

D a v i d
a n d
G o l i a t h

The Guardian Angel Chronicles

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a n d
G o l i a t h

A Novel

Bryan Hathaway

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To my children Brianna, Brandon, Brittany, and Brooke; may they realize that character is defined by their actions and not through their words. It takes years to develop a reputation and seconds to lose it.

To my brother, Todd, for reasons I cannot express.



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Special thanks to my wife, Bonnie, my sister, Hope, and my daughter, Brianna.

They believed in me.



Chapter One

MARY'S PULSE RACED. She did not know if the short climb up the stairs to the nursing home, or her feelings of guilt, triggered the acceleration of her heartbeat. She had placed her father at The Waters, a senior care facility, three months earlier. Today was his birthday. She was not sure how he would respond to visitors, but knew it was time to see him. She held her child's hand; her husband followed reluctantly.

"But I don't wanna see Grandpa today," the small boy whined.

"We've been through this already, Jimmy," Mary snapped at her son. "Today is Grandpa's birthday. Don't you think he'd enjoy a visit from his favorite grandson?" Mary glanced to her husband, Joe, for support.

"Favorite grandson, huh? Jimmy is his *only* grandson, not that your father's even aware of that. I don't know why you insist on visiting your dad. I think half the time he doesn't know who you are, either." Her husband's remark stung.

"Grandpa doesn't know you, Momma?"

Mary glowered at her husband and said to her son, "Your Grandpa is a wonderful person. I don't think it would be fair to leave him all alone on his birthday. That's no way to celebrate. You understand, don't you, honey?"

Jimmy mumbled a feeble, "I guess so, Momma."

Joe grabbed Jimmy's hand and tugged him up the staircase. "Come on, Jimmy. Maybe Grandpa will tell us about one of his great adventures."

Jimmy's laughter echoed off each step.

Mary wiped the moisture from her eyes. She managed a thin smile and followed her boys up the stairs, hoping her anxiety would leave the moment she saw her dad.



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David Liberty slumped in his chair, gaping lifelessly out the small window. His body was broken. No longer did he demonstrate the ability to control movement, and he knew his life would soon leave him as well. His mind was still intact, but no one would ever know, for his body had failed him. Why was the world so willing to go on without him?

He sat in silence, trapped in a body that had betrayed him, a body that had become a living tomb. He could recall almost every aspect of his seventy-five years, including each agonizing loss of strength, function, desire, and lastly, hope. He remembered each moment of the day his family decided to place him here at The Waters. The walls that surrounded him were as much of a prison as was his failing body.

Where had the man gone that he had struggled for years to build? More importantly, where were the lives he had touched now that he needed help? Was this how God rewarded him for years of a life lived as a role model to others?

David's despair was interrupted by a gentle knocking on his door.

"Mr. Liberty, you have guests here to see you." The nurse's aid pushed the door open.

Light flowed into the small and dreary room as Jimmy and his father came bouncing in.

"Howdy, Grandpa. Happy birthday!"

"Yes, happy birthday, David. It's good to see you," Joe said.

Mary entered last, walking slowly to where he sat by the window. She knelt in front of him and tenderly tried to lift his chin. "Hi, Daddy," she whispered. "How are you doing on this special day?"

Jimmy crawled into his mother's lap and placed his small hand on David's arm. "Grandpa? Do you have any stories to tell me?"

He could see the look of anticipation in his young grandson's eyes and felt the tender love in his daughter's touch. If only he could reach out and hug Jimmy—to hold him, play with him, and tell him about Mary and the rest of his family. If only he could tell his daughter, or even show her, how proud he was of her and how much he loved her.

He could not reach; he could not talk. His eyes did not convey recognition. In those few agonizing seconds, David Liberty put all his remaining energy into delivering his feelings. His head slumped forward, out of Mary's hand, the only response he could muster. His body betrayed him.

"Is Grandpa gonna talk, Mommy? Does he still love you? Am I still his favorite grandson?"

Chapter One

Of course I love your mommy! David's thoughts shouted. *I love you too, Jimmy.* He wanted to be alone. He wanted to die. He couldn't take it anymore. *God, please end this madness!* Why was this happening to him? *I love you, Mary. I love you, Jimmy! Just leave me alone and let me die. I can't stand seeing your faces.*

Mary gently placed Jimmy on the bed. Then returning to her father, she entwined his fingers with hers. "Happy birthday, Daddy." Tears welled in her eyes. "I hope you feel better soon."

Joe helped his wife stand, gently patted David on the shoulders and said, "David, it was good to see you again. We'll be by again on Thanksgiving."

He turned to his son. "Jimmy, say good-bye to your grandfather."

