

**The Bronze Saga #3: BRONZE AVENGERS**  
**A Doc Savage novel by Mark and Karen Eidemiller**

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"All a man's ways seem right to him, but the LORD weighs the heart. To do what is right and just is more acceptable to the LORD than sacrifice." (Proverbs 21:2,3 NIV)

"Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." (Romans 12:21 NIV)

"Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them." (Ephesians 5:11 NIV)

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Excerpt, ENCYCLOPEDIA AMERICANA, Millennium Edition:

SAVAGE, Clark, Junior. Born 1901, died?. In the early 1930's and 1940's, Clark Jr. ("Doc") Savage was thought to be an adventurer and crime fighter. However, because of the EDWARD R. MURROW expose into the so-called "Crime College" (see video, 'See It Now: TARNISHED BRONZE') and subsequent investigations (Senator ESTES KEFAUER in 1951, Senator RICHARD M. NIXON in 1952), the picture of the "Man of Bronze" became a major event in the battle for CIVIL RIGHTS in America. Savage was never brought to trial, but his holdings were liquidated by court order for compensation to the Crime College's victims. Rumors abound - especially in the tabloids - that Savage is still alive and in exile, but no proof of this has yet been found.

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Our Cast of Characters (in alphabetical order):

\* CAROLINE "CARRIE" BROOKS

The illegitimate daughter of Monk Mayfair and Patricia Savage, she was adopted and raised by Monk and Lea Mayfair. Years later, Carrie married her long-time friend Donald Brooks, son of Ham Brooks, and she gave birth to a daughter, Dorothy. In 1975, Donald Brooks was killed in an automobile accident involving a drunk driver, eventually prompting Carrie to seek a career in substance abuse rehabilitation. She is currently Administrator of the Serenity Drug and Alcohol Freedom Center (aka 'Serenity Center') in New York City.

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\* THEODORE "HAM" BROOKS

A member of the original team, he tried to continue the day-to-day activities and responsibilities of the Savage holdings following the Senate hearings. However, the overwhelming stress, compounded by his disbarment from legal practice and a growing alcohol abuse problem, prompted his suicide by gunshot in 1953. Following her husband's suicide and unable to cope with the shock, Ham's wife Dorothy abandoned their infant son Donald in the hands of Monk and Lea Mayfair and disappeared. She eventually remarried, but her current whereabouts are unknown.

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\* BONNIE CLAYTON

## The Bronze Saga #3: BRONZE AVENGERS

A former soldier-for-hire, she found a cause alongside Doctor Jillian Woodward and her organization APEX, serving as Woodward's right-hand lieutenant. Following the events in the Valley of the Vanished (see More Precious Than Gold), Pat Savage hired her on as Chief of Security for Caroline Island.

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### \* MITCHELL "MITCH" DRAKE

Director of Thunderhead, a covert organization that has helped Clark and crew. A long-time fan of Doc Savage, he recreated Doc's 86th Floor HQ in a massive underground vault from original items privately purchased during the liquidation of the Savage holdings.

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### \* JACK HEADY

A close friend of Perry Liston, he helped Clark become accustomed to modern life during his first months after his hibernation. He currently operates a ministry house in Portland, Oregon, and is spearheading efforts to establish ministry houses across the United States.

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### \* WILLIAM HARPER "JOHNNY" LITTLEJOHN

A member of the original team, he continued his love of archaeology after the Senate hearings, participating in several digs around the world, accepting a professorship in a small California university, and finally becoming the head of the Archaeology Department at Drake College near Rutland, Vermont. Having overseen the archaeological investigation of the Crime College and subsequent demolition in order to make way for The Savage Institute, he has returned to Vermont and his professorial duties.

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### \* PERRY LISTON

Formerly a street preacher from Portland, Oregon, he found his path in life closely tied to Clark's. Now as his friend and companion, he shares the task of evangelism with their Second Chances Ministry.

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### \* DOROTHY "DOT" LISTON

Maiden name Brooks, she is the daughter of Donald and Carrie Brooks. She became Clark and Perry's first contact in New York, leading them to her mother and reclusive grandfather. She proved herself by her actions intercepting Pat Savage's scheme to capture Clark and Perry in New York City (see Bronze Refined As Silver). Eagerly accompanying them through the rest of their quest, it was natural that she should become a part of their team. She became a Christian while she and Perry were in San Francisco, and fell in love with him. They were married in June of 2000, and now is the third partner of their traveling evangelism ministry.

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### \* DOUGLAS MARTIN

Grandson of the founder of Ham Brooks' law firm, he was befriended and personally mentored by Ham. He worked for several years within the Intelligence community (where he still has strong ties) and eventually returned to his grandfather's firm, where he is currently the senior partner. He met Clark through a mysterious trunk left by Ham prior to his death (see Bronze Refined as Silver), and now he is the main legal arm for Clark and Perry, as well as being the first one called in when a situation requires "special" talents.

## The Bronze Saga #3: BRONZE AVENGERS

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### \* ANDREW 'MONK' MAYFAIR

A member of the original team, Monk tried desperately to keep up with fighting crime after the Senate hearings. However, after several major events changed his life - his marriage to his 'favorite secretary' Lea Aster, the birth of his daughter Caroline, and the shocking suicide of his old friend and sparring partner Ham - he turned his back on his old life of crimefighting and adventuring, and withdrew to a lakefront house near Tulsa, Oklahoma, where he remained in isolation until Clark and Perry tracked him down. Monk accepted Jesus Christ during their reunion with Clark. Together, Monk and Lea have five children: Caroline, Clark, Hamilton, Mark and DeeDee.

In an attempt to prevent all of Doc's holdings from being liquidated, Monk purchased the land where the Crime College stood shortly after the Senate hearings. Later, following the Battle at Lincoln City (see Bronze Refined As Silver), he, Renny, and Johnny collaborated on a project that would replace the dilapidated College with a school "... a bit more worthwhile -- a private school that'll teach it like it is, and show 'em how to do it right." choosing to name it The Savage Institute in honor of Doc.

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### \* CLARK "GUMBALL" MAYFAIR

The firstborn son of Monk and Lea Mayfair. He served a critical role in rescuing Clark and Perry from Pat Savage (see Bronze Refined As Silver), and transporting Clark, Perry, Dot, and Amy to the Valley of the Vanished (see More Precious Than Gold). Now having finished his hitch in the U.S. Air Force, he owns and operates an executive air charter service, flying a custom Boeing V-22 Osprey tilt-wing jet named Blue Thunder.

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### \* IVAN (JOHN) "RENNY" RENWICK

A member of the original team, he returned to his career as an engineer after the Senate hearings. However, as the years passed, he grew nostalgic for his adventures with Doc and the team. Barely escaping the collapse of the Interstate 880 freeway during the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake, he was falsely presumed to have perished. Rather than stepping forward with the truth, he used the event to give him a second chance at an adventurous life, and so perpetuated the lie. He traveled the world anonymously, finally taking a personal interest in helping the people of Romania. He became a citizen of that country, changed his first name to Ivan, and eventually took a wife, Amanda. They immigrated to the United States in 1997, settling down on a farm in Oberlin, Kansas. Renny and Amanda continue to live in Oberlin while Renny works on The Savage Institute's construction.

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### \* THOMAS "LONG TOM" ROBERTS

In the 1960's, technology originated from Long Tom was sold to allied governments who later became enemies of the United States, and that technology was used in weaponry during the Vietnam War, causing great loss of life and property. While on a fact-finding mission through one of the decimated villages, Long Tom discovered the connection. Stunned and horrified at the revelation, he accidentally set off a booby trap that destroyed his legs and hospitalized him.

His desire to commit suicide and appease his guilt was overshadowed by the needs of a little girl in the medical ward, momentarily abandoned by the hospital staff. Upon learning that she was the only survivor of

## The Bronze Saga #3: BRONZE AVENGERS

the village destroyed using his technology, he adopted her and raised her as his own daughter. They moved to Lincoln City, Oregon, and spent many years in anonymity before being reunited with Doc Savage. Shortly after, however, he suffered a heart attack that weakened him further and eventually took his life. On his deathbed, though, he confessed to Doc the whole truth of how he lost his legs, and was able to find peace with God.

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### \* AMY PHAN ROBERTS

Long Tom's adopted daughter. She became his reason to live, as he raised her as his own. She was at his bedside when he accepted Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, and made the same decision soon after. She continues to live in their home in Lincoln City, Oregon, where she carries on her father's electronics research.

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### \* CLARK "DOC" SAVAGE, JR. (a.k.a. CLARK ROBESON DENT)

In 1950, following the events in 'Up From Earth's Center,' he returned to the caverns of Maine - alone, unarmed, and in secret - in a determined attempt to recapture the mysterious villain Wail. He was caught off-guard, rendered unconscious, and placed into suspended animation by another one of his enemies (for more details, read Epilogue, 'Bronze Refined as Silver').

Awakened fifty years later, he found himself not in Maine but near Portland, Oregon. Confused and troubled, he eventually wandered into a downtown rescue mission, where he found salvation in Jesus Christ as preached by Perry Liston. Befriended by Liston and members of his church, Clark was brought up to speed on what he had missed. However, he now faced the harsh reality that much of the world now saw Doc Savage as a criminal. Adopting the identity of 'Clark Robeson Dent', he and Liston set out across the United States in search of the rest of his team.

Clark now follows a new course in his life as a traveling evangelist, fighting the source of evil by preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

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### \* PATRICIA "PAT" SAVAGE

The unofficial 'sixth' member of the original team, Clark's cousin and only living relative, she is the daughter of Clark Savage Sr.'s brother.

When most of the team left to follow their own careers, she and Monk continued fighting crime while Ham took care of the administrative side of the organization. She lost her left eye during a fight in New Orleans. While Monk was nursing her back to health, they developed an emotional bond that resulted in a brief affair and an unpredicted pregnancy. Not wanting to take on the responsibility of a child, Pat arranged to relinquish custody of baby Caroline to Monk upon her birth.

Finding herself spurned from her old friends and acquaintances as a result of the Senate hearings, she purchased an island in Greece and relocated. During this self-imposed exile, she rediscovered the youth-restoring properties of the herb silphium, which she used to make her younger. She also re-established Patricia, Inc., making it into one of the leading cosmetics companies in the world. However, in order to keep her youthful new self a secret from the world, she invented an alter ego - a 'daughter' named Penelope, who worked with the public while 'Patricia' remained on the island as a recluse.

### The Bronze Saga #3: BRONZE AVENGERS

Despite her renewed success, she was a lonely, bitter woman, fostering a deep hatred for her absent cousin - whom she now blamed for all the ills that beset her. Therefore, she lashed out violently when Clark reappeared and confronted her with what she had been doing, and would have had him taken on a one-way trip to Caroline Island. However, her plans were intercepted, and Clark and Perry were rescued.

Months later, in an attempt to capture Clark away from protected soil, she drew him to the Valley of the Vanished on the ruse that his gold supply was endangered. However, before she could spring the trap, she herself was trapped by Jillian Woodward and her terrorist group APEX, held prisoner and forced to see what her company had done in her ignorance.

After Clark and his team rescued her, both she and Woodward discovered to their horror that they had been used as pawns against one another. The actual instigator had been Pat's own personal aide and paramour, Daniel Franklin. In a televised press conference, he had reported that 'Penelope' had been kidnapped, naming Woodward as the kidnapper, and then declared that 'Patricia' had put him in charge of the company. After a shaky truce between the two women, they joined forces and led an airborne assault against Caroline Island to take back her company.

In light of these events, Pat made some serious changes in her life. She chose to end her addiction to silphium and return to a more realistic age. She 'killed off' her alter ego Penelope. And she decided to dissolve her company, turning her efforts towards more humanitarian goals. She is currently supervising the refitting of Caroline Island into a refuge and home for all children (for more details, read Chapter 21, More Precious Than Gold).

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#### Prologue

"Pass the lunch box, Bob."

"Here y'go, Dave."

Quarters were cramped in the back of Ed's van, an old VW he'd rescued from a junkyard heap and restored. The three teenaged boys sat on mattresses that smelled of sweat and beer and smoke. Dave took the lunch box and opened it, taking out several packs of recently-purchased .22LR ammunition. He set them out and started loading clips for the rifle leaning up against the wall.

Ed took a drag on a joint and coughed. The other two laughed. Ed laughed with them, then took another drag. He paused long enough to count the number of grenades in the shoulder bag. "We got twenty. That should be enough to trash the gym and the cafeteria."

"And what they don't get, we will," added Bob, checking the clips on the two automatic pistols he carried under his Australian long coat.

"I can't wait to see the look on Old Man Peterson's face right before I erase it!" said Ed with an evil sneer.

"Yeah! I'm thinking about the Pepper twins! This'll show them not to turn ME down for a date!"

"Yeah, Bob, yeah!" gleefully agreed Ed. "After today, they'll never forget us! We're gonna make history!"

Urged on by the alcohol and drugs, they pumped each other up for the next twenty minutes, laughing and talking about the damage they were going to do and the people they were going to kill.

### The Bronze Saga #3: BRONZE AVENGERS

Suddenly Ed heard something from outside. Anxiously he got to his knees and peered through the VW's grimy windows. In his paranoid haste to verify their invisible intruders, he scrambled over the other two boys.

"Hey!" said Bob, slapping Ed's leg as he almost stepped on the loose ammunition.

"Watch it!" added Dave, cursing.

Ed ignored them as he scrambled from one end of the van to the other. Finally, satisfied that they were still alone in the school parking lot, he returned to his spot. He took a long drink from his beer and returned to his work.

"We'll show 'em, won't we baby," he said lovingly to a long-barreled Colt .357 Magnum.

Just then, Bob yawned.

"What's the matter, man? Couldn't sleep last night?" mocked Ed with a snicker.

Bob shook his head violently and cursed. "No! I'm fine!"

Then Dave yawned. As the other two looked at him, he pointed at Bob and accused him of starting it.

Ed stifled it as long as he could, but his mouth suddenly sprang open like a bear trap in reverse. He tried covering it up, but had to be the brunt of Bob and Dave's laughter. But it was more than that, he noticed. The expressions on the other two were starting to melt, like they were all falling asleep. And their voices seemed to blur. He forced his eyes to stay open, and reached for one of the grenades. We've been drugged somehow, he thought. But they won't take ... us ... alive ...

When Ed next opened his eyes, he was flat on his stomach, and his arms hurt. As he breathed in the oils and dirt and other smells that were part of the parking lot's blacktop, he tried to move his arms around, and found to his horror that his wrists were handcuffed together. He could hear voices, too, all around him.

Kids' voices.

He craned his head around, and saw Bob and Dave in the same constrained position as he was in. Standing near them were several policemen and officials from the school. And behind them, beyond the cars and the ring of yellow ribbon ... oh, no! ... were the other kids. These were the boys and girls who were to have been his targets, his victims. Now, instead of he standing over their lifeless bodies, they towered over him, looking down on them and their arsenal of weapons with terror in their eyes. He saw their fingers pointing at the three of them. He heard their names being repeated from all around.

They were being remembered.

Ed's earlier statement came back to him, and fear and misery gripped him as he realized the accuracy of his prediction.

They'd never be forgotten. Never.

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## The Bronze Saga #3: BRONZE AVENGERS

The three would-be murderers were read their rights, and -- their heads bowed in embarrassment -- were escorted past the kids to separate police cars. As they drove away, a black SWAT truck followed with the weapons and explosives, and a tow truck brought up the rear with the VW van. A final police cruiser pulled in the yellow ribbon and cleaned up the scene.

School officials and teachers encouraged the crowd of shocked teenagers -- some clinging to one another, many of them in tears -- to disburse, offering them grief counseling if they wanted it. After several minutes, the only ones who remained at the side of the parking lot were three: two young boys and an older girl. They had been watching silently the whole time, and only spoke as the last of the others drifted away.

"Very good, indeed, Charles," said the girl to one of the boys, a black youth of 13.

"Yeah, Chuck, if you hadn't spotted these scumbags, no telling how bad it would've gotten," said the other boy.

"Nonsense, Adam," countered Charles. "Your home-made anesthetic gas put them to sleep before they could act, and Roxanne was the one who called the police."

"Face it, it was a team effort," concluded the girl. "Worthy of Doc Savage himself."

Charles turned to the empty space where the van had been, and his voice turned solemn as he said, "To Doc Savage ... and the Bronze Avengers!"

The other two turned in the same direction and reverently repeated Charles' oath. "To Doc Savage ... and the Bronze Avengers!"

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### Chapter One

Sometimes, you never know what God has in mind until you get there.

Two years ago, I was a street preacher in Portland, Oregon. The only action I'd see would be a drunk getting out of line with somebody at the Old Town Mission where I'd preach. Personally, I was content to live my life as a recent bachelor -- having come out of a bad marriage with only a few scars on my heart remaining and a witness to the saving grace of Jesus Christ.

I liked the way I lived. It was simple, uncomplicated.

And then God sent a tall bronze man named Clark Savage, Jr. to that Mission ... and nothing's been the same since.

I've traveled across the United States in a camper van, participated in armed combat in a mysterious valley hidden deep within the heart of Central America, night parachuted over an island in the Mediterranean ... and did I mention that I married the granddaughter of Monk Mayfair?

Like I said ... never a dull moment!

"Mr. Liston," came a slightly-mechanical female voice. "We have reached the coordinates for Mr. Dent."

### The Bronze Saga #3: BRONZE AVENGERS

I cautiously applied the brakes on the Peterbilt 387 diesel tractor, not wishing to do anything to disturb the 54-foot trailer-turned-home in tow, and maneuvered to a stop. "Thank you, Myrna," I answered the onboard computer.

Looking out upon this section of Wyoming landscape, I wondered what in God's name had gotten into Clark to choose this barren area for a rendezvous point. Glancing in my side-view mirror, a large recreational vehicle -- sometimes referred to as a 'land yacht' -- was getting closer. On the front, in a bold typeface above an immense windshield, were the words JESUS IS LORD. Below the windshield, in a matching typeface, was the name Nomad. As it stopped next to me, I waved and smiled at the driver.

"This is pleasant," sarcastically commented my wife Dot, heard over our intra-vehicular communications link. "Why here?"

"Not a clue," I replied, then had a brainstorm. "Let me check something ... Myrna, activate heads-up display!"

The windshield before me tinted several degrees, canceling the bright outside view, and several digital readouts appeared along the edge: location in longitude and latitude, current time and time zone, temperature inside and outside, humidity, atmospheric pressure, etc. I took off my sunglasses.

"Myrna, check for any other vehicles within a five-mile radius of these coordinates."

A topographical map of the terrain radiated from the center of the windshield. Two blinking icons represented Nomad and my truck. It didn't take long to see that wherever Clark was, it wasn't near. "There are no other vehicles," confirmed Myrna. "Shall I extend the range?"

I considered the question a moment. "No, thank you."

The windshield returned to normal. I blinked a couple of times at the light, and put my sunglasses back on. Clark had wanted us to be at the rendezvous at 1:00; the overhead display had last read fifteen minutes before the hour.

As I sat back in the seat, my eyes wandered about the cabin, and I caught sight of the cord of the microphone to the Citizen's Band radio mounted on the ceiling above me. I grabbed the microphone, issuing a command to the computer: "Myrna, patch this through to Clark's cell phone."

I heard the buzzing of the cell phone, then the sound of Clark's voice. Wherever he was, it was windy, and he was shouting to be heard. "GOOD AFTERNOON, PERRY!" he said cheerfully. "I TAKE IT YOU'RE AT THE COORDINATES?"

"YES, WE ARE!" I said, unconsciously matching his volume. "WHERE ARE YOU?"

"ON OUR WAY! WE'LL BE DOWN IN A FEW MINUTES!"

Down? I looked at the microphone, as if I could see through to the other end. "OKAY!"

"HAVE THE CAMCORDER READY, WILL YOU?"

Interesting request. "SURE!"

"GOTTA GO, PERRY! SEE YOU IN A FEW MINUTES! OUT!" And he disconnected.

I hung up the microphone and said, "Dot, did you catch that?"

"Yeah! I'll get the camcorder!"

"Grab my binoculars, too!"

"Gotcha! Meet you outside!"

I started reaching for the door handle, but then recalled the outside temperature from the overhead display and climbed back into the sleeper cab. I retrieved a full bottle of filtered water from the mini-fridge, and headed for the door. When I opened the door, I saw Dot standing next to the truck; the strap of the camcorder bag was slung across her chest, and the binoculars hung from one hand. The impact of the heat was showing on her face. At the top of the cab, I handed her the water bottle, and she eagerly took it.

I felt the heat as I climbed down from the truck and took a deep breath. Dot handed me the binoculars, and I slung them around my neck. Then she returned the water bottle to me, and I took a satisfying swig before setting it down onto the truck step.

While Dot scanned the area with the camcorder, getting an idea of where we were, I scanned the skies; I didn't expect anything yet, but knew it would be soon. I also tried to stretch out some stiffness in my legs; despite the comfort of the truck, I preferred the seat of the RV.

Dot lowered the camera and commented, "Okay, so it's a safe bet they're not coming in by land. It's gotta be by air."

"He did say 'down', didn't he?" I replied. "What'd'ya think -- skydiving?"

She glanced up at the cirrus-clouded sky. "Wouldn't put it past him. We should be able to hear the plane when it gets near."

Three minutes later, we heard a buzzing in the distance, and both of us directed our optics skyward. A small twin-prop airplane circled overhead, then two figures broke away. The airplane circled once more, then executed an easy turn and headed back in the direction it came from.

"We're rolling," informed Dot, like a movie director.

We followed the two silhouettes moving through the air. There was something different about the way they descended; Dot recognized it first. "They're not skydiving -- they're sky surfing!"

She was correct. Like twin surfers skimming the waves of the ocean, so these two rode the air currents on boards secured to their feet. They swooped and sailed like human pendulums, much to our delight. There were even a few anxious moments, such as when they appeared to become airborne medieval jousters on an imminent collision course of doom. But, just at the last minute, they veered away, their arms stretching towards one another in a spectacular maneuver that gave new meaning to the phrase 'high five.'

This continued for a couple of minutes, as they performed feat after feat -- twisting, swirling, somersaults, and even flying upside-down -- like dancers on the wind. But finally the dance had to end. Moving a safe distance apart, each of them opened their canopies and glided down to almost-simultaneous touchdowns.

### The Bronze Saga #3: BRONZE AVENGERS

In the calm air we could hear their laughter even from that distance, and couldn't help share in their joy. They gathered their canopies and met in the middle with a long embrace. Then, removing their helmets, they walked towards us.

As they did, it struck me as to just how ordinary these two extraordinary people appeared from a distance. Most of my perception stemmed from the equality of their heights -- both of them stood close to seven feet tall, and she was only an inch or two shorter. Yet, for that height, their physiques were proportional, appearing neither like bean poles nor towering freaks.

I smiled to myself, seeing how really good they looked together.

As Bonnie Clayton removed her helmet and swept back her hair with a twist of her head, I could see just how Clark had taken a liking to this ex-mercenary from New Orleans. Her hair was a thick brown, falling around her shoulders, and looked remarkably well even after being cooped-up under the skydiving helmet. She was very pretty, and her face reminded me of Julia Roberts with that same natural beauty and wide, contagious smile.

Then I turned my observations towards Clark -- my friend and brother in Christ. As he matched Bonnie's casual stride, I couldn't help noticing what a commanding presence he had. For a moment, I flashed back to a wax museum in San Francisco, where they had another portrayal of 'Doc Savage'; that image was almost characteristically, as an armed barbarian, a Conan with twin .45 automatics and bared teeth like some sort of feral animal. In comparison, that statue looked very little like the man approaching us.

Part of his dissimilarity was due to what he had done to his physical appearance. Ever since finding out how the world at large regarded 'Doc Savage', he'd experimented to determine what looked good on him and still kept others from associating him with his previous identity.

Now he was content living with a simple buzz cut hairstyle and some chin whiskers. It looked nice, very distinguished and professorial.

I set the binoculars on the step of the truck, next to the water bottle, and ran over to the side of Clark's trailer. Several bays and pods were arrayed under the trailer -- arranged so smoothly between the front and rear wheels that they appeared to be a single unit. I tapped a combination on one of the bays, and the hydraulic door swung up to reveal an open storage area. I waved to direct them towards the open bay and shouted, "Clark! Bonnie! Over here!"

Clark reached me first, tossing his gear inside the bay; then he did the same for Bonnie's as she greeted me with a no-nonsense bear hug. With a slight twist of my body, I tactfully avoided any embarrassing physical contact with this woman who was at least a head taller than I, and returned the hug.

"Hi, Bonnie!" I greeted as we parted. "Looks like you've been doing some bodybuilding."

"Sure have," she replied, casually sweeping her hair away from her face. "What do you think?"

"It looks good on you," I answered honestly. The Amazonian head of security for Caroline Island was quite attractive anyhow, but this latest development seemed to improve things since we last met several months ago in Florida. The additional muscle wasn't grotesque like he had seen on other bodybuilding divas, but was just enough to compliment her statuesque figure.

"Thanks," she returned with a smile, then moved aside so Clark could give me a hug.

"Did you have any problems finding this place?" he asked me.

I shook my head. "No. But you could've let us know HOW you two were arriving."

Clark's laugh was like a clap of sudden thunder. "What," he replied with a grin. "And spoil the fun?"

Bonnie and Dot stood off to the side, Bonnie's arm casually draped over Dot's shoulders, and Dot's arm around Bonnie's waist.

"I just want to thank you again for lettin' me ride with y'all," Bonnie said sincerely. "I hope I'm not puttin' you out."

"On the contrary," I replied. "We've been planning this ever since you said you were coming. You and Dot will share the RV, and I'll be bunking with Clark."

"Just like old times," Clark added, placing a hand on my shoulder.

"But with a heckova lot more legroom," I returned with exaggerated relief.

"We just want you to feel at home, okay?" added Dot, emphasizing the sentiment with a squeeze.

Bonnie smiled. "Okay."

"We'll need to get Bonnie's gear back at the airport, and return this stuff," informed Clark. "So we better hit the road. Keys?" He reached out a massive palm to me.

I gave him the keys to the truck, then closed the cargo bay.

"Bonnie, you'll ride with me in the truck!" called Clark as he headed for the big rig.

The tall brunette gave Dot a last quick hug, then trotted off in the direction of the truck while Dot and I went back to the RV.

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"I have to admit, as comfortable as Clark's rig is, I prefer being right here," I commented to Dot, who sat on the steps to my right which led up to the rest of the RV. This vehicle had been designed with the driver's position closer to the ground, more like a regular automobile. It was nice, and allowed me to better gauge the road.

"Ready, Perry?" came Clark's voice from a speaker behind me to my left.

"Lead on, brother!" I said as I looked over at Dot and added softly, "Here we go."

My last statement had a double meaning, anticipating the time ahead with our newest member. It was hard to believe that, only a few months ago, Bonnie almost killed Clark in hand-to-hand combat in the Valley of the Vanished. But Clark had defeated the former mercenary and member of the quasi-terrorist group APEX, and he had thus earned her respect and admiration.

### The Bronze Saga #3: BRONZE AVENGERS

After Pat Savage's historic announcement to get out of the cosmetics business and devote her life to helping the children of the world, Clark and Bonnie went out on their first date. With a smile I recalled the 'debriefing' the next morning, when he told of how well they had gotten along together. They'd found a jazz club in Key West, Florida, where they enjoyed dinner and dancing and conversation. Not too surprising, they discovered they had a lot in common, particularly their experiences around the world, yet they held back many of their differences.

Bonnie wasn't a Christian, but she had seemed open to some concept of God. Treading softly, Clark made her an open invitation to join us on the road. She didn't immediately reject the idea, so we left the door open and prayed for God's will to be done.

Bonnie had kept in touch with Clark in the weeks following, sometimes indirectly through Pat, sometimes directly through email and the occasional phone call. And their friendship grew. As I looked over at Dot, I recalled that she hadn't been a Christian either when she had joined Clark and me on our first road trip. But God turned that all around, made her His ... then gave her to me as my wife.

And I wondered.

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BRONZE AVENGER WINGBEAR TO BRONZE AVENGER SOUTHFORK. SOUTHFORK, ARE YOU OUT THERE?

YEAH, I'M HERE. WHAT'S UP?

MASTERBLASTER HAS TAKEN ANOTHER VICTIM.

COOL. WHAT'S THE TOTAL?

SIXTEEN.

ANYBODY SUSPICIOUS YET?

NOPE. WE HIT AND RUN, AND NOBODY KNOWS WE WERE THERE.

COOL. KEEP UP THE GOOD WORK. GOTTA GO.

OKAY. TAKE IT EASY. WINGBEAR OUT.

SOUTHFORK OUT.

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#### Chapter Two

EDDIE'S DINER was a brick-and-glass structure, surrounded by a well-used gravel-and-asphalt parking lot. Two mud-spattered 4x4 pickups and a sedan were parked next to the building, and a Mack truck with Arizona plates obscured the neon sign at the roadside.

### The Bronze Saga #3: BRONZE AVENGERS

Since none of us had eaten since morning, this looked as good as any to get a bite and give our legs a well-deserved stretch. We parked side-by-side in an open area of the lot, climbed out, and activated the security systems.

Beyond the creaky screen door was an atmosphere tainted with cigarette smoke and kitchen grease. I recognized a 60's melody from the overhead speakers.

A middle-aged waitress with a well-worn nametag that said BEV stood behind the cash register, ringing up someone's bill. She gave us a quick look and a smile, and said, "Afternoon, folks! Go 'head and grab a seat. Your waitress will be right with ya!"

Clark and I stopped to use the rest room facilities, then joined the ladies at one of the booths. Bonnie got up and Clark slid in, while I took the outside seat next to Dot.

The establishment was small, but efficiently arranged. Four tables were clustered in the middle of the main dining area, while several booths lined the walls. We'd noticed a counter just outside the rest rooms; two of the four stools were occupied, as was one of the other booths nearby.

Along the walls were paintings depicting 'Buffalo Bill' Cody, Kit Carson, John Colter and even Teddy Roosevelt. Interspersed was a gallery of Wyoming's famous landmarks: Yellowstone National Park, and Forts Laramie, Casper, and Bridger. One picture was easy to recognize: the familiar stump-like shape of the Devil's Tower.

"So, Bonnie, what's new with Pat?"

Bonnie smiled at Dot's question. "Y'all saw the article in People magazine?"

I nodded and quoted the title, "'End Of An Era: Patricia Savage makes way for child benevolence crusade.'" I paused a beat. "It looked good; I'm glad they gave it a positive spin and not a critical one."

Just then our waitress showed up with menus and a tray of water glasses. Her nametag identified her as DONNA. She wasn't very much over five foot, but the way her blond hair was piled up at the back of her head made it appear as if she was taller. She forced a smile in our direction as she asked if any of us wanted coffee. We declined, and she walked away to allow us time to look at the menus.

