

# One

Of all of the places in all of the world, this was the last one Peter Carson ever expected to call home. He came from a good family and was blessed with a privileged upbringing and a pampered lifestyle, but all that was history.

Now he was stuck here in this purgatory, in the sweltering July heat of South Carolina, methodically mowing the grass at a federal prison camp. Once he traded securities and managed millions of dollars. Now all he had to exchange was his pint of milk for an extra cookie at chow. It was nearly as depressing as it was humiliating.

The misfiring two stroke engine had a calming effect on Peter's fragile nerves. The rusty machine was convenient distraction, focusing on the whirs and clangs of the old motor took Peter's mind off of his all too dismal reality. Mowing had become Peter's favorite escape, and he lost himself in the simple and repetitive task of cutting the grass whenever he got the chance.

But, without fail, within an hour or so of starting, Peter Carson would simply run out of lawn to mow. It was then that the demons returned with a vengeance and continued their attacks. Peter's life had become a living hell.

Three hundred miles away in Atlanta was the world Peter had been forced to leave behind. There was an ex-wife, who he considered to be the nexus of his misery, and a young son, barely ten, who desperately missed his father.

Kevin Carson spent his days wondering why his dad left him, why his mother remarried a jerk like Walter, and why God was so cruel. Once a

curious and playful child, Kevin was now anything but these things. Kev didn't seem to care anymore and, as kids are apt to do, he somehow believed the mess his life had become was all his fault.

Peter's calls and letters to his son were increasingly being met with hostility from both Kev and his ex, Julie. He was learning the hard way that when you're in prison, in many ways it's like you're dead. You can offer little comfort to those on the outside, and even less support.

So, on this day, Peter decided to skip his weekly call to his son. This would not be the first time he had opted out. He wondered, would he be missed, or rather, would Julie and Kevin be grateful not to have to deal with him? Slowly, but inexorably, Peter Carson was removing himself from his family's life. He was pursuing self-destruction, unknowingly serving a false god who offered only lies and pain.

Although he was permanently barred from the securities industry after his conviction, Peter Carson still followed his favorite investment vehicles like a hunter who could no longer kill, but now only stalk his prey. Carefully and methodically, he kept abreast of the latest economic trends, and tracked the major stock indexes. Why he couldn't really say, but like mowing the grass going through the motions of being an investment advisor seemed to dull his pain.

But, on this day, by the time Peter put the mower away and sat down with his outdated copy of a less-than-adequate small town paper's financial page, his misery was peaking. The waste of it all, the seeming finality of his failure as a husband, a father, and especially, as a man hit home like never before.

Peter had reached the stage where he despised his own soul without mercy. On this day he would stare into the abyss and see only blackness.

Finding a semi-private corner of the small library at the Parkersboro Federal Prison Camp, Peter rolled himself up into a ball and started to cry. His heart was breaking from the weight of his unforgiven sin. His mind was on fire, his spirit groaned, and he wished for the peace of death.

Mr. Peter Carson, the golden child, the MBA, the former owner of a fine home and a Porsche, husband of the beauty queen, the perpetual winner and success story, was now nothing more than an empty shell, a broken vessel. Everything Peter valued had been taken from him. Only a pitiful pool of pain and sorrow remained from the tidal wave generated by his prosecution and conviction.

In other words, God basically had Peter right where He wanted him.

“Panos Kallistos,” a voice from behind Peter softly called. “Turn and face me and be of good courage. The angel of the Lord encamps all around those who fear Him, and delivers them.”

Panos Kallistos.

That was a name Peter Carson had not heard spoken, or even thought of, since he was a child. It was in fact his proper Christian name given to him at baptism long ago.

After Peter’s parents, Nicholas and Neitha Kallistos, died together in an automobile crash when Peter was two, he was adopted by his first cousin on his mother’s side and her husband, Marie and Thomas Carson. His name was legally changed to Carson before he was old enough to speak it, yet someone now standing behind him knew him by this name.

Peter gathered himself, turned, and looked up at the striking face of a man who he was sure had to be a new arrival at the camp. With only two hundred or so inmates on the compound, everyone knew most of the faces, even if they didn’t always remember the names.

“What did you call me?” Peter asked, at the same time using his sleeves to wipe away the last of his tears.

“Your name, of course. Panos Kallistos, son of Nicholas and Neitha. Do you object to being called by your proper name? Do not be offended by what is holy.”

*Do not be offended by what is holy?* Peter’s wits were rapidly returning to him, and his first thought was that some psycho had gotten a hold of his Bureau of Prisons file and was now playing games with him.

“Who are you?” Peter asked.