"Do we get to go to McDonald's now, Dad?"

Joe flushed mildly and nodded. "Jimmy, say good-bye to—"

"Good-bye, Grandpa, see ya 'round." Jimmy hopped off the bed and tugged his father out the door.

Mary followed her family but paused and whispered, "Bye, Daddy. I miss you." She pulled the door softly closed, creating a dismal hue in the room.

Good . . . just leave . . . and don't bother coming back. I don't want to see any of you again.



The car ride home was long. Mary stared out the passenger's window, longing for the past, when her father was much healthier. She found herself recalling those moments. Flashing back to her past brought a smile to her lips. A spot of moisture formed on her cheek.

She truly had a blessed childhood, growing up with her three brothers and two parents. She adored her father. She was always excited to see him when he returned from business trips. Later on, Mary joined her father on some of his company trips.

Her father had been a motivational speaker. David Liberty was recognized throughout the United States as a man who could change small businesses into large, successful companies.

Businesses from around the country sought his strategies for goal setting, customer service, and interpersonal relationships. Even more exciting, he was instrumental in saving couples' marriages.

David's listening skills and genuinely good heart helped him form a bridge between struggling newlyweds or older couples. He always stated that

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the rewards of his work were proportional to the size of the smiles he helped create.

Mary's father was also an exercise nut. He not only exercised his body, but also his mind. He felt it was just as important to exercise the brain daily as it was the body. His charts and exercise graphs could be found in nearly every room of their home.

Mary treasured her father's discipline and tender touch. However, he was not always there while she grew older.

Mary knew her father's decline came from the inside out, rather from the outside in. The breakup of his marriage with her mother, the loss of his oldest son, and other events in his life weighed heavily on his soul. David placed the blame on God. Mary tried to tell him it was OK to be angry with God, but her father always changed the subject.

Mary sighed. She was sure he did not have much time left here on earth. She only hoped he would go quickly and quietly, so he would know no more suffering.



David lost track of time while he agonized in his despair. He heard a click, and the door to his room opened. Whether it had been mere moments or days since his family had left, he was unsure, but a melodious voice brought him back to his maddening reality.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Liberty." A woman's voice sang as she drew up his shades and spun his chair toward the door. "My name is Joelle. I'm your new physical therapist. We're going to see what you can do here on your own. What do you think of that?" Her smile was impish, and her eyes twinkled when she pulled out an ambulation belt.

I think you are a freakin' loon, lady. David's thoughts burned. *If I could move or walk do you think I'd be here?*

Joelle leaned David forward and expertly slipped the ambulation belt around his waist, humming cheerfully. Once the belt was secure, she placed David in an upright position.

"Time to begin the evaluation. Are you ready, Mr. Liberty?"

Sure am, you stupid idiot. Can't you—?

"I see in your file that you've lost your ability to speak. Can you move your head?"

Can you shut your mouth?

Chapter One

“Or blink your eyes?”

Drop dead.

“Let’s see if we have any movement in those arms and legs, Mr. Liberty.”

I wish I did, lady, ’cause I’d drop kick your butt across this floor.

Joelle moved each of David’s extremities, checking his range of motion and overall muscle tone. She continued her cheerful humming and asked him questions, but David was too irritated to hear or to mentally scold her any longer.

Finally, the incessant humming stopped. The physical “terrorist” seemed to be finished. Joelle was busy writing in his file. She finished, closed the chart, and placed her hands on either side of his face.

David felt a strange tremor throughout his being as Joelle cradled his head. His whole life played before him in an instantaneous slide show. He nearly lost consciousness from the barrage of emotions that clung to his life’s pictures.

As his senses recovered, his eyes refocused on his tormentor, who tapped the end of his nose with the tip of her finger. “Mr. Liberty, we’re all done today. I’ll see you tomorrow to begin your physical therapy.”

What the heck did you just do to me, lady? You need some mental therapy if you think this body can do anything. And shut the dang drapes before you go.

Joelle retrieved the belt, gathered her things, and left David to his now-lightened prison. The door remained open.

Close my door, you—

“One more thing.” Joelle popped her head back into the room and grabbed the door. “I’ll drop-kick your butt across the floor if I hear ‘freakin loon,’ ‘stupid idiot,’ or any other derogatory remarks from you again. You got that . . . David?”

Before he could think a response, the door slammed shut, and he was alone. His mind struggled with what her words implied. Did she know what he was thinking? He tried to recall their exact conversation, but his body failed him. He fell into a dreamless sleep.



Chapter Two

DAVID WAS RUDELY awakened by the floor nurse. “Time for your medicine.”

