

# **EVIL REALMS**

A Novella By

**CORTEZ LAW III**

**Metro Black & Blue Books  
Canton, GA 30115**

**Evil Apprehended.  
Justice Served.**

Romans 13:4, "For he [governing authorities] is the minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil."

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From John 3:19: "...the Light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil." (AMP)

Keep fighting the good fight of faith and never give up combating evil, people. *Never. Ever.*

*Evil Realms* is dedicated to you.



## **Acknowledgements**

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# 1

The police sirens pierced the air and the squad car's light bar flickered from red to blue and back again atop the vehicle. The target? A dark gray four-door Buick raced at sixty-five miles per hour along the rural road. The car spewed dirt, rocks, and gravel along the bent roadway. A series of farmhouses and the acreage that came with them blurred as they passed. Both cars' headlights illuminated the night.

Inside the car, the late-thirties, blond white male patrol officer gunned the engine to sixty-five. Now it race alongside the Buick. In the passenger seat was his late-twenties, raven-haired, white female partner. She braced herself with a straight forearm against the dashboard as she watched their prey.

"They're ready to run out of road!" she said.

"Their problem!"

A veer in the road caused the police cruiser to ease its speed. That's that. The Buick floored it and cut the sharp right at the bend with dirt cloud camouflage that made Houdini proud. Both occupants in the cruiser shifted left and right to track the target. When the road's rocks and dirt stopped playing ping pong with the windshield, they had their answer.

"Gone?" she asked.

"Smoke trails anywhere?"

The cops perused the night's scenes. Nothing. Not one thing. The man stopped the car and spoke into his shoulder mike.

"Suspects disappeared. Repeat, suspects have evaded capture in a dark gray, 2005 Buick LeSabre. APB for Caine Valentine, white male, blonde, six-foot-one inches, 170 pounds. Ronald LeMay, white male, dark hair, six-foot-two inches, 180 pounds. Both men suspected of robbing the Red Barn Savings & Loan

tonight. Both men named on the Georgia Sex Offender Registry—

He cut off his sentence. She felt his anger too.

“They’re off the grid. They’re off the grid serial rapists and child molesters over,” he said.

“Copy that. Continue to search. Will APB, over.”

“Copy that dispatch.”

They displayed disgust.

“If ever we needed to catch lowlifes, it’s those two,” she said.

“We will. But lots of farms, fields, and dirt roads—”

“Got it, okay? We continue to look. We’ll get them. Let’s go.”

He cranked the engine. The cruiser’s searchlight lit up the night and uncovered shadows amongst shadows on everything in sight. Nothing. The road ahead narrowed until it dead-ended at a closed fence with a block-lettered sign that read, ‘KEEP OUT Trespassers Will Be Shot.’

“Well, maybe they went in there. We’ll wait for the corpses to show.”

He agreed with her. “That’s affirmative.”

With that, he drove and reversed the vehicle several times and righted its course for the same path it took to get to this spot. In seconds, they left.

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Left of that sign through a small breach in the decrepit wooden fence a giant field of haystacks that sat as high as ten feet. Movement on both sides of one. Mouths coughed and wheezed for several seconds. Metal creaked and then slammed shut. Twice. The hay flew with successive swooshes in the still night. Four arms flailed the bodies they belonged to toward liberty. Two men emerged hay covered, tense, and paranoid.

“Freedom, Caine!”

“Hey, keep your voice down, Ronnie! We ain’t freed yet until we bolt this hick town, got it?”



Ronnie's enthusiasm subsided with his hands. He motioned for Caine to calm himself.

"Keep watch for a second."

Ronnie did as Caine checked beneath the haystack at the ground. He growled as he rose again.

"Man, we got two flats when we smashed through the fence."

"We got a spare, Caine—"

"Sure, we do. Be we ain't got no donut which means we stuck. We need wheels and we need 'em now."

They scouted the terrain for a breakthrough.

"Okay, we each carry a duffel bag—"

"Five million each! Wow!" Ronnie said.