“Gabriel,” was the reply.

“Well, Gabriel, I don’t know who you are or how you know my birth name, but don’t screw with me. You are new here, obviously. F\*\*\* with people in here and you could get hurt, pal.”

“There is that word again. I hear it everywhere I go on earth these days. So crude and ugly an expression for such a beautiful act of love. Why do you use such coarse language, Panos?”

*Okay*, Peter thought to himself, *whoever this fool is, or thinks he is, it’s time that I get away from him*. A year and a half in prison had taught Peter Carson that every inmate was a potential threat. He underestimated no one, and because he was white, forty years old, and had only minimal fighting skills, this was a wise policy.

“Where are you going, Panos?” Gabriel asked.

“Back out on the yard, Gabe. I’m going through some heavy sh.., ah stuff, right now and I need some space. I’ll catch you later.”

“Panos, please, sit down.”

With that Peter headed for the door. As he did so he thought, weren’t there two other guys in the library when I came in? The place was empty now, except for Peter and the mystery man.

Looking out of the window at the yard, Peter did a double take. What he saw could not be real. Everyone, inmates, staff and visitors, were all on the compound as they should be, but no one was moving. People appeared to be frozen in place.

Peter closed his eyes and opened them again. This made no difference; there still was no change to the now paused world. It was as if someone had taken a snapshot and inserted it in place of the full motion of life.

Terror gripped him. Peter’s legs got rubbery; he felt the urge to vomit and began shaking uncontrollably. Somehow, he managed to fall into a chair.

“Now that I have your attention, why don’t we start again? As I said, my name is Gabriel.”

All Peter could do at that moment was stare, grunt, and nod. He felt himself being held captive, but by what he was not sure. An invisible force of some kind? Even if he could, which he couldn't, he no longer wished to run. At least part of him didn't anyway.

“Do you believe, Panos?” Gabriel asked.

“Believe in what?” came the weak reply.

“God the creator, His son Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit,” was the response.

*Of course, I believe, Peter thought, but did not say. I have always believed. Obedience, that was another story.*

“Belief alone does not make one a humble servant of God, Panos, but you are stronger than you know, and more valuable to the Lord than you could possibly imagine. The time has come for you to begin your service to Christ.”

Peter realized Gabriel was reading his mind, answering his unspoken thoughts. He trembled at the idea of being in the presence of such power.

“My God,” Peter cried out. “Who are you and what do you want from me?”

“As for me, St. Luke and Daniel can tell you enough. As for you, Panos, that is why I am here. For you. The Lord, your God wants to reveal Himself, to convey His message.”

Then Gabriel raised his right arm and passed it over Peter Carson, like a priest giving a blessing. Instantly Peter was transported to another realm, to a place unlike anywhere on earth. He became the reluctant recipient of a direct communication from the Immortal One.

Peter was completely surrounded by this new reality and given a three hundred and sixty degree view of what the Lord wanted him to see.

Out of the swirling darkness he heard a Voice, one with an authority unlike any other, call out, “Feed My Children!” As these words were spoken, Peter was set upon by people on every side, most barely alive, all starving and emaciated. As they touched him, Peter felt their hunger,

their intense misery. He experienced himself dying with them, suffering along with each one of them individually.

He looked down and saw that he too was now nothing more than a decaying bag of flesh and bones. An all-encompassing malaise came over him. The agony of his hunger was very real and acute. Peter was starving to death.

Peter thought, all of these souls, mostly brown or black people, where did they come from? Why are they all trying to touch me? What do they want from me? How can I possibly help them?

Then, as quickly as it came, the scene vanished. For a second, the whirlwind of the vision ceased, and Peter looked at his body. He was back to his previous self once more, healthy, and well fed.

But before he had the chance to catch his breath (was he still breathing?), the Voice spoke again.

This time He said, "Heal My Children!"

Suddenly, again on all sides, Peter found himself within another sea of suffering humanity. This group was just as wretched as the first. Everyone here was sick, dying of one malady or another: cancer, heart disease, dysentery, malaria, hepatitis, the list was endless. As they touched him, somehow he knew what was killing each and every one of them, and he felt their agony.

Peter's body became a ravaged open sore, wracked with pain beyond description. The spirits before him now were male, female, young, old, white, Asian, black; they were indeed everyone.

When he was sure that he too was dead (and wished that he was), the vision once again terminated, and serenity was restored. Peter Carson's body reverted back to "normal," although he feared that normal would never be the same for him again.

As he heard the Voice speak for a third time, Peter was resigned to the experience. He knew that whatever was coming next, he had no choice but to endure.

The command now was, "Stop My Children!"