As soon as she was out of earshot, Dot leaned in and said quietly, "Did you see her arm? And her face?"

I looked up from my menu.

"Bruises," answered Bonnie. "It looked like she tried to cover them up with makeup, but didn't do a very good job."

I'd seen the bruises, but they didn't register in my mind until just now. I glanced in the direction of the waitress, who was refilling the coffee cup of a man sitting at the counter.

"Do you see how she keeps looking towards the door?" I now observed. "It's as if she's expecting somebody she doesn't want to see."

"She favors her bruised arm," mused Clark. "There might be more extensive damage than the eye can see."

### The Bronze Saga #3: BRONZE AVENGERS

She returned a few moments later to take our orders. Clark introduced himself and asked for suggestions from the menu.

"Well, the pot roast is really good today," she offered without hesitation. "So's the fried chicken. I'd go with either one."

"Sounds good. I'll go for the pot roast," replied Clark.

As she took our orders, I tried to discern more about our waitress. I have to admit, I've always been a sucker for a lady in distress, so Donna triggered God's compassion within me. I could see the poorly-concealed bruises, and my heart went out to her.

I also wondered who'd treated her this way; the most likely suspect was the unknown person she kept looking out for.

After she left the table with our orders, we lapsed into silence as our attention turned towards Donna. At one point she seemed to relax, but then a backfiring truck almost caused her to drop a couple of plates. All eyes turned to her, and she briefly retreated into the kitchen behind the counter. A couple of minutes later, more composed, she returned to her duties.

Apart from that, things were mostly uneventful, and our attention shifted to our food. As Donna walked away, Clark reached out his hands to join with ours to pray over the meal.

As we ate, our concentration shifted back to the previous topic of conversation. It was for that reason that we missed spotting the look of shock on the waitress' face when two pickup trucks pulled into the gravel lot and six men climbed out. We missed her excited reaction, quickly speaking to the other waitress before making a hasty retreat into the kitchen. And we didn't notice that the men outside were taking quite a bit longer than they should have, as one of their number broke away from the group to circle around to the back of the restaurant.

Clark was the first one to pick up an all-too-familiar sound with his sensitive hearing. But he was too late to do anything but turn his head to the door as the men came in.

"OKAY, EVERYBODY FREEZE!"

All eyes turned towards the shotgun first, then the man holding the shotgun in a ready stance, pointed ceilingward.

"Just stay put and nobody gets hurt!" he loudly instructed, then gestured to the three men behind him; they carried baseball bats, and now obediently spread out through the diner, strategically placing themselves where they could keep an eye on the rest of us.

We quickly assessed the situation. The man in the lead was tall and slender, dressed in jeans and a blue denim shirt, wearing intimidating dark glasses and a baseball cap carrying the logo of a chain saw company. None of the men appeared to be disguised; this could mean that they had no intention of leaving witnesses to identify them.

There was a moment of silence as everyone waited for the next move. It didn't take long. There was a sound from the kitchen as the cook loudly complained, "Hank, what're you doin' in here! Get outta my kitchen!" Then there was a cry of pain from a female voice; too late we realized that it was Donna. Unceremoniously,

### The Bronze Saga #3: BRONZE AVENGERS

the waitress and the cook were forced out of the kitchen, prodded by a baseball bat in the hands of a tall middle-aged man.

Once out of the kitchen, the cook did a double-take at the sight of the man with the shotgun, then took a bold step in his direction. "Dale! What the hell is this?" His eyes quickly scanned the scene, and his eyes burned with anger. With a blast of profanity, he growled defiantly, "Get outta my diner!"

"Take it easy, Eddie," replied the man condescendingly, the gun not wavering from the ceiling; its presence gave him more courage than he appeared to have. "We're not going to hurt anyone as long as Joe gets a chance to see his woman!" He turned towards the door, his face showing the barest relief as he put emotional distance between himself and the cook, and called out, "It's clear!"

The door creaked open and Joe slowly walked in. He appeared to be about Gina's age, maybe a year older, and was unarmed. He stopped just inside the door, took a commanding glance around the room, then walked past Dale and Eddie and made a direct line towards Donna. The terror-stricken waitress tried taking a step back, but the business end of Hank's baseball bat kept her from any possible retreat.

When Joe was within range, he grabbed Donna's already-injured arm, causing her to squeak in pain.

At the table, the three of us caught Bonnie's response, a softly-spoken but scathing profanity. We waited a moment to see if she would follow up her comment with action, but she remained seated despite the tensing of the muscles in her arms as she gripped the tabletop.

"Donna," addressed Joe with an eerie calmness. "Why did you run away from me last night?"

"Because you hurt me, Joe!" she said to his face, summoning as much courage as she could. Then she lowered her head and meekly declared, "And I've had enough of it."

"Then let's go home, babe ... and we can talk it through."

She suddenly turned defiant. "No! I know what you're doing! You just want me where you can pressure me. But I won't let you! You've got a drinking problem, Joe! When you get drunk you get violent! You gotta stop it, Joe, or you'll kill us both!"

Joe stood silent, a mountain of anger repressed behind tightly closed lips.

"Look," interjected Eddie the cook, taking a step towards the couple. His earlier anger had blown over as he saw the plight of his waitress. "Let's talk this over, okay?"

Joe shook his head with a burst of anger and a defensive wave of his free hand. "NO! THE TALKIN' IS OVER!" Then he turned back to Donna, his face a mask of rage. "You're comin' home with me NOW!"

"No," she whimpered, looking up at him.

Joe started to bring his hand back to strike her, but Eddie grabbed him at the wrist and held him back.

Bonnie leaned in towards Clark and whispered through clenched teeth, "You know we can waste these blankety-blanks ... what're we waitin' for?"

Joe released his hand from Donna's arm and brought it across to impact with Eddie's stomach. The cook released the arm as he doubled over with pain, dropping to his knees.

Clark whispered so we could all hear, "Soon!" Then he took a drink of water and abruptly coughed as if the liquid went down wrong.

Perry.

Huh? What was that? Had I heard my name somehow? But before I could dismiss the thought, Clark coughed again.

Perry.

There it was. I distinctly heard my name in the Mayan language! My eyes met Clark's and I nodded acknowledgment.

In the meantime, Joe was looking down at the wounded cook. "Eddie, I didn't want to hurt you! But you shouldn't have grabbed my arm!" He turned to Donna; he did not make a move to grab her arm again, but held his hands before him, gesturing as he talked.

"Donna ... baby ... I don't wanna hurt you," he pleaded. "I just want you home where you belong."

Strength welled up from inside her. "I can't trust you! You hurt me, Joe! How do I know you wouldn't do it again to me ... or the kids?"

Once more, he was silent.

Meanwhile, Clark and I were covertly exchanging ideas in Mayan. At one point, our coughing caused Dot to become concerned. Her hand touched my back, and she asked empathetically, "You okay, hon?"

"Yeah," I replied, taking another sip of water and pointing to my throat. "Tickle."

My water glass was soon empty, which was part of the plan Clark and I had agreed on.

I moved a leg out of the booth. As I did, I touched my wife's leg and tapped it three times very deliberately, conveying my need for prayer through a silent signal. Before she could ask me the reason for the need, I was clear of the booth and moving towards the center tables. As I walked, I stiffened my left leg and dragged it to make it appear as if I was disabled and posed no threat to our oppressors. Still, the man closest to us, shorter than I, with Latino features, moved over to me. In a heavy accent he ordered, "Return to your table, Senõr."

In a tone blazing with arrogance, I raised my voice and declared, "I will not!" At the same time, I moved my hand below his bat and swept it up and out of the way. "Look here ... we want more water!" I took a step past the man, heading towards Dale, and loudly repeated my demand: "WE WANT WATER!"

Everybody froze.

My childish outburst had caused the reaction we were hoping for, diverting everybody's attention -- including Joe and Donna's -- towards me. In those seconds that the spotlight was on me, Clark quickly conveyed our plan to Dot and Bonnie.

Dale was the first to respond to my display. "What? Sit down, mister! When we're gone you can have all the water you want! Pepe, take him back to his booth!"

### The Bronze Saga #3: BRONZE AVENGERS

As Pepe moved closer to forcibly move me, I looked Dale straight-on and, lifting up the empty glass, belligerently declared, "NO! I want some water, and I want it NOW!"

As the last word left my mouth, I punctuated it by throwing my glass against the wall near the front door. All eyes in range followed the movement, which was exactly what we hoped would happen.

Like a glass missile, the ashtray quickly traversed the distance between Clark's hand and Dale's cap, the chain saw logo becoming the point of impact. Head first, Dale was propelled backwards and through the door of the diner.

Clark and Bonnie had sprung into action before Dale's unconscious form hit the ground.

Using the closest table like a vaulting horse, Bonnie planted her hands on the tabletop and swept them over, accurately planting them into Pepe's side and knocking the wind out of him. The bat clattered to the floor behind him.

Clark had moved behind Bonnie, rushing another of the men, ducking low to avoid the swing of his baseball bat. His massive fists grabbed two handfuls of shirt, pulling the man towards him suddenly. Then, off balance, the man was lifted off the ground in a short arc and slammed into a nearby tabletop. A simple nerve pinch was all that was needed to render the helpless thug unconscious.

After I had thrown the glass, I moved low to avoid getting caught in a crossfire, as I closed the distance between me and where Dale had been standing. Clark knew what would happen to the shotgun when Dale went down, and I was there to catch it before it could hit the ground and accidentally discharge. I dove for the weapon, catching it mere inches off the ground. With a sigh of relief and a prayer of thanks, I sat on the floor for a few moments, the shotgun held tight to my chest.

While only a second behind Clark and Bonnie, Dot was not slack. She snatched up one of the discarded baseball bats en route to intercept Hank, intending to hit him in the midsection. But as she prepared to strike, he suddenly dropped his bat and raised his hands as high as they could go. "I give up," he begged. "Don't hurt me!"

The last of Joe's 'associates', covering the front counter, saw what was going on and tried to make a break for it. He didn't get far, as the two men sitting at the counter turned on him and soon had him pinned to the floor. They exchanged a high five as they rejoiced in their conquest.

His stomach still sore from Joe's punch, Eddie the cook took delight in watching a frantic Joe see his advantage turn into defeat. Then with a grin he balled up a fist and lightly addressed, "Oh, Joe?"

When he turned at the sound of his name, he was struck in the midsection, causing him to double over with a deep groan.

"Now we're even," Eddie said with a satisfied grin.

Bonnie appeared at my side, her hand extended in request of the shotgun I held for safe keeping. Since she was far more qualified than I, there was no hesitation in passing the weapon over. However, I doubted that decision in the next moment, as Bonnie moved to point-blank range of Joe and leveled the shotgun at his head.

"Alright, scumbag -- ON THE FLOOR AND SPREAD 'EM!" she ordered with bared teeth.

Again, we all froze, wondering if Bonnie was going to make good on her earlier burst of emotion. Joe turned his head sideways to look at her with an expression of pained defiance.

"Oh, please ... do something stupid," threatened Bonnie, the barrel unwavering from his head.

A moment or two passed, then Joe lowered to his knees, then to his stomach with his hands spread out at his side. Eddie grabbed one of the baseball bats and stood over him.

But the shotgun didn't lower.

"Bonnie," said Clark calmly from her left. "Give me the gun."

For several moments Bonnie didn't budge. Then her finger lifted from the trigger, and her hand moved away from the mechanism, so that her other hand held the weapon by the barrel stock. She held the shotgun so that it once more pointed at the ceiling, safe. She relinquished it to Clark, then took another look of distain at Joe, and swiftly walked out the door of the diner, over the unconscious body of Dale.

We all breathed a sigh of relief, especially Joe. I looked over at Dot; she was already moving in the direction of the door. "I've got it!" she assured us and was outside before we could say any more.

Clark expertly emptied the shotgun and handed the gun and the shells to me as he moved towards Joe.

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It wasn't hard for Dot to find Bonnie. All she had to do was follow the trail of self-directed obscenities. She was standing next to the big trailer, lamely kicking the tires and herself in the process.

"Bonnie?" said Dot.

The tall brunette turned a little, and Dot could see the tears she tried to hide.

"You lost it, didn't you?"

She kicked the tire again. "Yeah," she admitted, muttering another profanity.

"This was too close, right?" observed Dot. "Who was she?"

Bonnie hesitated, then gave in. "Her name was Lynn. We were best friends back in high school. She got married to this jerk who used to get drunk and rough her up ... just like this guy. We tried telling her that he was bad news, but she said that she loved him -" She spat out the words like they were venom. "- and knew he felt the same." She paused and gave the final page of the story. "He used a steak knife on her during one of his drunken rages. While he was drying out in jail, the ... hung himself."

As Bonnie had been relating her story, Dot had been slowly closing the distance, and now she lifted a comforting hand to rest on Bonnie's muscular shoulder.

"I don't want what happened to Lynn to happen to Donna!" Bonnie burst out.

"It won't," reassured Dot. "Accept it or not, God brought us here at this time and this place to make a difference in these people. And I'll give you odds that's exactly what's going on in there."

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I didn't hear any yelling outside, which was probably a good thing. The best thing I could do at the moment was keep us all covered in prayer.

Clark had given Dale a cursory medical examination, and pronounced that he would live -- although he'd have a doozy of a headache for awhile. His unconscious body was placed over in the far corner of the diner along with the others who had participated in Joe's little assault. They were all tied up -- even Hank, the one who had surrendered -- and one of the other patrons watched them with a baseball bat and a wary eye.

Donna sat in one of the booths crying, while Bev put a comforting arm around her shoulders.

Joe and Clark were sitting at the counter, talking.

"I could've easily let you lie there on your stomach and let the police deal with you, but I don't believe that would've been the best course of action," stated Clark calmly. "And there is always the possibility that the lady may still press charges against you and your ... friends. However, I would like to see if we can reconcile things without resorting to that."

"Yeah," said Joe. He looked over his shoulder at Eddie. The cook was standing between him and Donna, a baseball bat at the ready and a 'make my day' look in his eyes that sent a shiver down Joe's back. "Whatever you say, Mister."

"Please stay here," Clark addressed Joe in a very businesslike manner. "I wish to hear the lady's side of this matter. I will speak to you in a few minutes. Do not try to leave."

Joe looked back at Eddie. "I'll stay."

Clark rose from the stool and walked over to the booth where Donna and the other waitress sat. He slid into the other seat and faced them.

"My name is Clark Dent, and we are traveling evangelists. You are well within your rights to press charges against Joe, but my obligation is to see if there is a way of reconciling matters without resorting to police intervention." He paused. "Please tell me your side of this matter."

Occasionally breaking into tears, she described her relationship with Joe. They'd been living together for just over two years, and seemed to get along well. The problems started when Joe began hanging around with his buddies, resulting in a sharp increase in his drinking.

The latest incident had been the final straw for Donna. Two nights ago, in the early morning hours, Joe came home drunk and demanded dinner. She had prepared something for him, but he then wanted to see the kids - - her children from a previous relationship, a boy, 3, and a girl, 8 -- and wouldn't accept the fact that it was late and they were already asleep. He flew into a rage and started hitting on her. After a few minutes he stumbled into the bathroom, where he passed out while sitting on the toilet. She briefly considered getting even with him while he was unable to defend himself, but she admitted she cared for him, and couldn't justify even 'The Burning Bed' treatment. So she gathered up the kids and left the house, spending the first night with her mother before finding sanctuary with a friend in a neighboring town -- a friend unknown to Joe.

After staying away for three days, she knew she had to get back to work, even though she feared that Joe would find her.

### The Bronze Saga #3: BRONZE AVENGERS

As she reached across the table and took both of Clark's hands in hers, she tearfully expressed her thanks for what could've been a tragedy. Clark simply replied with, "I praise God that He brought us here at the right time."

Then Clark went to Joe and listened to his perspective on the matter. The facts were the same, but the attitude differed. Joe was of the mentality that the woman's place was in the house, and that the man's manhood was lessened when there was discord in the household.

Clark brought up the drinking, leaning in and speaking privately, "Could I ask you a few questions about your alcohol consumption?"

He paused a moment, then nodded.

"Do you find yourself preoccupied with the thoughts of drinking?" asked Clark in a nonchalant tone.

"Would humming the jingles from beer commercials count?" replied Joe dryly.

Clark didn't respond to the humor. "Do you drink alone?"

He nodded, and replied seriously, "Sometimes, after Donna and the kids have gone to bed."

"Has your sex drive been affected?"

Joe gave him a wide-eyed look of surprise, then said sharply, "I ... don't want to talk about that!"

Clark patiently asked question after question, exploring the nature of Joe's drinking: "Have you ever questioned yourself whether or not you have a problem?" "Can you accurately predict when you will stop drinking after the first one?" "Are you unhappy with the way your life has been going?" "Do you drink regardless of the consequences?" "Has your job or your relationships been affected?" "Do you refuse to go to places where you can't drink?" "Have you ever spent money that should have been spent on bills?" "Do you lie about the amount you drink?" "Do you need to drink to have fun or to enhance your social life?" "Is it uncomfortable for you in social situations without drinking?" "Do you have any legal problems as a result of your drinking?" "Do you compromise your values or morals?"

For what it was worth, Joe was honest in his answers, even though he had to whisper some of them to keep them from being overheard. To the question, "Do you constantly live in fear?" came the answer, "Fear of what? Of losing my family or plowing my car into a light post, like my dad did when I was a teenager? Yeah!"

"Do you drink to cope with feelings of pain, anger, or depression?"

"I could use one now," he mumbled, his head low.

"Do you feel that you are different from others and no one understands you?"

"I thought that. Some of my friends understand me ... but they drink, too."

Clark made his conclusion. "Joe, I'm afraid that you have all the signs of someone with a serious drinking problem. Donna was correct: you do need help."

### The Bronze Saga #3: BRONZE AVENGERS

Despite the self-exposing answers to Clark's questions, he shook his head sharply and denied, "No I don't! I can stop anytime I want!"

Clark didn't react to the anger, but looked forward, his voice low and ominous. "Are you sure?"

Joe's eyes flared for a moment, but he didn't make a move from the stool. After a few moments of silence, his head and shoulders dropped sharply as if he suddenly lost the will to hold them up. "Maybe I do," he whispered to himself, barely audible to Clark's sensitive hearing.

Seconds passed. Joe looked straight ahead, not wanting to make eye contact. "Maybe I do," he repeated, louder.

Clark didn't make a show of it, but simply asked, "Do you want to quit?"

Joe gritted his teeth and admitted, "I've tried before!"

"That's not what I asked," restated Clark. "If you don't really want to quit, you won't. But if you really want to be free ... I think can help you."

Joe's eyes opened a little wider. "How?"

"I have friends. One of them runs an alcohol rehabilitation clinic in New York City."

Joe released a snort from his nose. "I can't afford those places," he said cynically.

"Leave that to me," answered Clark. "Do you really want to quit?"

He looked up and over at Donna. For a moment their eyes met, and Joe's softened with the emotion he felt for his lady. "Yeah," he said with a new determination. "I'm tired of this crap!"

Without comment, Clark reached into a pocket and drew out a plastic card about the size and thickness of a credit card. One side of the card was colored a soft blue, and had the words SECOND CHANCES MINISTRY printed across the top along with a graphic logo of an empty tomb. Near the bottom of the card was a toll-free telephone number.

"Call this number," he instructed, showing Joe the blue side. Then he flipped it over. This side was white, and had a series of numbers and letters printed in the center. "When the woman on the other end answers, give her this code and answer any questions she may ask you. Answer her truthfully -- don't lie to her, and don't even think of trying to con her." He grinned and handed him the card. Joe felt it and turned it over in his hands. There was a puzzled expression on his face. Clark got his attention, and looked him in the eye. "You're getting a second chance to make it right," he said with a sincere smile. "Please don't screw it up."

Joe looked again at the card like it was an alien artifact, and then looked up at Clark. "Okay ... thanks!"

"One word of caution, though," he added, jerking a thumb in the direction of Dale and the other men, most of whom were unconscious or otherwise of no danger. "If any of these guys try convincing you to go back to the bottle, avoid them like the plague! If you don't, they'll drag you down, and you will be worse off than you can imagine!"

He looked Joe in the eyes as the younger man contemplated the words of wisdom, then nodded his head.

### The Bronze Saga #3: BRONZE AVENGERS

Leaving Eddie to watch over Joe, Clark once more talked to Donna. She had heard some of what had gone down, and expressed her gratitude in tears and hugs. She took his hands in hers and thanked him over and over.

"Donna," he addressed her. "My suggestion to you is to keep Joe at a safe distance until he shows signs that he's making changes -- but don't give up on him if you truly love him. It takes a big man to admit when he's messed up, especially among those who know him. Give him a second chance."

In tears, she admitted she loved Joe, and she'd wait for him. "W-what about the kids?" she asked.

"How do they feel about him?"

"He's been the closest thing to a father they've known. He's good to them ... when he's not ..."

"Then explain to them that he is working through some problems, and it'll take time. If they want to see him, let them ... but only when you know it's the right time. Like I said, look for the proof. It looks like you've got friends who'll be straight with you ..." He looked at Bev, who smiled at Clark and nodded her head in agreement. "Stick close to them, and listen to their advice."

Clark gave Donna another of the special plastic calling cards, and repeated the instructions. Donna showed her gratitude by giving Clark a big tearful hug.

-----

Dot and Bonnie were still standing next to the big rig when Clark came out to them.

"How are you doing?" he asked Bonnie.

"I'm a butthead," she admitted. "Is the guy okay?"

"Joe's fine. We've talked, and I think he'll be open to spending some time at Carrie's clinic in New York."

"And Donna?"

"Better. She really does care about him; she just needs to give him some time to get his act straight. She's got people around her who'll love her and be straight with her ... as long as she listens to them. I gave her one of our cards; if she needs help financially, we can do it."

"So now what?" asked Dot.

"Well, Hank seems to be on our side. He admitted that he went along with things because he's Dale's friend, but enough was enough. The three who were knocked out -- Dale, Pepe, and Alan -- are starting to come out of it. The last one, whose name is Jeff, is listening to Hank and not fighting us. I would like to see what could be done about reconciling matters with them, and not leaving here with enemies if at all possible."

"Sounds good," said Dot.

"Bonnie, are you willing to deal with Joe now?"

She paused. "Yeah. What do I need to do?"

"KISS," he replied.

Dot did a double take at Clark's response. "What?"

Bonnie understood, and translated to Dot, "KISS -- Keep It Simple Stupid."

"Exactly," agreed Clark. "You know what to do."

She nodded and walked ahead of them, into the diner. The door creaked, and all movement froze around her. For a moment she felt like the sheriff in some of the old westerns she used to watch on TV, entering the saloon and suddenly becoming the center of attention. In a way it was actually very funny. Her eyes moved left and right, and she saw Joe sitting at the counter to her right, with Eddie the cook standing guard with a baseball bat. He gave her a look of admiration as she stepped closer.

"I'm not letting you use the bat," declared Eddie with a tongue-in-cheek grin.

She gave him a sideways glance and a half-smile. "Don't want it," she replied. "Just came to talk."

She sat down on the stool to Joe's right. He looked a little like a whipped puppy, she noted, and not like the creep that killed Lynn. He didn't move from his stool.

"My name is Bonnie," she started. "I'll admit, I was about one second away from ... but I'm not now. It's not what you did, either, but what someone in my past did. Clark told me you were going to get some help, is that right?"

He nodded.

"I had a friend who went through the same thing you two did. In the end, he killed her, and then killed himself. If you have a chance to turn things around, to make a happy ending out of this, then I suggest you grab for it like a lifesaver to a drowning man." She stopped. "Anyhow, I'm sorry for what I did."

"Yeah," replied Joe. "Okay. Thanks."

She got up from the stool and turned to move away. Then she paused, turned back, and extended a hand to Joe. "Good luck."

He took the hand, and they exchanged a tension-diffusing smile. "Thanks."

-----

I watched the exchange between Bonnie and Joe, and was surprised when she started heading in my direction after finishing with him. She looked humbled.

"Perry," she started. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay," I replied, smiling. "If I'd have known what you had in mind with the shotgun, I'd have never let you have it. I'm glad you didn't use it."

She nodded.

"And to think, this is just your first day with us," I commented with a grin. "Sure you don't want to change your mind about staying with us?"

She grinned back. "No, I think I'll stay."

I started opening my arms for a hug. "Glad to hear it." We hugged, and I felt her holding on just a little tighter than I would've expected under the circumstances. But I understood, and let her go right ahead.

-----

Feeling safer now, Donna decided to get her children and return home. She had a lot of thinking to do. With the other waitress, Bev, they quietly left the diner.

"Well, it looks like I'm closed for the rest of the day," mourned Eddie.

"May I speak with you in private?" asked Clark, suddenly behind him.

"Yeah, sure. Nothing else for me to do," he responded, and the two of them walked back into the empty kitchen.

"I heard what you said back there, Eddie, and I wanted to help you out. Just between the two of us--" he emphasized, their eyes meeting, "--please accept this compensation." He had some folding money palmed in his large hand, and covertly passed it across to Eddie's.

Eddie was touched. "Thanks. Joe's an okay guy when he's off the sauce. I'm glad this is going to turn out all right."

"As are we," agreed Clark, and turned and walked back into the diner.

Eddie looked around at his kitchen, his world, and wondered what he would do next. He felt the thick folded wad of bills in his hand, and turned his palm up to see them. As he did, his eyes grew as big as saucers, seeing the ten \$100 bills in his possession. Feeling a sudden need for air, he stepped out the back door and gasped.

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Now we turned our attention to the rest of the participants.

Despite Hank's pleading to his old friend Dale, the shotgun owner was far from being in a forgiving-and-forgetting mood. He retrieved his empty weapon without resistance and stormed from the diner while cursing up a blue streak. The man who had been standing by the counter, whose name was Alan, left with him. Their truck took off in a flurry of gravel and exhaust fumes. Hank looked at us with apologetic eyes. "I'll try to talk to him later," he promised.

In the meantime, Pepe saw my unhindered walk and said, "Senðr, you conned me!"

"You're absolutely right."

### The Bronze Saga #3: BRONZE AVENGERS

"That woman, she is dangerous," he observed, tenderly placing his hand on his side where Bonnie had impacted with him. "The Attack of the 50-Foot Woman, she is!"

I moved closer. "Pepe, if I were you, I wouldn't say that too loudly. You wouldn't want her to get angry at you, would you?"

He looked over at Bonnie, who was talking with the one of the patrons at the counter. "Si. I understand."

"Is there anything I can do for you?" I asked sympathetically.

"I could really use a cup of coffee," he replied.

"Be right back."

I walked over to Clark and mentioned that Pepe wanted a cup of coffee. He picked up on the idea and went over to Eddie. "Would you be interested in preparing some food for us?"

Eddie was renewed. "Sure! Hey, order whatever you want -- my treat!" He patted his back pocket, where his wallet was.

Clark understood, and loudly asked if anyone wanted something to eat. A couple of people took him up on it, and we helped Eddie serving tables.

By the time we were done, a lot of good-old-boys became our friends, and many of the local folk were amazed at how the situation had been resolved. Our short rest stop ended up as a stay of several hours, most of it making sure everyone was settled with the outcome of the situation between Joe and Donna. Those who remained showed their support for Joe, much to his surprise.

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One of the patrons of the diner drew Clark aside. He was an older gentleman who had been reading a book prior to the action, and had stayed afterward to help. "I saw your rigs. You ARE preachers, aren't ya?"

"Yes, sir," Clark replied with a smile. "Traveling evangelists."

The man clapped his hands together and beamed. "Good, good! Where're you headin'?"

"West, towards Oregon ... but we're not on any particular timetable," Clark replied. "We travel about the country, doing gospel tent meetings wherever we're able."

"Then please stay with us a couple of days! I own the supermarket in town, and you could use my parking lot for your tent. God knows we could use a good dose of the Gospel! How much do you guys charge?"

Clark smiled. "Whatever the Lord puts on your heart. We're here to do His work, and He takes good care of us."

"Amazing!" He was speechless for a moment. "If you'll let me, I could help y'all out with some groceries and a couple tanks o'gas!"

"That would be much appreciated," replied Clark with a tip of the head.

"Why don't y'all follow me into town and I'll show you where to set up. Would tonight be too soon?"

Clark looked at his watch. It was late in the afternoon. "It'll take time to set up the tent, but I'm sure we can do it."

"Great!" the man replied, and they shook hands on it.

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Forty-five minutes later, the tent was being inflated.

Since our reason for being on the road was ministry, having a quick and efficient way to get our ministry tent set up and taken down was essential for our vehicles. And Clark's rig, Goliath, was made for just such a task. Below the truck bed, close to the ground between the sets of wheels, were several mobile modules. One module housed the tent, and another the compressor unit.

Retractable wheels allowed the modules to be moved away from the undercarriage of the trailer via remote control. Once directed to the inflation spot, the necessary connections were made and the domelike tent started taking shape. When it was large enough to get inside, we started transferring chairs, podium, audio-visual gear, and other items from another module under the truck.

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Clark tapped my arm to get my attention. "I'm going to call Christine!"

I nodded. "Tell her hi for us!" I added over the sound of the compressors.

"I will!"

Clark stepped up into the cab of the truck and closed the door behind him. He easily maneuvered his large frame back into the sleeper cab, and sat on the bed. Reaching forward, he activated a control on a communications array, then leaned back and waited for the computerized response from Myrna.

"Satellite uplink established," she announced.

"Connect me with the Office, please."

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Her name was Christine Snow. For twenty years she had been the finest secretary in the Pentagon. Then, two years ago, a blast from a terrorist bomb erased her legs and turned her into a charity case. But four months ago that all changed, when that nice Mr. Drake called her and offered her the position of a lifetime. Now she and her friend and caregiver Kay shared a beautiful house in Nevada, all free and clear ... and she held close a secret that brought back memories of stories her mother had told her. Stories of the amazing Doc Savage.

She was fixing a sandwich in the kitchen when the phone in the next room started bleeping in a pattern associated with a secured scrambled line. Without hesitation, she abandoned the sandwich and used the wheelchair's joystick with the skill of an Indianapolis driver, pivoting with daredevil speed and racing into the room she called The Office. With reflex action she glanced at one of the flat screen monitors on the walls; the monitor showed caller identification information, and this caller brought a smile to Christine's face.

"Channel D open, boss!" she greeted cheerfully. "What can I do for you?"

The microphone in the chair easily picked up her voice, and the response came from several Boze speakers about the Office. "Afternoon, Chris! Just calling to give you a heads up on a couple more of the calling cards. Ready?"

Her hand touched the control on the digital recorder. "Let 'er rip, Boss!"

