

Chapter 1

***Thou shalt not be afraid for the terror by night;
nor for the arrow that flieth by day; Nor for the
pestilence that walketh in darkness; nor for the
destruction that wasteth at noontday.***

Psalms 91:5,6

The crashing sound of a gunshot jarred the darkness, and Rev. Thomas Wilson was jerked awake. He quickly switched on the lamp beside his bed and sat upright, his mind in a tailspin. *What's going on? Are we in danger?* There was another reverberating gunshot, and the throaty roar of an accelerating engine, followed closely by the sound of squealing tires.

As the cobwebs of sleep cleared from his mind, he remembered: he was in bed, Amy was asleep beside him, and their adopted daughter Deanna was snuggled into her crib just inches from his side. As he looked at the two of them, blissfully unaware of any disturbances, he marveled again at how alike they were even though they had no blood connection whatsoever. Both slept like proverbial rocks, and it took more than a loud bang to waken either of them.

Thomas sighed, and threw the covers back from his legs, stepping out onto the carpet. The pale moonlight from the window let him find his houseshoes, and he slid his feet into them. Now that he had his wits about him, he figured he knew the cause for the gunshots and tire-squealing departure.

It was early November, and deer hunting season was in full swing. Thomas didn't mind that—he had eaten his share of venison jerky, barbecued venison, deerburgers, and so forth. But this year several large deer had appeared in the field across the road from the church and parsonage, and this was the second time this month he had been blasted awake by someone trying to “spotlight” a deer late at night.

“The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want,” Thomas muttered with irritation as he shuffled through the house. The 23rd Psalm always helped to calm him. Thomas was not easily angered, but he found it inexcusable that so-called sportsmen would attempt to shine a bright light into a deer's eyes to confuse and temporarily paralyze it, then shoot it while it was in this state of semi-stupefaction. That wasn't sporting—it wasn't even legal, for goodness sake.

That was why he was calling 9-1-1 right now, as he poured himself a glass of milk.

The bored-sounding emergency operator answered, “Cuthbert County Emergency Services. May I help you?”

“Yes, I'd like to report shots fired from the road in front of my house. They sounded like a high-powered rifle. They were followed by the sound of someone taking off in a car or truck, squealing their tires.”

“Is anyone there injured, sir?” There was a little more concern in the voice now.

“No one in my house is injured. I was awakened and startled, that's all.”

“Did any bullets strike the house, sir?”

“I have no idea. I didn’t notice any, but it's 2:40 AM, and I'm not going out there in my pajamas to check.” Thomas’s own voice was a little strained now.

“Alright sir, we'll have someone drive by and check it out. Is there anything else?”

“No, thanks. That was it.”

“Thank you, sir.” The emergency operator said, then hung up.

Thomas padded into the living room that faced the road, and peered out the window into the moonlit night, sipping his cold milk. He couldn't see any dark shapes lying in the pasture, so he hoped the poaching hunters missed whatever they were aiming at.

As he stood in the darkened living room, he marveled at the beauty of the night, even when it had just been disturbed by the intrusion of man's callous disregard for fair play and for the law. God seldom allowed man to permanently mar Creation with such individual stupidity. Suddenly Thomas’s attention was drawn to a part of the pasture near an adjoining woods. There was a figure moving there, but it didn't look like a deer. It looked like a human being.

Thomas peered more closely through the breath-fogged window. Yes, that was definitely a person, although he couldn’t have said whether male or female, young or old. The person stood at the edge of the woods for a few moments, then jumped up and down, flinging its arms about in a strange exuberance. Thomas's jaw dropped.

The figure stopped its strange dance and faded back into the darkness of the woods. Though

Thomas stood there straining his eyes for several minutes, he saw no more of the odd figure.

He blinked several times to clear his vision, wiped the window and peered again at the field, but was interrupted in his visual search by the arrival of a county police cruiser. The black-and-white Ford LTD pulled into the driveway of the parsonage, and two officers got out. He hurried to the door so they wouldn't ring the doorbell and possibly awaken Amy. She was conditioned to that, for some reason—it would awaken her, as would the phone, even though thunder, gunshot or other loud noises usually would not.

The two officers came in, taking off their hats, and introduced themselves as Officers Huffington and Riesling.

“We understand you reported some gunfire in front of your house. Can you tell us about it?” Officer Huffington said, as his partner took out a notepad.