A tangled and bloody mass of wounded bodies reached out for Peter, all of them injured by the instruments of violence: some were stabbed, others shot, and many had been beaten. All were hurting and dying and as in the other visions, so was Peter. He felt the trauma of a bullet ripping through his gut, the horror of a blade being stuck in his back, the ghastly sensation of having his head bashed in by a brick.

These encounters were very real and also, blessedly, brief. However impossible, he was experiencing what each of these people were experiencing, both their physical and emotional anguish.

Once again, the torment ended. Peter was still in one piece. He wondered how much more of this he could stand before he went insane. Was he already insane? He thought he must be.

For a fourth time the Divine Voice spoke and said, "Change My Children!" The suffering mass of flesh returned, but their torment now was different.

Peter saw children being cursed, abused, and neglected; people condemning, judging, and berating one another; blacks being called horrible names, women being sexually assaulted by men, confused souls committing suicide because they were unsure if they were male or female, despondent people enslaved by sexual addictions and perversions, ministers of God preaching hate. This exposure to man's inhumanity and weaknesses seemed to have no end, and it sickened him to the very center of his soul.

Peter realized that this last vision was by far the most horrible of them all. God let Peter see, let him feel, just how cruel and hateful man can be toward his brother and how little love and mercy is shown to so many in need.

As the last message closed it was Peter's heart, rather than his body, that was broken, and this wound did not heal at the vision's end. God had gone to a great deal of trouble to teach Peter Carson that man's free will decision to be disobedient, unmerciful, and unforgiving was the root cause of all his suffering.

The Lord made it known to Peter that if man would truly love his brother, as Christ commanded him to do, nothing would be impossible for him.

Still existing in this other place that God had taken him, Peter was now bathed in an intense white light. A milder, kinder, but still authoritative Voice asked, "How much longer must my children suffer, Panos?"

As he stood waiting in the brightness, it became clear to Peter that this question was not rhetorical.

"What can I do, God? I am only a man and not a very good one."

The Voice then said, "Do not be afraid, Panos, only believe. Watch and pray. Others are coming to help. Teach them as I have taught you and be obedient to My Word."

It was one p.m. when Peter Carson entered the library. At three p.m. some inmates found Peter, unconscious and curled up underneath a bench on the cement floor of the outdoor library patio.

This patio would soon become known by another name, Solomon's Porch.

# Two

Peter's head didn't clear until later that evening. While the memory of his vision was vivid, his recollection of being carried from the patio to the infirmary, then being examined and released was vague. It took several hours for Peter to gather himself, to regain the full use of his mind and senses, and to put in some order what he had experienced.

Although he could not explain why, Peter Carson was absolutely sure that his vision was real. "Real" being defined as having come from God. Peter knew that what he had felt and saw were pure truth. Further, he knew that he knew that he knew. This certainty defied rational reasoning; it went far beyond any worldly standard of proof.

As soon as he was fully revived, Panos Kallistos did something he hadn't done since he was in grade school.

He prayed.

As he did, he really didn't know what to expect. He surely didn't know what to say, much less how to say it. Was God going to put him through another ordeal every time he spoke to Him? He wondered if he could survive another vision, given his weakened condition.

Peter Carson's first prayer was for three things; strength, wisdom, and peace of mind. He wasn't sure why he was praying for these specific blessings. It was almost as if someone else inside him was doing the praying.

There were no more visions, for which Peter was very thankful, but after offering his simple prayer, Peter began to feel better, much better.

For the first time in what seemed like forever, Peter noticed that his anxiety was gone. That dull anguish, that gnawing erosion of his soul, had ceased. Instantly.

*When was the last time I felt this good? he silently asked himself. Has it really been three years since my arrest? Since the day my world fell apart?*

Peter's mind had begun the process of renewal. Old ideas and values, judgments, and self-images; views of right and wrong, everything was being rewired.

A new man was emerging. A child of God was replacing an unfaithful soul.

While Peter genuinely regretted stealing his client's funds, down deep, in the center of his being, what Peter regretted most was getting caught. Part of him had known this all along, but for some reason he had never admitted it to himself. At his sentencing, Peter Carson said all the right things. He delivered his lawyer's prefabricated and hollow apology speech to the court perfectly.

But, until this moment, the true nature of his sin, the heavy weight and blatant filth of it, had never been fully revealed to him. Peter had always tried to justify his evil using excuses such as "inordinate financial pressures," "lack of criminal intent," and even "clinical depression." While the world had held him accountable, Peter had never repented.

"S\*\*\* happens," he used to say.

"No, it doesn't," God told Peter, "you (and everyone else) allow it to happen."