Like a physician reporting to a dictation service, Clark relayed the information about the contacts in the diner, giving details, facts, impressions and opinions. He made the suggestion about sending Joe to Carrie's clinic. Chris paid close attention to the details, because they would tell her how to respond to their calls.

"Okay, Chris ... that'll cover it," he concluded. "By the way, Perry wanted me to tell you hi."

"How nice of him. Tell him hi back." She paused. "It sounds like this Joe-fellow has a lot of pride. It might make it hard to sell him on the Clinic ... but not to worry, I'll have him eating out of my hand in no time." She grinned.

"If anybody can pull it off, you can," he agreed. "Also, we've been invited to stay a couple of days for tent meetings. After that we'll probably continue heading west through Idaho and into Oregon. Keep us in prayer."

"How's Miss Clayton doing?"

"There was a tense moment at the diner, but she's recovered well. We never believed it would be a cakewalk, did we?" he confided.

"Nope," she agreed. "I'll keep you guys in prayer ... you'll need it."

"Appreciate it. Talk to you later."

"Take care, Doc."

"You, too. Bye."

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Bonnie tapped on the door to the cab, and Clark reached over to open it for her. She passed up a couple of sacks of groceries and items from the nearby supermarket.

As she climbed up into the cab and closed the door, she asked, "How come you're hidin' up here?"

"I was just contacting our 'office'."

"Office? When did y'all come up with that one?"

He leaned back. "A couple of months ago. Since our operations are mobile, we found that we still required an 'office' of sorts, a receiving station for mail and messages and the like. Christine is our 'secretary'; hers is the number we have printed on the back of the cards we hand out.

## The Bronze Saga #3: BRONZE AVENGERS

"I just gave her a heads-up on Joe and Donna, along with my instructions on where they need help. In Joe's case, she will encourage him to attend Carrie's rehab clinic in New York City. She'll let him know that if he agrees to it, we will pay full expenses in getting him there and back, and will even help Donna with finances while he is away. We're offering him a win-win situation ... an offer he cannot refuse. All he has to do is to seriously want to quit. Then Christine will take care of all the details."

"You make it very hard for someone to turn you down."

"That's the idea."

"I'm impressed."

Clark saw that something else was on her mind, but remained silent and waited. It wasn't long in coming. "Look, I just want to apologize for fryin' out like I did back there. I ... had a best friend who was killed by an abusive drinker. So I've got a sensitive spot for those who can't defend themselves, like Donna."

"I can relate. I've always had a soft spot for the classic 'lady in distress.' But I've learned through the years that often the 'lady in distress' has been more of a threat than many men."

"Like me," finished Bonnie. "And like Pat was."

Clark nodded, and folded his arms across his chest, musing aloud. "Y'know, this just goes to show how God is always at work in our lives, giving us a little push here and a little tap there ... just enough to keep us on the course He has for us."

"Do you really think God controls our lives? Don't we have any choice in the matter? What about free will?"

"Oh, there's always the choice in our lives to accept or reject what God gives us. But I look at it like this: God has a giant invisible bungee cord attached from him to all of us. We can't feel it, or see it. We can head in any direction we want for as long as we want. But as we do, there's a ... pulling ... which we can't explain or dismiss. Eventually we've got to seek out what that bungee cord's attached to, and then we make our decision to cut the cord and go our own way ... or let the cord pull us right into the heart of God." He paused. "God never pushes, but He is always inviting."

"You have a very interesting way of looking at things, Sugah," she noted. Then she turned and left the cab. Clark's eyes followed her as a smile crept across his lips.

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### Chapter Three

Pine Corners, Washington (Pop. 1,370) had only one Main Street. It ran through the middle of town, past everything from the local bank to the City Hall to the local feed store. A man could walk from one end of downtown to the other in less than a half hour ... longer if they stopped to talk to their neighbors along the way.

As a community, Pine Corners had the unique distinction of having a balanced racial mix of Anglos, African-Americans, Hispanics, and Asians. It was truly remarkable for such a small town, even more so considering everyone got along so well together.

Overall, Pine Corners was a nice, quiet town.

However, there were exceptions ...

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The people of the town heard the car long before they saw it.

It was the late-model Ford sedan owned by the Hernandez brothers, Juan and Marco, and it was equipped with a sound system that all-too-frequently pumped bass-intensive Latino rhythms into the air at deafening decibels. Juan and Marco didn't follow their parents' love of the small town, and were only too happy to let everyone else know just how un-happy they were.

The boys took great pleasure in parading down Main Street at just within the legal speed limit, showing their lack of respect for anyone who didn't like their music or how it was played. They would never run yellow lights, deliberately spending as much time at a signal as they could. And when a fellow driver or pedestrian would try to get them to turn down the sonic barrage, they would usually be greeted with a middle-finger salute and/or a response laced with bi-lingual profanities.

At the light at Main and 7th, a dark brown station wagon pulled alongside the Hernandez vehicle. There were three people in the car -- driver, front seat passenger, and rear seat passenger. The driver of the station wagon -- a boy on the high end of his teens, with a physique like a linebacker and a baby face -- smiled as he looked over at the Ford. Then he turned to his right and asked, "Ready, Sunni?"

The girl in the back seat with the short mop of brick red hair didn't look up from the device in her lap, which appeared to be an old canister vacuum cleaner. Her hands played across electrical controls, as the short hose with the wide triangular nozzle was pressed against the inside of the rear driver's side door. "Powering up! Rhonda, let me know when the light's getting ready to change!"

"Gotcha, Sunni," responded the passenger in the front seat, a pretty blond-haired girl a year younger than the driver. "It's yellow," she announced a few moments later.

"Okay." She paused a heartbeat, then touched a black button on the device. "It's away!" she barked, although nothing seemed to have happened. "Go!"

Their timing had been perfect, as the light changed to green and the station wagon pulled ahead.

The Hernandez' car, however, did not move. It had become strangely -- and suddenly -- mute. It took a second or two for Juan and Marco to realize that something bad had actually happened, and then they just sat there, not knowing what to make of it. Finally Juan tried restarting the car, but to no avail. It refused to respond to the turn of the key, as if the battery had gone suddenly dead. He tried again, and again, muttering increasingly-rapid profanities under his breath.

The motorists behind the Ford figured it was another of the boys' tricks, so started honking their horns. Finally they moved around the stranded vehicle, taking delight in the plight of the brothers who climbed out of the car to check under the hood. While Juan did that, Marco pulled out his cell phone to call for help. A moment later, amidst Spanish curses, he threw the phone into the car, complaining that it was dead. It was clear to them that the car had suddenly and permanently gone dead for them, much to the joy of the people around who laughed and made fun of the brothers' predicament.

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### The Bronze Saga #3: BRONZE AVENGERS

The trio in the station wagon were also having a good laugh on the Hernandez', despite the curious fact that they were far down the road, and hadn't even seen what had occurred after the light changed.

The girl in the back seat, Sunni, laughed and said, "Take us home, Deek!"

They continued past the downtown section of Pine Corners, along a road generally leading to the farms in the area, and took a right down Smith Road.

A mile farther, they turned right into Robinson Lane, a wide cul-de-sac. Several of the houses were finished, but the majority looked to have been deserted before the work had been completed. They pulled the wagon into the driveway of a plain white house.

Sunni felt the stirring under her legs, and reached down to pat the black Labrador sitting on the floorboards. "Yes, we're home, Sequoia!"

She unlocked and opened the door, and gave the command, "Sequoia, heel!" Without hesitation, the dog squirmed past her feet and out of the car, standing just outside of the door. Sunni swung her legs out, standing and taking the handle of the harness with her left hand. She commanded the dog again "Sequoia, left!"

As smooth as a drill team, they moved as one, walking up the driveway and pausing before the ramp leading to the front door. Then Sunni reached down and removed the harness, giving the command, "Sequoia, park!" The dog, who had been very patient about the need to relieve himself, didn't hesitate to rush for the grassy area in front of the house and take care of business.

In the meantime, Rhonda had come from behind Sunni and said, "Gimme the keys; I'll get the door." Sunni already had the keys in her hand; she moved her arm behind her, and Rhonda slid the spiral keyring from her wrist. "Got it," she announced, and walked up the ramp to the door. Deek followed behind Rhonda, carrying the device Sunni had used in his car.

The red-haired young woman stopped and her face turned upwards as she smelled the rain in the air. She heard the sound of her neighbor Mrs. Yee pruning her flowers in her back yard, and smiled at the memory of the blooms.

After a few moments, Sunni lowered a hand to signal and said, "Sequoia, heel!" The dog obediently came to her side, and, the harness draped over one arm, she connected the leash to his collar. Then, with a few directional commands, they went up the ramp and into the house, Sunni closing the door behind her. Kneeling beside the black lab, she removed the leash, and gave the dog a quick affectionate rub-down before letting him go 'off-duty'. She walked through the house into the kitchen, going straight to the fridge to get some sodas.

Deek came out of an adjacent room and announced, "Okay, I think I've got that thing hooked up right. You wanna check it when you get a chance?"

"Sure. Here, catch!" The blind woman tossed the can of soda in the direction of his voice. She was slightly off to one side, but not so far that he couldn't catch it. "Good shot!" he commended.

Deek Wilson was a homeboy, born and raised, and had looks that made him the target of every grandmother he'd ever encountered. He'd never allowed his sandy brown hair to grow past his shirt collar, and it was always neat and in place. He stepped aside as Sunni rushed through to the other room, and looked over at his Rhonda with a smile.

### The Bronze Saga #3: BRONZE AVENGERS

Rhonda Anderson had been one of the most popular girls in high school, and had shocked Deek by choosing him over all the other popular boys she could've dated. Walking down the street, they proved that Fred-and-Wilma relationships were actually possible. Rhonda truly loved Deek, in part due to his simple ways and inner strength. Sitting on the couch, she took another can of soda offered from Sunni, and popped the top.

Sunni checked out the device, making sure all the connections were secure. Then she walked over to another table and switched on her personal computer. After a few seconds, a musical sequence told her that everything was ready for her.

Turning her head to face a directional microphone nearby, she commanded in a clear voice, "Scan chat favorites!" A musical tone acknowledged her instructions.

Walking back into the other room, she heard the distinct sound of intense smooching. With a disgusted look on her face she addressed it. "Get a room, willya! For a moment there I thought the sink was backed up and somebody was using a plunger on it!"

"Oh, loosen up, girl," replied Rhonda, coming up for air. "You gotta get yourself a boyfriend! We've tried setting you up on some blind dates, but you keep turnin' us down."

Sunni walked over to an overstuffed chair and flopped into it. "I'm just not interested in a relationship. Besides ... every date's a blind date to me!" She cackled at her own joke.

"Rhonda's got a point, Sun," pressed Deek. "You're too cooped up in this place at times. It's not healthy!"

The blind woman planted two fists on the arms of the chair, her face starting to match the color of her hair. "Will you two drop it!" she exclaimed angrily. There was silence for several seconds, and Sunni came down from her fit. "I'm sorry. I appreciate all you've done, but I just don't have time for relationships right now."

Just then, a voice came from the other room. "Southfork just entered the chat area."

Sunni quickly headed for the computer, with Deek and Rhonda close behind. Sunni took a seat before the computer and said, "Bronze Avenger Wingbear to Bronze Avenger Southfork. Can you read me?"

A moment later a voice replied. It was mechanical, but somehow different than the first voice from the computer. "Bronze Avenger Southfork here. What's happening, Wingbear? Another notch on your gun?"

"Affirmative, Southfork. Snuck up on them and took them out at the light. We were gone before they knew what happened."

"Good work, Wingbear." There was a pause. "Just curious. You got a team, or do you Lone Ranger it?"

Sunni smiled. "A team. Newbies to the Avengers. Call them ... Boris and Doris."

Deek looked at Rhonda. "Doris?"

Rhonda smiled approvingly and kissed Deek lightly on the cheek. "My Boris."

He kissed her back. "My Doris."

Sunni shushed them.

"They're nearby?" asked the voice of Southfork.

"Affirmative. Right behind me."

"Cool. Welcome to the Bronze Avengers, Boris and Doris. It's a pleasure having you on board."

"Boris here. Likewise," said Deek.

"Doris here, too," added Rhonda. "Thanks."

Sunni remembered something. "Southfork, I want to give you a heads-up on something. I'm going to be out of town in a couple of weeks, so don't worry if I get silent all of a sudden."

"Thanks for the FYI. When do you head out?"

"I'll let you know the closer it gets to that time."

"Gotcha. Better let you go. Talk at you later."

"Ditto. Bronze Avenger Wingbear on the sidelines."

"Bronze Avenger Southfork out."

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#### Chapter Four

Dot sat on the bed at the rear of the Nomad. She'd adjusted the temperature for overnight, and then changed into a pair of sweats and slippers. With her PDA in her hand, she opened up a fresh document under the heading Dot's Journal, and began to write.

This has been a really good day!

We're in Idaho Falls. Got in just before noon, and started cruising around to get a feel of what God had in mind for us here. Sometimes He'd point us in the direction of a particular avenue of ministry, or tell us to settle in and get some rest for something bigger He had in mind later on, or He'd just tell us to keep going.

Anyhow, we ended up wandering their version of Skid Row, where we spotted a line of homeless people standing in front of a storefront mission. Almost immediately Clark and Perry were in one accord about coming back.

So we tried to find a place to stay. Perry gave me the name of an RV park where he and Clark had stayed during their first 'road trip' from Oregon to New York almost two years ago, and so we checked it out.

To make a long story short, we located the RV park, although it wasn't as easy to get them to understand that the load behind the Peterbilt was an actual RV. But not to worry, this hadn't been the first time we'd run into skeptics. We solved the problem by taking the local manager/owner on a tour through the trailer, plus offering them a sizable deposit. After that, they were only too eager to accommodate us, and supplied us with a couple of spaces with more than enough room on the outskirts of the park.

### The Bronze Saga #3: BRONZE AVENGERS

While Clark and Bonnie took the Black Diamond into town to recon the area, Perry and I took a "nap".

When they returned, they briefed us on what they found out. It's the Everlasting Hope Mission, operated through one of the Baptist churches in the area, and managed by a guy named Charles Andrews. Charlie (he preferred to be called) had no objections to us joining their regular group of volunteers and in-house staff. Clark quoted him as saying, 'the more the merrier'.

I noticed that Bonnie had only marginally participated in the time of prayer we had before heading out, and she was almost too quiet for her normal personality. But that changed over the course of the evening, as C

Dot's ears picked up Bonnie's voice outside of the RV, so she quickly saved the document and backed out of the application. She tucked the PDA into her bedside drawer, and offered up a quick prayer.

The RV's door swung opened with a hiss. "Hooo-weeee!" exclaimed Bonnie exuberantly. "What a night!" As she locked and secured the door, she called out, "Dot? You up there?"

"Yes, Bonnie, I'm here," she called back.

The tall brunette was at the top of the steps and saw Dot in the sweats. "You ain't goin to bed this moment, are ya? I gotta talk!"

Dot smiled. "No, Bonnie. I just wanted to get comfortable, that's all. I take it you enjoyed yourself tonight?" she said tongue-in-cheek.

"Girl, when y'all told me what'cha did down on the streets, I never thought it would be this wild!"

"Sometimes it's not as busy as tonight," amended Dot. "But I'll agree, tonight was exceptional."

"Ain't that an understatement!" agreed Bonnie. "The guy doin' the church service seemed to be all right." She smiled. "I gotta admit, I like the singing myself. Always have been, even though I can't carry a tune in a bucket."

Dot coughed. "Yeah, sure! From what I heard, you were terrific! You've got a good voice."

Bonnie shrugged it off. "Now Clark's the one with the voice. Did you hear him during 'How Great Thou Art'?"

"Yes! He's just discovering his singing ability. You ought to hear him and Perry when they do harmony."

Bonnie started taking her clothes off, preparing for bed. "I've got to admit, I'd never been to a mission before today. Do they usually rush to the soup line like a herd of stampeding rhinos?"

Dot's eyes rolled up into her head. "Oh, yeah! Mostly they're here for the food, and really could care less about the preaching. But if the promise of food is the only way they'll hear the gospel, then it's something they'll sit through. It's not the best method at times, but sometimes the message gets through. A lot of people take it in stride, accepting it as part of surviving."

"Yeah, I know what you mean. I saw some of their faces. The cold look in their eyes. It's spooky."

"Tell me about it," Dot sighed. "So you got drafted, I see. How was it?"

"It was fun. I was just sitting there, watchin' you all movin' around talkin' to people, when this one guy came up to me and asked if I wanted to help in the soup line. It was that Andrews guy, the one who runs this place ... nice guy. I'd worked on a mess line when I was a mercenary, but those guys were a lot different than these guys." She suddenly started laughing. "Did you see what happened when that little Russian guy tried hittin' on me?"

"I saw Clark there, but didn't see what happened."

"Well, Clark comes up behind this guy and plants a heavy hand on his shoulder. He turns and looks right into Clark's chest, then ... he ... looks ... up into Clark's smiling face. Then, in fluent Russian, Clark tells the guy politely to 'stop bothering the lady'. I tell you, that guy's face went pale when Clark said that." She laughed again.

"That's great! Oh, I wish I'd seen that!" added Dot laughingly.

"He's pretty good with the languages, isn't he?"

"I'll say! I saw him go from one person to the next, speaking to them in their own language. Let's see --" She strained to recall. "-- I remember at least Tomas from Albania, Peter from Italy, and Stefan from Zimbabwe. You know, he never looks down on these people just because they can't speak much English. He ministers to them on their own level, in their own language."

"And I saw you over there, with that woman Esther."

"Ethel," corrected Dot. "Yeah. She and I hit it off right away. She couldn't get around very well with that broken leg, so I got her food and helped her as much as I could. She was born in South Dakota, and doesn't have a home anymore."

"That's tough," said Bonnie, concerned. "Is there anything we can do for them?"

"We're trying to get together a network of group homes, like the one Perry had been a part of. We'll meet up with them in Portland." She paused. "Too many people give a few dollars to a mission and that's it; they expect the mission to be the home for the homeless. But it's not that easy. Perry and Clark have been looking for homes -- houses -- where people who might live their own lives alone and empty could help out others, and help themselves in the process. It's just a matter of putting the people together with the houses."

"How successful have they been?"

"So-so. Part of the problem is in making the contacts, and that's slow at the moment. Then finding the people who have an urge to house and help the homeless. The easy part is getting the information together and to the people. That's another function of those plastic cards, to establish a central connection."

"Yeah. Clark told me about the Office."

Dot suddenly stood. "Bonnie, you hungry?"

Bonnie hesitated a moment to consider the question, then answered, "Kinda."

"Why don't I nuke us up some popcorn."

### The Bronze Saga #3: BRONZE AVENGERS

"Sounds good!"

Dot walked into the galley while Bonnie finished changing for bed. A few minutes later, she brought the steaming bowl of popcorn back into the bedroom, along with a couple of sodas. Bonnie was sitting comfortably on the bed, dressed in sports bra and panties; she accepted the soda.

Dot went to place the other soda on the small bedside table. As she did, her fingers brushed the fur of a small teddy bear that sat there, knocking it over onto the floor. She picked the stuffed animal off the floor, gave it a light kiss on the forehead, and said softly, "Sorry, Grape."

As she returned it to the table, Bonnie commented, "Kinda fond of the critter, aren't ya?"

She smiled. "Yeah, I am. And I've got good reason to be. If it wasn't for Grape, I might never have become a Christian."

Bonnie blinked. "Say what?"

She took a bite of popcorn, and a sip of soda -- offering up a quick silent prayer as she did -- then started the story.

"About a week before the end of '99, Perry and I were in San Francisco, chasing down a lead on one of Clark's old teammates. We got what we were looking for, and were going to head back to Vermont where Clark and Johnny were, but they'd got snowed in. So we faxed them the information and decided to play tourist until the weather cleared up for us to return.

"We did a lot of walking, and, one night, we observed some gang-bangers setting up this couple for a mugging. Well, Perry was all gung-ho about rescuing them, and we did have the upper hand plus an ace in the hole. So the two of us went after the five of them ... and we busted their butts, but not before one of them caught me off-guard." She felt the back of her head where the gang member had struck her.

She continued. "The doctor said it was a slight concussion -- hard head, don't'cha know -- and ordered a few days of bed rest. So we returned to our hotel, and Perry took care of me like you wouldn't believe! He spent more time in my room than his -- feeding me, reading to me, always at my side ready to help, never expecting anything in return."

She wiped off a film of butter on her fingers and picked up the purple-furred little teddy bear. "One day I woke up to the smell of roses, and this little guy." She gave the bear another kiss on the head. "The note said his name was Grape Juice, and he was there to help take care of me."

"Awwwww," responded Bonnie, now lying on her side, propped up on one elbow.

Dot hesitated, remembering what came next. She stalled by taking a couple of bites of popcorn and drinking more of the soda.

"I got better ... but then I screwed things up, literally. In my mind I thought that Perry and I could be a couple even though I wasn't a Christian. I was wrong. Then I made it worse. Over a period of two days, I got drunk, screwed around with an old boyfriend, got into a bar fight, and nearly killed one of the gang members we'd busted the night before."

Bonnie's eyes were wide, and her jaw was slack. "You? And I thought I could be a junkyard dog."

Dot half-grinned. "Nope. In the condition that I was in at that time, I was not one to be around. I was mad at myself and lookin' for a fight. But when I finally dragged my sorry tail back to my hotel room, there he was: Perry. He'd been there ever since I'd run out on him the day before. He'd been praying for me all that time, and had even recruited Clark and my grandparents."

Dot's eyes met Bonnie's. "Have you ever felt so dirty that you thought that all the showers in the world couldn't make you clean?"

Surprisingly, the tall brunette nodded soberly. "Yeah, I have."

"Well, that was me. I didn't want anyone to care about me anymore, especially him. I screamed and cursed at him, and would've probably knocked him out in the state I was. Finally I just turned my back on him."

She picked up the teddy bear, and held him cupped in both hands. "And then I saw Grape Juice. Now, I'd been to the hotel room once before, right after my first screw-up. And in my anger, I'd tossed Grape across the room. But there he was ... so innocent, sitting on my bed where Perry had put him back. And I busted wide open."

She held back the tears that usually came when she told this story, and smiled weakly. "All of what Perry had told me now made sense, and I knew Jesus was the only one who could make me really clean. So, there and then, I became a Christian."

She paused. "In the middle of my garbage, God showed His love for me through Perry ... and a special little teddy bear." She kissed the top of the purple furred head, and put the bear back on the side table.

Bonnie was quiet. Dot couldn't read her face, so got up and went to the lavatory. When she returned, the brunette was sitting cross-legged on the bed, the small purple teddy bear gently cupped in her large hands.

"What'cha thinkin'?" asked Dot softly.

"When I was growin' up, I had the usual dolls and stuffed animals," she said, her voice soft and distant. "But it makes it hard keeping up the image of a tough-as-nails soldier-of-fortune when you're packin' a teddy bear." She shrugged.

"You're not a mercenary now, Bonnie," replied Dot. "Let's see what we can do. What d'ya think?"

She looked at the purple-furred bear and smiled. "Maybe."

-----

"Tonight's 'News Of The Weird' comes from the little hamlet of Pine Corners, Washington. It seems that many of the two thousand residents are experiencing what some are calling 'automobile meltdowns'. In the last three months, eighteen vehicles have had their electrical systems completely burned out, leaving the local police baffled. Opinions among the townspeople are diverse, ranging from UFO's, sunspot activity, gravitational flux, and even demonic activity. Whatever the cause, it's clear that it's been a gold mine for the local car repair business." The rest of the news team snickered politely at the lame attempt at humor.

The anchorman concluded the broadcast: "This is Brent Maxwell for all the team at Channel 7 News wishing you a good night!"

### The Bronze Saga #3: BRONZE AVENGERS

Clark pointed the remote control at the giant flat-screen TV hugging the wall of Goliath's living room, surfed the channels for a few moments, then powered the set off. He stared at the blank screen, his fingers steepled before his mouth, fingertips lightly touching.

I got up and rinsed out the glass I was using, when the silence got my attention. I looked back at Clark, saw his expression, and commented softly, "If it were fifty years ago, you'd be trilling by now."

His stone-like expression broke and he looked at me with a thin grin. "It's a difficult habit to break," he replied.

"Which -- trilling or curiosity?" I posed with a trace of a grin.

"Curiosity," he answered. "You of all people should understand that I was exploring the unknown long before the X Files. I believe the common phrase is: 'been there, done that'." He smiled. "You could say that I've always been drawn to dangerous situations ... like a moth to a flame. I always wanted to know what was behind the strange and the bizarre."

"Did you ever attribute any of these to God?"

Our eyes met and he shook his head deliberately. "Not even once. I always looked for an 'explainable' reason, whether it was a invention devised by man, or a phenomenon just skirting the bounds of nature. The only time I couldn't rationalize it away ... was Mr. Wail."

"All right, then, what's your take on this? What could cause a car's electrical system to .. as they put it ... melt down?"

Clark mused aloud. "Geological? Atmospheric? Electronic?" He paused at that, and became silent. Finally he turned to me and said, "An electromagnetic discharge or pulse."

My eyes grew big. "An EMP?" I sputtered. "Like from a nuclear bomb?"

"Hardly that, of course, but it would be the same principle."

"Well, it is a moot point. The only way we could know is if ..." I saw the smile on his face change slightly. "You want us to go to Pine Corners so you can investigate this?"

"Do you blame me?"

"No, I suppose not. But since we follow the Lord's map and timetable, He would have to want us there."

"Agreed," nodded Clark. "Therefore, if we become in one accord to visiting Pine Corners, then it would be safe to assume that God wants us there to investigate the mystery."

My eyes rolled up into my head. "Mystery," I repeated. I looked at Clark, who sat silently waiting for my response. Smiling, I moved closer, held out my hand and said, "Deal."

He took the hand and we shook on it.

I stood and offered a slight bow. "And with that, I'm heading to bed. Goodnight, brother."

"Perry, before you go," Clark said suddenly. "I need to talk to you about something."

The somber tone of his words concerned me. I slid back into a chair and leaned forward. "What's up?" I asked, trying to lend an air of ease.

"It has to do with Bonnie. I'm afraid that I may be letting our relationship become closer than intended."

His vagueness was confusing. "It's me, Clark. Speak English." Then I suddenly understood what he was trying to say, and my expression went blank with surprise. "You're falling in love with her!"

The cold silence in the air confirmed my suspicions. I leaned back in my chair and exhaled in a soft whistle. "How does she feel?"

"I don't know. She's not exhibited any outward signs. But ... I suspect so."

"Interesting," I said absently. "I knew you two were getting close, but had hoped you were keeping your guard up."

He gave me a rare embarrassed look. "So did I." He paused. "When I returned to the Valley, I had a chance to speak at length with Monja's family. It was an excellent time, and much was shared. However, I felt once more the pain of losing her after all these years. I suppose I sought some of those things in Bonnie, to compensate."

"On the rebound," I supplied.

"Exactly. Bonnie and I have much in common, and she's not exactly an unattractive woman. I know she's not a Christian, and I pray at length for that to change. On the road, we spend a lot of time talking; she's very knowledgeable." He paused. "This is something I have never encountered, and not with a woman in such a relaxed environment. I must have been overtaken by the newness of the experience."

"It happens," I empathized. "Dot and I had a lot in common before she became a Christian. And I sent out signals without realizing it ... signals that I was as interested in her as she was in me. That was a big mistake, although God turned it around for good in the end."

"I have considered confronting her with my emotions, but I feel that it would only push her farther away from us and from the opportunity we have to witness to her."

I nodded. "I agree. It's a touchy situation. It's best to keep things going as they are, but you need to develop your face of flint."

He looked at me with momentary puzzlement, and then made the Biblical connection. "Yes, yes. I used to be very good at that, before I knew what it was all about."

"I know. You want to pray?"

He nodded. We joined hands and bowed our heads, and brought our concerns before the throne of God. After several minutes, we separated and straightened up. Clark looked better after getting the matter off his chest. He gave me a smile. "Thank you, brother."

I smiled back. "Do you mind if I let Dot know? She can keep on the alert for anything from Bonnie. And if you feel yourself ... faltering ... you know how to say 'help' in Mayan, don't'cha?"

He smiled and nodded. "Yes, I do. Thank you, Perry."

I stood up. "I'm going to head to bed, give you time to think. You going to be okay?"

"Yes, brother. Thank you. I'll be along in a few minutes."

I walked forward, past the galley and bathroom, to the sleeping area. Bunks designed after Japanese "cocoon hotels" were on either side of the center hallway. I pressed the waist-high button to open the plastic privacy panel, revealing the single-person controllable-density waterbed.

But before I climbed in, my ears perked up to a familiar noise, and my lips curled into a big grin at the sound.

The sound of trilling.

-----

Sunni Bradshaw sat alone in her house. It was no surprise that the lights were out; only her sighted friends needed them. A CD was playing on her stereo, and she turned down the sound with the remote before reaching for the phone.

She dialed the long-distance number and waited. "Kari? It's Sunni. Yeah, long time no hear!" Her expression brightened noticeably. "Fine, fine ... how 'bout you?" A moment later, she ripped a high, piercing laugh that shook Sequoia from his nap; he looked at her to make sure his master was okay, then lowered his head back onto the bed pad. "Same old Kari! Hey, I'm going to be in your neck of the woods in a week, and I'm gonna need a place to crash for a couple of days!" She paused. "It's nothing serious -- just a checkup. Sure, I'll hold on!" She turned in the direction of Sequoia to make sure he was okay, then back to the phone. "Yeah -- what's the word? Thanks, Kari!" She paused. "Yeah. I'll let you know when I'll be coming in. Yeah, I've missed you, too! Talk to you soon! Bye!" Click.

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## Chapter Five

LARSEN'S KAR KINGDOM was the first thing you saw when driving into Pine Corners, and it was impressive. Display lots of sparking clean used vehicles spanned both sides of Main Street. People came from many of the neighboring towns to get the best deal at Larsen's.

Overhead banners welcomed people to the town, and to Larsen's Kar Kingdom. Like a Caesar of Rome, vertical banners along the Main Street side of the lots were plastered with Larsen's smiling visage.

Beyond the hype, though, Frank Larsen was a good old boy, a resident and business leader for almost fifteen years in the community. With his wife Louise, and their kids Frank, Jr. and Brigitte, they were the very models of upstanding citizens.

Larsen was a hands-on kind of leader, who could always be seen wandering around the lots, talking or joking with customers and salesmen. There was no mistaking his tall frame and ex-collegiate football shoulders, crowned by a mop of wavy black hair.

He walked toward two dark Hispanic youths who had been dropped off at his lot by another car. "Juan! Marco! Que pasa, amigos?"

### The Bronze Saga #3: BRONZE AVENGERS

"Is it ready?" asked Marco Hernandez coldly.