It was Clara, an uncaring, underpaid registered nurse. She poured liquid into a medicine cup, tipped David’s head back, and roughly fed it to him. “Looks like you’ve been in your chair all night,” she said. “Wait ’til I tell that poor excuse for an aid about her screw up. At least I don’t have to lift your sorry butt out of bed and into the chair.” She turned and slammed the door behind her.

While David tried to shake the cobwebs out of his head, the door opened. A musical note touched his ears, and his eyes observed the energetic form of Joelle. “Here we are again, Mr. Liberty. Are you ready for some fun?”

David’s head reeled. *What do you want with me?* His thoughts rang clear.

Joelle straightened his slumped form and placed his hands squarely on the armrests of the chair. “You do realize that sitting like this is extremely bad for your spine.”

Can you hear my thoughts?

“I think I’ll start by working with your legs, massaging and tapping to see if we can get those muscles to respond.”

Right. My mind is going bonkers as well. I’m going crazy, and now I’ve got this psycho therapist to push me over the edge.

Joelle worked on his right calf and spoke softly. “You’re not going crazy.”

In his mind, David froze. She *did* respond to his thoughts. She had heard them yesterday! *Who are you?*

“I told you my name is Joelle, and I’m here to help you rehab.”

I mean, who are you? How the heck can you read my thoughts? I don’t understand what’s going on here.

Joelle stopped and gingerly placed David’s leg down. She glided over to the window, peered out, sighed, and turned to address her patient. “There are rules to be followed, David.”

Chapter Two

What rules are you talking about?

“Rule number one: Only I ask the questions.”

What are you babbling about, woman? I—

“David, if you don’t follow the rules, I won’t come back.”

That would just break my heart.

“I’d think that you might actually enjoy the ability to converse with someone. How long has it been, Mr. Liberty, since you carried on an intelligent conversation? Three weeks? Three months? Or has it been a number of years?”

I don’t know what you’re talking about. Why are you doing this? What’s happening to me? I don’t—

“David! Do you really want me to leave, or would you like to have the opportunity to find out why I’m here?”

David did not respond right away. Everything was too confusing. He had been tired of living and tired of his body failing him. Most of all, he was tired of being lonely. His loneliness—and body that had become his prison—was enough to make him want to die.

The intrigue of the current development quelled his self pity. He settled his thoughts and stilled his emotions. In the span of a few seconds, he weighed the pros and cons. It did not take long.

Rule number two?

Joelle’s impish smile returned. “That’s a question, I believe, Mr. Liberty. Are you in agreement with rule number one?”

Yes. But once my sanity returns, I’ll make some rules.

“Sane or insane, I ask the questions. As for rule number two: I’m always right.”

Typical woman. If David could, he would have smiled. The burden he was carrying felt a little lighter. He was no longer alone.



Mary could not tolerate how she had left her father. What haunted her more than anything was the lack of life or recognition in her father’s eyes. David had been losing himself for a number of years; she was sure of that. The one thing she always believed, however, was that the man from the past was residing somewhere beneath the surface. She could see it when she looked into her father’s eyes. Not daily, but there were moments that she thought he could be rescued.

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Mary finished the last of the breakfast dishes and entered her bedroom. She had a feeling there was not much time. She delicately pulled a small cross out of its hiding place. It hung on a thin, gold chain. Both cross and chain still held their shine after all those years. She and her brothers had purchased the cross for a Father's Day gift. Later in the year when they had saved more money, they bought the chain for Christmas and gave it to their father.

Her father's eyes and smile had been radiant. After many hugs and kisses, he placed the chain around his neck. For years she never saw her father without it. On the beach, at the gym, or just around the house, it was a part of him, like his wedding band. Until his decline began.

Mary was not sure, exactly, when she found her father's wedding band in the toilet bowl. She was still in high school. The cross and chain she found in his sock drawer. It was sometime after Tommy, her brother, had died.

Mary wrapped the trinket in a wad of tissue and tucked it in her purse. It was a three-hour drive to the nursing home. If she left now she would be home in time for Jimmy's bus. She grabbed the keys to the car. Time was running short.



Feelings follow actions.

“Explain what you mean by that.”

Joelle's questions had been never ending for two hours. For the first hour and a half they appeared meaningless and wandered from subject to subject so aimlessly that David was sure that his mind had failed at last.

Most people wait to feel something before they act, David said mentally. That's not reality. Our feelings come after our actions. For example: If you start to act happy, such as smiling, laughing, joking and so forth, you will feel happy. It's a simple example and holds true, even in more complex situations.

“The same for love,” Joelle said.