Seen through God's eyes, Peter Carson's life was very different, far removed from his own previous conception of what it meant to be alive.

For the second time in two days, Peter wept; but these tears were healing, not condemning. He was truly sorry that he had allowed his weaknesses to overcome his soul, to take control, to make him an unwitting servant of the evil one.

He felt compelled to open his Bible, a book that had been given to him when he arrived at prison but had so far seen no use.

Without effort or conscious thought, he turned to the book of Job, the twenty-eighth chapter and the twenty-eighth verse. It reads, "And to man He said, 'Behold, the fear of the Lord that is wisdom, And to depart from evil is understanding.'"

It turns out that life was simpler to understand, and much more difficult to correctly live than Peter had ever imagined. He, like everyone else, could choose to obey or to ignore God. Striving to be truly obedient to the will of the Father, Peter now knew, was the toughest challenge any human being could possibly face.

Through the power of the Holy Spirit, the far reaching impact of Peter's sin was made fully apparent to him. There was the pain and suffering he had caused his immediate family, the harm he'd done to his clients, both financially and emotionally, and the disgrace he brought upon his firm and his friends. He mourned over the encouragement his sin might have given others to steal. Worst of all, Peter realized, he had deeply offended God.

His fingers flipped through the pages of his Bible once more, until again, without deliberate selection, they reached the one hundredth and third psalm, twelfth verse. It reads, "As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us."

Peter knew that this was a message specifically directed to him. All of his sins, pain, regrets, sorrow, anxiety, guilt, and shame were suddenly not his anymore. He had been liberated. Another now bore his burdens for him.

Peter closed his Bible, flipped off his reading light, and shut his eyes. With a clean heart and a peaceful mind, Panos Kallistos then slept for the better part of the next three days, waking only occasionally to eat and to be counted by the guards.

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Federal prison camps, like Parkersboro, are built on the premise that the inmates assigned to them have much more to lose by leaving than by staying and peacefully completing their sentence. There is no fence around a camp, so all an inmate has to do is walk away and he's back in the world. But very few prisoners chose to "escape" from Federal prison camps.

At any given time, there is often only two or three guards looking after three hundred or so inmates. The guards do not carry weapons of any kind and use conversation and persuasion, not intimidation, to get what they need from the prisoners.

Rule number one at a Federal prison camp is if you assault another inmate or guard in any manner, you're back behind a fence and barbed wire instantly. Rule number two is that if you seriously step out of line, for example if you sneak in a cell phone, alcohol, or drugs, you're also history.

The entire setup is based on prison officials doing a good job of evaluating prisoners, assigning only those to camps who are non-violent or have a huge incentive to behave, and inmates being motivated to remain in custody essentially of their own free will.

The Feds have been running minimum security prison camps for well over half a century. The “success” of these camps, as measured by the number of inmate escapes and recidivism rates, are the best in the entire penal system.

Minimum security inmates also provide cheap labor for other Federal facilities like Air Force bases and private contractors who often employ “campers” for ten cents an hour to do everything from turning old computers into sellable scrap and fighting forest fires.

The prison camp had become Peter’s world. While it was bleak compared to his previously lavish lifestyle, he did not face the threat of violence and was generally left alone which, until very recently, was exactly what he wanted to be, isolated from the world and left to stew in his misery.

But now everything for Peter had changed.

He committed himself to the study of the Scriptures and prayer. Peter did these things as discreetly as possible, making no mention of his vision or his newfound spirituality to anyone. He felt compelled by this new and powerful Inner Voice of his to wait before acting. The command he received was to “watch and pray.” He took it literally and seriously.

Over the past eighteen months at Parkersboro, Peter had made a few casual friends, but none of them so close as to make much of a fuss when he now politely avoided them. Chaplains came and went at the camp, conducting Bible studies and services for the men. Most meant well, but few had any real insights into God’s true nature or His word. Peter respected their efforts but did not participate in their meetings or discussions.

He read all day long, making notes and asking questions through prayer, and then receiving answers through understanding. His mind and soul were a sponge and he was soaking up information and gaining knowledge at a fantastic pace.

From the time of the Apostles it was believed, although the

Protestant reformation to a degree tries to deny this truth, that the Bible must be interpreted if it is to be properly understood. Through interpretation, many supposed contradictions are resolved, messages and prophecy become plain, and God's unchanging voice is made more apparent and consistent. When the books of the Bible are synchronized into the harmony of God's purpose it flows, and the same universal truths are revealed from beginning to end.