Caine rushed him with violence on his mind.

"I ain't gonna tell you again. Shut up. Grab the bags and follow the haystacks. I bet we can find shelter in one of these old barns or something."

"I'm ready to eat this hay, Caine."

Caine's face lessened its intensity. He shook Ronnie by the back of the neck, smirked and replied.

"Ten million dollars can buy you hay and anything else you want, buddy. Let's go."

Ronnie smiled, and they jogged amidst the massive piles of straw.

After they walked for thirty minutes, the pair riveted on a small crowd of people. They sat atop trimmed green grass, others stood, and others ran everywhere. As they closed the distance to the assembly, they viewed each other. Four young women and a dozen children about ages six months to six years old. Even gender split as far as they could tell. Like wolves who spotted their prey, the men studied one another first, then focused on the group.

"You see that, Ronnie?"

"I think so. But I'll tell you what I don't see too. I don't see no men, Caine. I don't see no men anywhere."

His lips quivered just a touch as his gray eyes coveted the prospects before them.

“Now, I bet you they holed up inside, Ronnie. We play this right, we got ‘em. Steal their car and snatch as many as we want. With ten million, we can take ‘em anywhere in the country. But we gotta play this smart as we ever have before together and when we worked apart. You hear me?”

“Heard and understood.”

Caine led the way along the outskirts of the assembly. Tall trees and the woods helped to cover their reconnaissance. They stooped along the ground to the right of congregation. That’s when they noticed it together.

“Where they cars?” Ronnie asked.

“They got to be here somewhere!”

“Now whose voice needs to quiet.”

“Don’t even start that with me, Ronnie! Let’s go.”

Several more feet. No vehicles. Not even a tractor or lawn mower sighted.

“Let’s check up that way.”

Ronnie just nodded at the suggestion and onward they went. After twenty more minutes, they spied an old, barren, and secluded farmhouse. Naked trees arched their gnarly, ashen limbs everywhere. They readied to reach out and to help someone or to hurt someone.

Close to that sat an old but large cemetery full of archaic headstones. It’s quiet. Too quiet.

“Man, where are we goin’, Caine? Let’s go back and get’s that action, huh?”

“We will, we will. Car first, then we have fun.”

Ronnie’s malicious smile morphed his face.

“You know I ain’t had a little one for a long time. Seein’ them back there together was more than my heart can stand. Let’s get those cars. Now!”

Caine grabbed Ronnie after they both jogged another few feet, mounted a woods and tree dominated

hill, descended, turned to the opened ground, and froze. This time Ronnie grabbed Caine and yanked him to the ground. Horror filled Ronnie's visage. Caine looked at him a second, then took in what mesmerized his partner. A bunch of people mumblin' something by tombstones. As they kneeled upon the dead grass, every one of them adorned black robes with hoods that covered their heads. The group moved in perfect synchronization. One person stood as the vocals synched as well and arose to a feverish pitch. When he raised his hands, movement and decibels ceased. A male voice spoke next.

"All hail our Lord and Master."

The others repeated after him.

"All hail our Lord and Master."

Caine and Ronnie dared not to move.

The person who stood continued.

"He has brought it to my attention it's time. We have come so far so fast. But we are far from finished with the work our Master has called us to complete. Despite evidence to the contrary, not everyone is onboard."

That person with the masculine voice strolled between those who kneeled in the circle. His shadow draped over each hooded member as he did.

"Who can we trust when the trustworthy betray our just cause? You know it's his and my way or death. Nothing more, nothing less. Complete obedience to us and to do our will."

As he walked, his hands disappeared into his robe's pockets and as reflected in the full moonlight, a pair of golden blade daggers rested in his palms.

"We know a breach of unity that dismembers our collective obedience requires a sacrifice. I and the Master will need nothing less. Now, bow before me."

The visitors fought the 'fight or flight' syndrome that raced through their bodies.