“About 25 minutes ago, I was awakened by a very loud gunshot. It sounded to my ears like a high-powered rifle—like a .30-30 or a .30-06. I sat up in bed, and there was another gunshot, within ten to fifteen seconds of the first one.”

“What happened then?”

“Right after the second gunshot, I heard the sound of an accelerating engine with a loud muffler and the squeal of tires. I got up and looked out the window, but couldn't see any car or truck,” Thomas stated.

Both officers nodded, and Riesling asked, “Did you see anyone or anything unusual after the car left?”

“Well, you know, it is odd, but I wasn’t sure if I wanted to mention this.” He took a deep breath, but plunged ahead like a diver into cold water. “This year several large whitetail deer that have shown up in the field across the road,” and he gestured in that direction. “Someone was out there about a week ago trying to spotlight a deer. That time I saw the vehicle, but not clearly enough to get a good description or a license plate number. I figured that was what happened tonight, too.

“But as I was waiting for you two to arrive, I was standing by the front door and looking out the window at the pasture where the deer normally show up. As you can see, it's a brightly moonlit night. I didn't see any deer, but after a few minutes I saw what looked like a person come out of the woods beside the pasture.” He stopped, uncertain how to finish.

The officers both reacted to this news with increased alertness, like two hounds who caught a scent. Huffington asked, “What did the person do, Reverend?”

“That's the really odd part,” Thomas said, “and I can't explain it. This person, whoever he or she was, came out of the woods, paused a few seconds, and then jumped up and down, flapping their arms. Whether they were trying to get warm, celebrate or dance, I have no idea!” He looked at both men, whose level gazes gave away nothing about what might be going through their minds. “After a few moments of that, the person stopped and went back into the woods. I continued watching to see if they would return, but they did

not. A little later, you two drove up in your police car.”

Officer Riesling cleared his throat. “Ah, I see. Well, I’ll go out and check by the road to see if I can find any signs, while my partner checks the front of your house to see if he can see any bullet damage.” With that, both men replaced their caps and went outside. Thomas stood on the front steps of the parsonage in his pajamas and a terrycloth robe, watching Riesling checking the road with a flashlight, while Huffington investigated the front of the house.

In about five minutes Officer Riesling returned to the door and entered. “There are fresh tire marks on the road that indicate someone left here in a hurry not long ago, although I didn’t see any spent rounds.” He shrugged. “They may have been ejected into the interior of the vehicle.” He started to turn away, then stopped and asked, “Did anyone else hear or see the gunshots or the vehicle?”

“I don’t think so, Officer—at least not here in this house. My wife and baby both sleep like logs, and when I woke up they didn’t stir at all.” The officer raised his eyebrows at this, but Thomas nodded his head. “Oh, yes, Officer. My wife will waken at the phone, the doorbell, or the cry of the baby, but just about nothing else will disturb her when she is solidly asleep. She’s been that way for years.”

Officer Huffington returned then, his shoes wet with dew and covered with little pieces of cut grass from the lawn. “There are no signs of any

bullet damage to the house, Reverend, at least not as far as I can see.”

“I didn't expect there would be,” Thomas replied. “Like I said, I believe they were trying to shoot a deer illegally.”

“Well, whatever they were trying to do, it was illegal,” replied Riesling. “Hunting deer more than thirty minutes after sundown is illegal. Hunting within 100 yards of a state highway is illegal. Firing a weapon from a vehicle is illegal. And disturbing the peace is illegal. So, they are in trouble one way or another, *if* we can catch them.”

“And how likely do you think that is, realistically?” Thomas asked.

Officer Riesling grinned humorlessly at him. “Well, that's the point, isn't it? We really don't have a lot to go on, but every time a report like this comes in we get a little more information, and maybe it will all add up eventually. So, I'd say keep your eyes open for anyone who may stop and seem to be examining that field too closely.” He paused. “You know what I mean: seeing what they might be able to shoot, if they had the chance.”

Thomas nodded, then asked, “What about the person who came out of the woods and did a little dance? Is that going to be investigated?”

The two officers looked at each other, then Huffington cleared his throat and said, “Well, as far as we can determine, that person, whoever he or she may be, didn't break any law or cause any trouble. We really have no reason to investigate who they may be, or what they might have been doing, sir.”

Thomas opened his mouth to speak, then closed it as he realized they were perfectly right. Strange, even downright nutty behavior, wasn't necessarily a reason for a police investigation as long as no one was endangered or injured. So he just said, "Thank you, officers. Do I need to sign anything now?"