Larsen's smile never faltered. "As good as new!" he acknowledged. "Follow me!" He headed for the office.

The two youths were distant as they signed the paperwork on the repairs, paid the bill out of a wad of cash, and walked to their car. They revved up the engine, sending blue clouds of exhaust across half the lot, deliberately disrupting normal business. Then they switched on the sound system, cranking up the bass so much that the windows in the showroom shook. A minute later, the car ripped out of the lot and headed up Main Street with demonic fury.

Larsen just smiled to himself and said, "Idiots."

He took a last look around the lot, then turned and walked past the showroom to his office. Stepping over the threshold, he closed the door and switched on a neon DO NOT DISTURB sign mounted above the doorway.

He looked down at the report laying face-down upon the manilla envelope it came in. He sat down in his leather chair, and reached down to the bottom right drawer of his desk. With practiced ease, he extracted the water glass and the bottle of his favorite scotch whiskey. He poured a couple of fingers of the amber liquid, and placed the bottle on the table.

Leaning back, he took a sip of the whiskey, feeling it burning down his throat and into his stomach, and he suppressed a gasp.

Then he turned the report over and started to re-read it, sipping from the glass as he did. He finally shook his head in wonder, and emptied the glass in a single swallow. He thought about a second round, but dismissed it, and replaced both glass and bottle in the drawer.

He reached over to the intercom and pressed the pager button.

-----

"Brock ... Stern ... to my office."

Across the street, in one of the automotive bays, two men in white lab coats looked up, then at each other. One, a white man in his early 30's, spoke nervously. "Dan! He read the report!"

His partner, a black man of the same age, replied, "Will you stop worrying? He's got to believe us! We double-checked all the numbers!"

"I know that, and you know that ... but it's still going to sound like we're off our rockers!"

"We'll see! Let's go, Al!"

As they crossed the street, they walked with almost a synchronized step. No surprise, the two had been good friends for most of their lives.

Daniel Brock and Albert Stern had been born and raised in Pine Corners, but time made them long for the world outside of the small town. They left together, attending college at Washington State, both majoring in electronics. Then after graduation, they got jobs with a semiconductor plant in the Willamette Valley -- until

the plant sold out to Taiwan and they were laid off. For years they worked odd jobs, determined not to return to Pine Corners.

But it was the death of Stern's father to cancer that forced them back to the small town. It was a hard time, but his good friend Brock was there to see him through, just as he had been there when Brock's short and rocky marriage came to a crushing end. Since Pine Corners was definitely low-tech, the only place they could use their electronics skills and education was Larsen's, working on electrical and sound systems. It was below what they were capable of, but it was consistent and paid the bills -- so that was all that mattered for now.

They approached the secretary. "Sally, how is he?"

The middle-aged woman gave them a maternal smile and said, "If you're asking if he's angry, no."

A layer of tension fell away from the duo as they moved to the door and knocked.

"Come," said Larsen. As Brock reached for the doorknob, they tried to decipher the tone of the voice, to no avail.

The two men entered quietly, and stood before the desk.

"You called, Boss?" asked Stern.

"I've been looking over this report of yours." He held up the papers as he leaned back in his chair. His voice was slick. "You ARE kidding me, aren't you? When cars bought from MY lot started dropping in the streets, everyone pointed at me. And since you two are my electronics 'experts', I pointed them right back at you."

"We didn't cause the damage to those cars!" blurted Stern.

"So you've told me," replied Larsen. "And I told you to prove it -- to tell me what did go wrong with those cars, and why it wasn't you! And you give me science fiction!" He slammed the report down to punctuate his point.

His face shifted into a grin. "Now tell me the truth, boys ... you're not trying to pull this old boy's leg, are ya? An electromagnetic pulse, like what you get when you detonate an atomic bomb?"

Brock spread his hands. "Mr. Larsen ... sir ... it was just as hard for us to believe as well, so we triple-checked it --"

"-- with extreme skepticism!" added Stern.

"All of the vehicles we examined, along with the results of the interviews, pointed in the same direction. But not only were the electrical systems of the vehicles rendered inoperative, but anything the occupants had of an electronic nature were also burned out. Every digital watch, beeper, cell phone, personal stereo or tape player was rendered inoperative as if hit by a massive burst of electromagnetic energy. They overloaded --" He snapped his fingers. "-- just that fast! Only something like an EMP could do that!"

Larsen's expression was dubious. "But how?"

They shook their heads in unison. "We don't know," stated Brock soberly. "But we're determined to find out ... with your permission, of course."

### The Bronze Saga #3: BRONZE AVENGERS

Larsen sat silently, his eyes drilling into the faces of his technicians, looking for any weakness he could pounce upon. "Very well," he finally said, slowly. "Keep at it. I want you to find out how this was done ... and by whom."

Brock and Stern both nodded.

"I want daily updates on this desk by the close of business. This will take precedence over your usual duties, unless I say otherwise. Do you understand?"

"Yessir!" they answered as one.

"Should we finish the car we're working on?" asked Stern.

Larsen nodded. "Yes!" He paused a moment, then said, "You're dismissed!"

The salt-and-pepper team quickly left the office, closing the door gently in their haste. Alone, Larsen looked down at a group of framed photos on his desk. His eyes acknowledged the pictures of his wife and kids, and continued to settle on an autographed photo of his favorite motivational speaker, Kenny Countryman.

In times of stress, he found he thought better when he spoke to the picture, as if he were speaking to the man. "Ken ... is it possible? Has somebody come up with a way of creating a practical electromagnetic pulse?" He paused and shook his head in awe. "I know you've always said that there's no limit to what a man can do, but I could never imagine THIS!" He paced the floor, musing aloud. "Those ... punks paid me through the nose for their fancy boom cars, and they're paying me again to replace all the stuff that got fried." He smiled with satisfaction. "Business is good -- real good!"

He stood and looked out a window at the showroom. "But there's gotta be more. You've said it yourself. Strive for the best, like a salmon swimming upstream to spawn. 'A man who only looks at the mountain will never see the view from the top,'" he quoted.

He mused aloud. "What if I could do that to cars? What if I could fry 'em out ... then turn around and fix 'em ... on a large scale, perhaps from several shops across the state. You know how much money that would generate?" He whistled low, his eyes unfocusing at the thought.

"Better yet, what if I turned it around and put the ... device? ... out on the open market? Wow!" He stopped, struck with the magnitude of it all. "If I'd had one of those things, I wouldn't have had to leave Atlanta."

He sat down and looked at the picture of Countryman, frozen in a dynamic pose with arms outstretched to the sky. "But that's still so ... local. You said to think big, bigger, biggest! What if I put it on the international market? Sell it to some of those bozos with the turbans? Woof!"

He leaned back in his chair and grinned.

-----

It was around noon, and we were back on the road again. Clark was ahead of me, exactly matching my speed. Dot was taking a nap upstairs, which gave me time for quiet reflection.

### The Bronze Saga #3: BRONZE AVENGERS

I had to admit, cross-country driving involves long periods of monotonous scenery, and it could drive some people crazy. But it's not that way for us.

Here, for example.

We were driving I-84 on the Oregon side of the Columbia River, through the Columbia Gorge. One person could take in the scenery and get be bored stiff. There were stretches of freeway, such as those around Irrigon and Boardman, with flatland as far south as the eye could see. But that was the fascination of it all, to see the land God had created in all its diversity. The walls of the Gorge itself, never failed to amaze me -- with its many shades of brown, looking almost like velvet or burnished leather, rising up above the blue waters of the river below. I could picture God with his blade, cutting sharp angles in the rock for miles, while taking His fingers and raking troughs elsewhere.

I looked off to my right, at the Washington side of the Gorge, and saw a rail caravan of at least thirty cars carrying ship-bound cargo containers. As long as the train was, I could see it all, as if it were no more than a scale miniature of the real thing. It gave me a brief perspective of how God sees us -- yet simultaneous existing within the hearts of all Christians.

"Love it," I whispered with a smile.

As we went into a series of turns, my concentration returned to my driving. Goliath was a safe distance ahead of us, and I could picture Clark monitoring the CB radio frequencies, conversing with truckers and sharing Jesus whenever he could.

Clark, in many ways, was now like a child, seeing things in ways he'd never seen before. He was finally taking time to 'stop and smell the roses', and was discovering -- much to his delight -- how beautiful the roses really were.

We came out of the turns into a straightaway, and I gave Myrna instructions to continue reading aloud Bible passages where we had left off. That lasted for only a few minutes, when Myrna muted things at the end of a verse and announced, "Perry, you've got mail."

I flinched at the over-used phrase, and then requested, "Read it to me."

After the message ended, I thought a few moments, then commanded, "Compose response: 'Good to hear from you. We'll be in town in' ... Myrna, fill that one in, will you? ... 'and look forward to getting together.' Next paragraph. 'We'll be praying for you and your friend. Hope to see you all at the tent meetings. Just to let you know, Clark will be doing most of the preaching, and he is looking forward to meeting you.'" I suppressed a chuckle, and continued. "Next paragraph. 'I'll give you a call from the house. Hugs all around. Signed, Perry.' End response. Read that back to me, Myrna." The computer promptly complied, and I nodded my satisfaction. "Good. Transmit email. Thank you, Myrna."

A few seconds later, the computer announced, "Email sent, sir."

"Thank you, Myrna," I replied.

The recorded scriptures continued playing, a few verses before when it had been paused.

"I have to admit," I said softly. "You're spoiling me."

### The Bronze Saga #3: BRONZE AVENGERS

Ahead of me, on a section of windshield used to display time and temperature, the words I'M FLATTERED ... THANK YOU appeared, then disappeared.

I chuckled.

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Right before going to bed, Sunni dictated a quick email to her fellow Bronze Avenger:

SOUTHFORK:

I'LL BE HEADING OUT OF TOWN TOMORROW MORNING, AND WILL BE BACK IN A WEEK OR SO.

DO RIGHT TO ALL, AND WRONG NO MAN.

WINGBEAR

She read it back, then sent it on its way.

-----

Sunni sat in the front seat of the bus, right behind the driver, in a spot she always associated as reserved for the disabled. Sequoia was curled up at her feet, resting like she wished she could.

Deek and Rhonda had made sure she boarded the bus and got situated, and told her they'd keep an eye on her house while she was gone. She smiled. They were good friends to her, watching out for her but not crowding her space. Sure, they bugged her about not seeking after a boyfriend, but that was because they cared about her.

She was excited to be able to see her good friend again. It had been several years since they had last spent time together, right before she moved to Pine Corners to attend the School for the Blind in neighboring Wilson City. That had been ... eight years ago? It seemed impossible that it had been that long, but it was true. How had she ever survived this long, she wondered.

Pine Corners wasn't a bad place to live. It was small and comfortable, and the people were friendly. Independent living for a blind person wasn't easy, especially in a larger community. On the other hand, she had no problems maneuvering around the town, even though many considered her as the town's token blind person. Ah, well, she shrugged. It could be worse. At least here they accept her for who she was.

She reached over and put her hand on her backpack. Her suitcase was in the luggage bay below their feet, but she wanted the special, personal items close to her. One of those items was a critical component to the EMP generator, safely in a padded box at the bottom of the bag.

She fought the urge to ask the driver how long until they reached Portland. She knew it would be a few hours, and he would let her know when they got close.

Slipping on a pair of stereo headphones, she felt through the braille-labeled CDs in her bag, choosing one and putting it in the player. The soft tones were a pleasant distraction, and she leaned back and let the music carry her away.

And she dreamt of meeting Doc Savage.

-----

## Chapter Six

We arrived in Portland just around 10 a.m., and headed directly for the house I knew as home for many years. Clark had gotten through a couple of lights before they changed to red, so he was a minute or two ahead of me.

"Perry?" suddenly came the bass voice from the big rig.

"Yeah, Clark."

"I can see the house," he reported.

"How's it look?" I said eagerly.

"Good. And ..." There was a moment of silence. "I think you better brace yourself."

My excitement turned to concern. "Why?"

"You'll see," Clark replied, and I thought I detected an upward change in his tone.

Dot, standing at the top of the steps, suddenly exclaimed, "Oh, wow!"

"What is it?"

"Look!" she said, pointing ahead of us. I knew she had a higher vantage point than I, and that we'd be in range before I could get a straight answer.

Then we came into range and my jaw dropped.

"Oh ... my."

The banner was as wide as the house itself -- WELCOME HOME CLARK AND PERRY -- and there were at least thirty people waving. The large semi was being assisted by several people, who guided him into a parking area next to the house, a tract of land that Jack had purchased and was now leveled in preparation for future construction.

I was speechless.

Dot had stepped down to my level, but was so swept up in the excitement of the moment; she couldn't sit on the steps as she often did. She pointed to a pair of brothers wearing reflective vests and carrying glowing wands. "That must be our escort," I commented, following their lead.

Moving in unison, they directed us into a space between Clark's rig and the house, while other brothers had moved into the street and redirected traffic. In no time at all, we were parked, and instructed to shut down the engines.

### The Bronze Saga #3: BRONZE AVENGERS

Goliath had been parked adjacent to the flattened lot where I assumed the tent would go, and Clark had descended from the cab into a mob of people offering hugs and handshakes and pats on the back. I wished I had a camera getting all this.

Meanwhile, Dot had moved down to the foot of the stairs, standing on the platform at the front of the RV, and gaped. "Wow," she repeated.

-----  
"My GAWD, ain't this somethin'?" commented Jack Heady about the semi tractor-trailer RV as he reached Clark and gave him a handshake and a hug.

Just then Bonnie stepped down apprehensively from the cab of the truck. Jack's head looked up and his eyes went wide. He took a moment to compose himself before saying, "And you must be Bonnie Clayton."

"As y'all must be Jack Heady," she replied, diplomatically refusing to comment on his reaction.

Jack's eyebrows perked up. "Georgia?"

"Close," she replied. "New Orleans, Louisiana."

His face broke into a toothy smile. "Ah'm from Tennessee! Makes us practically neighbors! Welcome to the family!" Without preamble, he reached out and gave her a big hug that took her by surprise.

-----  
"Ready to meet the howling mob?" I asked, unbuckling my seat belt and standing.

"Bring it on," replied Dot, as I hit the control to open the door.

The two who had guided us in were the first ones to welcome us as we stepped down, followed by many others. We got hugged and patted and my hand was starting to hurt after a few minutes. But I wouldn't have missed it for the world.

And there were, of course, the questions. "How are ya?" "What'cha been up to?" "Are you guys okay?" "What's been going on?" "Where'd you get the rigs?" "How much did this beauty cost you?" "What kind of mileage does this get?" "Can I see the inside?" "Can I take it for a drive?" "How long you gonna stay?" "Are you back for good?" "Can I join you when you go?" We did our best to answer them as we could, reacquainting us with old friends as we introduced ourselves to new arrivals to the house.

My eyes caught sight of an old man in a worn leather jacket, standing off to one side, waiting his turn with a patient smile. I turned to him and he closed the distance, offering a hand. "Don't know if you remember me ... it's been a while."

I examined the weather-beaten face and the shoulder-length grey hair tied at the back, and desperately tried to focus the vague image in my memory. Then I exclaimed, "Jim? Jim Bronson?"

He nodded. I released his hand and wrapped my arms around his slender-but-muscular frame; we buried our faces in each other's shoulder.

### The Bronze Saga #3: BRONZE AVENGERS

Jim Bronson and his antique Triumph motorcycle had been broken down at the side of the highway when Clark and I came through on our first road trip east, and we stopped to give him some assistance. He'd been roaming the highways of America for several decades, an explorer of sorts, but mostly a drifter without a place to call home. We helped him in more ways than one, pointing him in the direction of Portland ... and the cross of Christ. Now he had a home on earth, and the hope of an eternal home in heaven.

"What happened to your old bike?" I asked curiously.

"Well, Jack and the guys replaced my old Triumph with a restored one that used'ta belong to a collector down in Ojai. Same model, same year, same color, just like mine -- it was like stepping backwards in time."

"Jim, I can't remember -- were you here when Dot and I got married?"

He shook his head. "Musta been on the road then. I still take the bike out for weeks at a time, runnin' round the countryside ... but now I do it for Jesus. And I know I always got a homebase to come back to." He smiled.

"I am so happy for you," I said smiling, punctuating my feelings with another hug.

-----  
Leaving Jack and Bonnie talking about their respective homelands, Clark walked around Goliath for a once-over, then headed towards the house. The upstairs floor was obscured by the immense banner, and he felt the love that went into making it. Apart from a new paint job and a new roof, the house hadn't changed. He waved back at the men on the wraparound porch; a few old familiar faces stood out among the new ones who were impressed at the big bronze man, and he grinned back at them.

One man seemed to be following him at a distance, trying unsuccessfully not to be noticed. He was in his late 20's, and his body showed the deteriorating effects of cocaine and heroin. The young man seemed to be fascinated yet shy, almost afraid to get close to Clark. After leading him along a few more steps, Clark stopped and did a slow, deliberate pivot, facing the man and stopping him in his tracks. Casually placing his hands into his pockets, he smiled and introduced himself, "I'm Clark."

"Y-yeah, I know," the other man replied hesitatingly. "The big man everybody's been talking about. My-my name is Todd. Todd Wiggins. I'm new."

"Kicking the habit?" Clark gently asked.

Todd nodded. "Tryin' to."

Clark slowly pulled his hands out of his pockets. He gestured towards the house. "You're in good hands. These people have been through it just like you, and they'll be there for you."

"I know," he acknowledged. "I'm sick of it. I wanna be clean ... really clean."

"Then you're in the right place with the right company." He opened his arms wide, closed the gap, and wrapped them around the man who bore the scars of addiction. Todd just let Clark hold him for a moment or two, then his arms went around the big man's waist and he returned the hug.

### The Bronze Saga #3: BRONZE AVENGERS

There suddenly came an ear-blasting whistle from the porch of the house. Jack Heady had two fingers in his mouth, and was waving with the other arm. "CAN I GET EVERYONE'S ATTENTION FOR A MINUTE?" he yelled.

Clark and Todd joined the movement towards the porch.

"Perry ... Clark ... Dot ... Bonnie," he addressed with sincerity. "Since it's probably been MONTHS since y'all have had any kind of good old home cookin', we thought we'd do something special for ya!" He paused. "We've got a big ol' barbecue out in the back, and a couple tons of steaks and burgers just waiting to get cooked!" He paused as everyone cheered their approval. "But first, while I've got everybody's attention, let's have a word of prayer to thank God for bringin' our brothers and sisters safely home."

Clark and Todd stood side-by-side, and Clark draped an arm around the younger man's shoulders as they, too, bowed their heads for the prayer.

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After talking to Jack Heady, Bonnie mingled the best she could, but mostly she observed. Almost all of the people around her were men, and they kept a safe distance from her. She knew the pattern well: because she was taller than the average woman, she was either a threat to them or an Everest to be conquered.

However, as she wandered around the area, ending up in front of a large porch, she was pleasantly surprised by how the people here treated her ... and each other. There was a certain familial feeling to it, like an extended family.

Sure, there was a certain camaraderie among mercenaries when fighting side-by-side in foreign lands, but she always had to be on her guard against the hidden agenda of the person next to her. On the other hand, during her stint with APEX, the all-woman 'terrorist' group, their bond of sisterhood was the closest thing Bonnie had felt to a family since her own had been taken from her. Their cause pushed aside individual agendas, and they were a team.

But here ... this was something even more different than APEX. There was the abundance of love and concern they showed towards Clark, Perry, and Dot. But there was more. It nagged at her sensibilities like a beautiful butterfly fluttering just beyond her peripheral vision.

"Amazing, isn't it?" came a voice from behind her.

Bonnie looked up onto the porch where Dot leaned against the railing. "Uh huh," she agreed.

"Stay there; I'll join you," Dot said, and came around to Bonnie's side. "I saw that look on your face; I know how you feel. It was the same way for me when Perry and I came here during our honeymoon," she admitted. "I felt so out of place, like the new girl on the block. I didn't know how to handle people who didn't have an ulterior motive to everything they said or did. I even found myself wondering if all this compassion was real or just good acting."

"And ...?" she asked with a tilt of her head.

"Oh, it's real, all right!" She smiled. "Now please don't get me wrong -- there's a lot of guys in here trying to get free of their junk, and they're probably just as skeptical as you. But they acknowledge this place for what it is: a refuge in the midst of the storms of life, a safe port where a lot of good people are trying to help them out of their mess while coping with their own messes."

"Like a support group," offered Bonnie.

Dot shook her head slowly. "No ... it's more like a family. They watch out for one another with a love that goes beyond what a support group can offer."

"Okay," she conceded. "I was just thinking it was --"

"DOT!"

They turned to the source of the sudden shout. A young woman with plum-colored hair was running towards them. Dot recognized the woman, and ran to intercept her. The other woman was wearing a low-hemmed peasant dress and a Seattle Mariners sweatshirt, and she and Dot came together in a crashing embrace. Laughing, they walked back to where Bonnie stood slightly perplexed. The younger woman grinned despite the lack of a couple of teeth, and her sunken eyes crinkled at the corners.

Dot made the introductions. "Bonnie, this is Monica --"

Monica finished the sentence, extending her hand, "Resident computer whiz and occasional token white female for this motley crew, at your service!" She looked up at Bonnie and added, "Man, you're almost as tall as Clark!"

"Correction," said Bonnie with a grin. "I AM as tall as Clark." And she accepted the hand.

"I believe it! Welcome to the clan!" She turned to Dot. "Have you two met the new cook?"

"NEW cook? What happened to Cindy?"

"She got married about three months ago. They moved to Canada, and get this ... she's pregnant!"

"All right!" Dot replied excitedly. "When's she due?"

"October!"

"That's great!"

Monica continued. "Cheryl's the new boss of the kitchen ... she's probably up to her elbows in barbecue sauce. Let's join her!"

Without waiting for a reply, Monica grabbed Dot's hand and started towing her in the direction of a column of smoke on the other side of the house. After a pause, and a glance at Dot's anxious look backwards, Bonnie nodded and followed.

-----

"Are you sure he won't mind?"

Dot stopped at the door and turned to Monica. "Naw. He just doesn't want a lot of people walking through our home like tourists through Graceland."

She opened the door. "We wanted the driver's area to be down here rather than like most RVs. The fact that it's closer to the ground means we get a less-distorted view of the road. And it allows us to have an upstairs with a forward viewing area."

"Cool," said Monica, following Dot up the stairs. From the upper deck, she could see all around the RV. "This is great!"

"Yeah. Makes it fun on those long drives. It always reminds me of those scenic cars on trains."

Monica nodded her head in agreement. "For sure! I took a train from Los Angeles to Chicago once, and that was the best part of the trip!"

They passed through the living room area, with its couch and lounge chairs, and the galley area with a two-person table.

Dot showed Monica the kitchen and pantry, explaining the unique pantry. "It's on a conveyor system that runs down into one of the bays underneath us. Say that I'm looking for cereal. I hit this button here ... and the conveyor circulates before this opening here ... until the cereal comes into view. It gives the small pantry five times as much room."

Moving past a storage area, they reached the exquisite bathroom and shower. "Wow! This is better than the one in the house!" gawked Monica.

They finally reached the bedroom. Dot explained that she had been the creative force behind this room, and was very pleased with the results. Monica agreed with her, as they sat on the end of the bed and looked up the length of the RV. "This is a very nice rig," she beamed.

"I like it. Hey, if you're going to be living on the road 90% of the year, might as well make the most of it."

Monica saw a laptop computer on a side table, and stared at it a moment. "Perry's computer?"

Dot nodded. "Yeah. Top of the line Cray sub-notebook." She ran off the impressive stats on the machine. Monica simply gawked at the high-tech tool.

"I would kill for one of those," she finally mumbled.

"Tell you what. Why don't I talk to Clark and Perry about getting you one. It's not as if we're scrimping on finances."

Monica surprised Dot with a sudden hug. "Thank you thank you thank you thank you!"

-----

Jack and Clark stood munching off a couple of well-filled plates. Clark commented about the quality of the food, and Jack told him about how Cheryl came to join them.

"Hey, Clark, what would it take to get a look inside that rig of yours?"

"Well, we really don't want a lot of people roaming through ... after all, it is our home. But I think we can wander inside for a few minutes." He paused. "How about after we're done?"

### The Bronze Saga #3: BRONZE AVENGERS

"Great! Don't wanna pass up this food!" He took another mouthful of hamburger.

Ten minutes later they stood before the side of Goliath's trailer. Clark reached under the lip of the trailer and touched a control. A second later the panel in the side of the trailer started separating, popping out an inch, then began to move, unhinging at the bottom and swinging slowly down until the top edge touched the ground. As it did, they saw that the inside of the panel was reinforced and formed steps that led up to a door.

Clark walked up the steps and placed a plastic card against a panel next to the door, causing the door to slide effortlessly aside. "C'mon," he said to Jack, who didn't need prompting.

The door opened into a hallway. "Towards the front is my exercise room, towards the back is the bathroom, bunk area, galley, living room, and garage."

"Garage? You got a car in here, too?"

"Yes. The door at the rear swings down to form a ramp. I'll bring it out later, but we can take a look now."

They walked through the living and dining areas to a wall with a rubber-sealed door. Past the door was a small but functional garage and workshop. Jack was impressed at the number of power tools in the room, all well-secured to keep them from coming loose while the rig was in motion.

They moved back into the living area for a closer look. There was a couch and a couple of durable leather-covered chairs. Jack commented at the entertainment center against the one wall.

Towards the front of the trailer, explained Clark, was the galley and bunk area. Clark explained about the special bunks, where they had borrowed the idea, and that each bunk was a self-contained micro-bedroom in and of itself, complete with lights, temperature control, privacy panel, and a compact entertainment center.

At the front of the trailer was what Clark called the Workout Room. It was a simple space, with mirrored walls and ceiling, padded floor, and a set of weights securely bolted to the far wall.

"Glad you're keeping up on your exercises. I remember when you first got here. You looked strong enough, but all that time in the cavern had atrophied your muscles."

They returned to the living room. "On that subject, Jack, have you any new leads to finding my cavern?"

"You know you'd be the first to hear, Clark." He slowly shook his head. "I checked both state and federal agencies, just in case it was a refuge or a game preserve ... but I've come up empty every time. Not that I've given up, mind you -- not by a long shot!"

"I appreciate all you've done, Jack, in this and in the group home network."

"Yeah, at least that part's improving. We've got seventeen houses throughout four states, and I've been talking with the guys in the house who might know of other places to check."

"Good. The cards are working fine. Gave out three of them in the last week. Christine's got the details."

Jack smiled. "Yeah, I've talked to her a few times. She's a neat lady. Can you tell me any more about her?"

"Not much to say, except that we've given her a second chance, too, and we've all benefitted from her talents."

"Clark? Y'think she'd be interested in meetin' an old coot like me?"

Clark grinned. "Ask her."

Jack grinned back. "I might just do that."

-----

The bus pulled into the terminal. The driver announced, "Okay, Miss Bradshaw, here we are. Watch your step."

"Thanks, Mike!"

Sunni put the backpack on and gave Sequoia the instruction to heel. She maneuvered to the top of the stairs until the door opened. As she stepped down to the concrete, she heard a voice call her name: "Sunni? It's Mark!"

"Hiya, Mark," she returned. "Where's Kari?"

"Over by the door! You need an assist?"

"Yeah, that'd be great!" she said, and held out her right hand. He maneuvered around and offered his left elbow.

Several yards ahead of them, another voice called out, "Hi, Sunni!"

She beamed, "Hi, Karen!"

As they walked towards the bus terminal building, Mark said, "Once we're in, I'll get your luggage. I'll need your claim ticket."

"Thanks! It's in the front pocket of my backpack."

They all moved to the left just inside the building, clear of any traffic, and the two old friends came together in a big hug. Mark moved away to get the claim ticket and retrieved Sunni's wheeled suitcase. As he looked back, he offered up a quick prayer for the evening ahead. He wanted desperately to attend the first night of the tent meetings, but he didn't want to push Sunni into what would be a last-minute surprise. Since she was Karen's good friend, they had decided to let Karen take the lead in the invitation, while he supported in prayer and encouragement.

-----

The sun was down, the tent was up, and people had been showing up for a good hour. Jack's advance work with the smaller local churches and on the streets were paying off. Two recently-purchased used minivans were shuttling back and forth, bringing whoever desired to attend.

I was impressed.

### The Bronze Saga #3: BRONZE AVENGERS

I walked around the perimeter of the tent with a flashlight, giving things a final check, and then passed through the double-chambered entrance that kept the air from escaping too fast and causing deflation. The chairs were set up and the tent's micro-filament lighting system caused the ceiling to glow from the inside as well as the outside. It was an indirect lighting, bright enough on the inside to work. The sound system was compact and simple, and the dome had been designed to be acoustically sufficient.

As I looked over the crowd, I was surprised at my nervousness. This was far from the first time we'd preached in this tent, but it was the first time with a home audience. I recognized a few familiar faces in the crowd, and moved about to talk to them and give hugs.

A few minutes later, my eyes caught the large figure of Mark Eidemiller coming into the tent. His wife, Karen, was at his side, and they were followed by another blind woman with flaming red hair. As Mark looked around for a place, his eyes caught mine. We shared a smile and a nod, and they moved on to take a place near the left aisle. Despite the sour look on the other woman's face, I was glad she had come.

-----

It was time for services to begin.

I moved to the front and held up my hands for attention. The crowd hushed. I offered a word of welcome and introduction, followed by a quick opening prayer.

The lights dimmed a little, and the flat projection screen glowed with the words to several songs, both classic hymns and contemporary praise and worship numbers. Our singing was acapella because it brought out the rich variations of people's singing voices, especially considering the acoustics of the tent. In a word, it was grand.

The lights came up again, and the screen dimmed.

Clark stepped up to the podium. He was dressed quite casually in jeans and the TRUST JESUS tee-shirt he had received from Mark last year; I caught the surprised look on my old friend's face, and grinned.

Clark stood motionless for several seconds, like a silent colossus; he was an imposing figure that drew everyone's attention. Then in a voice that was almost conversational, he asked, "Does anyone here remember Doc Savage?"

-----

Just a few moments earlier, Sunni Bradshaw had been uncomfortably fidgeting in her seat. I should've seen this coming, she thought. I knew Karen had gotten religion, but I should've resisted this more than I did. Oh well, she mentally surrendered; it'll be over soon, and hopefully they won't bug me about it all the time I'm here.

But with the preacher's opening line, Sunni froze in her seat. Did he just say Doc Savage? she thought, her attention snapping back to the speaker.

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"In the 1940's he was known as 'The Man of Bronze'. He was an inventor, explorer, world traveler, adventurer, crime fighter, daredevil, etc. A lot of people have said that I look like him. I'm truly flattered,

### The Bronze Saga #3: BRONZE AVENGERS

although I used to feel otherwise; I'd hide the resemblance by letting my hair grow long, or shave it off entirely." He paused. "But now I embrace the fact that I look like Doc Savage.