The faces bowed before the ground with arms extended forward. The male who spoke stood behind one kneeler. He tapped the shoulders of two persons who kneeled on each side of the person before the male leader. With cat reflexes, they gripped a white man's arms. Those daggers slammed into the man's pinned to the ground hands. He screamed as others broke the circle. They hogtied, gagged, and carried him off above their heads away from the cemetery.

A wicked glee changed the surprised looks of Caine and Ronnie now. A huge tree that stood thirty to forty feet high contained a thick, knotty limb of eight to ten feet long with a noose hung from it. The male voice commanded the others to slip his feet into the gap. Done, they pulled it so tight it caused a gagged whimper from the terrified white man.

Other hooded members doused a massive woodpile with gasoline. That male voice ordered two lit torches tossed onto the pile. With a whoosh, the flame shot upward and outward just out of reach from the hung victim. The others stripped the man of his robe and left him in his undergarments and socks.

"We need a sacrifice by bloodshed for selfishness. I can still hear the voice of your brother's blood cry out. You share everything even your wife with whoever wants her, and that includes your brother. I pronounce you cursed from the earth which received his blood from your betrayal and like the Judas you are so too shall your entrails burst as you burn with hellfire in condemnation!"

The man handled those daggers again and sliced with uncanny speed and precision a myriad of cuts across the hung man's abdomen. When the last cut ripped the gag off his mouth, he screamed and squirmed. With a simple nod, three members loosened their grip on the rope and the man fell headlong into the inferno. After a shortened period, the man ceased any noise and movement.

Another of the robbed members handed the male voice a towel to clean off the daggers, which he hid again in the robe's pockets. That member tossed the towel into the fire as the others peered in morbid fascination.

A cell phone rang from the inside the male voice's robe. He waited for a spell before he spoke.

"I told you that the great threat on the horizon will not be a problem. The Black Robe Masters will summon our unseen allies and destroy them."

Satisfied, he returned the cell inside his robe when he stopped. He studied his other worshippers, they reciprocated, then he pivoted toward Caine and Ronnie. His followers duplicated that move too.

"Oh, no, no, Caine. He saw us!"

"No, Ronnie! *They* saw us! Let's go!"

With that, the pair bolted upright. They used the same direction as before, inched their way back up that hill, and crashed with no aplomb. The millions of stolen dollar bags bashed against their ribs as the twosome fought a lost battle with their fears.

They huffed and puffed, tripped and fell, helped each other up, and left each other in their wakes. At last, they reached that house of women and children. They ran around the back for them. Only the women present, their presence sent them into a tizzy.

"Oh!" a red-haired lady said.

"Who are you?" the blond-haired woman asked.

"And what do you want?" a brunette lady asked.

Caine stuck his hand up in self-defense.

"Listen, we mean you no harm now. We want a car. That's it."

Ronnie's glances said otherwise.

"Naw, that ain't it."

"Hey, focus! Who's got the keys? Hey! Hey!"

"Today, ladies!" Ronnie said.

The red-haired lady in her early forties complied and tossed them to Caine. The other three closed the

gap to the criminals. Caine reached into his bag and exposed a .45 caliber handgun.

“I don’t want to use this, but I will. Which car is it?”

The redhead eased her arms about Caine’s neck and the blond copied her. The brunette and another blond surrounded Ronnie. His lust meter kicked into immediate overdrive. Caine slowed this test of potential suitors out. Though his flesh desired the same thing.

“Ain’t no time for this here, ma’am. If there was, I can promise you, you’d never forget it. Believe me,” Caine said.

“Yeah, believe us both. I ain’t never had two at one time. Ah, man, just a quickie, Caine. Think they didn’t see us?”

“No names!”

The redhead spoke.

“It doesn’t matter, boys. He knows your name. A father knows the names of all his children.”

“Father? What father?” Caine asked.

A sudden rush of wind so putrid, both men gag reflexed. With that wind a shadow so dark and expansive it absorbed the lights in the house. They experienced such blackness a void in space couldn’t even match it. A gruff voice with an eerie calm sweetness to it emitted.