Huffington shook his head. "No, sir. We have to type up the report, and you can come in and sign it sometime in the next two or three days. We won't have it complete before the day after tomorrow, anyway."

"Ah, OK, then." Thomas yawned. "I think I'll try to get back to sleep. I hope the rest of your shift is quiet, gentlemen. God bless you and keep you both safe!" The men touched their caps in a sort of salute, and left, with Thomas shutting and locking the door behind them.

Thomas returned to bed as he heard the police car pulling away from their driveway. He lay there in the darkness, listening to the sound of Amy breathing, and the lighter, faster echo of that sound from little Deanna. *Thank God they hadn't been endangered!*

He stood up again, going over to the side of Deanna's crib. He reached down and rested his hand lightly on her chest, feeling the swift rise and fall of her ribs, and the light "tap-tap" of her tiny heartbeat. He smiled in the darkness, thinking of the wonder of the little life there, and the joy that God had given them by allowing them to adopt this beautiful child.

Father, he prayed, make me always mindful of the blessings you have given us, and most

especially of the blessing of those we love and who love us. Don't let me fall into the habit of taking that love for granted, Lord.

He bent over and kissed Deanna's forehead. She puckered up in a little frown, but relaxed again with a sigh. Thomas returned to bed then, comforted both by his faith and by the warm feeling of being surrounded by those he loved, his baby daughter on one side and his wife on the other. With that happy thought in his mind, he drifted off to sleep.

* * *

The next morning dawned cool and clear, and Thomas had a little trouble getting out of bed with his loss of sleep. But Deanna helped with that. As soon as she heard the alarm clock begin its raucous buzz, she opened her eyes and added her voice to the din. Breakfast was always high on her list of priorities when she awakened and today was no exception.

But Amy was a step ahead of her. Just as Thomas rolled out of bed and leaned across into the crib to comfort Deanna, Amy walked in with a bottle in one hand and a cup of coffee in the other. "Here you go, Thomas. I've already had mine," she said as she handed him the steaming mug. She picked up Deanna and offered her the breakfast bottle, which the hungry baby immediately accepted.

After a couple of minutes of ravenous sucking sounds coming from Deanna and her bottle, accompanied by murmured endearments from Amy, she turned to Thomas and asked, "Did something happen last night that I don't know

about? I seem to vaguely remember you getting up out of bed, and there is a lot less milk in the 'fridge than there was last night after supper! I barely had enough for a bowl of cereal!"

Thomas laughed. "Well, yes, something did happen. I'm surprised you remember anything about it, though. I thought you were dead to the world." He told her about the gunshot that woke him, and about the subsequent visit by the police. He also told her about the strange figure he saw jumping at the edge of the woods, and her eyebrows rose.

"There was someone there at 2:45 in the morning?" she asked in amazement. "Are you sure?"

He nodded his head. "Yes, I am sure. You're giving me the same sort of look the police officer gave me, honey! I was awake, not sleepwalking." He grinned, then got up and went into the bathroom to get started with the day.

Later, showered and dressed, Thomas decided to see what he could find across the road. He donned some sneakers and a jacket, and carefully navigated his way through the barbed-wire fence around the pasture. The pasture owner had already sold off this year's beef cattle, so the pasture was empty. He headed in the general direction of where he saw the jumping figure, and saw several indications along the way that deer had been recently feeding there.

Thomas walked along the edge of the forest, looking for any signs of the phantom dancer, but at first was frustrated. He walked about one hundred yards, and decided to call it quits. But on his way

back, he noticed the pine needles were disturbed at one point and as he approached, he saw the distinct imprint of a sneaker in the clay soil beneath. It was the toe of the sneaker only, which he thought would be reasonable if the wearer were jumping up and down.

Satisfied now that he definitely had seen the strange, exultant figure (he was beginning to wonder!), he made his way back to the parsonage and informed Amy of what he found. She acted surprised that he went to the trouble to verify what he saw, but was just as puzzled as he by the idea of someone jumping up and down in the edge of a pasture at 2:45 AM on a Tuesday morning.

“Thomas, Father McClenny called to remind you of the Interfaith Initiative meeting this afternoon,” she said as she handed him the paper where she wrote down the particulars of the phone call.

“Oh, right! It's being held at Temple Beth Shalom this month. I hadn't totally forgotten, but I have to admit it wasn't at the top of my memory.”