"You see, Doc Savage had a dream. He believed that those who committed crimes need not die for their deeds, nor drain society by spending a lifetime behind bars. He wanted to rehabilitate criminals, take away their evil tendencies, and turn them into productive members of society. In short, he wanted to give everyone who committed crimes a second chance at life."

-----  
Yes -- exactly, thought Sunni, that's just what Doc was trying for! But, in the long run, it didn't work.

-----  
"And yet, for all his good intentions, he failed.

"He failed because he tried doing it using his own understanding. He failed because he forced people to be changed. He didn't give them an option, he didn't give them a choice. And that failure was what brought down his whole empire.

"He vanished. And he died. The Doc Savage of the 1940's lives no longer ... but his dream lives on.

"His dream lives on simply because it wasn't his dream in the first place. He didn't know it, but the dream began two thousand years earlier in a stable in Bethlehem. Jesus Christ had the dream first, and fulfilled it ... because Jesus never forced people to change. Instead, he offered ... he invited sinners to come to him. Tonight we will have such an invitation. I tell you now so it will not be a surprise. I will invite those who want to change their lives to come forward and pray with us for that change."

He paused and shifted gears. "Have you ever been deserted, abandoned, rejected? Have those closest to you left you high and dry?"

-----  
Been there, done that, related Sunni bitterly. Where are you now ... Mom, Dad, Stephen ... always a million miles away, living it up in some remote part of the world? When did we last talk? Thanksgiving, last year? And Steven, I haven't talked to you in years. Was I that much of an embarrassment to you ... were you so ashamed of me ... just because I was born blind?

Mom ... Dad ... you gave me all the stuff I needed ... provided me with a nanny to care for me ... and then ignored me. I was one of your charities, something you could throw money at and pretend your conscience was appeased.

She clenched her fists in her lap and cursed her family.

-----  
"You're not alone if you have. Two thousand years ago, Jesus Christ rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, while thousands upon thousands of people stood on either side of the road, paving his way with palm leaves and their own coats, and joyfully cheered, 'Hosanna! Hosanna to the son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!'"

### The Bronze Saga #3: BRONZE AVENGERS

"And yet, one week later ... a mere seven days ... when Pilate asked those same people, 'What shall I do with Jesus whom you call the Christ -- your Messiah?' they angrily screamed back, 'Crucify him! Crucify him!'"

"Those same people who had cheered him ... now hated him." He paused. "His closest friends denied that they ever knew him, and ran frightened into the night. When he needed them most, they abandoned him." He paused again. "Even God the Father seemed to reject his only Son. As Jesus hung on the cross, suspended between heaven and earth, alone, he cried out 'MY GOD! MY GOD! WHY HAVE YOU FORSAKEN ME?'"

-----

Sunni winced at the booming voice crying out to God, and thought about her nanny. I remember that! Elise used to tell me stories about Jesus when I was a kid. But I didn't ... how could he take it all? Everybody deserting him ... being tortured ... then nailed to the cross ... how could he stand it?

-----

"He died on the cross ... alone and abandoned. Was he helpless? No way! He had the power to come down from the cross at any time. He had ten thousand angels waiting for his cry, waiting to rush to his side, free him from the pain of the cross. He could've also gotten even with those traitors who'd rejected him!"

"But ... he didn't," he said softly.

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Wow! Jesus had the power to blast 'em all, and he passed it up? That's crazy! Why didn't he do it?

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"Jesus Christ went through more pain than any of us have ever experienced. Not just physical pain, but the pain of taking all the harassment from the very ones he was there to help. You say that's crazy? Why would he put up with all that for a people that hated him?"

He stopped and waited a moment, then two. Then he said one word, and let it hang in the air. "Love."

"While all that was going on, he prayed -- not for himself, but for them: 'Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.'" He paused, then opened his Bible and read from two bookmarked places. "'For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.' 'Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.'"

"We all know the way it goes." He closed the book and held it flat in his palm at shoulder height. "Jesus Christ died. But he didn't stay dead. Three days later the tomb was empty and a resurrected Jesus walked the earth. He promised that he would rise again, and he kept his promise."

"He also promises us a life that is full, both now and later." He read again from his Bible. "'I have come so that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.' 'And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent.' 'Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life.'"

### The Bronze Saga #3: BRONZE AVENGERS

He looked out at the audience. "For a moment, examine your own lives. Is it a fulfilled life, one overflowing with love, peace, and joy ... the kind of life you wished everybody had? Or is it just the opposite, where each day is a hopeless struggle and each morning is a painful reminder of a going-nowhere existence?"

-----

Sunni considered her own life.

She had her electronics, and Deek and Rhonda, who were good friends ... and there were others within the Bronze Avengers whom she called friends. Other than that, there weren't any real challenges in her life. Didn't look too good, did it? she concluded.

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"If your life has been one that's empty, Jesus Christ can transform it into one that's full. And if it's already full, He can make it even more full, beyond your wildest imagination. That transformation can be yours tonight!"

-----

Sunni grunted. Ha! What can Jesus do ... what magic can he do to me to make living in Pine Corners full?

-----

"One of Doc Savage's own men, 'Ham' Brooks, was a famous man ... a lawyer and adventurer. He had everything this world would attribute to success -- money, friends, and fame. But inside ... inside ... his life was empty, and led to his own self-destruction and suicide. His final days were filled with ... self-pity ... and loneliness. It was a tragic waste of the gift of life given to him by God."

-----

Sunni hung her head.

The breakup of Doc's empire had been years before she had been born, but she felt like she knew all of Doc's team, and Ham's death had been one of the hardest things to understand. Why would he kill himself, with so much to live for? she thought. Had his life been so empty that death seemed the only way out? I know the feeling.

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"But I've also seen lives turned around literally at death's door. I've can tell you that, when a man dies knowing Jesus Christ, there is no fear of death, only hope. 'Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me.' 'For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind.'"

-----

He's right, she thought, remembering her nanny. Elise was that way. There, in the nursing home, she wasn't afraid to die. She kept mentioning something about a mansion that was waiting for her. I never asked her

what she meant ... I just figured she was going senile there towards the end. Maybe she wasn't. Maybe this is what this guy is talking about, peace in the face of death.

I wish I had that kind of peace.

-----

"Where is your security? What do you base your hope upon?" the big preacher asked the audience. "If it's anything but Jesus Christ, it will eventually whither up and blow away. So maybe it's time for a change. Jesus Christ can make that change in your life and give you a hope for the future, beyond what this life has to offer.

"Do you hope in what will come in the future? Can you see what will happen in your life tomorrow? ... or next week? ... or next year? God can. He knows every detail just as if it were yesterday, and He knows how to carry you through the rough spots like a father holds the hand of a child through a patch of thorn bushes, knowing just which steps will get you through the narrow path to the other side."

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The picture of being guided through thorn bushes was very vivid to Sunni. She never had a father to hold her hand in her difficulties. She had Sequoia, sure ... but it wasn't the same thing. And there had been Elise, but she's gone now. I miss you, Elise! I really wish I'd paid more attention to you when you were talking about the things this preacher's talking about.

-----

"The Bible says, 'Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.' The peace is there, but there's a price to pay." He grinned. "YOU have to come to HIM and ask. You can't just stay in the pit where you're at and hope to get that rest on your own merits or efforts. It won't work that way.

"You must let go of the rocks you have been holding onto all your life, and let God take over. If you think you can handle it yourself or pave your own highway to Heaven, then you're going to be in for a very big disappointment at the end of this life.

"But for those who know they don't have anything to give, anything they can do for God, and think they're nothing about nothing, then they are the ones who God has eternal life for."

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My life has been a waste, Sunni reflected. What I have back in Pine Corners is one boring day after another, until ... I die. And then what? But this guy says that Jesus can make a change in me. I don't know ... I just don't know. But there's Elise. She knew. I want to know, too, just like her. But how?

-----

Clark opened his mouth to say something else, but stopped a moment. Then he opened his arms before him and announced, "Now is the time for decision. Heaven or hell -- it's your choice. To those who want to give it all up for Jesus Christ, then come forward and let's pray together."

-----  
"Softly and tenderly, Jesus is calling, calling for you and for me ..." The rendition of the well-known hymn, like a heavenly choir, came from compact Bose speakers around the tent.

But Sunni didn't notice it, nor the tears that were forming in her eyes. She just knew that she had to go forward.

"Forward," she said aloud.

Sequoia immediately responded to the command, standing and taking a step. Sunni's hand unconsciously moved down to the handle of the harness, and she stood. Under normal circumstances, she'd stop the dog and reprimand him for the unprovoked action, but this time he was going her way.

-----  
As I scanned the audience, seeing a few people rise in response to the invitation, I was excited to see the blind woman with the dog pull suddenly ahead. Mark and Karen, realizing what was happening, quickly followed. I silently thanked God for touching her heart, then looked over at Clark. An older man who had been sitting close to the front had responded to the call; they were already kneeling together in prayer.

I wanted to join my friends over on the other side of the tent, but there were others, closer, responding to the invitation. A teenaged boy and girl -- the girl in tears, the boy comforting her -- were approaching close to me, and my attention turned to them.

-----  
Bonnie Clayton stood at the back of the tent and observed.

It hadn't taken long for her to confirm that Clark, Perry, and Dot had a hidden agenda in her invitation to join them. She even suspected Pat had a hand in this, although she couldn't put her finger on how. She knew they wanted her to become a Christian, and she was touched to know they cared about her that much to want her to share their beliefs. But she wasn't ready for such a commitment in her life, and sure wasn't about ready to let anyone press her into one.

As she looked across the audience, watching people move towards the front, she recalled her own hidden agenda. Ever since Clark had busted her butt in hand-to-hand combat back in the Valley of the Vanished, she'd developed a healthy respect for him. Later, during their 'first date', she found out they had much in common, plus some distinct differences she could let slide.

Of all the men she had known in her life, this Clark Dent aka Clark Savage Jr. had a unique combination of brains, brawn, and character that was actually very sexy to her.

When this is all over, she thought with a grin, we'll see who converts who.

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Chapter Seven

"Can I see him now, can I, can I?" begged Sunni, tugging excitedly on my sleeve. As we stood outside the tent, I could see how Christ had already changed her. "Please, I gotta see him!"

I smiled and looked at my watch. "Hang on a second. Let me check."

I passed through the tent's 'airlock', and saw Clark sitting alone at the front of the tent. This was a recent practice of Clark's, to clear everyone from the tent and devote twenty minutes to solitude and prayer for those who had responded to the invitation. It was also a good time to recharge the spiritual batteries, a need I could well relate to.

And if anyone wanted to talk to him, he'd be more than happy to do it afterward. Dot and I would talk to those with urgent needs, and perform a spiritual triage on visitors, determining priorities. So far, it had worked well, with everything in order.

I said Clark's name softly. His head raised and he stood and turned in my direction. "Yes, Perry?"

"Ready for visitors?"

He stretched, placing his palms together before him, raising them together as high as they could go, while performing a breathing exercise. As he exhaled, refreshed, he said, "Yes. Who's here?"

I smiled. "Sunni Bradshaw's chomping at the bit ... she really wants to meet you. Then there's Mark; he's being patient about letting Sunni go ahead, but I wouldn't let him wait too long." I paused. "Jack had a talk with the brothers from the house before the tent meeting, and asked them to give you some space ... considering we're going to be right next door for the next few days."

"Thank him for me, will you. And send Sunni in." He started walking down the aisle, while I went outside and returned with the redhead at my elbow. Her guide dog obediently on her other side, we stopped in front of Clark.

I moved away while Clark made the introduction: "I'm Clark Dent. It's good to meet you."

Sunni's excited face became practically incandescent as she wrapped her arms around Clark's waist and buried her face in his chest. His arms went around her, and he could feel her body shaking as she wept unashamedly.

Several seconds later, she lifted her head and asked, "How did you know?"

Clark knew what she was talking about, but led her in by asking back, "Know what?"

"About my family deserting me because I'm blind ... about the loneliness, the frustration! How did you know?"

"I didn't," he said simply. "God did. And He spoke to your pain, like He has spoken to mine. His Word says, 'Cast your cares on Him, because He cares for you.' Do you want to do this?"

She nodded furiously. "Oh, yes, yes! I'm so tired of the pain! But I don't know where to start!"

"We start in prayer, for His guidance. Then we'll ask God to remove the pain and fill you with his love, peace, and joy. Do you want that, Sunni?"

"Oh, yes!" she sighed.

### The Bronze Saga #3: BRONZE AVENGERS

"I'll start, then I'll turn it over to you. You don't need fancy words ... just say what's in your heart, as if you were talking to me." He took her hands in his and bowed his head. Then he offered up a simple petition on her behalf. Sunni nodded every now and then, agreeing with his prayer. When it was over, she gave him another big hug and asked, "Can we talk more? I'm here with Mark and Karen, and won't be here for long."

"I'm sure we can. I know Mark wanted to talk to me. Why don't we see how things are after I finish with him."

"Okay." She gave him another hug. "Thanks!"

-----

Mark Eidemiller shook Clark's hand and looked up at him. After a moment of silence, he grinned and said, "Y'know, I actually tried rehearsing what I was going to say to you now. I wanted everything to go off without being nervous. And now -" His face cracked a big grin. "- I can't remember a word I was going to say."

They both laughed, and Clark gestured them towards a row of vacant seats. "I wanted to thank you for the tee-shirt," said Clark. "I'm glad you were able to find the right size."

"It was the biggest one they had; Perry gave me the size. Do you still rip through shirts, or was that just a part of the stories?"

He grinned. "The shirts back then didn't have the stretch of today's materials."

"Since Perry told me you were alive, I've done a lot of research to refresh myself on your exploits. Did you know there are still a couple of hospitals in other countries, still carrying your name?"

His eyes brightened. "Really? Where?"

Mark gave the information, adding, "You'd probably be surprised at how many people still side with you. They understand what you were trying to do, and can forgive your methods at the time." He paused, then added, "By the way, I like the way you diverted attention in the sermon by directly associating yourself with Doc Savage."

"It's called 'hiding in plain sight'. I hope it works."

"Me, too."

"Perry has told me about your ministry. Quite unique. I commend you both for your boldness."

Mark shrugged off the praise. "It's a niche God put us in, and it continues to work. If the need arises, would you mind us referring others to your ministry?"

"I'd consider it an honor. Has Jack told you about the group houses?"

"Yes. Karen and I are thinking about a house on the eastside. Since you're willing to buy the house and keep it going, all you need are people willing to keep it running."

"Exactly."

"I know you probably have a full schedule, but ... I'd really like to talk to you again."

"I don't see a problem with that. We'll be in town a few days; I'm sure we can find time. And I'll give you one of my cards."

"Thank you very much!" They stood. "Can I introduce you to my wife?"

"It would be my pleasure."

They walked together towards the exit.

-----

I was outside the tent, talking with Jack Heady, when Dot came alongside. "Guys, Clark wants to go out and get something to eat. He wants to know if we want to join him ... his treat!"

An hour later we were sitting around a large dining table in a local open-all-night restaurant. Clark was sitting at one end, with Sunni Bradshaw on one side, and Mark Eidemiller on the other.

Mark and I were involved in an intense discussion about the association between evangelism and eating.

"Fact," I stated. "Food has always been an integral part in Bible events. If it hadn't been for the fruit on the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, man would not have fallen."

"Now that's stretching it, Perry," responded Mark with a frown. "On the other hand, look at the way Jesus fed the multitude at the same time He taught them. We both know that people are more prone to listening if their creature comforts are met."

"Sometimes," I countered. "But missions feed AFTER the message."

"True. But you can't deny that some of Jesus' best ministry was when there was food and drink involved. Consider Matthew the tax collector ... Simon the Pharisee ... Zacchaeus the publican ... and even the little meal of broiled fish after his resurrection when he challenged Peter with 'Do you love me?'"

I nodded, swallowing some of my own meal. "It wasn't a coincidence that he told the parable of the Prodigal Son at the house of Matthew, surrounded by all those people who needed to hear it. The simple act of sitting around with food and drink puts everybody on the same page. All people eat, more or less in the same way, whether they be beggar or king. And while these people were eating, side-by-side with this 'teacher from Galilee', their guard was down and they were being ministered to. Now, Jesus could've preached the exact same thing in the synagogue, but how many of those friends of Matthew would've gone within ten miles of there, let alone be open to hear it?"

"Right! But they could hardly walk out on a free meal at Matthew's place. And to know that Jesus was there made what he said ... easier to swallow."

Mark grinned and I groaned.

-----

Clark turned to his right and asked Sunni, "Tell me about your parents."

### The Bronze Saga #3: BRONZE AVENGERS

The sensitive question startled the blind woman for a moment. She hesitated in responding, but finally opened up to him. "Like I said, I was born blind. I've got an older brother, too. His name is Stephen."

"What does he do for a living?"

She shrugged. "Anything he wants to, I suppose. It's the same as my parents. They're rich ... a lawyer in California transfers a monthly allowance directly to my bank account ... and my parents never have to see me again. Pitiful, isn't it?"

Clark agreed, but didn't comment aloud. "So how were you raised?"

"A nanny. Elise. Elise Collinworth. She was a wonderful lady."

"Was. She's no longer with us?"

Sunni shook her head, a little sad from the memories. "She died three years ago. I was going to school in Vancouver at the time."

"Did she tell you about Jesus?"

"Oh, yes. I didn't understand it all at the time, but I'm starting to now."

"Good. I'd like to keep in touch with you. You said you were here a short time. Where do you live?"

"Pine Corners, Washington. It's east, near Spokane."

Clark's eyes opened a little wider when she named the town. I also caught the name, and saw his reaction.

"Sunni," Clark asked. "How'd you like to ride with us back to Pine Corners?"

The redhead almost choked on her food. "Ride with you?" she sputtered.

"Certainly. If no one objects." He looked up and asked the question to the group. "Sunni lives in Pine Corners, Washington. Would anyone object to that being our next destination, and Sunni riding with us?"

Dot and Bonnie shook their heads. After a momentary pause, I added, "No problem."

"Then it's settled." He turned back to Sunni. "You're riding with us."

Sunni was practically in tears as she awkwardly reached across the table to hug Clark. "I'll let my friends know tomorrow that I'll not be coming back by bus!"

"Hey, Sunni?" I asked. "We saw something on the news the other day, about Pine Corners -- something about cars mysteriously breaking down? You know anything about it?"

Her reaction was startled, and her response was rushed. "Y-yeah! Everybody in town knows about it. Nobody can figure out how it happens. I don't have a car, so it doesn't bother me!"

Clark and I made eye contact, but otherwise said nothing. The rest of the meal went without event, and things broke up with hugs and handshakes.

-----  
"Clark, that was a dirty trick!"

He gave a half-turn and I could swear there was a smirk on his face. "What trick, brother?"

"You know just what I'm talking about!" I mimicked his tone, repeating his earlier words. "'Would anyone object to that being our next destination, and Sunni riding with us?' Yeah, as if I'm going to be the one dissenting voice. That's not fair!"

"Perry, you have to admit that having Sunni come from Pine Corners is far from coincidental ... true?"

"True. And her response to my question about the cars wasn't what I would've expected."

"Agreed. I can understand her reaction if there was someone in her town -- a friend, for example -- who had suffered the same fate as these hits. But if that were the case, she would have clarified her concern."

"Unless, of course, she's concealing something." I paused. "I know the Word says that love believes all things, but I think our new sister might know more than she's letting on."

"Why don't you talk to Mark and Karen; they've known her longer, perhaps they can shed some light on her attitude."

"Sure. I'll talk to Mark in the morning."

"I'm going to bed. Good night."

"Good night, Clark."

"Perry? I'm sorry if I took advantage of you. But I'm sure God wants us in Pine Corners."

"Yeah -- can't argue that. It's okay. Good night."

-----  
Chapter Eight

The sign on the store's front -- RIMMER'S ELECTRONICS -- was old and weathered, but inside the products were state-of-the-art. Behind the counter, A.J. Rimmer stood from his rocking chair and addressed the two men who came in, "Mornin', Al, Daniel. What can I do for you?"

"A.J., you know about these meltdowns, don't'cha?" asked Brock.

"Who doesn't?" the old gent replied with a smile. "Sure is a lot quieter since they happened, though."

"Quieter?" asked Stern. "How?"

"Well, I'd never gotten used to those boom box cars the kids drive nowadays. But it seems they're getting to be less and less."

### The Bronze Saga #3: BRONZE AVENGERS

The two men looked at one another. "That's true. All of the cars had souped-up sound systems," commented Brock, then turned back to Rimmer. "What's your theory, A.J.?"

The old man shook his head slowly. "Ain't got one. I ain't gonna look a gift horse in the mouth, and this silence is a blessing around this town."

"All those cars came from Larsen's," explained Stern. "And since we do the electronics work for him, we're the prime suspects, as if we'd done some kinda sabotage!"

"We didn't do it ... and we're trying to find out who did," added Brock. "We suspect that somebody in town is doing this, although we don't know how."

Stern continued. "Would you know if you've had any 'unique' purchases of electrical components in the last few months?"

The balding Rimmer grinned and hesitated only for an instant. "The only one who gets things like that around here is Sunni ... Sunni Bradshaw."

Brock scribbled the name on a notepad as Stern asked, "Who's she?"

"I'm surprised you've never met her, especially considering how we all got electronics in common. She's an amazing girl ... she's totally blind, yet, somehow, she can feel the movement of electrical current. Just goes to show you how one sense compensates when another sense is gone."

Both men looked up at Rimmer. "She's ... blind?" stuttered Stern.

He nodded. "Yeah. Like I said, she's really something! I had a VCR that was on the fritz, and took it to her to see if she could find the problem. Well, she read that thing like a book, and fixed the problem in twenty minutes."

The two men looked at one another, then back at Rimmer. "Like you said, amazing. Do you know where she lives?"

"Yeah. She's out by Robinson Road, in that little cul-de-sac where they were going to build all those fancy houses before the construction company went belly up. Know the place?"

Brock nodded. "Which house?"

"Brown house. Outside's kept up, not that it makes any difference to Sunni." He paused and shook his head slowly. "She's a good kid. Can't picture her involved in this sorta stuff."

"Yeah. Good kid," Stern muttered absently.

"Thank you for your help, A.J.," Brock shook the old man's hand, and they left the shop.

"You know what'll happen when we tell Mr. Larsen about this, don't you?" complained Stern once they were in the car. "He'll laugh us out of his office!"

"Relax, Al. Let's follow the lead anyhow. Right now, it can't get worse."

-----

### The Bronze Saga #3: BRONZE AVENGERS

A large teenaged boy greeted them at the door of the brown house. "Yeah?"

"Uh-we're looking for Sunni Bradshaw," said Brock. "This where she lives?"

"Yeah, but she's not here right now. What'cha want?"

"A.J. Rimmer told us about her, said she was an electronics wonder. I've got a short wave set that's not working, and I was hoping she could tell me what's wrong with it."

The boy relaxed. "Yeah, that's Sunni. Something else, ain't she?"

Brock nodded his head. "From what we've heard. When will she be back?"

"She out of town. Be back in about a week. You want me to take your names and numbers?"

"Sure." Stern scribbled his home phone on the back of a page from his notebook, and handed it to the boy. "Thanks."

"Sure thing," he replied. "Later."

They left the house and climbed back into their car. Once clear of the cul-de-sac, Stern said, "We still don't know if she's the one."

"Maybe. One thing's for sure: if these attacks stop while she's gone, there may be a connection."

"Should we tell the boss?"

He shook his head. "Not yet." He looked back in the direction of the cul-de-sac. "I wanna see inside that house. Let's find a place where we can watch. When the kid leaves, I'll slip us in the back way."

"Dan, you're talking breaking-and-entering! Are you out of your mind?"

"Al, our representatives are on the line, and there's nothing stopping the boss from tossing our butts into jail if we can't come up the real culprit. So I say the ends justifies the means. Are you with me?"

The other man sat silently for a few seconds. "Yeah, I'm with you ... if only to keep you from getting caught."

-----

"Clark? It's Monk!" squealed the familiar voice over the cell phone.

"Good morning, brother! What can I do for you?"

"How busy are ya?"

"Not very. What's up?"

"Would'cha be able to get away from there for a few hours? I promise I'll have you back by evening."

"I have nothing scheduled. What do you have in mind?"

"Y'know we've talked about getting a PR person to act as a liaison between the Institute and the media. Well, ever since Patty's little newsmaker, we've been getting requests left and right for more information on the Institute. I've been working my tail off over the last couple of weeks ... so I wanna expedite things!"

"Who do you have in mind?" asked Clark.

"Karleen Bush," replied the simian chemist without hesitation.

"I remember her. She was very helpful. I approve."

Monk's voice faltered slightly. "Also, I ... I sorta promised her a piece of the action after she got us the video." He paused. "Look, Doc, she's a good kid, and I believe we can trust her all the way."

Clark considered the matter for a moment. "Very well. What do you have in mind?"

-----

The phone beeped at Karleen Bush's elbow. She jammed the handset between her shoulder and ear, as she continued typing out copy on her PC.

"Karleen speaking," she said reflexively.

"Karli, it's Monk!"

She interrupted her typing and took the handset from her shoulder. "Monk, how's tricks?"

"Good, good! Say, you got some time to meet this afternoon?"

"For you, anything! Lemme take a peek at my schedule, just in case!" She glanced over at her PDA in its desk stand/recharger and brought up her calendar. "Yeah! Oddly enough, my afternoon's free. Where and when?"

"How about 1:00 on the roof of your building?"

"The ... roof?" she questioned.

"Yeah," replied Monk casually, closing the matter.

"Okay. See you then." She hung up the phone, and scheduled a one-hour block of time on the PDA. She returned to her typing, then stopped. Squinting at the calendar on the device, she reached across and stretched the duration of the appointment to encompass the rest of the afternoon and early evening. With a satisfied nod, she returned to her typing.

-----

Standing on the rooftop helipad, Karleen scanned the skies while holding tight to the hem of her jacket against the breeze. She'd been out there for ten minutes, and had just looked at her watch when she heard the unique whine of an airplane engine. Looking up, she was startled to see the Boeing V-22B Osprey shifting

### The Bronze Saga #3: BRONZE AVENGERS

from horizontal to vertical flight over her head. Gaping at the sight, she almost didn't step out of the way of the tilt-wing craft as it gracefully descended to the helipad. Through the front windshield she saw the helmeted faces of the pilot and co-pilot. Then the side door opened, and a short set of steps swung outward.

Monk Mayfair stuck his homely head out of the door, grinned and waved for her to come aboard.

As she reached the foot of the steps, she raised her voice to be heard and said, "Can I bring my camera crew?"

The unflappable Monk grinned back and shook his head. "Nice try, Karli!"

She climbed on board and took Monk's outstretched hand. "Can't fault me for trying! I didn't know you had an Osprey!"

"I don't! It belongs to my boy," he answered casually, retracting the steps and closing the door. He gestured to the seats and instructed, "Strap yourself in!"

She took a swivel chair next to a window and fastened her seat belt. Monk took one near her and yelled forward for them to take off. A moment later they felt themselves rising above Manhattan Island and angling out over the Atlantic.

"Where're we going?" she asked.

"Nowhere in particular," replied the simian chemist. "I just wanted a place where we could talk privately. You wired?"

She shook her head. "Didn't think I'd have to be."

"Just checking." His eyes narrowed, and he repeated, "You wired?"

"Here!" She opened her jacket wide. "Knock yourself out!"

He smirked back. "We already did ... you're clean."

Karleen looked back with an irritated expression. "So why did you ask?"

"Security, Karli. Sorry 'bout that, but it's necessary." He paused. "You know how much attention we've been getting ever since Pat Savage's big announcement."

"Do I? At least three local affiliates have used my tape from last year, and I'm sure you can tell me how many have knocked on YOUR door."

Monk spread his hands apart, palms up. "Exactly. Which brings me to why you're here. Last year, when you supplied that feed of your story, you asked for a piece of the action. Well, this is it. How'd you like to be media liaison for The Savage Institute?"

Karleen went fishing. "Why me?"

He gave her a 'duh' look. "C'mon, Karli! You're familiar with both the Institute and the media. Plus, you got what they used to call moxie way back when ... you don't pull punches, and you don't back down under fire. Besides ... I trust you!"

### The Bronze Saga #3: BRONZE AVENGERS

She blinked a couple of times at his comments and smiled. "I'm flattered. To tell you the truth, I've taken a bit of an interest in the Institute since I did the story on it. You're putting together something that's rarely seen nowadays, a school that refuses to bend to the 'politically correct'." She paused. "So what's the bottom line?"

With an impish grin crossing his face, he outlined the salary and benefits.

Karleen's self-confident expression turned to shock. Her eyes grew large and her mouth went slack, and she slumped back in her seat. A moment later she caught herself and sat bolt upright. "There's got to be a catch to this!" she gasped. "Who do I have to kill?"

Monk guffawed, "No catch, Karli! This is a big job, and we think you're the best one to handle it. So is it yes?"

This time she gave him a 'duh' look. "Without knowing all of what it involves ... I'd be stupid not to accept!" She held out her hand. "You bet I'll take it!"

He took the hand and they shook on it. "Good! I knew you would!" he beamed. "As of right now you're on the payroll!" He reached into a briefcase next to him and produced an envelope. "Consider this a hiring bonus."

With more reluctance than she normally would have, she accepted and opened the envelope. She stopped breathing as she read the amount on the cashier's check inside. "Th-thanks, Monk ... boss!" she gasped.

Monk grinned. "Karli. By accepting this position and the bonus, it also means you fully accept the responsibilities of the position. Agreed?"

She regained her composure long enough to give him a nod and a wry expression. "More of this security stuff?"

"On the contrary, kid. Now you're in on the 'need-to-know'." He called in the direction of the cockpit. "Clark?"

A big man walked back from the co-pilot's seat of the cockpit, and removed his helmet. Karleen saw a familiarity there, but it didn't hit her until he stretched out his hand and said, "Welcome aboard, Ms. Bush ... I'm Clark Savage, Jr."

-----  
As Karleen watched the Osprey return to the clouds, she reached over and pinched her other arm. Wincing at the pain, she smiled to know this hadn't been a dream. She shared a secret that could -- if leaked -- be the greatest blockbuster since Watergate. And those closest to it had put their trust in her to keep it a secret. She nodded to herself and vowed that she wouldn't betray their trust in her.

She turned and looked out on the city. As she fixed upon the tower of the Empire State Building, she felt like Dorothy looking upon the magnificent city of Oz, awed by it all. And, like Dorothy, she knew this was going to be the beginning of the greatest adventure of her life.