“I believe you have something that belongs to us.”

The criminals responded with fear.

“Take–take the–the keys! We don’t want ‘em!” Caine said.

“Yeah, just let us go!”

That gruff voice echoed through the masses:

“Oh, you have something else that belongs to us too.”

Without notice, a multitude of red eyes dotted the room. Those in unison gruff voices announced:

“We believe you’ll serve him well.”

Objects crashed against one another. Screams of torture, mouths that growled, and teeth that gnashed drowned out everything else in the room.

## 2

### *A Year Later...*

Deborah's upscale Atlanta neighborhood was quiet, except for the usual nightlife of cricket chirps and the occasional owl hoots. The houses that dotted her subdivision shared the late-night picturesque landscape of colorful flowers, well-trimmed bushes, and groomed trees of varied lengths. Many security signs reflected off the street light posts erected along perfect cement sidewalks. Those homes ranged from \$400,000 to \$750,000, which more than likely meant the inhabitants enjoyed six-figure incomes. Last year, the house's assessment topped out at \$675,000; \$50,000 more than the prior period. The gross household income peaked at an all-time high of \$1 million. The net worth rested at \$10 million. She managed a smile; even a broken one beat none.

Deborah reached out a hand toward the coffee table in front of her as she sat on her gray three-seated sofa in the spacious living room. An elegant clock read 11:30 pm as it hung over the mantel and fireplace. An older photograph in hand among many in an album, she edged the picture closer to her face. A happier time in life with husband Joel at their wedding. They prepared for that day. Both realized the ceremony was less than a day, but the marriage a lifetime. That goal wasn't so unusual from any other couple who adventured down the aisle. Belief reigned supreme they could beat the 55% divorce rate that saturated every demographic of race, income, political status, a region of the country, newlyweds, divorced, and the separated.

A shaky right hand extended for the porcelain teacup half-filled with a chamomile green tea concoction that supposed to calm the nerves. She assured herself that a psychologist's opinion differed.



The cup rattled against the paired saucer held underneath in her left palm. Maybe she required counsel. *Don't hide from the truth, Deborah!* Proverbs 4:23 said, "Keep and guard your heart with all vigilance and above all that you guard, for out of it flow the springs of life." She had to do this. No one else could but her. She primped and pranced before her vanity set daily to assure she presented herself in excellence. The time and the money spent on the outside 'vendors' she used like beauty, hair and nail salons, spas, health clubs and nutritionists. Whew. The *Bible* wasn't talking referring to physical appearance though. She sipped and replaced the china on the table.

Deborah wanted a spiritual heart checkup. A 'hypocritical heart' checkup. If she mentioned this to Joel, that started World War III. In truth, he wouldn't want to invite hers either. How many times had she forced him to fess up about his inadequacies past, present, and future? Told him what he ought to do but refused to do the same. Her middle name was Marie, but it should be Pharisee. At this stage of life, she'd fit right in with those whitewashed tombs.

*What had she done wrong or pretended to be?*

She wasn't down with buttons or pins or bumper stickers with a Jesus flava. She hadn't gloated over her perfect church attendance, large financial gifts, or how often she prayed daily or had she? Did she stick a snooty, self-righteousness nose in the air toward anyone? If the Holy Ghost took inventory of her false heart, what would He find? One Deborah Pharisee Marie Benjamin was a phony. All fig tree leaves and no fruit. She knew what Jesus pronounced on that lonely tree. He spoke a curse and the next day it died.

She choked up with regret. Tears fell upon clothes, chinaware, the table and the tea itself. God declared her light of the world. Salt of the earth. To bear the fruit of love. The world always looked for eternal hope

that shined from God's people. She guarded her heart or her spirit. Without a doubt, she blocked His efforts to change the deepest part of her and needed to meet with Him to discuss this. His grace guarded her heart, and she needed His love. She cried again because she wanted more time. But there wasn't any left.

