into the horse's sides and slowly approached the car swaying sensuously in the saddle with the horse's movement. Her blonde hair captured the sunlight and sprayed it across the damp shadows of the dew-laden morning. The rider's fair cheeks were stung a crimson red by a vigorous ride through a nearby field. Wisps of fog rising in the warming air enshrouded the pair as they approached the car. The high cheek bones of the girl rose with a smile as she recognized the preacher.

"Good morning," she chirped as the horse snorted and turned its head for a better view into the open window.

"Jessica?" questioned Dan. She smiled casting her eyes down. "My, but you have changed since I last saw you."

"I no longer look like a boy?" she asked.

"No, not in the least. You are a beautiful young woman now, just like your mother." Jessica blushed another smile and looked down at the horse's reins as she twisted the leather strap in her fingers. "I'm looking for Kem. Is she at home?"

"Yes, it's the first drive on your right," explained Jessica pointing back over her shoulder. "You're early. The party is not until three." The horse shook its head and shifted his weight from one front leg to the other.

“I know. I won’t be able to stay for the party, so I came early. I have to be in Virginia Beach tomorrow. Is Kem up?”

“Yes, she was up when I left about forty-five minutes ago. She has a lot to do today.”

“Good, perhaps I can help her. It’s good to see you again, Jessica. You take care...”

“Before you go, it is only fair to warn you the Aunt Kem has changed since The Fight.”

“In what way?” asked Dan.

“You’ll see. Tell her that I’ll be back in a couple of hours. Y’all behave now.” Jessica smiled and steered the horse away from the car.

“Kik-kik” and with that they took off down the road at a full gallop. Dan stared at them for a moment in the rear view mirror as Jessica’s flowing hair and back side flashed in and out of the patches of sunlight.

The sound of hoof-beats faded away as Dan rolled the car window up and pulled back into the road to continue on. The face of Jessica five years ago came to mind as he compared the changes. Because those changes included puberty, the changes were dramatic. What changes had Kem undergone in those same years? They had to be equally dramatic for a teenage niece to take note of them.

Dan turned right into the driveway as a black mailbox clung fearlessly to the side of the road. The large gold letters boldly proclaimed the owner of the property and caused Dan to stop and stare at the name. He sighed at the emptiness he felt within him for not having changed Kem’s last name to that of his own. Yet if only the sight of her name stirred such feelings within, how much more would seeing her again inflame the passion that burned within him so long ago.

The driveway was a long graveled road shaded by young maple trees planted along a five-wire pasture fence, their furthest limbs barely meeting over the center of the road. Hon-eyesuckle vines dotted the fence along the way adding a welcoming aroma to the morning air. Patches of spring flowers

covered the ground, their heavy blooms bowing toward the ground and swaying in the gentle breeze. A small rabbit sprang from a growth of honeysuckle, paused in the center of the road to inspect the oncoming car before diving for safety, flowers quivering in its wake. Beyond the fence were pastures of neatly trimmed fescue, extending for miles before ending in wooded acreage on one side and some type of orchard on the other. Mockingbirds, robins and blue jays sat in the highest boughs of the maples, singing their own songs, keeping time with the bowing flowers as the car carefully intruded upon the tranquility, its tires steadily rolling over the crunching gravel.

Several hundred yards further, the fence parted and trailed off at opposing angles to encircle a large area. Dan looked and could see a large brick structure coming into view, its formidable size and splendor was set ablaze in the morning sunlight. The drive terminated into a large circle consisting of a band of flat rock pavement around the circumference with a neatly kept garden of boxwoods, junipers and perennials in the center. The rock pavement was connected to a walkway of similar stones leading up to the front entrance which included carved marble arches above two oak doors hand carved with large Old English "M"s in the center of each. The structure was a finely crafted, two-storied English Tudor mansion with large windows of leaded glass which sparkled as priceless jewels in the midst of river-red brick trimmed with white marble quoins.

Dan drove around the circle stopping at the walkway.