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Chapter Nine

### The Bronze Saga #3: BRONZE AVENGERS

The small Ford pickup bounced along the asphalt road, while USGS Geologist James Newman steered with his left hand while keeping the cup holder steady on the passenger seat with his right hand. Given the fact that it was thirty miles to the nearest Starbucks, the two mugs of coffee were precious cargo. The sign attached to the chain-link fence ahead read:

UNITED STATES GEOLOGICAL SURVEY  
Eastern Washington Seismic Monitoring Station #42  
Authorized Personnel Only  
No Trespassing

He drove past the chain link fence onto the gravel parking area surrounding the white single-story prefabricated house, and pulled into the crudely-marked parking spot. Breathing a sigh of relief at having made it this far without spilling the coffee, he came around to the other side of the cab and reached in for the cup holder and his jacket.

There was a sudden blast of trumpets from inside the building, nearly causing Newman to upset the cup holder. "Wagner again," he muttered as he regained his nerves.

The two geologists had come to an agreement about the type of music that would be played: the first one there got the first choice. Usually that was Newman, but occasionally -- like today -- Rae beat him to it. Well, he thought, maybe she'll see the coffee and thank him by allowing him to play his jazz.

His jacket draped over his arm, he opened the door to the building and went in. Rae was nowhere to be seen; probably in the bathroom, he thought. No wonder the volume was up so loud.

He placed one cup in the middle of her workstation, and took the other to his desk. Then he reached over to the CD player and turned down the music a notch or three.

"Jim, 'zat you?" came a female voice from the other room.

"Yeah, Rae!" he called back.

Newman switched on his computer and checked his email. As he scrolled through, Rae Childers walked into the room. Freezing in place, the 32-year-old redhead smelled the air appreciatively. As she took the mug in both hands and breathed freely of the steaming brew, she smiled seraphically and said, "Ah ... Starbuck's. Jim, you're too good to me."

He shrugged off the praise. "I figured it was time. What's the situation?"

Too intent on the first taste of the coffee, she ignored him. She made a face like a wine connoisseur. Then, returning to the real world, she began giving him an overview of local seismic activity.

There really wasn't a lot to say. They were located about sixty miles west of Spokane, in an area where earthquakes were more rare than Starbuck's in the morning. Most of Washington's seismic activity tended to be in the western half of the state, where the Cascadia subduction zone -- the convergent boundary between the offshore North American plate and the Juan de Fuca plate -- was in constant strain. And when that subtle strain was suddenly released, there were earthquakes.

### The Bronze Saga #3: BRONZE AVENGERS

Rae walked over to a seismograph and examined the paper readout. "This one's got me worried. It's in an area where the last quake took place maybe two hundred years ago. It could be building up for another ... and soon."

"You're sure of this?"

She straightened up and took a deep breath. "No. It could be the strata reacting to a change of magma flow, or an underwater hot springs getting ready to geyser. The only way to be sure is to send someone to investigate."

Newman shook his head. "And our budget is stretched as is. We'd have to justify a probe, and you don't sound very convincing, even to me."

"Uh huh," she agreed. "So what do we do?"

"Sit tight and monitor. If it keeps up, we'll let the Regional Office know, and let them decide on the course of action."

"Sounds good to me," Rae said with a note of relief. "By the way, thanks for the coffee."

"My pleasure," Newman replied with a smile.

-----

Many small rural towns, especially agriculturally-based ones, wake and sleep with the rising and setting of the sun. For a lot of the residents of Pine Corners, this has been the case for several generations.

As Brock and Stern watched from some trees a half-mile behind Sunni's house in the cul-de-sac, they were glad for this fact. The large boy closed up the house an hour before sundown and climbed into the dark brown station wagon.

After the sun had set, the two men began advancing on the back side of the house. They felt somewhat foolish in their dark clothing and ski masks, but knew it was necessary. Despite the fact that they looked like cat burglars, it took them fifteen minutes to deactivate the alarm and jimmy open one of the windows at the back of the house. Once they were inside, they brought out the flashlights and began sweeping through the house.

-----

Frank Larsen looked across the table at the two men who once more stood before him, then tossed the report onto the table with a loud slap. When he spoke, he didn't even attempt to hide his contempt. "First you hand me this science-fiction story about electromagnetic whatsis, and now you're trying to convince me that a blind girl's behind it all?"

"But just look at the pictures, sir!" pleaded Brock, breaking formation and indicating the Polaroid pictures. "We weren't fully convinced either, so we brought my camera and got pictures of her workshop!"

"Look at the tools, the soldering iron! Why would a blind girl need an electronics lab?" supported Stern. "And it's gotta be for her -- just look -- the labels are in braille!"

"So what do they say?" led Larsen.

### The Bronze Saga #3: BRONZE AVENGERS

They shrugged. "Neither of us read braille, so we don't know. But the fact of the machine should convince you she might have a part in this."

Larsen was quiet. He didn't want to believe their fantastic story, but their proof was hard to dismiss, and he had more questions than answers as to the blind girl's activities.

"And you say she's out of town?" he asked. "How long?"

"She's been gone for three days already," supplied Stern. "And you'll note, there've been no new meltdowns!"

"And if it remains clear while she's gone ...," mused Brock, deliberately aloud.

Larsen didn't want to give in too easily, not at this point. "Let's say that I believe you for the time being. But I'm going to need more than just a few snapshots to get you two off the hook!" He paused to consider his options. "If she's the one, I want her invention! Do what you have to -- do you understand?"

They both nodded.

"Good work. Dismissed!"

Encouraged, the two men quickly left the room, leaving Larsen looking at the picture of Kenny Countryman and humming to himself. "This sounds too fantastic to be true ... and yet ... "

He smiled.

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"Okay, we got this far," said Stern, relieved. "Now what?"

"Now we find a short wave radio," replied Brock.

-----

"Deek, it's Sunni!"

"How y'doin, Sun?"

"Great! The doctor appointment was yesterday, so I'll probably be heading home tomorrow!"

"What time's your bus coming in?"

"I'm not coming in by bus. Some friends have offered me a ride. They've got an RV; lots more comfortable than the bus. I'll give you a call when I'm close, okay? How's the house?"

"Hasn't moved an inch," he replied with a chuckle. "Oh, by the way, you had a couple of visitors yesterday."

"Who?"

"A Mr. Brock and a Mr. Stern. The guy's got a busted short wave set he wanted you to look at."

"Okay. Thanks for taking care of the place, Deek. I've got lots to tell you about, okay? See you later. Love ya! Bye!"

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## Chapter Ten

Dot sat at the notebook computer and composed an email.

Mark and Karen:

Sunni's taking a nap at the moment, so I thought drop you a quick line to let you know all is well since leaving Portland.

I want to personally thank you both for introducing us to Sunni. She's delightful, and it is such a pleasure to have someone to share Jesus with on the road. Bonnie is still not moved yet, which disturbs me; Karen, you and I both know what it took to bring me to Christ, and I shudder to think to what lengths God might have to do to her to bring her to the cross. I ask myself at times, why do people have to be so hardened to the Gospel, but then I remember my 'former self' and I have my answer. Needless to say, keep her in prayer, and I'll keep you posted.

Back to Sunni. We get along well, and have a common love of computers. I acquainted her with the layout of the RV, and she told me what she'd done at home with her computer, using varied synthesized voices to distinguish between people in her chat room. Wow!

Perry and I switch off with the driving to lessen stress and fatigue, and Sunni's always there with me, sitting on the steps, holding tight to the rail, while her dog is on the lower landing or just at the top of the stairs in the living room. We like to talk. It's good for us to be able to share with one another.

As you probably know already, she's got a lot of bitterness toward her family. Even though I told her about forgiveness, she is still reserved. The only thing I can do is tell her the truth and keep praying for her, and let God sort out the details in His timing.

Oh, another quick matter to keep in prayer. Perry said I could pass this along to you both. Clark discovered that he's starting to fall in love with Bonnie. Personally, I think that's great, especially since he's been alone for so long. But until Bonnie becomes a Christian, they are unequally yoked ... just as Perry and I were before I became a Christian. Clark needs a lot of strength not to rush into anything. Bonnie could be a man-eater if she wanted ... and I think she has intentions towards Clark that even Perry doesn't see. This scares me.

Anyhow, please keep us all in prayer to be able to handle this situation correctly. And I'll do my best to keep you both posted.

Anyhow, I better let you go. This short note didn't end up as short as I thought <grin>. Oh, well. Take care, both of you, and keep us in your prayers. God bless.

Dot

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### The Bronze Saga #3: BRONZE AVENGERS

The last few miles to Pine Corners was through a dense forest and across a wide river. Sunni commented that the two-lane covered bridge was the only way into town, which seemed awfully isolationist to her, but everybody else in town seemed to accept it as a part of the rural life.

We passed the used car business of Larsen's Kar Kingdom. With lots of gleaming vehicles on both sides of the street, and the Caesar-esque banners waving in the mild breeze, it reminded me of another popular car mogul in Portland; with a private grin, I wondered if this was a genetic thing, or just ego.

My ears caught a deep rumbling coming from the lot on our right, and I glanced over to see a familiar group of motorcycles parked near one of the shop buildings. The pack has passed us a few miles back, and it now appeared that one of their number had developed mechanical problems. Most of the nasties were busy checking out their bikes or the other cars in the lot, but a couple of them were looking back at us.

We were somewhat accustomed to the attention we generated. As we slowly cruised through the main street, people stopped in mid-stride and looked in our direction, often pointing with expressions of amazement, admiration, and even wonder. We met their looks with smiles and polite waves.

Sunni identified where the Hall of Records was; there would be our first stop after taking our passenger home, to see about getting permission to hold evangelical meetings. From our impressions of the curious, we knew there would be an interest.

It didn't take long for us to arrive at Sunni's house within the unfinished cul-de-sac. A brown station wagon was parked in the driveway, and a tall boy and a shorter blond girl came out of the house as we stopped. Sunni identified them as her best friends, Deek and Rhonda, and greeted them with big, excited hugs. She introduced us to them, and asked us to stay for awhile. Clark declined with a smile, wanting to settle in before dark; but he did promise that we would get together very soon, which brought a beaming smile to the blind woman's face.

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Moving back through town was slow, and our vehicles barely cleared the lines of the signal lights strung across the street. Regretfully discovering that suitable parking along the main drag would be impossible for our rigs, we settled for an unused series of adjoining single spaces a couple of blocks east of the Hall of Records. Dot and Bonnie volunteered to keep guard on the vehicles while Clark and I went to see about the permit.

The Asian-American man behind the counter practically came to attention as we entered the office. The nametag on the counter identified him as Sato Takekawa, and he asked how he could help us. A moment later his smiling countenance turned to disappointment.

"I'm terribly sorry, but I'm afraid I can't help you," he apologized profusely. "Ms. Hare, the usual person behind this counter, had to go out of town on a family emergency; I believe it was a death in the family." He paused reverently. "She's the only one who can authorize permits, and I don't know when she'll be coming back. I'd love to give you the okay myself, but that would get me into trouble."

Clark and I looked at each other. It was disappointing that we wouldn't be able to set up the tent, but it wasn't the first town where that had happened. "That's all right," reassured Clark. "We'd still like to stay in town for a few days if we could. Perry's driving a Class A RV and I'm driving a semi trailer truck. Do you know of any place where we can camp?"

### The Bronze Saga #3: BRONZE AVENGERS

He gave us a sheepish grin. "Yes ... but not at this time. We're planning on putting in an RV park, but that's not until next year. Y'see, tourism's not very big here. Not much to see, except for the wineries ... " His face suddenly brightened. "Hey, y'know, that might work! The wineries aren't very busy this time of year ... they might let you use their lot!" He shrugged. "Sorry, guys, but that's the best we got."

Clark nodded. "That's great! Can you give us directions?"

"Now that I can do for you!" He reached into a drawer and brought out a town map and a highlighter pen. As he outlined the route on the map, he told us about the wineries. There were two of them, in the hills to the east of the main section of town. They were family-owned, and were one of the few reasons that Pine Corners was still on the map and wasn't a ghost town. After a moment, he amended, "Oops, I can't forget the Austin farm, in the northern flatlands. They're the reason for the pine in Pine Corners. The Austin family founded the town in 1893, and they've got over a hundred acres of pine trees to their name. Shame on me for forgetting about them!"

We voiced our appreciation to Mr. Takekawa, then walked back to the rigs. The directions were easy to follow, and it took us about fifteen minutes to find the Denari Winery. Leopold Denari was a stocky man in his seventies, who seemed to be nice enough, but regretfully informed us that he couldn't accommodate our needs. Then his eyes brightened and he suggested the owner of the other winery in the area.

"Jacob LaCroix," he informed us. "His family and mine have worked this land for decades. He's a good man, but a lousy chess player." He grinned to punctuate the opinion.

Minutes later, we were passing acre upon acre of vines, laid out in seemingly-endless rows, as we reached the opened gate. To the left of the gate was a large slab of petrified wood, still retaining many of the original curves, with the name LaCROIX WINERY deeply etched in a neat sans serif font. Below it hung a smaller wooden sign, showing the hours of operation and informing WINE TASTING ROOM NOW OPEN. We passed through and slowly made our way along a winding uphill road. About halfway up we reached a fork; the road to the left continued up towards a pair of Colonial-style houses; one house was smaller than the other, but otherwise they were identical. The road to the right led to some buildings. At the fork was a directional sign, made of petrified wood similar to the one at the entrance, which carried the inscription:

INFORMATION CENTER  
WINE TASTING ROOM

We hesitated briefly, and then started down the road to the right. It curved slightly as we approached the main building. As we got closer, we suddenly heard Clark's surprised voice over the intercom: "Perry -- look to your right!"

Dot and I looked over and our jaws sagged.

There were three crosses, made from the most beautiful wood I'd ever seen. The cross in between was taller than those on either side, and had a ring of thorns hung about the top. The shorter crosses were nice, to say the least, but the one in the middle was special. The shining of the light off the layers of lacquer-protected paint made it take on an almost-golden appearance.

In other words, it was breathtaking.

"Ooohhh wow," breathed Dot.

### The Bronze Saga #3: BRONZE AVENGERS

"And, once again, the hand of Providence guides us to the right place," commented Clark, with a twinge of smugness.

"Amen," I seconded, ignoring the smug, but agreeing with the sentiment.

The parking lot was empty, so we swung the vehicles around in the direction we came, and parked. Without hesitation, Clark started walking to the Information Center, with the rest of us close behind. There were two short steps made of some sort of quartz; the door opened before we reached it, and a young man wearing a light blue smock greeted us.

"A gracious good afternoon, gentlemen, ladies!" He gave us a warm smile, and his voice carried a slight accent that I was unable to pinpoint. "My name is LaCroix ... Scott LaCroix; my father is the owner of this winery. If you would follow me, I'll take you to our wine tasting room ..." And, before we could interrupt the young man, he turned on his heel and moved inside the building, down a long hallway lined with fancy wood paneling and spotted with framed documents.

We looked at each other for a moment, then gave a collective shrug and followed. Our guide continued to tell of the history of the winery and list the accolades received through the years. It was obvious that the young Mr. LaCroix was very proud of the family business, as he showed off framed and displayed letters from dignitaries from the United States and other countries, including one specially framed letter from the White House. It was impressive, to say the least.

We looked for an opportunity to interrupt him, and that opportunity came when he paused for air. "This is all very nice, Mr. LaCroix," said Clark quickly. "But we're actually here to ask a favor."

The young man hesitated, wide eyed and slightly embarrassed at his forwardness, and apologized, "I'm very sorry ... how can I help you?"

Clark quickly explained about coming into town, seeking out a place to stay but finding none, and the referral given them by Mr. Takekawa. He explained how they had first visited the Denari Winery, and Mr. Denari suggested coming here.

"Leopold is a fine winemaker, but a bit of a blowhard," came a voice from behind us. We turned to see a tall man with Mediterranean features and chalk white hair, who appeared to be twenty years younger than he actually was.

"My name is Jacob LaCroix. What was it you were looking for?"

As Clark repeated our request, the elder LaCroix' eyes fell upon the large cross around Clark's neck, causing a definite change in his countenance.

"Forgive my impertinence, Mr. Dent, but I couldn't help admiring the cross around your neck. Are you a believer?"

"I'm a Christian, sir," Clark said boldly. "My friend Perry and I are traveling evangelists."

"What brings you here?"

"Do you know Sunni Bradshaw?"

He nodded.

"We were last in Portland, Oregon. She was visiting friends there, and came to one of our tent meeting. She became a Christian, and we offered to take her home." He deliberately omitted the other reason, investigating the strange incidents with the cars.

LaCroix' face broke into a wide smile. "She has accepted Jesus Christ?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, praise the Lord! This is cause for celebration!" he beamed. "And of course you can stay here, for as long as you like!" He turned to his son. "Scott, the loading docks aren't being used at this time, are they?"

"No, Papa," the younger man responded respectfully. "We're not expecting anything for a week. We've given the crew time off."

"Very good!" He turned to us. "My son will assist you in connecting your vehicles. Then I would consider it a great honor if you would join us for dinner. Ours is the large house on the left, at the top of the hill," he informed us. "It's a bit of a walk, so we use electric golf carts. While you park the vehicles, I'll take these two lovely ladies up to the house." He gave Dot and Bonnie a mischievous grin.

"Are you sure it won't be any trouble?" asked Clark politely.

"No, my brother!" LaCroix gave a booming laugh. "During these slack times, we delight in the fellowship!"

"Very well. Thank you!"

I gave Dot a kiss. "Would you bring my Betty Bag?" she asked, referring to the shoulder bag we got from Portland's Saturday Market last year. I nodded, and she moved in the direction Jacob LaCroix and Bonnie were heading.

Scott LaCroix took us in a different direction, along a gravel path to where the loading docks were. Then he pointed to the road leading back up to where our rigs were, and advised us on the best way to drive it. We nodded, and walked the road back to the parking area. Twenty minutes later, our vehicles were parked and connected, and we had followed Scott up to the house in the Black Diamond.

We found the elder LaCroix and the ladies sitting in an elegant living room, involved in conversation with Dot and Bonnie.

I walked over to Dot and handed her the plum-colored Betty Bag. "I've been giving him the low-down on Second Chances Ministries," she explained.

"Yes," added LaCroix. "A most fascinating ministry! I would like to hear more!"

We sat around and talked for a few minutes, until the door to the kitchen opened and another woman came out. She was a striking woman, who reminded me a little of Dot's mother Carrie ... although the way she held herself was more like Maureen O'Hara in *The Quiet Man*. She had a natural beauty, with no need to emphasize matters with makeup, and wore a simple floor-length dress in the manner of Amish women. Her hair was a flaming red, which formed a braid at the back of her head. "Dinner is served," she announced.

"Thank you, Charlene," replied LaCroix, who explained to us that Charlene Cornwell had been their housekeeper since well before Jacob's wife Sofia had died.

### The Bronze Saga #3: BRONZE AVENGERS

We sat around an ornate oak dining table, and Charlene served us an excellent cream of broccoli soup, thick and rich, with homemade biscuits on the side. Jacob excused himself for a few minutes, returning with a couple of dark-colored wine bottles. "This is one of my finest vintages. Would anyone care to have some with us?"

Bonnie lifted her glass, and he poured her a little for sampling. She sniffed it, then sipped and smiled. "Very good," she said, extending her arm for more. As he filled her glass, he asked the rest of us if we wanted any. Dot and I declined, but Clark lifted his glass as Bonnie had. "I will, thank you."

I gave Clark a double-take as he followed Bonnie's example of inhaling the wine's bouquet, and sipping the liquid, allowing it to rest in his mouth a moment before swallowing it. Then to our continued surprise, he gave several professional-sounding comments on the structure of the wine.

"Very good," commented Jacob with admiration. "I didn't know you were a wine connoisseur, Mr. Dent."

"I wouldn't call myself a connoisseur; I learned a few things from an old friend of mine, several years ago." He turned in my direction and we made eye contact. I silently mouthed the word "Ham" and he nodded slightly in acknowledgment.

"And for you?" LaCroix asked me.

"We don't care for wine," I apologized.

He produced the other bottle. "That's why I brought this." He uncorked the bottle and poured a sample into my glass. I looked at the purple liquid, smelled it, then took a sip. It was remarkable. "Grape juice. No alcohol," I identified.

"Exactly," beamed Jacob, filling my glass, then Dot's. "This is my own private stock, a very special blend of my finest grapes. Completely non-alcoholic, but nothing like those sparkling fruit juices they have at the stores." I thought I sensed a little contempt in his voice.

I sipped more, and Dot tried hers with appreciation. Jacob continued talking about the mixture. "Eleven years ago I was in Jerusalem when a friend of mine, a rabbi, told me of this. Fermentation has been minimized almost to zero, and it is extremely mild, as I'm sure you can see. You'll also find it has a calming effect on the digestive system. I fully believe this was what the apostle Paul was referring to when he advised his spiritual son Timothy to take a little wine for his stomach."

I took another sip. It was unlike any grape juice I had ever tasted, and I could actually tell the difference on my stomach. I nodded my approval. "It's very good."

"As I said, this is my private stock; it will never be marketed. Many winemakers -- like Denari -- turn up their nose at the use of non-fermented grapes in mixtures such as this, but I say, what do they know? I use my grapes as I see fit. Remind me, and I will give you a few bottles to take with you."

"I'm honored, sir," I said with a tilt of my head.

While we ate dinner, Clark brought up the topic of the automobile breakdowns. "We saw something on the news about this town, regarding some problems with cars ...?"

### The Bronze Saga #3: BRONZE AVENGERS

Jacob rolled his eyes up. "Yes, I know what you're talking about. Our local newspaper coined the phrase 'automobile meltdown' to describe it, but we have no idea what is behind it."

Scott added, "I actually saw it happen once. I was downtown, and there was a car with its stereo blasting at full volume -- you know the type -- when it suddenly went silent. That got my attention, and I looked over at it. Well, the car had stopped dead in its tracks, and the driver was unable to restart it."

I could see the wheels churning in Clark's head, as the detective took over. "How far away were you when this happened?"

"Maybe fifteen feet, from the sidewalk to the middle of the street. Strangest thing I'd ever seen."

"Then what happened?"

"Well, I stayed where I was for several minutes, as did others who had seen it happen. The driver looked under the hood, tried a few things, but nothing seemed to work. And -- yes! -- one of them tried using his cell phone, but it didn't appear to be working; I remember this because he started cursing at the phone, and finally threw it on the ground in frustration. Broke it."

"Did anything else stop working for them, like watches, or pagers?"

Scott thought about it for a moment. "I'm not sure. A few of us found their predicament quite amusing. Their car had been a big nuisance, what with their disregard for other people's eardrums, and it was hilarious to see them get their due."

"Were there any other vehicles around them at the time their car went dead?"

"A few, of course. They were at the light, and the other cars moved on when the light changed. The cars behind them honked a few times until they realized what had happened, then moved around them and on."

"But, apart from that single car, everything else appeared to be normal?"

He took a sip of wine and nodded.

"Very interesting," commented Clark.

"You behave like a detective, Mr. Dent," said Jacob, eyes narrowed. "Perhaps you have a theory to this ... mystery?"

"Not really," Clark shrugged. "Like you said, this is a mystery, and I have a certain fondness for mysteries. I was a great fan of Sherlock Holmes in my youth."

"Well, it may take a Sherlock Holmes to discern the answer to this dilemma," Jacob concluded, finishing the wine in his glass and humming in appreciation.

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Chapter Eleven

### The Bronze Saga #3: BRONZE AVENGERS

Sunni Bradshaw slept in, and woke up feeling cleaner than she ever had. Part was due to sleeping in her own bed in her own home. Another part was due to removing a -- how had Dot phrased it? -- a 'millstone from about her neck'. She showered and dressed and fixed breakfast for herself and Sequoia. Then she went out her back door and checked out the pile of heavy-duty plastic bags. Before last night they would hold disgusting yard debris -- leaves and small branches. This morning they were the final resting place for her well-demolished MasterBlaster.

As she ran her hands across the dew-covered bags, she hoped Deek and Rhonda would understand why she had decided to end her little vendetta against the cars. There was a sizable investment in those bags, in time and money. But right now, none of it really seemed to matter.

The idea had first hit her while they were still quite a distance from town. Without a doubt, she'd felt God's touch on her heart, convicting her that her actions had been wrong, regardless of why she'd started things in the first place.

In the beginning, she'd found it easy to justify her anger against those boom boxes with motors, and the disrespectful people who drove them. But that was changed. She still didn't like what they did or the manner in which they did it, but she knew her way of dealing with it hadn't been the answer, either.

It took most of the night to carry out her mission, carefully disassembling the EMP generator, then smashing it beyond repair. She winced at the pain in her hands, especially where she'd overshot her target and made contact with three fingers of her left hand.

"Oh well." she shrugged with a satisfied grin. "No pain, no gain, they say."

The second part of her scheme was made clear as she filled up the heavy-duty bags. She felt an incredible calm as she sat before her computer and systematically deleted every file related to the construction and operation of the EMP generator. It had taken months for her to gather, and probably could never be replaced, but it didn't matter anymore.

She didn't need it. And she could breathe easier now because it was out of her life. She turned her face upwards, to the sky, and wondered what her life would be like now that Jesus was in her life, and the MasterBlaster was out of it.

"Better," she whispered, and returned to her house.

-----

The first of the visits to her house came shortly after she had finished cleaning up her breakfast dishes.

They identified themselves as Daniel Brock and Albert Stern. "We came by a couple of days ago, about a broken short wave radio."

She recognized the names. "I just got back into town yesterday. How'd you know I was home?"

"We were driving past, and thought we'd take a chance. Is this a bad time?"

"Naw, I guess not." Unlatching the door, she let them in. "Have a seat." As they moved past her, she added, "Oh, could you please let me know where you are? I don't want to accidentally sit in somebody's lap."

"Yeah," said one, the voice at the door. He was on the couch.

"Sure," said the other, also on the couch.

Sitting in a straight-backed chair with the coffee table between her and her guests, she held out her hands. "The radio?"

She heard the rustling of a paper bag, and the radio was placed into her hands. She was familiar with most short wave sets, and this was an older model. She relaxed and concentrated, taking slow, deep breaths, and slowly moved her hands along the surfaces of the device. Her head tilted to one side, then the other.

She set the short wave down and got up. "Be right back," she excused herself. She disappeared into her lab for a minute, returning with a handled basket. Expertly she removed the back of the radio, and took a diagnostic device from the basket. A musical tone modulated as she touched a couple of probes to circuits within the radio. Within a few minutes, she was closing the back of the box.

"There," she said, putting the tools away. "Plug it in. There's an outlet to your right."

One of the men did as Sunni asked, and she turned the set on. A blast of static came from the speaker. With a satisfied grin, Sunni worked the controls, expertly moving up and down the frequencies, stopping periodically to listen. She switched off the set, concentrated again, and ran her hands across the box like a fireman checking for heat from a door.

"Okay," she concluded. "Go ahead and unplug it."

As the same man unplugged it and wrapped the cord up for transporting, the other man gawked, "That was amazing!"

She smiled. "Piece'o cake. So which of you tampered with it?"

There was a pause. "Excuse me?" said the man on her right.

"This radio wasn't broken," she declared boldly. "It was deliberately disabled. Why?"

There was a pause, and Sunni's ears picked up a faint click. I'm being recorded, she thought, trying not to let on.

The voice of the man on her right lowered. "You are correct, Miss Bradshaw. It was a test, to see if what others had said about your talents was accurate. And, of course, you passed."

Okay, thought Sunni, it wouldn't be the first time a skeptic had tested her abilities. But she wondered why she was being recorded, and debated over exposing that little fact. In the end she decided to hold off and see what happened. "Okay."

"Mr. Stern and I represent a private party who's interested in something of yours."

"What 'something'?"

"The device you've been using to destroy the electrical systems of the cars in town."

Sunni froze and fought the urge to panic. They know, she thought, they know! She prayed silently. What do I do? A moment later she took a deep breath, and knew -- find out what they have on me. They may just be bluffing.

"Whatever are you talking about?" she countered, calling their bluff. "You think I'm behind it? That's ridiculous! Where do you get off making accusations like that?"

"That device you have in the other room. The one that produces electromagnetic pulses."

Sunni's breath stopped.

They'd been here! They'd seen the MasterBlaster! Inside, she felt violated, angry. She knew she couldn't blow up at them -- it would justify them! Remember, the MasterBlaster is history now -- scrap metal and deleted files.

"In the other room?" she shot back. "What do you know of the other rooms in my house? Have you been snooping around? Have you been here before?"

The two men were quiet. She had put them on the defensive now.

"Miss Bradshaw," said the one called Brock. "Let's stop playing games. The private party we represent wants your invention, and is willing to do anything to get it."

"Look, there's no such device here! But, if you must insist, then satisfy your curiosity and look in the other room! But after that I want you both gone -- and don't come back!"

The two men sitting on the couch spoke to one another too quiet for Sunni to hear. Then she heard them stand. She tensed, preparing herself for a physical attack. But instead, they picked up the sack and their radio, and quietly headed for the door. But before they opened it, Brock said, "Miss Bradshaw. We know about your machine, and the damage it's caused. We could allow that information to fall into the hands of the police." He paused. "Or ... consider what would happen if this information leaked out to the people who were affected by your invention? How would you feel if they started knocking on your door?"

"If they knocked," added the other man.

Sunni kept silent, even though she was shaking inside, and her hands were tightly gripping the arms of her chair.

"Mr. Stern, why don't we give the lady some time to think about what we've said?"

"An excellent idea, Mr. Brock."

She heard the door open.

"We'll be back," said Brock before closing the door.

Sunni scrambled over to the door, almost tripping over her own feet in the process, and quickly bolted it. Her back against the door, she slid down to the floor, her knees against her chest, and sobbed. A few moments later she felt Sequoia nuzzle against her head, and she pulled him to her for comfort. "It's okay, it's okay," she repeated.

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### The Bronze Saga #3: BRONZE AVENGERS

Sunni was scared.

She'd done the right thing by trashing the MasterBlaster, but she hadn't figured on this. Even if I could remember all the details, she promised herself, I wouldn't.

She went to the phone. "Eddie, it's Sunni Bradshaw. Yeah, I'm home: got in yesterday afternoon." She grinned. "It was terrific! Hey, can you come by and pick up my trash? I got ... inspired ... to do some early spring cleaning, and I've got a few big bags to go. You can? Great! Thanks, Eddie! I'll see you in a little while!"

Within the hour, a small truck arrived, leaving five minutes later with the heavy-duty bags full of the former MasterBlaster. She breathed a sigh of relief at the sound of the truck backing out.

Sitting on the floor, brushing Sequoia, she reflected, "Now it's just my word against theirs. They don't have any proof. But it still scares me. I don't know how this is going to turn out. I mean, I hope their 'private party' will just give up and leave us alone." She hugged the dog's neck. "I just don't know."