St Luke's Gospel says that for His Apostles, Jesus "opened their understanding that they might comprehend the Scriptures." God now did the same for Peter Carson. It was a gift that would enable him to fulfill God's purpose for his life. It would also make him unique, and set him apart from other men, with all of the blessings and trials that such a privileged status endows.

With each passing day, Peter was changing, further evolving into a "new creature," as St. Paul testifies. He didn't seem to get angry anymore and began to feel compassion for those he used to despise. The petty things in life that formerly irritated Peter to no end no longer mattered. Patience, a virtue almost unknown to the old Peter Carson, was becoming the core of his new character. The world's influence on Panos Kallistos was diminishing, and love, God's perfect and unconditional love, was replacing it.

Before his vision, if Peter dreamed at all about the future, it was of him having survived his ordeal and then living the "good life" once again with a new career, a new wife, and plenty of money. He now understood, with clarity and certainty so intense it frightened him, that if he had continued down this old road, his particular weaknesses, dishonesty, and greed being chief, would inevitably have gotten the best of him. Without a doubt, he would have ended up back in prison, and worse, in hell.

Money meant little to Peter's "new man," beyond what was required to survive and to care for his son. Status and worldly glory, all of the "stuff" that this fleshly existence holds to be so valuable, had become worthless to him.

Peter began to realize, to believe by faith, that he had been snatched from the jaws of the evil one not for his own glory, pleasure, or comfort, but to fulfill God's purpose. Exactly what he was supposed to do

he didn't know, but he trusted that Christ would reveal this to him in His time.

Meditating often on his vision, Peter could not help but wonder what it all meant, for him specifically and for everyone else. Who were these "others" God spoke about who were coming to help him? How would he know who they were? What were they supposed to do once they arrived?

Yet, even in the face of all this uncertainty, Peter was not anxious. He worried for nothing, wanted for nothing. Even though the United States government held his body captive, Peter was now truly free. He had asked God for the forgiveness of his sins and had received it. He was at peace with the Lord and with himself.

He did still enjoy mowing the lawn, maybe even more so now. One bright September morning, while he was happily cutting away, engrossed in some thoughts about the prophet Isaiah, two men came walking toward him. Both were unfamiliar.

One was black, maybe thirty, and he was large, muscular, and menacing. The other was much older, slender, and white, and had the look of someone who had gotten the worst of one too many bar fights. They stood directly in his path, obviously intent on making Peter stop and pay attention to whatever it was they had to say.

Peter pulled back on his machine and turned it off. He removed his earplugs and watched as both of them looked him over, silently but very thoroughly. After a minute or so, it was the skinny white man who spoke first.

"Is your name Panos, Panos Chrismos, or something like that?"

"Yes, yes it is," Peter responded, startled by being addressed by his birth name once again by another total stranger.

"Good. We need to talk to you, man. Are you the one Gabriel sent us to find? What do you know about our dreams?"

# Three

Peter needed a few minutes to prepare himself, so after brief introductions he asked the two new men to meet him in the library in half an hour. Peter's mind was racing, he could sense the Spirit telling him that whatever God was planning was starting right here, right now. It was a holy mission that could not be stopped or delayed, something both magnificent and perilous.

Their names were Malik and Saul. Evidently, they rode in together on the Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP) bus from Atlanta but had come from separate institutions. Saul, the thin white guy, mumbled something about being "drawn" to Malik, but he did not elaborate further.

It was also certain that both of them had seen Gabriel. Dreams, they'd also mentioned dreams. Peter wondered if God had put them through the same tortuous series of sufferings he had endured.

Walking toward the library, Peter saw Malik sitting alone on the patio. They greeted each other and shook hands, which with Malik Graham was like grabbing a bear.

Even restrained, Malik's physical strength was impressive. As were his tattoos, which consisted of various women's names, assorted firearms, drug paraphernalia, barbed wire, and snakes. His two front teeth had gold caps and his left forearm bore a surgery scar from elbow to wrist. Anyone with eyes and common sense could see that Malik Graham had a violent past and that he was not someone to be disrespected.

Before his vision, Peter Carson would never have come near a man like Malik Graham unless he had been forced to by circumstance. If that

happened, outwardly Peter would have remained calm, but on the inside he would have been panicky.

But as they sat down together on one of the hard wooden benches on the outdoor library patio, Peter wasn't afraid. Malik's body was saying "I'm a dangerous man," but his eyes were those of a frightened child. Peter understood the source of this fear immediately, God must have recently touched Malik. No matter how big and bad you are in this world, you are as helpless as a fly in a hurricane before the Almighty.

"Should I be calling you Panos or Peter?" Malik asked.

"Peter is good, it doesn't matter."