'So this is what she got for not marrying me,' he thought as he stepped out of the car, 'It's some consolation prize!' He turned and reached into the open car door to retrieve the invitation and engagement ring. Placing both of them into his breast pocket, he turned back toward the house, closing the car door behind him. Pulling his hat off, he smoothed his hair down with a few passes of his comb and checked his clothes to make sure everything was zipped, buttoned, and in place before approaching the door. He wanted everything to be perfect today, yet that perfection seemed in-

adequate in light of the mansion that he was approaching.

‘Surely Karen E. Mills did not live here,’ Dan thought as he reached and pressed the doorbell. ‘The ‘M’ on the doors stood for someone else. ‘Moore’ perhaps or maybe ‘Martin.’ That’s it, Mr. Martin lives here. He was rich. He owned a store at one time.’ Dan pressed the button again.

‘Kem only works here, perhaps as a stable hand. That’s right, she loves horses. She won’t be here at the house, but around at the barn with the other hired help.’

Dan stepped back from the house and scanned the windows on the upper floor looking for Kem. He then stepped off the porch to inspect the delicate roses blooming beside the house. Glancing back to the door and nearby window, Dan swiftly turned back to the bush and plucked the largest yellow rose available. As he brought the dewy flower to his nose, a rumble of a small engine was heard in the distance. He carefully broke the thorns off of the flower’s stem as the combustion noise became louder and louder. Dan stepped back on the walkway in time to see Kem ride up on a large motorcycle. She smiled at Dan as her green eyes sparkled beneath the wind guard of the helmet. The engine rumbled and roared as she playfully displayed her prowess with the vehicle by revving the motor with the accelerator. The deafening roar was followed by equally deafening silence as she switched off the engine and pushed the kick stand down with her left heel. Several minutes passed as they absorbed the vision that was before each other, both having thirsted for five long years and longed for the moment that they would see the other again. That moment had finally come.

Kem sat poised upon the motorcycle as a mythological centaur of Thessaly, her legs straddling the vehicle as if the machine had become part of her and her part of the machine. Her hands were spread across her thighs offering a base of support for the arms which provided a balance for the large flaming red helmet on her head. To absorb the full impact of the vision, Dan decided to start at the feet which bore black leather ankle boots. Above the boots were dark blue denim

jeans which clung to her slender legs. A red knit shirt reflected the color of the helmet and peeked from beneath a denim-suede jacket. The vision of beauty was capped by a broad smile upon her face like an invitingly sweet cherry poised atop a cool, chocolate-drenched ice cream sundae causing Dan to feel the pain of such a long absence.

Kem flipped the helmet's wind guard up and unsnapped the strap beneath her chin. She looked quietly at Dan to inspect his clothes and physical features hoping to find a flaw that would justify her decision not to marry him that she had made five years earlier. His wide brim hat sat precisely upon his head perhaps covering the fact that Dan was growing bald. What curls that could be seen were a mixture of brown and silver brushed back from the temples by a sweep of a pocket comb. The glasses were a different style from the delicate ones she remembered yet they were youthfully stylish and complimented his clothes. The mustache was quite different, being neatly groomed and not the walrus-type shag he used to wear which she hated so much but didn't have the heart to tell him. His body appeared well and physically fit beneath the finely tailored pin-striped suit and white linen, long-sleeve shirt. A very colorful striped tie bound the shirt's collar about his neck in a neat way. His shoes were of sparkling black leather. Kem was impressed with what she saw and passed her eyes over him again before removing her helmet and shaking her head to loosen the sweaty curls.

"Bon jour, mademoiselle," began Dan bowing slightly and presenting the rose to Kem. She smiled at the gesture and took the rose from Dan before dismounting from the motorcycle.

"I see you like my roses," she exclaimed laughingly.

"How did you know?" asked Dan with a surprised look on his face.

"The dew on your shoes." Kem lifted the rose to her nose and sniffed as Dan looked down at his shoes with an embarrassed gesture. She laughed as he timidly looked up and peered at her over the rims of his glasses. She reached for him

with open arms and pulled him close to hug him.