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It was around 1pm when Sunni received her second visitor.

She froze when she heard the car pull into the driveway. But then she realized that its engine was different, more powerful, and that eased her concern a bit. Then, when she heard three car doors open and close, and three familiar voices, she practically jumped to the door and threw it open.

Clark was her first target. She bumped into his chest, and her arms wrapped around him in a bear hug.

"Good to see you too, Sunni," he said dryly, returning the hug.

She hugged each person as they came to the door. When things ended at three, she turned and asked, "Where's Bonnie?"

"She opted to stay at Jacob's," answered Clark.

"Nothing against you," added Dot, putting an arm around her shoulders. "She's not a Christian, and she may be thinking that we'd be ganging up on her with the Gospel."

Sunni nodded empathetically. "Just like me, before you found a way I could relate to God without feeling threatened." She paused and changed subjects. "Would anybody be interested in a tour of my humble abode?"

All three went with it. She maneuvered around the house easily, having long ago memorized every part of it. There was the living room, bedroom, kitchen, bathroom, and her workshop.

Perry commented from the living room, "Dot told me that you can feel the movement of electricity. Is that true?"

"Uh huh," she said, sitting on the couch.

"Have you had this ability all your life?" asked Clark.

### The Bronze Saga #3: BRONZE AVENGERS

"As long as I can remember. When I was a child I used to walk next to the wall of my room. Everybody thought I was just exploring the outside of my room, until Elise realized I was following the electrical wires running through the walls. After a couple of tests in other rooms, she knew I could somehow feel an electrical current." She paused. "When I was older, she challenged me with electrical appliances, and found that I could 'read' things in them, tell when things weren't working right, and pinpointing where the problems were."

"Amazing," Perry commented with awe. "So what do you do with it now?"

"Mostly tinker in my lab. Every now and then somebody brings me something of theirs that's on the fritz. I can usually figure it out and fix it. It's more of a hobby rather than a career, something to keep busy than to make money offa."

"So, then, if you don't mind me asking," inquired Clark. "What do you do during the day?"

"Not much. I surf the chat rooms on my computer, get out with my friends every now and then, and mostly keep to myself. Of course, now -- thanks to you guys -- I've got Praise and Worship CDs to listen to, as well as the Bible on CD."

They sat around and visited for a couple of hours. Sunni didn't mention anything about her earlier guests, because she didn't want too many questions. She suspected, however, that her new friends didn't quite buy her attitude that everything was all right. If they did, they didn't say anything about it. She appreciated that.

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It was mid-afternoon. She had the computer on in the other room, and was casually listening to the traffic in the chat room while playing some Praise and Worship CDs in the living room. The knock on the door surprised her, because she hadn't heard the approach of a car.

She moved to the door without opening it and asked, "Who is it?"

There was a moment of silence, followed by, "Mr. Brock and Mr. Stern."

"Go away!" she replied sharply. "I told you I'm not the person you're looking for!"

"I'm sorry to hear you say that, Miss Bradshaw," the man she remembered as Brock said; his voice was low and menacing. "You've forced us to pass your secret over to others who won't be so kind."

She paused, then challenged him, "Go ahead! Who'll believe your story, that a blind woman could create such a device? They won't find anything here, anyway!"

There was another silence, and she wondered if they were going to call her bluff.

"Very well, Miss Bradshaw. But this is not over. We'll be back."

This time she heard their retreating steps, the sound of their car doors opening and closing, and their departure. Her breathing was rapid, as was her heartbeat. She wanted to get help, but she was afraid of the consequences of her actions or being rejected by her friends.

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### The Bronze Saga #3: BRONZE AVENGERS

As the day wore on, Sunni stayed inside her house, venturing outside only when Sequoia needed to go for a walk. Even then, her precautions reflected her paranoia, as they went out the back for only as long as was necessary, keeping close to the house, confining their movements to the small yard.

The hours passed without event, which was somewhat of a relief. Maybe Mr. Brock and Mr. Stern had indeed backed off, she hoped, as she considered dinner.

Suddenly, her ears picked up an approaching vehicle. It was powerful, but not like Clark's. This one had a distinctive tone to it, like a racing car or sports car. It stopped in the driveway, and a single car door opened and closed. Sunni's anxiety shot up, and she groaned within herself. It's a stranger, she knew. Friend or foe? Should I even answer the door? Should I pretend I'm not even here, wait until they go away? She thought about grabbing a knife from the kitchen, in case it was an attacker.

The knock-knockknock at the door was not what she would have expected; it was lighter, yet firm. It was not what she would've expected from an enemy. She prayed that they would just go away. A few seconds later there was a second knock, just as the first. She knew they wouldn't go away. Timidly, she finally said, "Who is it?"

"Miss Bradshaw? My name is Frank Larsen. I own Larsen's Kar Kingdom. Can we talk?"

This took her by surprise. She knew about the business, but never thought she'd be visited by the owner. Still, her response was suspicious. "About what?"

His voice was friendly but businesslike. "I'd like to make a deal with you. I'm alone and unarmed. Can I please come in?"

She quickly analyzed his words. Deal? What kind of deal? And why would he use a phrase like 'alone and unarmed'? Unless, she thought, cringing, maybe he's associated with those other two goons. She wanted to walk away from this one, but she felt compelled to let him in.

She unlocked the door. He waited until she moved back before coming in. "Thank you, Sunni -- can I call you Sunni? Nice house, by the way."

Her gut feelings regretted letting him in, but it was too late to stop him. Keeping her internal defenses up, she disregarded the empty flattery and took charge. "Mr. Larsen. Would you please sit over there, in the overstuffed brown chair?"

"Certainly," he said with exaggerated calm, like a hostage negotiator responding to a gunman's demand. Sitting in the chair, the springs gave off a perceptible squeak when he moved. Now she could, by the sound, tell if he moved or left the chair. She moved over to the couch, placing the coffee table between them like a barrier.

"Okay. Talk," she instructed.

"Very well. First of all, let me congratulate you. You're an extremely intelligent and resourceful woman."

She saw the bull in his words, and wasn't taken in by it. "Thank you. Now what is it that you want?"

"Miss Bradshaw. Let's put all our cards on the table. You've already spoken to a couple of my employees -- Brock and Stern. I apologize for the manner in which they approached you; they're technicians, and know very little of diplomacy. Please accept my heartfelt apology if they may have frightened you."

### The Bronze Saga #3: BRONZE AVENGERS

He IS associated with those two goons, she thought with a rush. He must be the 'private party' who wants my EMP generator. Well, I'm not about to let him know just how much they had frightened me. "Okay," she accepted.

He leaned back in the chair, producing the squeak. "Last week -- while you were out of town, my dear -- I was given a ludicrous theory explaining what had happened to our local cars. It was a fantastic story about electromagnetic pulses -- sounding totally impossible! But the more they showed me what they had, the more I believed their theory. A couple of days ago they even brought me Polaroid pictures of the amazing device."

Sunni's eyebrows raised. They took pictures? she thought, trying to remain calm. Why didn't they tell me this themselves? Maybe he's bluffing! "I told your goons that there is no such machine! Why can't you leave me alone?"

Larsen laughed, and Sunni felt an involuntary shudder. "Regardless of your denial, I believe that such a machine does exist, and that you are the genius behind it. And regardless of whether it may still exist, I think you still retain the knowledge to make another one. And that's why I want to make a deal with you."

"What do you mean?"

"Miss Bradshaw, let me tell you about a dream I had last night," he said wistfully. "I dreamt that there was such a machine, and that I had it in my possession. I was able to copy that machine, and send the copies across the land. And every car that was touched came to me through businesses that I owned. I saw hundreds of cars, all lined up to be repaired at my shops. And the money flowed like water from a snow-covered mountain. Do you ever visit the mountains, Sunni?"

She was distracted by the question in the midst of his rambling. "Huh?"

"Have you ever visited the mountains?" he repeated. "Beautiful there. The air is so cold and clean that you want to stay there forever."

Sunni realized what his plan was. But there was no machine, no way for her to make another one, let alone duplicate it.

Larsen continued. "Oh, a detail I overlooked. Not all of the cars in the land would be 'taken advantage' of. No. The punks with their cars disrespectfully filling the air with their offensive music at offensive volumes - - the ones who have the money to buy the cars in the first place would also have the money to have them repaired."

Sunni listened patiently. "An interesting ... dream. But no such machine exists, as I have said before."

"Of course," he came out of his reverie. "But think of the riches that would befall anyone owning such a thing. Oh, I know you're financially secure, Miss Bradshaw. But even you can agree that one can never have enough money. You could donate to charities, or sock it away for a rainy day."

Larsen became silent. He had made his plea, stated his case, and now it was up to Sunni to respond.

"Mr. Larsen, what if I were to take what you just told me to the police?"

"What did I tell you? I told you of a dream I had, and some hypothetical possibilities. I never admitted to anything, just as you. Besides, you'd have to explain why you had knowledge of these things, and that might just incriminate yourself." He paused. "Right now, the most advantageous thing you can do is to consider becoming my partner in this ... endeavor."

"And if I refuse?"

His voice lowered a couple of octaves. "That would not be in your best interest, Miss Bradshaw. It could be ... unfortunate ... to yourself and to those you hold dear ... including your precious guide dog."

Sunni stiffened on the couch. She wanted to reach over and draw Sequoia close to her, behind her coffee table wall. But he was peacefully curled up in his box, napping.

"It has occurred to me," continued Larsen, "that none of the witnesses observed a blind girl carrying an unusual device the size of the machine in the pictures ... so you must have a vehicle at your disposal, and a driver. Maybe I should look into who your friends are ..."

Sunni bolted to her feet, her voice a shrill scream. "GET OUT! GET OUT! GET OUT OF MY HOUSE -- NOW!" Her left arm jerked with anger as she pointed to the door, her right rigid at her side, terminating in a tense fist.

Larsen didn't move for a moment, although he had initially jerked at her surprise outburst. Then he stood, slowly and deliberately strolling towards the door. "I know when I'm not welcome," he said in a mock-insulted tone. "I'll see myself out, thank you."

He opened the door. Before he stepped out, he looked back and said, "You know where to find me. Don't wait too long." Then he left, closing the door easily behind him.

Sunni stood transfixed, her body vibrating -- part out of fear, part out of anger. Sequoia, having awoke at her alarmed yell, saw her tension and walked over to her, gently rubbing against her leg. She went down to her knees and wrapped her arms about him, holding the lab close and sobbing.

-----

It was evening.

Sunni sat in a dark house, still curled up on the floor, her tears dried on her face. She hadn't moved for a long time, possibly hours. No one else came to her door.

Shortly after Larsen's visit, she frantically got Deek and Rhonda on a conference call with her, and told them that her cover had been blown.

"Be on your guard! I had a couple visits from some guys that work for Frank Larsen -- Brock and Stern -- and a personal threat by Larsen himself!"

"Larsen?" chirped Rhonda. "My dad got his car from Larsen!"

"Most of us have," added Deek. "But I always thought he was an okay guy ... a bit of a square, perhaps, but okay."

### The Bronze Saga #3: BRONZE AVENGERS

"Trust me, he's pond scum!" declared Sunni. "He's making a lot of money repairing the cars that we fried -- and he likes it so much that he wants to copy the MasterBlaster and take it on the road. But he can't! I trashed the MasterBlaster last night! There's no trace of it, physical or electronic. But he's threatened me by sayin' he might go after my friends! So, for God's sake, if you see him, run like -" She cut off what would've been her normal response. "Well, you know!"

"Is he serious?" asked Rhonda.

"Trust me, he's serious! And he's got a lot to lose, so that makes him dangerous. Don't underestimate him, guys!"

There was a long pause, then Deek said, "Okay, Sun, I'll keep my eyes open."

"Yeah," added Rhonda. "Me, too. You gonna be okay? I can stay with you if you want."

"Thanks. I'm okay right now."

"Sunni, what made you trash the MasterBlaster?" asked Deek.

She took a deep breath. "Guys, while I was in Portland ... I became a Christian. And, as much as I hate those boom-boxes on wheels, it's not going to solve anything by zapping them. I don't know if there's a right way, but I couldn't keep doing it this way. D'ya understand what I'm trying to say?"

There was a long silence, then Deek spoke up. "Yeah, I think so. So does that mean you're quittin' the Avengers?"

"I don't think so," she replied. "Believe it or not, the preacher that led me to Jesus is a Doc Savage fan -- I mean, is that cool or what? -- and he gave me a whole different take on Doc, an angle I never woulda imagined!" She suddenly felt a renewed strength. "I can tell you more ..."

"Maybe next time, Sun, I'm gonna let you go now. Call me if you need me."

She felt let down. "Gotcha, Deek. Thanks."

"Bye." He disconnected from the call.

She sighed. "He's not thrilled, Rhonda."

"It's a lot to take in, Sunni. All of it."

"I want to tell you both about all that's happened to me. Now's not the time." Sunni paused. "But soon."

"Soon," agreed Rhonda, relieved. "Talk at ya later, girl!"

"Later," she returned, and hung up.

Sunni set the phone down and turned in the direction of Sequoia, who was lapping at his water dish. "Well, that went well," she sighed sarcastically.

-----

She finally found the urge to get up and prepare herself something to eat. Then she spent the rest of the evening listening in on the Bronze Avengers' chat room. When things got sparse around 10:30, she headed to bed.

In her prayers, she pleaded, "God, please let tomorrow be nothing like today was! Thanks."

Then she hugged Sequoia good-night, and snuggled under the covers.

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## Chapter Twelve

Frank Larsen couldn't sleep. As he sat up in bed, browsing through a copy of Auto World, he strained to hear the sounds beyond his house.

Next to him, lightly snoring, was his wife Louise. She still looked good, he reflected, ever since he came here from Alabama twenty years ago.

Twenty years. Had it really been that long? Back then he'd been Francisco Larkin -- con man, check forger, car thief. Made a pretty good living, he did, until he made the mistake of falling into a Federal sting operation. He got away, and led the cops on a two-state chase before he lost them. He turned north to Idaho, where he came close to getting caught again, then crossed over into Washington.

Eventually he found Pine Corners, a small town he could lose himself in -- and did. He changed his name, and settled down. Using his knowledge of cars and sales techniques, he got a job at the used car lot at the entrance to town. He got to know the owner, Erik Vakaris, who immediately took a liking to him, and who introduced him to his only daughter Louise.

On their fifth wedding anniversary, Erik turned the business over to his son-in-law and retired. Frank kept the name of the company until Erik died two years later, then changed it to Larsen's Kar Kingdom and expanded the business to encompass both sides of Main Street.

He'd put his past life behind him, and enjoyed the role of husband, father, successful businessman, and civic leader. He was respected now.

He was ... happy ... wasn't he?

He'd thought so.

Then they told him about that machine. They showed him the Polaroids, and played the tape, and convinced him. He'd felt that their methods were amateurish, but didn't fault them for it. Then one of them, not really realizing what he was saying, suggested that he talk to the girl.

So he did. However, it didn't seem to persuade her. She needed some additional ... leverage.

That's what he was sitting up in bed for -- waiting.

Then his ears picked up the sound in the distance. He took a deep breath, smiled, then put down the magazine, turned off the light, and slid under the covers.

Two minutes later he was asleep.

-----  
Sunni heard the sound, too, and felt fear. It was a rumbling noise, like that of a motorcycle. No -- several motorcycles. Then, before she knew it, the sound got closer.

And, from inside her head, she heard a single phrase scream out: "Call Clark!"

Her hand swung to the cordless phone on her bedside table.

-----  
Clark usually didn't keep his cell phone nearby, but God had impressed it on his heart to do so this time. He instantly came awake, and caught the call a heartbeat after the first ring. "Clark speaking!"

It was Sunni; her voice was panicky. "Thank God you're there! Motorcycles coming this way ... they're after me, Clark! Help me!" The rumbling in the background backed up her plea.

"Are you dressed?" he asked, stressing a calm tone to his voice.

"No! I was in bed!"

"All right, Sunni. Get dressed, but don't hang up the phone! Keep the line open!"

"Okay!" she said, breathless, and set the phone down on the bed as she swung her legs to the floor.

Clark put the cell on MUTE and swung the panel open. "Perry! Sunni's in trouble!"

-----  
I was awake instantly at Clark's alert, but things took a moment to register. "What? From who?"

"Those bikers we saw when we came into town! For some reason, they're after Sunni!" He was pulling on his jeans, occasionally putting his cell phone to his ear; I could hear a few sounds, but couldn't make out what they were.

Rushing over to the nearest of several communications terminals throughout the large trailer -- small units connected to similar units aboard Nomad -- Clark hit the comm button and barked, "Dot, Bonnie -- Sunni's in trouble! We'll take Goliath -- you follow in the Diamond! GO!"

There was a clipped response from the speaker; I could picture both women -- combat ready in their own way -- jumping into action, awake instantly, dressing hastily.

"Myrna!" he commanded the computer. "Emergency Goliath separation! Unlock the doors and start the engine!"

"Acknowledged," came the even-toned reply.

I had seen the emergency separation before. It always reminded me of pre-launch procedures for the Space Shuttle, as the electrical and hydraulic connections to the truck flew away and dropped clear, saving us precious time in allowing us to leave the trailer behind.

### The Bronze Saga #3: BRONZE AVENGERS

Without hesitation, we ran around to the cab of the truck and climbed in. The motor was already running, as we reflexively put on our seat harnesses, and Clark hit the accelerator. With a strong hand at the wheel, we easily reached the parking lot of the information center, then rapidly down the curving road leading to the front gate. Once we turned onto the main road, Clark floored the gas pedal, and we jumped forward.

"Night vision, Myrna!" Clark ordered. "And give me a geographical display showing our position and Sunni's house!"

"Acknowledged," replied the computer. A moment later all the windows began to glow with an odd luminescence, as the glass recalibrated to view the infrared spectrum now produced by our headlights. To anyone looking at the truck from outside, our headlights would appear to be extinguished, and the windows darkly tinted. At the same time, a display in the center of the front windshield showed a map of the vicinity, with icons indicating our moving position, and Sunni's house in the cul-de-sac. The numbers at the bottom of the display showed our distance and ETA; we were just under two miles and three minutes.

I suddenly remembered something we'd need ahead. Reaching behind me into the sleeper cab, I found a panel and firmly pressed on it. It recessed a quarter of an inch, then popped open, exposing an equipment locker. I removed two odd-looking handguns and a small padded box. I set the box on the console between us, and made a quick check of the guns, prepping them for firing.

The weapons were the latest generation of Clark's signature weapon, the superfirer. They fired special 'mercy bullets' that contained a drug of Clark's own devising, producing several hours of unconsciousness when making contact with the skin. They were also by design recoilless, and had several other functions that made them clearly the most amazing things I had seen -- or worked with -- in Clark's arsenal. The box contained several small marble-sized balls, thin-walled plastic globes containing compressed anesthetic gas.

"I've modified our configuration in order to confuse any witnesses; it wouldn't be good if they could easily trace us back to Jacob's," informed Clark.

"We better inform the ladies, since the neighbors probably saw the Diamond yesterday!"

Clark nodded. "Myrna, com link to Black Diamond!"

A moment later, we heard Dot's excited voice coming from the speaker: "We're about 90 seconds behind you!"

"Change your configuration so you won't be recognized by the neighbors," ordered Clark.

"Roger that!"

"Save some of the action for us!" added Bonnie eagerly.

"Will do," replied Clark dryly. "Out." He paused a moment, then commented aside to me, "Reminds me of Monk; he was the same way when I'd go into a fight without him."

We could hear the deafening roar of the motorcycles before we reached the cul-de-sac; in a way, it would be to our advantage, masking the sound of our engine until we'd be right on top of them. As we prepared to turn into the cul-de-sac, we could see the bikers circling about, waving chains and baseball bats in the air, yelling and whooping like Indians from an old Western movie.

### The Bronze Saga #3: BRONZE AVENGERS

For some odd reason, I couldn't hold back a grin. I felt exhilarated, alive, as we plunged head-first into danger.

Glancing over in the direction of Sunni's house, we could see two motorcycles in the driveway. Clark gripped the wheel harder and said, "Cover me! I'm going to take us right through them, then vector off into the driveway!"

"Gotcha!" I said, jamming my finger down on the power window button and gripping the superfirer.

"Myrna! Night vision off -- lights to full!" The windows returned to their normal transparency, and our headlights became instantly very bright. At the same time, Clark leaned on the truck's air horn. To the bikers ahead of us, we must've appeared like a phantom freight train, barreling at them from out of the night.

Finding a sudden need for self-preservation, the motorcycles scattered before us like a drop of ink in a saucer of water. Their expressions were predictably frantic, and we both felt the crunch of metal under our wheels, accompanied by a panicked yell.

Clark swung the wheel to the left, and we made a beeline for Sunni's driveway. The two motorcycles didn't stand a chance as we smashed into them, pushing them through the garage door. The Paradox-reinforced body of the truck, stronger and harder than steel, wasn't even scratched -- unlike the motorcycles, which became a mass of twisted metal under our front end.

Clark grabbed his superfirer as he opened the door and jumped to the ground. As he started up the ramp, one of the bikers appeared in the doorway. Clark didn't hesitate to fire a burst from the superfirer, knocking the man back through the door. As I jumped down from my side, I heard Sunni's sudden scream; I prayed as I took cover behind the rig and started firing back in the direction of the angry, regrouping bikers.

-----  
The front door had been knocked completely off its hinges; it lay on the floor just inside, partially splintered. The biker he had shot was sprawled just inside the doorway. Suddenly he heard a growl and a yell -- "You shot Ratso!" -- and felt the crushing impact as the source of the yell sent the two of them flying out of the house, off the edge of the ramp, and landing hard onto the front lawn. They wrestled on the grass, Clark discovering that the other man was close to his own size. Forcing away the pain from hitting the ground, Clark tucked his knees in and pushed upwards, heaving the biker into the air, and giving him time to get to his feet.

As the two men faced one another, their eyes met, and Clark could see the madness behind the biker's eyes. Then the man made the mistake of charging him, allowing Clark to easily avoid him and bring an elbow driving down on his opponent's back, sending him headfirst into the ground. Stunned and dazed, he started to move to get up, but Clark quickly moved to his side and gave him a massive punch to the back of the head, effectively ending his struggles.

He looked around to see if there were any other immediate threats. Seeing only the Black Diamond entering the cul-de-sac, he knew things were under control, and so scrambled back to the ramp, clearing it in one large step, and entered the house. Amidst the silence, he could hear Sunni's labored breathing, and identified himself as he moved closer. As her arms touched him, she wrapped them around his neck and began to cry, "Thank God you made it!"

"It's okay, Sunni," he replied calmly, sweeping her up in his arms. "We're going somewhere safe! Is there anything you need?"

### The Bronze Saga #3: BRONZE AVENGERS

She turned back. "Sequoia -- come!"

The lab had been waiting off side, watching intently but unfortunately unable to defend his master because of his guide dog training. But she was okay now and calling his name, and he obediently came to her side.

The Diamond had come into the cul-de-sac like a juggernaut, Bonnie leaping out before it had even stopped. Between her and Perry, they had the bikers in a crossfire of mercy bullets. By the time Clark came out of the house with Sunni in his arms, the area was littered with sleeping bikers and damaged motorcycles.

Through the battlefield, Clark carried Sunni to the open door of the Diamond -- which now displayed a large stylized Toyota logo against a cream-colored SUV body -- and placed her in the front seat. Sequoia jumped in behind her and curled around at her feet. Clark reached in, connecting the seat belt.

Bonnie jumped into the back seat. "I'm in!" she announced. "Punch it!"

"See you later!" called Dot, hitting the gas and briefly fishtailing before racing out of the cul-de-sac.

-----

I was standing by the passenger side of the truck, watching Clark head towards the driver's side. "Okay," he said. "Let's g--"

His voice was cut off as the big biker smashed into his side, the two of them hitting the side of the truck so violently that I felt it lean on my side. Clark had not expected his former opponent to recover so quickly, and the attack took him completely off-guard, with the wind knocked from him. For a moment, they both vanished below the window level of the truck. Clark arched his back against the pounding fists of the biker, then turned and started counterattacking, delivering a roundhouse fist to the other man. He took it as if it were a delicate slap, and came back with a fist to Clark's stomach. They exchanged blows for a few seconds, while I prayed desperately.

My options were pitiful. I still had the superfirer, but they were too close to pick one target from the other. I could've always shot them both and sorted it out later, but Clark was heavier than I could handle, and I expected the police here within minutes. Suddenly I looked across the seats, and saw the box containing the anesthetic gas balls. Inspired, I dropped the superfirer onto the floorboards, lunged for the box, and emptied it into my hand. Throwing myself across the seat, I reached for the power window control and jammed down the button. I couldn't see what was going on, but prayed desperately for accuracy. Then I yelled as loud as I could, "BOMBS AWAY!" At the same time, I threw the balls out the window, took a quick deep breath, and waited.

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"BOMBS AWAY!"

Clark recognized Perry's voice, and caught on immediately. Facing the biker, he kept his arms before him, letting them take the brunt of the blows, as he took in a deep breath and held it. A heartbeat later, the space around them was filled with the gas balls, which burst on contact. The biker didn't have a clue to what was going on, and that was his mistake. Clark took advantage of his hesitation, and delivered both fists into the biker's stomach, causing him to gasp reflexively. As he inhaled deeply, his expression went blank for a moment, and his eyes rolled back in his head before closing in sleep. Grabbing the biker's leather jacket, Clark redirected his fall from the hard concrete to the softer grass, and dragged him away from the driveway.

Perry had the driver's door open now, and was waiting for him. He quickly retrieved his superfirer from where it had fallen, and jumped into the cab. Without preamble, they backed out of the driveway, then turned and moved quickly around the bodies and broken machines, and out of the cul-de-sac.

Then, and only then, did they begin breathing. And they shared a triumphant laugh.

"That was brilliant!" exclaimed Clark, speeding back in the direction of the winery.

"I'm just glad you got the hint!"

"I did! Thanks!"

-----

### Chapter Thirteen

Deputy Robert ("Bobby") Platte liked working nights. It gave him time for his writing.

With his notebook PC set up on his desk, he worked on his not-so-Great American Novel, borrowing from his ten years of service with the Force in Denver, Colorado. His writing ambition was not necessarily greatness, but simply to be acceptable to the reading public. He had seen examples like Joseph Wambaugh, and figured he could do just as well. Pine Corners was a nice town to work in, and -- apart from this string of automobile meltdowns -- the crime rate was practically nil. That, and considering that most of the town was asleep by 11:00, this was his favorite time of the day.

It was because of these quiet evenings that he was unprepared when the phone rang next to him as he was pouring himself another cup of coffee. Startled, he almost dropped the glass pot, catching himself at the last moment. Embarrassed, he looked at the phone, expecting it not to ring again. Then it did, and he quickly snatched up the instrument.

"Deputy Platte," he greeted.

As he listened, his eyes grew large with surprise; he placed the cup down on the table and searched for a pen and paper. Finally he was able to get a word in, and took over the conversation. "Okay, Ruth -- let's take it from the top ... give me your address ... uh huh, uh huh ... now tell me again what you saw."

On the other end of the phone, 73-year-old Ruth Willoughby excitedly recounted the battle that had just taken place in her cul-de-sac, allegedly between a group of leather-clad bikers and some truckers. "They had guns!" she reported. "There are bodies all over the place!"

Platte knew the old lady from town social functions, and knew she wasn't the type to cry wolf or imagine things this bizarre. "Okay, Ruth, I got it," he said when she had finished. "Was anybody else in the cul-de-sac involved?"

"Heavens, yes!" she replied with an exasperated sigh. "That poor blind girl, Sunni Bradshaw -- a couple of the hoodlums broke down her front door! There was a fight on her front lawn between one of the bikers and one of the truckers! And the trucker carried her away!"

"Okay, Ruth. I'll be there in a few minutes," Platte finished. His adrenaline now pumping, he hung up the phone. Remembering what he was doing before the phone rang, he quickly saved his story on the notebook

PC, backed out, and powered off the machine. Grabbing a few things he'd need, he headed for the police cruiser in the parking lot.

-----

Jacob LaCroix sat in the small security room, looking up at a series of monitors. Scott walked into the room with a glass of water.

"Have they returned yet, Papa?"

Jacob slowly shook his head. "Someone has, son; a lighter colored car similar to the one they had parked in the back of the trailer." He paused. "This is very strange. The black car and the truck section of the semi left here in quite a rush; they set off the front gate alarm. Now this car has returned, and has parked by the RV."

Scott pointed to a monitor. "Papa -- look!"

A semi truck was driving through the front gate, a blue one with pinstripes, unlike the black one that left. Jacob rose from his chair. "Scott, close and lock the front gate. Then let's check this out."

"Should I get the rifles, Papa?"

"Yes, Scott. Just in case."

-----

We pulled around and slowly backed up towards the semi trailer, stopping short of docking. We got out of the truck. Dot and Bonnie climbed out of the Diamond, and Dot assisted Sunni. Bonnie looked at us as we approached them, commenting, "What took you so long?"

"Their leader didn't want to stay down."

Her eyes narrowed with concern. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, thanks to a little quick thinking from Perry."

"Good," sighed Dot, coming to my side with a hug and a kiss. "My hero!"

"How's Sunni?" I asked.

"I'm fine," she replied, approaching; she held the leash to the guide dog loosely in her hand. "Thanks."

"So what do we do now?" asked Bonnie.

"I would suggest," came the sudden voice of Jacob LaCroix, "that you don't move, unless you wish my son to shoot you from his vantage point above us."

I glanced up the hill, and saw the barrel of a rifle with a telescopic sight pointing in our direction. "Oh, terrific," I whispered.

"Jacob," said Clark. "Would you allow me to explain?"

"Mr. Dent, I absolutely insist on it. But first, please remove all your weapons and raise your hands."

Dot and I complied, lifting our hands high. Clark and Bonnie held their superfirers by the barrels and lowered them slowly to the ground; raising their hands, they stepped away from them.

"Is this sufficient?" asked Clark.

"For the moment." He walked over and picked up the weapons. Then he walked over to Sunni, surprised at her presence. "Why are you here?"

"Mr. LaCroix?" she asked, hesitatingly.

"Yes," he confirmed.

She reached out for him, and gripped his arm. "Please don't hurt them! They saved my life! There were some bikers ... they broke my door, tried to hurt me ... Clark saved me!"

His expression was confusion. "I don't understand. Why would any bikers want to harm you?"

The blind woman was hesitant. "Uh ...," she started.

"Jacob," said Clark. "I think there are a lot of things to be explained. Is this the right place for it?"