Yes, it is. Love . . . David answered too quickly. He paused and realized the depth of her reply. It had not been a question, but a statement that carried an accusatory tone.

His thoughts were interrupted by a knock on the door. It swung open. His daughter stepped into the room. She appeared flushed and disheveled, looking as if she had just rolled out of bed.

“Oh. Hi. I'm Mary, David's daughter.”

Chapter Two

Joelle looked panicked. She turned toward David to hide her expression and the coloring of her face. “All right, Mr. Liberty. That’s all for physical therapy today.”

“Oh, thank God they have found someone to help you, Dad.”

“Hi. My name is Joelle.” She extended her hand.

Mary enclosed the extended hand and hugged Joelle. “I hope it’s not too late. We’ve been lobbying for various services.” She stepped back, keeping both hands on Joelle’s shoulders. “When was this approved?”

David’s glass struck the floor. Liquid flowed across the floorboards. David lifted his arm from the tray to his chair.

“Daddy, you moved your arm!” Mary broke her engagement with Joelle and raced to his side, laying her head against his chest. “Oh, Daddy, I saw your arm. It actually moved!” She looked into his eyes.

David stared ahead and managed a single nod. Mary buried her face in his chest and sobbed.

Joelle slipped quietly out the door.



Chapter Three

DAVID WATCHED JOELLE leave without saying good-bye.

“Daddy, I’m so proud of you,” Mary chimed. “I brought something for you. It’s important that you wear it. In fact, I want you to wear it for me. I’ll talk to the staff to make sure no one removes it.”

She reached into her purse and removed the chain from its fragile protector. Then she hung the necklace around David’s neck. Delicately she adjusted the cross against his chest.

David screamed in his mind. *No, Mary! I’m not ready for this. I don’t want to remember. I can’t remember Tommy or you every day. It hurts too much! Please take it off. I don’t want to remember Him, either.*

Mary stepped back to admire her work. “Now, that’s my father.” She moved forward and embraced him.

“Knock, knock, Mr. Liberty. It’s time to see the doctor,” a stout nurse quipped and entered the room. “Good morning, Mrs. Mathew. Didn’t I see your name on the guest list just yesterday?”

“Yes, you did, Wilma. I needed to see Dad again today.”

Wilma pushed a wheelchair over to David as a young aid also entered the room. Both women made preparations to transfer David into the wheelchair. “I’m sorry to cut your visit short, dear, but we have to take your father down to see Dr. Stevens.”

“Oh, no, that’s quite all right. I’ve got to get going anyway. It’s delightful to see you have a physical therapist on board. I’m sure she’ll be beneficial. Especially with Dad. He—”

“Physical therapist? What on earth are you talking about?”

“Your staff physical therapist. I met her this morning. She was helping Dad. I saw him move his arm.”

“Therapist, huh? Are you aware of any P.T. on staff, Michele?” Wilma addressed the young aid.

“No ma’am, I’m not.”

Chapter Three

“Here we go, Michele. One, two, three, and lift.” Two pros, the caretakers transferred David to the chair and wheeled him out the door.

“I’m not sure who you met this morning, Mrs. Mathew,” Wilma said. “As far as I’m aware there is no therapist on staff. I’ll double check. What did you say her name was?”

“I . . . I’m not sure . . . I don’t remember. In all the excitement of Dad moving his arm, I guess I forgot.”

“That’s all right. Don’t you worry; I’ll see what I can come up with. Have a good day. I’ll call you this evening.”

The women escorted David down the hall, leaving Mary behind.

David wondered who Joelle really was. He thought any sane person would be fearful of such a stranger, especially since he could not defend himself or run away. Instead of a feeling of alarm, however, David was energized. It had been a long time since he felt any excitement.

He wanted to console Mary, for he believed that Joelle did not mean him any harm. Instead, he was still powerless to communicate his thoughts to his daughter, but he *had* moved his arm and his head. What an interesting day! When would he see Joelle again?

“Michele, I don’t know who was in Mr. Liberty’s room, but I intend to find out,” Wilma stated while the trio continued down the hall.

“Maybe we do have a new therapist on staff,” Michele said. “Dr. Stevens is new. He started this week.”

“No, I don’t think so, dear. We’ve not had any plans of bringing a therapist of any sort on staff. More overhead, you know. Can’t have the big wigs shelling out any of their profits,” Wilma huffed. “And speaking of Dr. Stevens, I don’t like the man. I think the board made a poor choice by hiring him. He shouldn’t be practicing medicine in this setting.”

“I think you’re being a little old-fashioned, Wilma. Medicine isn’t what it was when you first started working.”