“That’s all right. It’s the thought that counts,” she consoled as they turned toward the house to enter, her left arm still around Dan’s waist. “Have you had any breakfast?” she asked as they reached the front porch.

“Yes – no, I mean, don’t go to any trouble,” stammered Dan, once again intoxicated by the essence of Kem’s beauty. The feelings he thought were buried for five years began to resurrect themselves quickly. He was now at the mercy of his own emotions and in the hands of the cheerful woman that perhaps, just perhaps, was luring him into her house and life.

“It’s no trouble,” she chirped opening the front door and gesturing for him to enter first. As he entered the house, Dan reached into his coat breast pocket to confirm the presence of the engagement ring which now would instantly become the true symbol of his innocence. Would he leave the house without the ring and therefore give up his bachelorhood? If only God would be so kind!

* * * * *

“I’m glad that you could come, but I am sorry that you cannot stay for the party,” confessed Kem setting a plate of piping hot muffins on the kitchen table. “We have so much to talk about.” She sat down across from Dan and gestured for him to ask the blessing. They bowed their heads and Dan spoke a short, tender prayer thanking God for the food and friendship that they were about to share. When Dan raised his head and saw Kem across from him, something he had said at The Fight came up within his heart: ‘I only wish to marry you so that when you look up, there shall I be, and when I look up, there you will be.’ He smiled at the thought of such simple and tender fellowship.

“I have been trying for months to meet with the President without success. His press secretary has granted me an appointment for tomorrow morning in Virginia Beach. I would like to be up there by midnight tonight and it’s a good twelve-

hour drive.”

“You’re not flying?” asked Kem pouring some fresh coffee into their mugs.

“No. I quit flying when I heard that you went to work for Hartsfield Airport in Atlanta,” he teased reaching for a muffin. Kem’s pleasant expression turned cold as she directed a piercing glare at him only to quickly change and collapse in laughter recalling the past when they truly teased each other mercilessly. At times it became a game to see who could insult the other the worse only to end in laughter with slightly wounded pride. “No. I enjoy driving. It gives me ample time to really fellowship with God.”

“If you will stay, I’ll put you on a plane to Norfolk tonight,” offered Kem.

“That’s very sweet of you, but I think this short visit will turn out to be a blessing for both of us.” Dan took a bite of the muffin. “Mmm. It’s delicious. I’m impressed, Kem.”

“That I’m domesticated now?” she questioned buttering her own muffin.

“No. Well, yes, but not only that. I’m impressed with this house, the land, the horses....oh, yes, I saw Jessica on my way in. She said she would be back in a couple of hours.”

“She loves it out here. She stays here more than at home.”

“I don’t blame her. God has truly blessed you since I left you at the Coliseum.”

“Don’t say that,” countered Kem.

“Say what?”

“You seem to be saying that I was blessed because you left me. Such is certainly not the case. We were both blessed with or without marriage.”

“And yet we will never know....” sighed Dan.

“Know what?” questioned Kem.

“If our blessings would have been even greater had we married.”

“Of course they would!” scolded Kem enthusiastically.

“You finally have come to realize that fact?” asked Dan

taking a sip of coffee and reaching for a second muffin.

“No. I knew it all along. Since the first time that you proposed to me.” As she spoke these words she stared intently at Dan’s face to see what his reaction would be. Dan froze at the statement, his knife and pat of butter held up in mid-air, the halved muffin quickly cooling in the plate. He turned his eyes of sorrow toward her as a man who had wasted many years in loneliness.

“Then why?” he asked wrestling with the need to cry.

“I simply wasn’t ready.” Kem’s eyes conveyed the message truthfully for there was a time when she was not ready for marriage. Yet once the message was conveyed, her entire countenance changed. Her eyes showed an empty stare which reflected a life without purpose, a house without a family to make it a home. All her life she lived in a home, but suddenly she found herself a prisoner in a house, a cold empty house and the values and warmth of a home were missing and she longed for that day that she could create a home. Her body was screaming for fellowship, for comfort, for love, wonderful emotional love that made her feel like a woman by granting her the security that she was needed and cared for. Oh, to have a man fawn over her, catering to her every wish! She strained her ears to hear Dan’s reply.