Amy grinned. “We don't want the representative of the Holly Creek Christian Church to be missing, do we? And isn't that where Larry Meyer attends services?” Amy asked.

“Yes, it is. They have a very nice facility there, with a K-12 school as well as the normal synagogue facilities,” Thomas replied

“Don't go getting ideas about putting a K-12 school into our new church building! We have enough worries with just building the new sanctuary, Christian education center and

fellowship hall!” Amy looked at him with mock horror.

“Actually, I was thinking about starting our own Bible college and seminary!” he teased her.

That afternoon, he went to the monthly meeting of the Interfaith Initiative at 1:30, and it was over by 3:00. He was surprised to meet Larry Meyer in the hallway as he was leaving.

“Larry, how are you? Not working today?” Thomas asked.

“The second pharmacist is taking care of things for an hour or two while I look in on my daughter Esther. She's in a play here at the school, and they are practicing this afternoon. I wanted to sneak around and watch her while she is practicing, you know? I didn't want her to know I was here because it might make her nervous,” Larry explained.

“Really? What play are they performing?”

“It's an Agatha Christie play, 'Ten Little Indians'. She is playing this really up-tight religious woman who is a big hypocrite.” He grinned at Thomas. “Luckily, she's not identified as any particular faith, other than she quotes the Bible a lot.”

“I remember seeing a movie by that name. It was an old black-and-white movie, though, from the Forties,” Thomas said.

“Well, they're just getting started practicing, I think. Want to go and spy on them with me?”

Thomas agreed and walked along with Larry to a door that led to stairs which went up to a small

balcony area looking down on a stage. They quietly took their seats and watched.

The first scene was sort of slow at first. It was primarily setting the tone of the play, and introducing all the main characters, which were ten in all.

Larry nudged Thomas when his daughter came out onto the stage. "There she is," he whispered.

The last time Thomas had seen Esther was about six months ago, but she matured a lot during that time and he didn't think he would have recognized her. It gave him a warm feeling to think that he might be experiencing the same sort of fatherly pride in his own daughter in a few years.

The young actors had practiced a lot, it was obvious, but it was interesting to see how the director was stopping things and advising them on how to get the most out of their parts. All the kids were nervous, but none were reading their parts, although a few did have to be prompted at one point or another.

Finally, it came time for the climax of the first act. A handsome young man, playing the callow and detestable Anthony Marston, flawlessly executed his lines and tossed back a pretend glass of whiskey.

He grasped his throat, then his stomach, and arched his back, then fell to the floor rolling and retching.

"Cut! Stop, stop!" the director, a young woman of about thirty yelled. "Eddie, for goodness sake, what was THAT?" she demanded.

The young actor raised himself up onto his elbow and said, "What was what?"

"What was all that contorting and thrashing around?" his director asked, obviously displeased. "You're supposed to be dying from cyanide, not having a fit!"

The rest of the young cast giggled, and the erstwhile corpse grinned. "Well, I was trying for something more dramatic this time!"

"OK, well, how about trying a different way to be dramatic? Why don't you go to Mrs. Kniebel, the science teacher, and ask her how a cyanide poisoning would affect someone? Dramatic is good, but let's think about realistic, too. Then, come back and we'll talk about it, OK?"

The young man got up, brushed off his clothes and went off, supposedly to find the science teacher.

The practice continued, but in a short while Thomas looked at his watch and realized he was going to be late for dinner if he didn't leave now. He still needed to run a couple of errands before heading home. Whispering a goodbye to Larry, he stood up to leave, but Larry followed him out.

"So, what do you think?" Larry asked, fully the proud papa.

"I think with a little more practice, they're going to be great!"

"Listen, the performance is going to be on Thursday night, Saturday night, and on Sunday night, next week. I'll get a couple of tickets for you and Amy, if you'd like to come see it," Larry offered.

Thomas smiled, both at the offer and at Larry's obvious pride in his daughter's acting. "Sure, Larry! We'd love to see the play."

"Great, then. What night is best?"

Thomas thought for a second. "Thursday, I think. Saturday's are always busy with preparation for the next day's service."

Larry nodded and said, "Thursday night, then," and returned to his perch in the balcony. Thomas ran his errands, and hurried, but it was still growing dusk as he approached his home. He pulled into the driveway, stopped the car and got out, then stood absolutely still. Those deer were in the field across the road again, and he was always entranced by their graceful movements and beauty. Thomas finally shook off the charm of the creatures and went inside with the bags of groceries.