"Are you some sort of prophet? Do you have any idea of the weird s\*\*\*, sorry, crap, that's been happening to me bro?"

"Can't seem to curse much anymore, can you," Peter said, laughing.

"No, and it's a pain. I thought God's last name was damn until real recent. I was a motherfucking, straight up gangsta, Mr. Pete. No one badder'n me. Genuine thorough hoodlum. Now look at me, sitting here in this punk a\*\* prison conversating with a crazy old white dude. Oh, no offense there, Mr. Pete. Damn! What's happening to me?"

"Why don't you tell me about it," Peter asked, trying his best not to smile.

Using the broken syntax of sixth grade level English mixed with a unique southern variety of Eubonics, Malik began telling his life story, condensed and summarized to the best of his ability.

Like so many other black, violent, and incarcerated men, Malik Graham came from a poor home with no father. Born and raised on the north side of Charlotte, North Carolina, Malik learned his lessons early.

Lesson one was that he was bigger and meaner than almost anyone else his own age. Once he hit sixteen or so, this comparison then also applied to the population as a whole. Being large and tough in the projects meant that you were respected and feared. Malik's self-image was built entirely around his ability to be the "baddest motherfucker on the block."

Lesson two was that the way to get ahead in this world is to deal drugs and steal. None of Malik Graham's peers were anything but antisocial

and criminally inclined. The guys that drove the Beemers or the classic cars with the three thousand dollar rims, the homies who passed around Benjamin's like they were candy, the gangsters who had a stable of women at their command, these were Malik's role models. Who else, what else, could he possibly want to be?

Only one person in his whole life ever saw Malik Graham as anything other than a career criminal and a violent felon, his grandmother Josie.

Josie Arnold was Malik's maternal grandmother. When her daughter abandoned her only child at the age of twelve because her drug dealer boyfriend didn't want him around, Josie took Malik in. But by then it was already well past too late. Malik's heart was hardened, his life's course set.

Granny Arnold was the only person Malik truly loved. While she wasn't nearly a strong enough influence on him to keep him away from the streets, drugs, violence, and "the life," Granny Arnold was able to get his attention when no one else could.

In and out of juvenile facilities on charges ranging from assault to grand theft, Malik left a swath of destruction from an early age. During those rare short periods when Malik slowed down for a while to appease a judge or a probation officer, Josie Arnold got him to read the Bible and go to church.

The Arnolds had been Pentecostals always, which meant church services included copious amounts of "spirit-filled" worship, like prophesying and speaking in tongues.

One Sunday night, when Malik was fifteen, Josie was able to cajole him into going to a particularly raucous service. Men were "on fire with the Spirit" that night, many were "slain," demons were "exorcised," "miraculous healings" were achieved, new and unique "heavenly languages" were spoken.

Malik told Peter that during all of this commotion, a man appeared out of nowhere. A white man about thirty or so, with light brown, curly hair. This man's presence at once made Malik uneasy or, as he put it, "scart

to death.” Why? For one thing, white people didn’t go to Granny’s church, so at first Malik thought he might be a cop or a social worker that had come to take him away. For another, this person, in Malik’s words, threw off a “righteous power” he could readily sense if not easily relate.

Before Malik even said it, Peter knew he was describing Gabriel.

Young Malik sat there petrified as Gabriel held his hand and said to him, “Say of the Lord, He is my refuge and my fortress; My God, in Him I will trust.” Gabriel repeated this short verse from the Psalms three times.

Then he said, “Be ready when you are called, Malik. The Lord will protect you always and make you honored among men.”

Malik remembered at that moment a blanket of peace swept over him. It was unlike anything he had ever experienced before. He described it as “pure joy,” a calmness, a passive, positive feeling of acceptance and love both “intense” and “comforting.” Malik remembered thinking that this has to be “what heaven is like.”

Malik told Peter that he turned his head to get Granny Arnold’s attention and to show her this unusual white man. Josie was evidently completely engrossed in the service and in the thirty seconds or so that it took him to get her awareness, Gabriel disappeared.

On the ride home, Malik told Granny Arnold everything Gabriel had said to him. Almost anyone else would have dismissed Malik’s statements as the rantings of a disturbed and impressionable teenager, overcome by an intensely dramatic Pentecostal service, but Josie Arnold wasn’t anybody else.

“That was your angel, Malik,” she told him. “We all have ’em. Always remember what he told you, boy. God must have something real special planned for you.” She said this with such assurance that Malik believed it without question. He didn’t understand it, but he did believe it.

“Scary thing is, Mr. Pete,” Malik said, catching his breath after telling the Gabriel portion of his story, “now I think I do understand.”