‘Now! Ask her now!’ thought Dan. ‘She said she wasn’t ready then. Ask her if she is ready now! Now! Don’t wait! She has led you to this point as a horse to water. All you have to do is drink! The fountain of her beauty awaits you!’ Dan opened his mouth to speak but no words came out. His emotions were more than he could deal with. He wanted to toss the table from between them and pull her into his arms, never to let her go. His love for her had grown to be a raging river and he wanted both of them to be swept away in the flood. Her green eyes pierced his heart as they had done many times before. The engagement ring burned within his breast pocket, next to his heart, and cried out to his conscience, ‘Take me out! Let her see me! She’ll say yes this time!’ Dan bowed his head and began to spread the butter on the cold muffin.

The moment that he had waited for all his adult life had come and gone and he missed it.

“So,” began Kem shattering the lamentable silence, “how has everything been with you? I’m sure God has blessed you, being an evangelist.”

“He has, but there is no purpose to it. I have no one to share it with. A modest car, a simple house and some clothes are all that I require from God. All the rest, I give away to the poor, the hungry, the destitute, and to other ministries. Yet the more I give, the more I receive in return. It’s amazing to see the kingdom principles at work. Just last year I gave away almost one million dollars, keeping only twenty thousand to live on, only a fifth of what I promised God that I would take from the offerings.” Dan quickly ate the second muffin and finished his coffee. Kem offered him more to drink but he pleasantly waved her off.

“Are you happy?” she asked, hoping to create another opportunity for the discussion of marriage.

“Yes, I suppose I am,” stated Dan looking about the kitchen admiring the neatness. He turned his attention back to Kem and leaned over the table, covering her hand with his. “But I am lonely, very lonely. I did not realize until I saw you again today how much I still love you.” Kem smiled and looked timidly down at their hands, her heart racing within her bosom. Moments would only pass before their wait would be over. Dan gripped her hand tighter. “You are breath and bread and water to me. I have been fasting in your absence for five years. The time has come for me to breathe, to eat, to drink – to live again. Kem...” His voice trailed off into deep thought. He pulled her hand up from the table and looked closely at its form before leaning over, softly kissing it, and carefully releasing it to her own power. He slowly stood and whispered, “I must be going. I have a long drive ahead of me.”

“Must you leave so soon? You haven’t seen the rest of the house and the land. You’ll love it. Please stay another hour. It’s only 9:15.” She rose and rushed around the table to stop him.

“I wish I could, honestly, just like I wish that I could express in words the love that I still have for you, but I can’t.”

“Then don’t say a word,” encouraged Kem, grabbing both of his hands and pulling him toward the dining room, “I want to show you something before you go. Come with me.”

“Where are we going?” asked Dan, puzzled at her actions.

“It’s a surprise. It’s upstairs. Come on. You’ll love it!” She clasped his left forearm under her arm and escorted him through the dining room, into the foyer, and up the stairs.

Along the way, Dan took note of the furniture, paintings, and objects of art that occupied each room. Each was carefully selected and placed to reflect the English Tudor style. How wonderful it must be to live in the midst of such beauty and luxury. How dreadful it was to realize that she had acquired this wealth without his help. For fifteen months, Dan had promised Kem the world if she would marry him; now that she had secured the world, she would certainly have no need for him.

As they ascended the stairs, Dan marveled at the carved rosewood banister rubbing his fingers along the rich, red finish. At the top of the stairs, Kem stopped abruptly and twirled around.

“Close you eyes. It’s a surprise. You’ll love it!” exclaimed Kem. Dan looked into Kem’s eyes, now dancing with fire and excitement, and briefly hesitated to obey. “Trust me,” she encouraged, “this is not a trick.”

Possessed by the excitement that leapt from her into him, Dan laughed, closed his eyes tightly, and extended his hand. “I am completely at your mercy.” Soon he felt her hand slip into his and grip it firmly. His mind rushed back to a moonlit night when they sat together on the hood of his car. He asked her that night if he could hold her hand. She said yes and awkwardly offered it to him. He was too overcome with joy to notice the calluses and healing scars, for to him, it was as if he had ascended into heaven to caress a cottony cloud.