The phone rang. Again. She peered over her shoulder at the fireplace clock. Eleven thirty-five. Five rings. The house phones picked up the caller after the third one. Since it started—that's nine. She viewed the ceiling, frowned, and closed her ever so tired eyes. Familiar fury arose inside—the rings stopped at ten. She remained fixated on the roof but heard nothing. When she exhaled and lifted the cup to her lips once more—it sounded. She exclaimed in fear and frustration. The cup and saucer slipped from her hands and shattered on the oak hardwood floors. The glass peppered around her fuchsia-colored pedicure. No matter though. The tea felt lukewarm and trickled between each toe. The fragments could no more prick her skin and do her harm than the phone to her psyche. Oh no, Deborah. Too small in scope. Try your life!

Answer the phone, or let it ring? Answer the phone, or let it ring? Numbers nine, ten, eleven, and twelve. In times past, the option exercised most often? Let the answering machine record it. Enough. She snatched up the portable device on unlucky thirteen. Maybe this thirteen proved fortunate for her. Something good had to come amidst this torture.

Her hands rocked to their own internal tunes as she gripped the receiver with both hands. With breath ragged and mouth cotton dry, sweat and tears dripped into her eyes and burned them. Uneven breaths matched her own.

She whispered, "Hello?"

An electronic alteration of 'The Voice' emitted intimidation and emotionless instructions.

“It’s time. In fact, it’s past time. Which means, time’s gone.”

Deborah gathered her courage like always, but patience wore thinner than her weight the last several weeks. Twenty-five pounds thinner. Her own God-given black hair wound into a bun underneath lost length, width, height and depth. She even believed her auburn hair unit, thanks to Clairol Textures & Tones, thinned out too. She didn’t reckon herself a coward—yeah, tell another lie! What courage she kept she trolled this mystery intruder.

“Excuse me? Who is this? I don’t believe you’ve given me your name—”

“That’s right, I haven’t. Bottom line: I know who you are... and I know what they did.”

Her left hand held the receiver, and the other attempted to massage her temples. A headache loomed. She quelled her wish to scream into the phone. So, through gritted teeth...

“Listen, you call here again, and I will tell the authorities. Swirling lights, sirens, handcuffs, guns, jail. Is any of this sinking into you? And speaking of sinking in, how about police dog teeth doing that to your face!”

A pause, before the emotionless responses continued.

“Humph. I’ve seen that. Doesn’t work for me. As for the cops? Trust me the police are the last notification you want to make. Now, submit and obey.”

Heard the click and the dial tone. The clock struck twelve on her worse nightmare’s preordained doom. She felt relieved and even though it would last a short while, it sufficed for now. She wanted to sleep and needed to sleep. The question was could she and where?

Deborah viewed the high tray ceiling and five-figure chandelier. She left the spilled liquid, smashed teacup/saucer combo, and her tea-stained feet as they

were. With the cauldron of thoughts inside, she stood there in a galaxy far, far, away instead.

She took notice of the mantel clock. Eleven thirty-five. She blinked three times. It counted backward? A slow progression at first, the hands sped up at a feverish pace. Deborah prepared to duck to the floor for safety soaked in the drink. She declined to take her eyes off the timepiece. What the—after several revolutions, it stopped at 11:38 pm. Three minutes later. What did this mean? The tea hadn't worked. Humph. Not surprised.

### 3

The interior of the study was immaculate. Rich traditional wood desk, built-in bookshelves, and other storage furniture fit for a king. Well, fit for a king and a queen when she brought her 'A' game, Joel thought. His head shook and dropped to the gorgeous oak hardwood floors for several seconds. Here he sat with a career that maintained an upward trajectory. He garnered considerable respect, power and privilege in the community and the world. An overabundance of wealth in cash, stocks, bonds, T-Bills, and options. Others named it and he claimed it. CEO of his kingdom with many 'humble subjects and servants.' That's what he heard through that cliched grapevine. Heaven, even Deborah said as much. Wrong on all counts from everyone. Forty-five years young, in excellent shape at a few inches under six-foot, 12% body fat on one-hundred and eighty pounds. He pinched his abs. Worked out four days a week. Defied the odds with a full head of hair that eschewed the bald look.