“We pursued a career in medicine because we cared about people. Dr. Stevens doesn’t seem to care,” Wilma insisted.

“Listen to you. You better keep your voice down, or somebody might hear you.”

“Sweetie, at my age I just tell it like it is.”

I hear you, sister! Fire both them barrels. David normally tuned out conversations. The events of the day however, had changed his awareness. For the moment, he was very interested in what was going on around him.

“Mr. Liberty, here we are.” Michele came to a stop in the small treatment room. Wilma placed David’s records on the counter and patted him on the

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shoulder. “Dr. Stevens will be here in a moment. Don’t you run too far away.”

Funny. Try not to get your butt stuck to a chair, either.

No sooner had the women left when a man entered the room. He was young for a doctor. He sat on a stool and opened David’s file.

He flipped through the pages, and occasionally paused and scribbled. For several minutes he didn’t acknowledge there was another person in the room. Head down, he was absorbed by the file. He paused. Turning slowly, he focused his attention on the patient in the wheelchair. He stared at David intently.


Whadya looking at, smiley? You’ve got the personality of a door knob, David’s mind said.

All of a sudden, the doctor lunged and reached through David’s collar. His fingers grasped the chain Mary had placed around David’s neck. With a quick jerk, he snapped the chain and held it in his clenched fist. He shook it only inches from David’s face. “You won’t need this any longer.”

David, stunned by the pain, reeled in agony. The throbbing came more from his chest than his neck. He watched the doctor place the chain in his pocket and exit the room.

David’s hands tried to clutch at his chest as he collapsed forward in the chair. The pain was searing. *What have you done?* His mind wailed in anguish, *That’s mine. It’s from my children. Give it back to me!* A stench of sulfur interrupted his thoughts.

Then everything went black.



Chapter Four

MARY WAITED UNEASILY by the telephone that evening. She had had a difficult time driving home. Her mind played out hundreds of scenarios that could explain the therapist she met in her father's room.

The phone rang and she scooped up the receiver. "Hello, this is Mary."

"Hello, Mrs. Mathew. This is Wilma from the nursing home."

"I've been waiting for your call. What did you find out?" Mary asked.

"I'm afraid I have some bad news. After your father's medical checkup, we found him collapsed in his wheelchair. Dr. Stevens reexamined him and thinks he suffered a seizure."

"Oh, no! Will he be all right?"

"Dr. Stevens is not sure how your father's body will handle the stress. And Mrs. Mathew, there is something else."

"Something else? What? What else?" Mary's heart pounded.

"We had to restrain your father. He began clawing at his neck and chest."

"What? I don't understand. Dad hasn't been able to move his arms for a long time."

"I don't understand either, dear. Something happened, but we're not exactly sure what."

"I'll be there as soon as I can, I just have—"

"No, Dr. Stevens says he shouldn't have any visitors for the next few days. He's afraid any more stimulation would be too much."

"But what can I do?"

"Just sit tight, hon. I'll keep you informed."

"Wilma, what about the physical therapist?"

"That's the other thing. I don't know who you saw, honey, but there's no therapist on staff. I checked with everyone. We're not even looking to hire one."

"Then who was in Dad's room this morning?"

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“I don’t know. But I’ll take extra care of your father. Don’t you worry.”

“Thanks, Wilma.” Mary struggled to maintain her composure. “Please call me as soon as you know anything.”

“Will do, dear. Sorry about the news. Good night.”

“Good night.”

After Mary hung up, she sobbed. She had always known that at some time she would lose her father. She was just not prepared for it right now. Her father wasn’t prepared for it either.



David’s head reeled as he gradually awakened. The burning in his chest was less intense, but its presence brought a sudden recollection of the encounter with Dr. Stevens. His chain and cross had been ripped from him. Stolen! He tried to rub his chest and realized his arms were bound. Nooo! He was trapped.

David’s head sagged, but no tears came. His one brief moment of hope and excitement had been followed by a blast of reality. He did not know if he could endure the torment.

His body had failed over the years, but what had been the cause? He had received no answers from any of the specialists he had visited. One or two of the quacks actually stated that his perceived failure was due to a psychological shutdown.

His mind searched for answers. When had it all started? Things had gone downhill sometime after Tommy died. At first, David’s legs slowed. He stopped exercising. After being confined to a wheelchair, he stopped reading. Eventually, he stopped communicating and wished for death.

The intrigue of his female visitor had stirred buried thoughts. He now felt alive. There was no rational explanation for the feeling. The only reason must be based on his simple interaction with Joelle. He did not know if he would ever see the strange therapist again. His heart burned with a desire for Joelle to return.