He could hear Kem giggling now as she pulled him

through his mysterious, dark world. Surely he appeared to her as an idiot as he shuffled along not wanting to put his complete trust in her guidance. Somewhat intimidated by the unknown, he wore a silly grin on his face and he could feel his cheeks burning with a blush. They soon stopped as Kem grabbed Dan by his elbow to turn him ninety degrees to his left.

"Before you open your eyes, let me tell you that it is very bright in here, so open them slowly. Ready?" Dan nodded. "O.K. Open them."

As Dan began to lift his eyelids, a brightness spilled into his consciousness and blurred his vision. A few seconds passed before he realized that he was standing before an upstairs window looking out across the meadows dotted with horses. Large majestic oaks were seen along the fence creating a foundation for the natural, living portrait of the world. The sun hung midway up the eastern sky and showered a cheerful spray of life through the glass, which transformed the rays into little rainbows fitly framing this heavenly view of God's glorious earth. Dan stood speechless at the sight.

"I had this window installed especially for you, because I know how much you liked art," boasted Kem. "The beveled glass is imported from England. Do you like it?"

"Oh, I love it!" remarked Dan glancing quickly at Kem and then looking back out the window.

"I have something else for you," she added stepping between Dan and the window. Dan looked into her face as the brilliance from the window created a glorious halo about her. "Are you still waiting for your first kiss?" she asked. Dan paused briefly in thought before nodding.

"Have mercy," whispered Dan as Kem moved slowly toward him. She closed her eyes as she pulled him toward her. He took careful aim before closing his own eyes. Soon their lips touched as fire shot forth from their souls and lifted their hearts to heights of sheer joy that neither had ever known. Dan whimpered softly as he realized that his heart's desire and prayers had finally been answered.

Dan withdrew slightly from their embrace as Kem

looked at him with concern. He pressed his forefinger lightly against his lips in a request for their interaction to remain without spoken words. Reaching into the breast pocket of his coat, he took out the plastic pouch containing the ring. Kem watched with interest as he opened the packet and spilled the gold ring into his hand. Her mouth shot open as she drew in a breath of air as the diamond shimmered in the morning brightness within the room. Dan smiled as he captured her left hand in his and slid the ring onto her third finger. She pondered the ring for awhile before turning her tear-stained face up to his. As they gazed longingly at one another, the divine love of God rose up within them as a gently dove and baptized them into the sanctity of His Holy Will as Kem nodded her head in response to his wordless proposal.

His own face now streaked with tears of joy, Dan reached and cupped Kem's face in his hands. Only God could create such beauty he now held. He kissed her again as he gathered her in his arms to hold her close. The sunlight and rainbows hovered about the two as if the glory of God and His heavenly hosts had entered the room. Time stood still.

Thirty-five years ago, God sent His Holy Spirit to seal the fate of a child in his mother's womb. Someday he would become a great evangelist. Almost nine years later, He sent the same Holy Spirit to the womb of another mother. Her child would become the wife of that great evangelist and she also would preach God's Word. They wept in each other's embrace knowing that God's purpose in their lives had finally been fulfilled.

Dan lifted up his head and looked out the window. Down in the meadow two horses ran about in circles; one a stallion and the other a mare. During a round, the mare pulled up short and stopped, turning about away from the stallion, which saw her action and made a round about path back to her. He timidly reached to nuzzle her neck. The mare did not bolt and run but stayed and grazed at the stallion's side. Dan smiled as he felt Kem's hair against his neck.

But seek ye first the kingdom of God and His right-

eousness and all these things shall be added unto you for God is a rewarder of them that diligently seek Him. Be anxious for nothing, fret not thyself, lean not to thine own understanding; delight thyself also in the Lord and he shall give thee the desires of thine heart. Marriage is honorable in all, and the bed is undefiled. But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

MAY GOD'S BEST ALWAYS BE YOURS!