He exhaled at the roof. So, the problem, Joel? His vision viewed the floor and his imagination saw beyond it to what lay beneath: His adversary. Great.

He rolled his eyes from the vision's and imagination's pre-occupation and studied not the book on the desk, but the wedding band on his left fourth finger. It glistened gold like his marital covenant once did to his 'better half'? Oh, not these days. Had he made a mistake in a lifetime partner choice? Had he missed sound advice from family and close friends that maybe she wasn't the one? Joel hadn't even wanted to acknowledge the One he needed to consult on his marital decision. He felt they shared an impasse now.

Joel stood and stretched in a t-shirt and gray sweatpants. Plenty of space to wander, he took a few steps. He studied his framed wall pictures of magazine

covers shoots: *21st Century Church, African-American Christianity Today, The Biblical Voice, Black Conservative Family Values* and others. Well-dressed, well-groomed, handsome, successful. Then the image hit him: Like an expectant father in a hospital delivery room who waited, waited, and waited. Why think of that? For sure his imagination had more depth of the creative than that tired portrait. His person sensed he birthed something soon. Peace ran from him for several months. Where was his help? From here and above, he hadn't much confidence in either realm right now. Again, his head dipped to the hardwoods beneath his house shoe covered feet. That sarcastic grin and disgusted countenance glared at what lived below it.

He reflected again on what that problem was, and the Spirit answered in the 'ear' within the center of his heart: It's a spirit of separation with the mission out to destroy God's people through division.

The Associate Pastor Kelvin Jennings and his wife, Janette. They came to the church to be their own persons. Led by Kelvin, they wanted to step out of the shadows of his famous father and mother, Bryant and Cynthia Jennings. Not called to his own ministry just yet, he apprenticed with him and his other half. He viewed the floor again with contempt.

The couple exuded a passion for Christianity that ignited other parishioners. Everyone loved them. They were infectious. They committed to the church and their spiritual leaders, "We love it and you and we won't leave! Whatever you want us to do, we'll do it!"

He took them at their word. One day Kelvin felt some type of way about a recent financial report. When confronted, he didn't describe what the real deal was that offended him. His thoughts based upon his words were this pastor and the first lady mismanaged the funds. That's why the series of congressional oversights focused on this ministry and others. He as his spiritual leader gave the Jennings, in particular Kelvin, the

impression he and Deborah were due most of the credit for the ministry's success.

The final assessment? Pastor Joel had a problem with greed and arrogance. Kelvin and Janette disagreed with one another. He fine-tuned his analysis to where the church and his spiritual father and mother he swore allegiance to did nothing right.

The memory was so vivid. So, he met with Kelvin. The rest of his apprentice's mask came off then. The man attempted intimidation, unjust criticism and self-righteousness. Plain brutality with no divine love in sight. Joel tried to respond with reason but nothing extinguished the inflammatory, twisted, and disjointed accusations. He and his wife felt sorry for Janette who fought to raise her head for any support or to debunk her husband's tirade.

He offered to pray with Kelvin. Nah, he took his reticent spouse and bailed. Bailed on his spiritual leaders and the congregation he swore they supported. In fact, he bellowed, 'Overrated! Overrated!' in everything associated with the church. The vitriol entailed fingers and spittle that invaded his personal spaces.

The grapevine reported a year later, that Kelvin and Janette's drowned from hardened hearts, evil communications that corrupted good manners, and the silent treatment. Neither party sought solutions. They separated and soon thereafter they divorced.

Satan fractured then broke that union and violated every joint that supplied what the body of Christ needed. Twisted words, thoughts, emotions, decisions and actions led to confusion, suspicion and separation. It was one of the saddest days of his life. He still believed his wife felt the same. They blindsided the Benjamins and Walk Worthy Christian Life Center. Have mercy.