Chapter Five

DAVID WAS NOT sure how long he had been restrained. What he gathered from the conversation around him was that Dr. Stevens had left strict orders that he was to be restrained at all times. Apparently the good doctor was falsifying his accounts that he examined David regularly.

Something began to change in David. He did not fully understand the mechanism of the change, but he desired life. His freedom had been taken away. He now realized that his old prison had been one of self-limitation. His new prison was imposed by someone else. Perhaps his need for justice or retribution fueled his need for life.

Through the days that followed, Wilma was a blessing. The kind nurse checked on him frequently during her shift. She talked to him as if David could understand everything she was saying. Of course he could, but he had regained only the ability to nod his head. He was unable to turn right or left; therefore he could respond only with a “yes.” Wilma caught on quickly and continued to soothe and talk to him.

Wilma told him that she talked to his daughter every day. Mary would come as soon as circumstances allowed. David guessed Dr. Stevens was the driving force behind her not visiting.

“I don’t like that man one bit, Mr. Liberty,” Wilma said.

Yeah, I scratched his name off my Christmas list too.

“He is insulting and demeaning; a regular wolf in sheep’s clothing, if you ask me. Thank the Almighty we’re getting a new resident.”

What? What did you say?

“She’s supposed to start tomorrow. Our good Dr. Stevens has not been around the last few days, so the board brought on a new physician. I hope she can demonstrate some compassion.”

Great . . . but how will I ever get my cross and chain back?

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Wilma finished fussing over David, kissed him lightly on the forehead and said, "I'm sure we'll get you out of those restraints soon, Mr. Liberty. Maybe the new doctor will show us how evil Dr. Stevens really was."

Evil? I'd definitely say there's something wrong with that man.

Wilma left David deep in thought. He hoped the new doctor was proficient enough to see that he was not a threat to himself. He had frantically tried to demonstrate that his necklace had been stolen. His waving and clawing raised alarm with the nursing staff, who thought David was trying to inflict harm to himself. They had quickly restrained his arms.

He did not understand anything about his encounter with Dr. Stevens. Why or how did he know that David was wearing a cross? More importantly, why did he rip it off? What had triggered the return of his arm mobility? David stared up at the ceiling. *I miss my family.*

"Why, that is so nice to hear, Mr. Liberty," the musical voice chimed.

David's heart leaped. He stared at Joelle, who knelt beside him. *Where did you come from? I mean, where've you been?*

"Tsk, tsk. Rule number one, Mr. Liberty."

If David could, he would have laughed out loud. His surprise rapidly turned to joy and relief when Joelle released his bonds. His arms were free! He inspected the backs and palms of each hand. He could move!

David recounted to Joelle the events that had followed the day Mary had interrupted them.

Joelle listened to his thoughts as David explained what had transpired in the exam room. She squeezed his hand. "I'm sorry, David. I know these dealings have been confusing. I don't mean to brush aside what has happened since our last meeting, but there are questions that I must ask you. Is that OK?"

Yes, as long as you promise not to leave—I mean disappear—again.

"That is not for me to decide."

David felt his heart sink, but he did not want his companion to leave just yet. *Fire away.*

Joelle's warm smile returned. "Here we go, Mr. Liberty. I know about your past, but I'm unclear on certain details. You spoke to hundreds of business people in hopes of improving their profitability and success. What was your main premise?"

Be a servant.

"What does that mean?"

It's simple. Serve others. This applies not only to your customers, but to your co-workers, employer, and suppliers, as well. By taking a servant's attitude, you make others feel important. We all want to feel special. If you increase others'

Chapter Five

feelings of self-worth, you strengthen the relationship. Strengthen the relationship, and you improve profitability.

“You also counseled married couples. What tended to be your main principle?”

Live each day as if it were your last. Selfishness destroys a marriage. As humans, we ironically tend to give more to others when we know our time is short. We studied terminal patients. A large percentage of them grew closer to their loved ones. Their knowledge that time is short changed their actions. When we act like we love one another, the feeling of love follows.

Most difficulties come later in marriage. Our actions have changed. We do not put our partner first. With changes in actions, the feeling of love will fade. It is recommended that each morning we should actively decide to love our spouse.

“That is how you lived your marriage?”

The question caught David by surprise. He struggled momentarily with a memory that he tried to suppress. *I . . . I'm not sure.*

“So you taught these principles but did not live them.”

Now, wait! That's not entirely accurate. I—

“You did not practice what you taught. You spoke of actions and how they affected relationships, whether in a marriage or business, but you never followed your own advice.”

What are you talking about? It was not my fault—

“Are you familiar with the story of Adam and Eve?”