From the age of fifteen on (he was thirty now), Malik Graham lived the gangster life. His encounter with Gabriel did not change that. By eighteen he had killed his first man. There would be several more.

Malik sold crack cocaine, fentanyl, oxy, heroin, pretty much any drug he could get his hands on. He robbed other dealers, pimped whores, fenced stolen property, and set up a counterfeit money ring. Every few months or so, he would get arrested.

Since he had plenty of money for lawyers and “business expenses,” like bail and bribes, Malik was never in jail for very long. Clever at his craft, the local authorities could never stick Malik with anything serious enough to put him behind bars for any length of time.

This changed when Malik turned twenty-four. It was then that a federal drug task force zeroed in on his operation. The FBI set up wires and surveillance, paid informants, and tracked all of Malik’s criminal activities for six months. Then they nailed him.

Malik woke up one morning to the sight of ten U.S. Marshals, all pointing shotguns at his head. They seized everything; cash, cars, motorcycles, boats, jewelry. The Feds also found twenty kilos of cocaine in his basement, enough to put Malik away for the rest of his life.

You cannot easily buy or talk your way out of major federal drug trafficking charges, Malik found out. He spent the last fifty thousand he had stashed on a top-notch defense attorney.

What did it get him? Rather than life in prison, he signed a plea for a sentence of three hundred months. Thirty years. Even with good time, that meant Malik Graham wouldn’t see the world again until he was fifty something.

They sent Malik to the United States Penitentiary (USP) in Atlanta. He fit right in. Malik knew four or five of the inmates there, because he once ran with them in Charlotte. They quickly became his crew and did Malik’s bidding.

Always the dominant one, Malik Graham ruled his block with harsh discipline and cruelty. What privileges and luxuries that existed in a bleak place like a USP, Malik made sure he had plenty of, like drugs, liquor, and dirty magazines. Actually, his life was little changed from the one he lived on the streets, the only real difference being he couldn’t move around freely, and his “hos” were now punks.

So should have ended the saga of Malik Graham. Over and done, a menace to society, put away and left to rot during the best years of his life.

Granny Arnold died just before the Feds arrested Malik. Despite the fact that he had at least ten children by six different “baby mamas,” after Josie Arnold passed on, there was no one left in the world who really gave a damn about Malik Graham.

As it turns out, this world is not what it seems.

About six months ago, Malik told Peter, he started having “crazy dreams.” The first set of these were not dreams at all, but rather lucid nighttime recollections of several near death experiences he’d survived during his thug life.

Malik relived the shotgun blast from ten feet away that somehow completely missed him, the time he rolled his new Corvette, totaled it, yet amazingly walked away without a scratch, and the night when his ex-best friend Tyrone blasted away at him with a pistol from across his living room and only managed to graze him.

Malik awoke from all of these dreams with the same thoughts. *Why am I still alive? Just to sit in this human zoo for twenty plus years? I should be dead.* Malik had questions, but no answers.

Then one afternoon, about a month before this day on which Malik Graham sat pouring out his heart and soul to a complete stranger at Parkersboro, a new inmate arrived on his block at the USP. He was white, about thirty or so with light brown, curly hair. Malik recognized him immediately, even though he had not seen him in fifteen years.

At the time he didn’t recall Gabriel’s prophecy because he was so taken aback by watching this “angel” stow his gear in a cell and then walk out on to the recreation yard. Without prompting, Malik followed him.

“Hello, Malik,” Gabriel said, extending his hand. “Do you know who I am? Do you remember that Sunday some years ago when we first met?”

“Yes sir,” Malik answered.

“Your time has come, Malik. The Lord requires your service. He shall make you honored among men.”

Then Gabriel touched him and said some words in a language Malik did not understand.

Malik felt a surge of power hit him. It was a force far greater than anything of this world. It took control of his body. It froze him physically and mentally.

“And that’s how I found out about you, Mr. Pete. Gabriel shows me you and this place and Saul and four other guys. God wants us to work for Him, Mr. Pete, and I don’t think we best say no.”

“Tell me what happened when Gabriel touched you,” Peter asked.

“Like I said, Mr. Pete, God shows me all seven of us standing in a circle on this porch praying. White lights so bright it’d blind ya if ya stared at it shooting off our heads like bolts of lightning.”

“You’re the leader, Mr. Pete. Gabriel told me. He says, ‘Find Panos Kallistos and he will help you to fulfill your purpose. He is God’s instrument, and you are his servant.’ That’s what he said, Mr. Pete. On my life, on Granny Arnold’s soul. I’m here to do what you tell me. I won’t disobey anymore, Mr. Pete. I know how rotten, violent, and sinful I always been, but you got to believe me, ever since Gabriel touched me, I can’t hurt a fly. I’m not the same man that I was, Mr. Pete.”