He sat again at his desk and mumbled. His present situation called for an explanation on how to feed his

faith and to starve his doubts to death. One place he knew best. He stared at the open book on the desk. The *Bible*. After a few seconds that shook his body, he slammed the book shut. Pictures, pen/pencil holder, and stapler shuddered in absolute fear. Now, tears welled and spilled over his eyelids and onto his cheeks.

His hands maneuvered the computer mouse, and the desktop awakened from its slumber. He signed in again and what waited for him? The monitor displayed what he was certain about one moment and not sure the next. He pointed his right index finger at it. Joel's head shook as if the device was an armed robber with a gun positioned at him readied to end his life on Earth. He stared and read to himself:

- 1) Trinity In The Heavens
- 2) Global Outreach Ministries
- 3) Salvation Of The Heart Ministries
- 4) Hallowed Ground Of The Cross Church

He exhaled then stood. That's when the phone rang.

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Joel though not real enthused to venture downstairs, well, he didn't want an argument this late at night. As he descended the black wrought iron spiral staircase, the scene wasn't any different from past ones.

He watched Deborah frozen in time. Same old, same old. He crept down the rest of the stairs and with mental exhaustion, approached her until he stopped next to her. The clock struck midnight when he gasped at the liquid around her feet.

"Deborah! Hey—"

He reached out to connect with her right forearm when she jerked it back with a quickened scream. He viewed what shell of a wife he had left and wondered how much longer she remained that way?

"Who was on the phone?"

"I don't know but it's the same person as always. Want to call it that."



“The electronic—”

“I said the same one, didn’t I? Like you care for all the help you’ve provided.”

“Humph. I believe it was you who wanted no police involvement.”

“No, because I thought my husband could deal with it. Handle everything else with an iron fist why not a little annoying midnight caller?”

He pivoted a half-circle with scorn on his face as she tracked her tea-stained feet to the kitchen ahead. His arms swung out and up in questioned tones as she did.

“Let me get the paper towels, Deborah—”

“I got it now, Mr. Clean. One monkey don’t stop no show I’d thought you’d know.”

That riled him. Her constant disrespect was way out of order and his tolerance out of time. See that, he was a poet, and she didn’t know it, huh?

He watched her use an inordinate amount of the towels to tidy the floor at her feet. He needed to stay focused before he stepped over that line. Deborah dried her stained foot soles. She scooped up the glass pieces scattered about the living room with gentle pings as they clanged into one another.

“Change our number—”

Here she went with that again. It’s called selective memory he reminded himself.

“We’re a global ministry, Deborah. Global. The world needs our callings. We have to accept these assignments.”

“No, you believed, that God told you to take them, not me, love.”

“Love refused to listen to your husband and lest you’ve forgotten, the head of the woman slash wife.”

“Listen to what? A man too proud to admit that he missed God’s voice and now wants to lead this family—”

“Well, there’s no family but us—”

“On another fake Holy Grail conquest—”

“Though not without this husband who tried and who may need to pray for a second immaculate conception—”

“Based upon anonymous phone calls—”

“We both know that’s not the whole story, Deborah—”

“Yeah, you’re right. And repetitive nightmares—”

“Visions and dreams, love. Visions and dreams. It’s there in the *Bible*—”

“And how’s that for added irony? It’s in the Book of Joel and somehow that solidifies that God spoke to you about these assignments?”

The Lord heard this so He can cut her off now.

“Blessed is the man who sits not in the seat of the scornful—”

“Oh, I mock you?” she asked.

“What you are is an instrument of Satan—”

She slung two handfuls of wet, brown, ragged paper towels into his face with a splat! That stung and it better not had dripped onto his sofa. He felt the liquid drops as they ran down his mien and into his mouth. When did she get more Chamomile Green Tea? He never cared for it which could mean that this seemed premeditated to him.

“Check yourself, Brother Benjamin. I might have the forked tongue and pitchfork, but you can stick a fork in this conversation because we’re done. Oh and forget any other fork sticking you planned on as well for this family of two. But, have you ever heard of beef jerky? Smooches.”