The change in topics confused David. *What? Yes, I'm familiar with the story.*

“What was Adam's sin?”

David's focus was not entirely on Joelle's question. He was flustered by the accusation that he did not “walk his talk.”

“Mr. Liberty, what was Adam's sin?” Joelle's second attempt with the question penetrated his defenses. Her voice echoed through his body.

He . . . he ate the fruit from the tree of knowledge.

“How was that sin?”

David racked his brain. Had it been so long that he couldn't remember the simple story of creation? *I think it was because he disobeyed the Lord.*

“So, his sin was one of disobedience?”

David felt a trap close around him. *Yes.*

“But this was not Adam's first sin of disobedience, was it?”

David drew a blank. The strange feeling of being led down an unwanted path continued, and he was unable to run away from the uncomfortable confrontation. *I'm not sure.*

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“What about the fact that God placed Adam in the Garden of Eden to care for it, to cultivate it, to protect the garden? Yet Adam stood by as the serpent threatened the garden and his wife. Adam stood by and did nothing. He did not stop his wife from taking the fruit and did not call for help from God when the serpent stood before them. Adam was disobedient before he ever ate of the fruit. By failing to act, he committed a sin against his Lord.”

Confusion and bewilderment flooded David’s mind. He did not understand what Joelle was saying.

“You stopped praying. Your lack of action led to your love for God to dwindle as well. You became disobedient. Like Adam, you sinned against God with your lack of actions.”

He took my son. If there really was a god, how could He have let that happen to me? I was faithful. He was not. David closed his eyes. He did not want to think of it again.

Joelle seized him by the shoulders. The strength of her grip was startling, causing David to pop his eyes open. “You listen closely, David Liberty. Don’t you think that God, being a Father, felt your pain? Don’t you think He remembers the pain of losing His own Son? That He consciously turned His back while His Son was tortured and crucified. What makes you think you are so special not to share that pain?”

David shrank in his chair. He struggled to break free from the fiery gaze that held him. He wanted to run away from the questions. More importantly, he wanted to avoid the answers.

“What do you want, David Liberty? What do you want?”

What kind of question was *that*?

What’s wrong with you? He was unable to break her grasp or look away from the stare that held him.

“You turned your back on God. At first, you were just angry with Him, but then you shut Him completely out of your life. What makes you think that He won’t turn His back on you when you stand before Him?” Joelle stomped out of the room and slammed the door. Her words echoed within his head. *What do you want?*

An incredible amount of energy left the room with her. David’s heart raced faster and faster. The thought of salvation and eternity frightened him more than the prospect of life merely ending.

What if there really *were* heaven and hell? If death was truly a new beginning and not an ending, was he willing to risk eternity? What would happen when he died? It was easy to accept death as an end. It was far more difficult

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to accept there was more after death. It could imply that there were consequences for actions or the lack of actions.

What if his own selfishness was the causative factor in the failure of his marriage or in the death of Tommy? He cried throughout the night, chest and shoulders heaving, but no tears fell. His thoughts and memories kept him from sleeping. David was not sure what he wanted.



David waited anxiously for the return of Joelle. He was unsure which words he would use, but his night of reflection had stirred something deep inside his being. As his focus shifted from the window to the door, a familiar form glided into the room.

“Good morning, David.” No smile or enchanting song escaped Joelle’s lips. Her face carried an intense look of determination. Power radiated in the room, surrounding her. “Your answer?” She crossed her arms and stared through David.

Terror gripped David. Doubt and confusion engulfed him. His defenses went into action. *I want to live.*

“You call this living? All men must die, David Liberty. What do you want?”

I don’t want to die.

“All men die, but only a few truly live their life. Why don’t you want to die?”

I’m afraid. I don’t want God to be angry with me. I want to have time to fix my relationship.

“Words. Merely words. It is no longer the time for words; now is the time for action.”

But . . . but . . . I can’t earn salvation! Salvation is a gift, a gift borne of faith. I want time to ask forgiveness.

“Do you have faith in God?”

I did. I mean . . . I can again.

“Faith of itself, if it does not have works, is dead.”

David was stunned. *I can’t act. I have only my arm movement. I can’t walk or communicate. How can I demonstrate my faith?*

“I will ignore your question and ask mine anew. What do you want?”

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I want to be healed. I want to love again. I want to live. David paused and changed his answer. The self revelation came without difficulty. *I want a second chance. I want to see my son. I want a second chance at life.*

Joelle's countenance softened. She knelt beside David. "Mr. Liberty, are you asking God for a second chance?"