Peter was trying to absorb all of this when Saul appeared and joined them on the porch.

“I guess by now you’ve heard Mr. Graham’s story,” Saul said, nervously finding a seat on the bench next to Malik. “Since he and I had the same dream, and believe me, we did, let me lay it all out for you, Mr. Carson.”

Saul Cohen had none of the language handicaps of Malik Graham. It became immediately obvious to Peter that Saul was well-educated and articulate.

“It’s frighteningly simple. In our dreams, we are brought here, and by “here” I mean right here, Mr. Carson, to this porch. It’s so fuc . . . , sorry, incredibly real, it’s not like you’re just seeing it, you are actually there.”

“He’s telling you true, Mr. Pete. Swear he is,” Malik confirmed.

“We are all standing around in a circle, holding hands and praying. I know that we’re praying, because I figured out after my visit with Gabriel that we are all saying the Lord’s Prayer in unison.”

“We keep repeating this prayer, over and over, until this intense white light, brighter than the sun, suddenly shoots out from the tops of our heads. Then I wake up.

“That’s how we knew who you were, Mr. Carson. We’ve both seen you before, many, many times.” Malik nodded his head in agreement.

“You also spoke to Gabriel, Saul, is that right?” Peter asked.

“Same man, different uniform. Gabriel came to me as an FBI agent, but he told me the same thing he told Malik. Essentially, anyway.”

“Essentially?” Peter repeated. “Exactly what does that mean?”

While Malik Graham’s lack of verbal skills limited the type and breadth of his expressions, they did not limit their length. Malik loved to talk. Saul Cohen was just the opposite when it came to communication. He had the ability to explain and expound, but not the desire.

All he would tell Peter about himself (for the moment) was that he was fifty-eight years old, Jewish, from New York City, and in the middle of a fifteen year sentence for bank robbery. He also caught the BOP bus to Atlanta, but his journey began at the Federal Correctional Institution in Lexington, Kentucky, a “low custody” facility. This type of prison is one step up from a camp, but nowhere near as onerous as a penitentiary.

The moment Saul stepped on the bus to Parkersboro, he said he recognized Malik from his dreams. Without stopping to think, because if he had he would have realized how stupid and potentially suicidal it was, he pushed his way into a seat next to Malik. But before the other black inmates sitting nearby could react and beat down the skinny old white dude for his insolence, Malik said, “He’s with me.”

They spent the next three hours trying to figure out why God wanted anything to do with the likes of them, and how in the world they ended up on this bus together.

Under Federal Bureau of Prisons guidelines, neither Saul Cohen nor Malik Graham had any business being designated to a Federal prison camp. Camps are for people like Peter Carson, non-violent offenders with sentences under ten years.

While someone like Saul might see a camp near the end of his sentence, it was unheard of for a man to go from a maximum security USP straight to a camp. Malik told Saul that the BOP people in Atlanta checked and rechecked his paperwork several times before they put him on the bus, even going so far as to call Washington for confirmation.

A man like Malik Graham, such as he was before God through Gabriel touched him, doing time in a prison camp, would be like turning loose a tiger on a herd of trapped deer. In the few hours or days he would spend there, since there was no fence a man like Malik Graham would be gone almost instantly, he would intimidate, rob, and beat the other prisoners at will.

Yet, as Peter sat looking at his new friends, he was struck by how unthreatening they both now were. Malik had become a lamb in a lion's body, and Saul, who Peter rightly surmised had been every bit as evil if not as violent as Malik, looked like a chastened schoolboy ready to obey his Daddy and get straight.

"Well, brothers, if what you say is right, and believe me I do not doubt anything that you've told me, we've got work to do. I guess we should be expecting four more to join us shortly," Peter said, contemplating exactly what his next move should be. "I'm new at this business of being God's servant, but let me assure you, He won't leave any doubt about what we are to do next."

"Do either of you have a Bible?" Peter asked.

Two heads shook no.

"We will solve that problem quickly. For now, let me quote to you from a book in the Bible called James, the first chapter and the fifth verse. It describes our current situation. James says, "If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him."

With that Peter stood and motioned for Saul and Malik to do the same. They held hands and formed a small circle. Peter led them in prayer.

Several inmates who had been milling around the porch watched this happen and wondered why Peter Carson was praying at all, much less with two new guys he couldn't possibly know.

It was the first time men were seen praying on the porch, but what now seemed odd would soon become a regular part of life at Parkersboro.