With that, Deborah fast walked the stairs. In a matter of a few more seconds, she reappeared. With much ‘tude, she tossed a pair of pillows and a blanket at him. They collected at his feet in a disheveled clump. She strolled back upstairs. He wasn’t having any of that.

“We’re both tired! When fatigue walks in, faith walks out! But we’ll do what the Lord says!”

A door slammed shut. He viewed the room, then snatched up the pillows and blanket.

“Even if I’m not sure God said to do it... yes, I am... right?”

He looked up with uncertainty the winner. He fought tears and made his bed on the sofa.

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*Darkness everywhere. Pitch beyond black. No stars, no moon, no nothing. Like apparitions, a group of people collected in a large field appeared stuck in place. With a collective consciousness, they viewed behind them. A cliff awaited. Fear ensued and pursued them. In unison, they attempted to move forward away from the edge. But something... something pushed them toward the edge. Closer... closer... closer. The mouths opened and emitted screams that bled the eardrums dry. The wildlife faded into the background to nothingness. There was no stopping the unstoppable. The masses flailed and kicked and in futile attempts grasped at the air to prevent their descent.*

*Down below what awaited them was a murky, lifeless swamp with dead, decayed, bent trees. Death reigned in these parts a long time. Its stench accommodated the lifelong inhabitants. Those bodies, bodies by the thousands splashed into the dismal, dank, depths of darkness.*

*Those screams ceased when the bodies smacked the swamp’s surfaces and drowned. In seconds, the swamp awakened with bubbles that popped by the tens and hundreds of thousands along every square inch of the muddy surface. Steam arose from the now fast boiling marsh. Then those bodies resurfaced just when the bubbling sludge transformed into a lake of fire. Scarred bone and seared flesh, some of which dripped off into the flames and sizzled on contact, joined the malignant chorus of horrific shrieks of torment that overpowered other senses except the excruciating pain of those deformed bodies.*

*As they erected themselves in furious anger, fear and torture, chains bound one body to the next by the ankles, wrists and neck. Charred bone and melted flesh strained, stretched and snapped alike in vain efforts to free themselves. Hideous disfigurements pulled and pushed immediate bodies out from the fire as best as they could. Now, they focused on one thing.*

*Him.*

*The Man beheld them in shock. His fear planted him and struggled to grow roots deep into the terrifying night. Like those before him, there was no escape. But the masses pursued The Man. He turned to run away but sank into the ground. The crowds encompassed The Man and closed in when he opened his own mouth to scream. No sound came forth! The Man reached into his pristine jacket, drew out a Bible, and flung it open. Just one passage appeared on the page in big bold letters:*

*“Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; For you are with me...”*

*The Man lifted up the Bible and displayed the page at the horrific, helpless, and hapless humanity. In the next instant, a bright white light shone on the wretched multitude. Flesh reconvened over brilliant intact bone structures. Chains loosed, gravity seized them in a communal, jangled, metallic heap. The lake of fire lost its roar and transfigured into the most lush, evergreen meadow mere humans could ever have envisioned.*

*The Man smiled enough to illuminate the entire field. Then, the Bible burst into flames. The Man tried to assess what intruded such prodigious beauty and peace. That’s when a massive deformed skull... of Deborah... rammed itself through the book! Her abnormal, elongated jaws of ferocious, fire-seared fangs like tusks encased a forked tongued, two-headed anaconda. It too opened its fearsome jowls and ejected a long stream of blazes likened from an incendiary device. She bellowed when...*

Joel hollered and jerked himself onto the floor with a wicked bounce. He scraped against the coffee table as he slid on the hardwood floors. His head surveyed the room. Soaked in sweat, his body shook, and his breaths labored toward hyperventilation. He took in the fireplace clock again. Two thirty a.m. He wanted to drag himself back to the sofa. After several seconds of indecision, he elected to stay awake right there.