David's thoughts raced. He dreamed about reliving his life and correcting his mistakes, to touch, to laugh, to sing. *I guess I am.*

"He must love you very much, to give you such a chance." Joelle paused, as did David's heart, "This chance carries a heavy price and consequences. It is a battle you will fight for your very soul. You will also be fighting for the souls of others; therefore, it is a war you cannot afford to lose. There will not be another chance. Is that understood?"

No . . . I mean yes. I'm not sure what you're telling me. Who or what, exactly, are you?

She ignored the question. "You will be sent into the lives of others to demonstrate your faith and commitment to the Lord. You will get your second chance. Your body will be born anew, but your speech will be impaired. You will use actions to assist those in need and to demonstrate your beliefs. No longer will you be able to use meaningless words to teach; now you will *do*.

"You will take the role of a face in the crowd. The essence of who you are shall not be lost. You will have the knowledge necessary to interact with others in your host body. Your trials may not be obvious at first, but all of them must be completed. Your actions or lack of actions will be judged by others."

What? I don't understand. How—?

"You will be judged by the people you come into contact with. Their verdict will determine your eternity. You are your brother's keeper. If you are able to win back their lives, then yours will not be forfeited."

David's eyes widened; his heart raced. He could not believe what he was hearing.

"Any decision not to complete the trials results in failure. Failure means an eternity away from your heavenly Father, and you will never see your son again. Your trial has begun.

"I've been sent to tell you that life does not end with death. Your past life was incomplete. You were not obedient to your Father, and this new path is now your atonement. Do you understand what that means?"

No, but I'm sure you'll tell me.

"I *have* been telling you, David. It will be your apology for lack of obedience. You will demonstrate to God through your actions that you believe and

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love Him. You will ultimately help others so they will not lose eternity and you, therefore, will gain yours. Your actions will reveal your soul.”

But that's not what is written—

“Don't tell *me* what is written! I have read the Scriptures. Even the fallen one believes in the existence of the Lord, but that does not grant him eternity. To you it will be revealed through others and the Word. With the discrepancies in your world on the interpretation of Scripture, don't be so naïve to think you know the mind of God. He has chosen you for a second chance. Feel blessed and make the most of it.”

David sat in bewilderment. The weight of what was happening tore at his remaining sanity. Everything had been more acceptable just a few days earlier. He'd had no hope. He'd had no fear. His only desire had been to escape life—life that mocked him while his spirit failed. Now, his soul stirred. It cried out for life. It cried for the opportunity to be rejoined with something that had left. It was a cry that could not be ignored.


“David, there is one more thing.” Joelle's voice softened, and David began to lose consciousness. “Satan will be trying to win people's souls. He takes great delight in destroying the Lord's children. His minions will be your adversaries, and you may not recognize them. Beware! The ability he has to distort the truth and tempt humanity is great. Once Satan identifies you, your mission will—”

Will what? David's world blackened around his unanswered question.

BOOK ONE

“Pride goes before disaster, and a haughty spirit before a fall. It is better to be humble with the meek than to share plunder with the proud.”

—Proverbs 16:18–19



Chapter One

DAVID BENT FORWARD to pluck the irritating weeds from the luscious landscape. With rake and hoe in hand, he turned over the sun-baked earth. He stooped and broke the smaller clumps of dirt with gloveless hands.

Exhausted, he leaned heavily on his tools. Taking his last sip of water, he wiped his chapped lips and sweaty forehead on his shirtsleeve. The afternoon sun beat down relentlessly in this part of California. His job as the Barnes' caretaker was as thankless as they come. "Whether a business owner or an employee at McDonald's, take pride in your work. Give one-hundred-and-ten percent effort and your hard work will pay strong dividends in the future. Serve others in whatever capacity you are employed. Servitude and humility will attract new customers and keep the old ones returning. Strong relationships are built with this principle. Relationships are the key to success." David smiled inwardly at the words from one of his first seminars. His self-reflection was brought to a disrespectful end.

"Hey, Mr. Dirt Digger. Tie my shoes!" The rude command was uttered from a twelve-year old boy standing defiantly on David's bag of collected weeds. Three of the boy's friends stood by, gawking at their friend's bravado.

The young boy, Sam, turned to his friends and said, "Watch what I can make him do!" He glared at David. "I said, 'Tie my shoes!' And I want double knots."

"Aww, come on, Sam, let's go back and play some more ball." One of Sam's playmates looked to the ball field.

"No, wait," replied another. "Let's see what happens."

"This dumb oaf has been working for my dad for only three days, and I can tell him whatever I want." Sam's expression looked like that of a conquering war hero. "Fact is, he can't talk or nothing. Big, stupid, girly gardener. I said, 'Tie my shoes!'"