"No," he replied. "No, I don't think so." He hesitated; the look on his face suggested that he was praying for a quick answer. Then he looked at us and relaxed. "Let's go up to the house. Scott?"

"Yes, Father?" There was tension in his voice.

"Meet you at the house!"

"Very well ... Papa."

"Jacob, shall we take my car?" asked Clark. "It's safe, really."

"This is your car? I thought it was black."

Clark gave a thin grin. "It is. Would you allow me to show you?"

He hesitated, and then nodded. Clark went over to the driver's side of the vehicle, with LaCroix behind him. "All of our vehicles have been specially modified. The body is made of a special composite polymer, making it exceptionally strong. It also allows it to behave like a computer screen. When I manipulate controls here --" He pointed to a small panel on the dash. "-- I can change the outside of the car like a chameleon changes color." He pushed a couple of buttons, and the cream-colored outside changed back to black, the Toyota logo fading away as if it never existed. Jacob's eyes opened wide, and his jaw went slightly slack.

"Oh, my," he said softly.

"There's more, Jacob. But you'll have to trust me."

The two men looked at each other for several moments. "Very well. Let's take your car."

-----

Driving towards the cul-de-sac, Deputy Platte remembered hearing the bikers loudly passing through town, but hadn't given it a second thought. They'd been in town for a couple of days due to repairs at Larsen's, and had, more or less, kept to themselves.

But his first reaction at what greeted him was beyond his expectations. There was metal all over the place, and the bodies of four bikers. He moved slowly as he tried reaching past his senses, scanning for any sign of danger, but finding none. It looked like whoever had done this was long gone, as Ruth had told him. Maneuvering into a spot near the center of the melee, he turned off the engine and climbed out, his hand on his pistol, his mind not yet willing to give into what his senses were telling him. He turned in a slow circle, spotting Mrs. Willoughby standing on the porch of her house, waving in his direction. Finally he returned the wave, accepting that, although the danger had passed, the mystery was clear and present.

He looked in her direction and met her eyes in acknowledgment, then raised an index finger to indicate that he would be with her shortly. First, though, he knew he needed to check the bodies.

A couple of minutes and a quick tour of the area later, he joined the old woman on her porch. Mrs. Willoughby looked about as frightened as was expected, and he tried to show confidence in his voice.

"Evenin', Ruth."

"My land, Bobby, will you look at this! Nothin' every happen like this here before. Are ... are they dead?"

"No, they're just unconscious," he informed.

"I don't want to be around when they wake up," she declared, fear in her voice.

"I'll give the Chief a call, and we'll have somebody down here to take them in. No need to worry, Ruth -- we'll take care of them." He reached into a belt pocket and took one of a pair of microcassette recorders, showing it to the old woman. "Now, I'm going to have to get an official statement from you. This here's a tape recorder. You press this button to talk and this one when you're done. While I check the scene and call for support, you just talk into this and record everything you can about what you saw; give me as many details as you remember, in the order in which they occurred. Facts, Ruth -- don't speculate, okay? D'ya understand?"

She nodded, and he handed her the recorder, making sure she got started on the right foot. Then, as she talked, he returned to the cruiser for the Crime Scene Investigation Kit. Included in the CSI Kit were several disposable 35mm cameras. Pocketing one, he used the other as he walked through the battleground.

The big question that hung in his mind, as he gave more time to examining the bikers, was how they had been taken down. Ruth had said there had been shooting, but he couldn't find any guns or empty holsters on any of the bikers. Stranger still, there were no obvious signs of bullet wounds. No empty shell casings, no blood. He quickly recorded his observations and questions into the other microcassette recorder, and moved on.

A few minutes later he returned to his car and made the call. "Chief? It's Bobby. Sorry to wake you, but we've got a situation at the cul-de-sac just off Robinson Road. You know those bikers who've been in town the last couple of days? Well, it appears they went on a rampage here, terrorizing the neighbors and breaking

into the house of Sunni Bradshaw. There's more to it, Chief." He paused. "A semi truck trailer and a cream-colored Toyota SUV pulled in while the bikers were at it. I don't know exactly what happened, but the bikers are all out cold, and the bikes mostly in pieces. One of the neighbors reported shooting, but there's no sign of trauma on any of the bikers. It just looks like they're asleep. It's weird, Chief. Real weird."

"Anybody hurt?"

"No, but Sunni Bradshaw's missing, along with her guide dog. It looks like one of the second group carried her from her house and put her into the back of the Toyota. Don't know if she went willingly or forcefully, or where they went."

There was a sigh on the other end. "Okay. I'll call Aaron, Andy, and Wedge to back you up. What's the condition of the bikers?"

"Like I said, they're sleeping like babies, but I don't guarantee how long that'll last. And I've only got two pairs of handcuffs."

"Okay, I'll tell'em to rush it! Wedge has the van; load'em in there and transport'em to the station for tonight! We'll sort things out in the morning!"

"Luke Considine's got a large flat-bed trailer that would be perfect for hauling these bikes away," offered Platte.

"Good idea," replied the Chief. "You checked out the crime scene?"

"Yeah. Ruth's putting her statement on one micro, and I'm taking notes on another. And I'm on my second camera."

"Any shell casings or signs of weapons?"

"Chains, baseball bats, and a few knives. No firearms. Whole thing's a puzzle, Chief."

"Okay. I'm on my way." He paused. "Bobby, I know I don't have to remind you, if any of those bikers start coming to, do whatever you gotta to keep them in line."

"Gotcha!"

"See you soon."

As he hung up, he saw Mrs. Willoughby waving in his direction. He walked over and she held out the microcassette recorder. "I think I got it all, Bobby," she said meekly.

He gave her a reassuring smile. "I'm sure you did, Ruth. If we have any questions, we'll let you know." He paused. "I called the Chief for backup and support. They'll be here soon, and it may take awhile. We'll try to be quiet, but you might as well go on back to bed."

She sighed. "How can I sleep, with this here? Mercy me, how could something like this happen in a quiet town like ours?"

"I haven't a clue," he honestly agreed, with a slow shake of his head. "Good night, Ruth."

Mrs. Willoughby returned to her house, and Platte looked over the cul-de-sac again. Then he walked back to the trunk of his car, retrieved a small Ziplock bag from the CSI Kit, and used a felt pen to label it. Then he put the microcassette recorder and the disposable camera into a larger Ziplock, and set it on top of the cruiser.

As he leaned back against the car, waiting, he put down a few notes on the microcassette. "Found another biker inside the Bradshaw house, also mysteriously unconscious." He paused. "Why was this house the only one deliberately approached? Was it a deliberate attack on the part of the bikers, or just a random act of violence? Continued." Click.

Platte shook his head, and made a quick sweep of the house. No sign of the blind woman nor her guide dog. He had more questions than clues, as he returned to his vehicle.

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We all sat around the LaCroix living room. Being the good host that he was, Jacob asked, "Since we might be here a bit, might as well be comfortable. Would anyone care for something to drink -- water, coffee, juice, wine?"

Bonnie yawned and raised a hand. "Coffee, please -- black and strong."

"Sunni?"

"Water, please."

He started moving towards the kitchen, but his son stood first and waved a hand. "I'll get it, Papa," he offered.

"Thank you, son."

As Scott disappeared into the kitchen, Jacob stood and began to pace the floor. "It's late. And I am not exactly the most diplomatic of people when I am tired. So let me apologize in advance if I speak ... inappropriately." He paused to see if anyone had any objections, then continued. "Since this all centers around you, Sunni, why don't you tell us what happened tonight."

Sunni sat on the couch, her legs pulled up to her chest. She was visibly shaken, but spoke calmly. "Well, I was asleep, and I started hearing the bikers coming after me. I was frightened. Then I called Clark."

"Clark?" redirected Jacob.

"Sunni called my cell phone, and told me that motorcycles were coming that way, that they were after her, and she begged for help. I could hear motorcycles in the background."

"Sunni," returned Jacob. "Why did you say they were after you?"

Sunni tried opening her mouth a couple of times to speak, but no words came. Then her face distorted into a mask of inner pain, and she broke into uncontrollable sobbing. It was so sudden, so unexpected, that none of us reacted to it for a moment. Then we all responded, seeking out how we could help.

### The Bronze Saga #3: BRONZE AVENGERS

Jacob was the closest; with remarkable swiftness, he drew out a bandanna from a rear pants pocket, and placed it into Sunni's hands. "It's all right, my dear," he soothed. "This must be quite disturbing for you to recall; please take your time."

"Jacob," said Clark, as we all settled back into our seats. "Could I talk to you privately?"

The older man looked at Clark, then nodded. "Let's use my study," he replied, and they went through a door adjacent to the living room. Clark closed the door as Jacob took a position sitting on the on the edge of a large mahogany desk.

Standing with his arms loosely folded across his chest, Clark asked tentatively. "Are you familiar with the name Doc Savage?"

"Now that's a name I've not heard in a long time." Jacob's expression relaxed, and he became nostalgic. "When I was a boy I always kept up with his adventures. It's too bad what happened to him. Why do you ask?"

"You may find impossible what I'm going to tell you, but I ask you to believe me ... in faith ... as a brother in Christ."

His expression remained dubious. "I'm not sure where you're leading. But I will try."

"Fair enough. I am Clark Savage, Jr.," he stated bluntly. "In 1950 I was placed into a form of suspended animation where I did not age. Two years ago I awoke in Portland, Oregon. I ended up in the rescue mission where Perry was preaching, and it was there where I became a Christian." He paused; LaCroix was not revealing himself. "I can provide evidence, if you'd like."

LaCroix stared intently at Clark's face, then his eyes went wide. "God Almighty!" he sighed. "Those weapons you had. Superfirers?"

"The latest generation," Clark elaborated. "They still fire mercy bullets."

Jacob took a deep breath. "This is all so ... amazing! And that you're a brother in Christ ... I'm overjoyed! But all this technology, these weapons ... why should a traveling evangelist need such things?"

Clark smiled. "I have discovered that, no matter how I may avoid adventure ... it seems that adventure has a tendency to follow me. The technology and the weapons are there in case things get out of control."

"I suppose I can understand that. The old circuit riders met many dangers as they preached the Gospel. So I shouldn't blame you for wanting to protect yourself." He changed the subject. "You made these things yourself?"

"We have a friend in Florida who did all the work, since I no longer have the facilities." He smiled thinly.

"Fascinating. So you came to Sunni's rescue?"

"The motorcyclists were indeed terrorizing the cul-de-sac, and had broken down the door to her house. Perry and I arrived first. While Perry laid down cover fire, I rescued Sunni from two bikers in her house. A few moments later, the ladies arrived in the other vehicle, and the bikers were subdued."

"The bullets you used on the bikers were mercy bullets?"

"Yes. They should be waking up within the hour, with no harmful side-effects." He paused, then said straight-faced, "If you wish to test the bullets, I'll be willing to serve as a target."

"Very well. I believe you. But the police will certainly believe you kidnapped Sunni, unless they hear otherwise. It would probably be well for her to call the police and inform them that she is alive and well."

Suddenly the two men heard an ear-piercing scream from the other room, followed by the sound of glass breaking.

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#### Chapter Fourteen

Within a few minutes a police van showed up in the cul-de-sac. Platte had moved some of the metal aside -- those pieces he could move without straining himself. He got the driver's attention, and waved him over to a clear spot. A portly man in his 30's, the driver climbed out and looked around at the scene, unable to contain a low whistle.

"Holy cow!" he commented. "The Chief told me what had happened, but I wouldn't have expected this!"

"Yeah, isn't it somethin'?" replied Platte. "They've been out ever since I got here. Looks like they were drugged, but I'll be dipped if I know how. Are you carrying restraints?"

He nodded. "Full box of plastic cinch ties, premium grade. They'll hold even these boys, especially when they wake up."

"Well, I'm not going to wait until these guys start waking up to start restraining them! Grab the ties and let's start with these two!"

The other man nodded. Stuffing a handful of the plastic cinch ties into his back pocket, they made sure the bikers wouldn't get away once they started waking up. Then, starting with the big man in front of the Bradshaw house, they carried the men over and placed them in the back of the van.

As they were doing that, another car showed up with Chief Randolph. Platte met him and told him what had been done since they last spoke.

"I wish you would've been able to read'em their rights before taking 'em in," said the Chief. "But I don't blame you for being cautious. We'll deal with it later. Also, I've called Merilee to meet us at the station; she'll check 'em out and make sure they're okay. Hopefully, she can also figure out what knocked them out."

"I've got one camera and the micro of the witness' statement in my car. Let me get those," said Platte, and they walked to his car.

"Good." Chief Randolph yawned as he took the items.

"Sorry to get you up this early," apologized Platte.

The Chief waved it off. "It's all a part of the job. Besides, the baby's teething, and she's keeping both me and Betsy awake."

Platte gave him a sympathetic look. "That's rough. Wish I could do something to help."

"Thanks. I'll let you baby-sit sometime. In the meantime, why don't you head back to the station and make sure the holding cells are ready."

"Good idea. Last time they were used was ... Matt Brady, wasn't it?"

"Yeah, I think you're right. Thanks."

"See you back at the station."

As Platte backed away from the cul-de-sac, Chief Isaac Randolph ordered the other deputies, "Andy! You ride in the back of the van ... make sure those bikers get to the station ... and don't forget to read them their rights as soon as they appear to be cognizant."

"Sure thing, Chief," the other man agreed.

A few minutes later, a large flat-bed trailer drove into the cul-de-sac, with the driver and three muscled assistants. "Luke," greeted Randolph.

"Ike," returned the big black man. "Lookit this! I haven't seen this many trashed Hogs since Sturgis '93! Any idea who did it?"

"Witness said a semi was involved. Seen any around town?"

"Only one, a couple of days ago. Didn't see it leave town. But it was black ... jet black."

"Okay. Keep your eyes open."

"Sure thing." Luke yelled to his men to start loading up the flatbed. "Ike, where'd'ya want us to dump it?"

"Back behind the station!"

"It'll cost, you know!"

"I know." He offered a thin grin and a handshake. "Thanks."

"No problem."

-----

We had still been sitting in the living room when it happened. Sunni had stopped crying, and was sipping at a glass of water. Dot was closest to her when it happened. Sunni's head had been angled as if she was listening to something the rest of us couldn't hear. Then her eyes opened wide as she let out a scream, and her body went totally limp.

We all rushed to her side, to see what was the matter. Her guide dog curiously looked up at his master. Then the door to the study opened and Clark and Jacob ran to join us. Scott summarized what had happened. Clark looked over at Dot and commanded, "The first-aid kit in the Diamond!"

### The Bronze Saga #3: BRONZE AVENGERS

Without hesitation, Dot moved away and ran for the door. A few moments later she was back, the first-aid kit in hand. Opening it, she tore off a capsule taped to the inside lid, popped it between her fingers, and handed it across to Clark. He waved it under Sunni's nose, and her eyes immediately popped open. Startled, she felt the cushions beneath her, and reached in front of her, finding and gripping Clark's muscled arm.

"Sunni," asked Clark. "You fainted. Are you all right?"

"Clark!" she exclaimed. "You ... you ARE Doc Savage!"

We all looked at one another. I then knew what had happened. Clark must've told Jacob who he really was, and Sunni's extraordinary hearing had picked it up. Why, though, she had fainted at the knowledge, I hadn't a clue.

"Yes, Sunni," confessed Clark calmly. "I am."

She ran her hands over his chest, shoulders, and head, with all the holy reverence that Mary Magdeline had for Jesus outside the empty tomb.

Clark gently took her hands off his body and moved them in front of her. "Sunni. Why were those bikers after you?"

"I-I don't know," she stammered, Clark still lightly but firmly holding onto her wrists. "They were trying to hurt me! I don't know why!"

We were all quiet as Clark continued the questioning. "Sunni. You know more than you're telling us. We're your friends ... your family in Christ. What are you holding back?" His tone was pleading.

She suddenly twisted, trying to bury her face in the couch, sobbing. Clark looked up at Dot, who came around and kneeled at the couch's side. She put comforting hands on Sunni, who gravitated into the soft touch and hugged Dot. After a few minutes, she was able to compose herself, and allowed herself to be guided into a sitting position on the couch with Dot at her side, an arm still around her shoulders.

"First thing, I've got to repent to you all for not telling you what had happened," said Sunni, her head lowered. "I was afraid you'd reject me!"

"Then you underestimated us," commented Clark to her right, placing a hand on her shoulder. "We're family here, and there's nothing you can tell us that'll make us reject you. In Christ it's just not possible."

She touched his hand and took a deep breath. "I'm behind the meltdowns. I did it."

Scott LaCroix stammered, "You? How? Why?"

Her words were emotional. "All I wanted to do was to shut up those boom boxes on wheels! They don't respect anybody! All they want to do is show their contempt by cranking up their music and driving around town!" She paused at her accusing and turned it back inward. "I wanted to shut them up! So I did! I built an EMP generator!"

My eyes went wide as she confirmed Clark's suspicions. It was amazing, but it was just another reminder that nothing should be surprising when you travel with Doc Savage.

"Your friends, Deek and Rhonda ...?" prompted Clark.

"We used Deek's car. Rhonda acted as lookout, while Deek drove. But there's no more EMP generator! It's been trashed, all of it! When we were heading here from Portland, I knew I had to get rid of it. So that night I broke it to pieces, and erased all the information on it from my computer. There's nothing left of it -- nothing!"

"Nothing?" probed Clark.

"I put all the parts in trash bags, and the garbage man came and got them yesterday."

"Wow," commented Scott, exhaling. "I can't believe you did it."

Clark responded, "Actually, it's not surprising, knowing Sunni's amazing talent with electronics. But I am thankful that, in the end, you did the right thing."

"Can you all ... forgive me?" she squeaked.

"Of course," said Clark, as he leaned over and gave Sunni a loving hug. Dot and I moved in and also hugged the blind woman, who was now weeping with the joy of knowing forgiveness. I had to admit, I wasn't the only one misty-eyed with empathy, having gone through the same thing Sunni was.

"So, somebody else found out about it?" asked Jacob.

Sunni wiped her eyes with a napkin provided by Scott LaCroix, and nodded.

"They came after you for the invention," said Clark. "Who?"

"Frank Larsen," answered Sunni.

"The used car guy?" I asked, flabbergasted.

She nodded. "First there were two men, Brock and Stern. They said they represented a private party interested in my invention. At that time I didn't know it was Larsen. They used scare tactics on me. But I didn't give in. Besides, they didn't know that I had destroyed the machine and all my notes the night before."

"But the two men didn't know that, and continued to threaten you," stated Clark.

"Yes. I was ashamed at what I'd done, and didn't want you to be mad at me ... that's why I didn't tell you earlier."

"I understand, Sunni. Go ahead ... the two men visited you?"

"Twice yesterday. They offered me fame and fortune." Her smile was bitter. "I turned them down. They threatened me, said they would expose me, or tell the car owners who screwed up their cars. I called their bluff, and it looked like they had backed off. Then Larsen visited me. He threatened me and those close to me, if I didn't give him the secret to the EMP generator."

Clark's face was taut, but I knew he could relate directly to what she was going through; he had lived for many years in subtle loneliness because of the possibility that one of his enemies would force his hand by going through those he cared for the most. I thanked God that those days were over for him.

### The Bronze Saga #3: BRONZE AVENGERS

"I can't believe Frank Larsen has a hand in this," lamented Jacob. "He's one of our most upstanding citizens, a leader of the community. What would cause him to stoop to this level of behavior?"

"Greed," said Clark simply. "'The love of money is the root of all kinds of evil.' It is the only thing that makes sense. In the news broadcast we watched about this situation, they commented that it was 'a gold mine for local car repair shops.' That aspect of Larsen's business has grown during this time, and it would be only natural for him to want it to increase, not decrease."

"Yeah!" agreed Sunni. "That's just what he said! He wanted my machine so he could plant them in surrounding towns and melt down cars just so they could be repaired in shops that he controlled."

"So what can we do?" Jacob asked.

"I say we turn the tables on this Larsen guy and threaten to expose him to the world," commented Bonnie.

"We could do nothing without proper evidence. It would be his word against ours," replied Clark. "If we were to do nothing, in time they would realize that the rash of car attacks was over, and they would go back to business as usual. But would they leave Sunni alone? Doubtful, since they believe you still retain the knowledge of the EMP machine regardless of the existence of one."

"And by the way he talked, I doubt he'd give up easily," added Sunni. "He frightens me."

"What if you moved?" offered Dot.

"I don't know. Where would I go? And besides, he threatened my friends Deek and Rhonda. He could get to me through them." She shook her head slowly.

I could see something cooking behind Clark's gold-flecked eyes, but he was keeping silent about it.

"I have a suggestion," said Jacob. "Sunni, why don't you call the police and let them know you weren't kidnapped. That'll keep them off our doorstep. Then -- for what's left of it -- let's get some sleep. You can have the guest bedroom, Sunni."

We all agreed with the idea. Sunni borrowed Dot's cell phone and dialed the police station.

-----

Chief Randolph looked through the bars of the two holding cells at the six bikers. Some paced the cells, looking for a way out, while others sat on the back benches and glared angrily in his direction. He was unfazed by their intimidating gazes and occasional outbursts of profane threats. After putting up with a few more moments of this, he turned and walked back into the office. The rest of the deputies had been sent home for a few hours sleep, while he stayed behind with Bobby Platte.

"Delightful group," he sarcastically commented. "I liked them better when they were unconscious."

Platte grinned. "Amen."

"How's the cleanup coming?"

"Luke dropped off the scrap metal a few minutes ago, and told me that the cul-de-sac is pretty well cleared up ... all it might need is a decent street sweeping to get the glass and small stuff."

"Okay, I'll call the public utilities boys in the morning."

"I contacted the surrounding towns to be on the lookout for the two vehicles involved in the Bradshaw abduction. Too bad the witness didn't notice the license numbers."

The Chief poured himself a cup of coffee and looked back at the deputy. "You believe she was kidnapped?"

"I know the witness, and she said the woman was carried to a car by the man who put down the big biker I found in the driveway." He consulted his notes. "His jacket identifies him as Crusher, and he won't tell us his real name -- none of them have yet." He paused. "I would rather overestimate it to say she was kidnapped than underestimate and be wrong."

"Okay, Bobby," said the Chief, nodding. "You've got things covered outside of town. I'm going to have one of the guys drive around town once the day shift starts, look around for signs of the suspect vehicles."

Just then, the telephone rang. Chief Randolph picked it up and identified himself.

"Chief? It's Sunni Bradshaw!"

"Sunni!" he exclaimed. Bobby Platte, wide-eyed, turned in that direction and listened intently.

"Sunni, where are you?" the Chief asked. "Are you all right?"

The woman's voice was calm. "Yes, Chief, I'm fine. I'm sorry I didn't get a message to you earlier. I'm with friends, and I'm safe."

"What happened to you?"

"I'm not really sure. Those bikers were circling the cul-de-sac, probably scaring everybody. Then they broke down my door and tried to hurt me. But my friends came and rescued me."

"Friends? Who? Where are you now?" he probed.

"They're just friends," she said easily. "Who doesn't matter right now. I'm really all right, and I'm safe with them."

"Where are you?" he pressed.

"I don't feel safe in saying where I am. The bikers might have friends."

"Sunni, the bikers are in our holding cells. I promise you safety from them. But I'm going to need a statement from you in order to press charges."

There was a momentary silence. "I understand. I'll try and stop by tomorrow and give you my statement."

"That would be great. See you tomorrow, Sunni. Good night ... and thanks!"

"You're welcome, Chief. Good night!"

-----

She hung up the phone and turned her head to the left. "Do you think he bought it?"

"Don't know," commented Dot. "But at least you've bought yourself some time. Tomorrow I'll go with you when you give your statement. I don't see any need to worry about it."

Jacob stood up. "Now that that's over, why don't we see what we can do about getting some sleep. I suspect tomorrow's going to be a full day."

Clark nodded. "Agreed."

"Sunni, go ahead and take the guest bedroom."

"Thanks. Dot ... Dot?"

She felt a hand on her shoulder. "Yeah, I'm here."

"I don't really want to be by myself tonight. Could you ...?"

Dot's eyes met mine, and I nodded. She gave the blind woman a gentle hug. "Sure."

Sunni leaned into the hug. "Thanks."

"Before we go our own ways," spoke up Clark. "I'd like to suggest prayer. God knows, with all we've been through tonight, and what faces us tomorrow, we can sure use it."

Apart from Bonnie -- who remained quiet -- everyone expressed their assenting to the suggestion. We gathered together in the middle of the room and joined hands.

"Jacob?" asked Clark. "Would you?"

The older man was flattered, and nodded. After a moment, he took a deep breath, letting it out slowly, then began. "Lord God of Heaven and Earth, we come before you, humbled by Your Power and Grace, and thank You for getting us through this night. We ask You to guide us in the things we do tomorrow, and bring a favorable conclusion to the matters we face. Fill us up with Your love, peace, and joy, and protect us by Your armor, against all the attacks of the Enemy. Even though the hour is late, we ask that you give us all a good night's sleep, and get us up in the morning refreshed and ready. It's a tall order we ask, Lord, but we know You are more than capable of it." He paused. "Thank You. This we pray in the name of Jesus Christ Your Son ... Amen."

"Amen," said we all.

-----

Sunni didn't know why she woke up a couple of hours after going to bed, but she was not afraid this time. Turning her head to try and focus on the deep sound her ears had caught, she was unable to discern its location. Then, as quickly as it had come, it was gone, replaced by a new sound. At the side of the bed, her guide dog was also awake, softly whimpering. She reached down to comfort him. Had he heard the same thing she had, she thought? She could feel his tension, which quickly abated at her touch.

### The Bronze Saga #3: BRONZE AVENGERS

Sunni started to reach for the voice button of her talking watch, but stopped abruptly, remembering that Dot was sleeping in the same room, and the sound of the watch could wake her.

It was so nice of Dot to stay and keep her company, she reflected. It didn't seem fair to her husband, Perry, but he seemed to take it all in stride. He was a nice man. They were all nice, even Bonnie, who seemed so quiet at times.

Within a few seconds, her breathing relaxed and she returned to sleep.

-----

The next morning, as she dressed, she reflected on the changes her life had taken in the last few days.

The most amazing thing was learning that her idol, Doc Savage, was really alive! When she overheard him talking to Mr. LaCroix, admitting to him who he was and how he had survived the last fifty years, it was too much for her. Just the sheer thrill of it all made her light-headed, and, even now, she grinned knowing that she knew his secret.

Doc Savage is alive, she thought with wonder. He's alive and is a Christian preacher roaming the country bringing the word of Jesus! He's not just fighting crime anymore, he's trying to change the world -- one soul at a time. Her breathing increased, as she thought about the Bronze Avengers. Yeah, yeah, yeah! They've gotta hear about this, she thought excitedly.

"They've gotta hear about this!"

"What did you say, Sunni?" said Dot from another part of the room. "Are you okay?"

She realized with embarrassment that, in her excitement, she had voiced her thoughts. "Yeah, I'm fine!"

Dot had moved closer. "You said something about 'they've gotta hear about this.' What were you talking about?"

She swivelled around into a sitting position on the edge of the bed. Dot had been so good to her; she couldn't deceive them any longer. And knowing that Doc Savage trusted her with his secret, she couldn't hold back on telling them all.

"There's something I need to share with everybody."

"Can it wait until breakfast?"

"Yeah ... sure."

-----

An hour later, as we were all gathered around the dining room table, Dot told us that Sunni had something important to say to everybody.

"Before I tell you, you've got to promise me you'll never let this get public," said Sunni enigmatically.

We looked at each other, slightly confused and curious. I saw the look of interest on Clark's face, which didn't give away what was going on under the surface. Then we all spoke our acknowledgment.

"I don't know what's the true story behind this; I don't really think anyone knows, to be honest. It was sometime after Doc -- you -- had disappeared in 1950. The most popular of the stories has to do with an employee of the Postal Service, seeing how many letters came in addressed to 'Doc Savage,' unable to be delivered, ending up in the Dead Letter Office next to the letters for Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny. Most of them had come from children too young to remember the scandal, or simply people who still believed in the Man of Bronze, and sent letters to the Post Office hoping they'd know where to send them. Unfortunately most of those letters would end up in recycling bins across the country."

She paused to take a sip of milk. "Anyhow, this anonymous postal worker rescued some of those letters and -- helped by some friends -- began acting on their requests for help. At first they didn't have a name for them or what they did, but eventually somebody coined the phrase 'Bronze Avengers', and it stuck.

"This group of people had -- in their own way -- witnessed the good that Doc had done, and they wanted to keep the dream alive. And they did. They always did their work in secret, receiving no honor for their deeds, always in the name of Doc Savage."

I looked over at Clark. His expression was stoically unemotional, but I could see the light glinting off the mist in his eyes. I figured he was glowing with joy inside, knowing what he had started was still making an impression in the world.

"As the years passed, their numbers grew. Nobody knows how many exist within the Bronze Avengers, and that's how they want it to stay. Our strength is in our anonymity. Anyhow, packets of followers popped up all across the world, even in foreign countries. There is no central authority within the Bronze Avengers, but there is communication. At first it was snail mail -- appropriately -- but that was replaced by email. There is currently an isolated chat area on the internet that is accessible only by members of the Bronze Avengers, and it is there we share our experiences and otherwise communicate with one another. I've got it set up on my PC at home.

"A friend of mine brought me in to the Bronze Avengers, and I brought in Deek and Rhonda. We do our work quietly, without fanfare or applause. We do it to keep Doc Savage's work alive."

"How amazing!" I said.

"So that explains it," added Jacob. "I have heard of things like that happening in town, but no one was ever around to take the credit. So it was you?"

"More than likely," answered Sunni. "Clark, what do you think?"

"I ... am honored." His voice cracked with emotion. "Thank you."

"I've got a question for you, Clark," started Sunni. "I want to tell them about you. Can I?"

Everything in the dining room froze. This was something totally unexpected. I could see Clark thinking it over. Very few people knew of his dual identity, and they had been told person-to-person. We knew each and every one of them, and could trust them explicitly with his secret. To have that secret sent over the internet might trigger a response that could lead to disaster. On the other hand, if this Bronze Avengers group were to know about Clark, it could be a great help in the ministry, searching out potential group homes. It could even be a resource along the lines of the Baker Street Irregulars, able to go where we could not. Either way, it would be fascinating.

"That's a very interesting proposition," replied Clark. "I'll need to think about this before I can give you an answer."

"Okay." We could see that it wasn't what she was hoping for, but she didn't press the matter.

"So what's on the schedule for today?" I asked, changing the subject.

"I need to make a statement with the police," said Sunni. "Dot said she'd go with me."

"And we need to speak to this Larsen fellow about backing off from his attempts on Sunni," said Clark. "Perhaps he needs a firmer reminder that the EMP generator is no more."

"He's slick," commented Sunni. "When he was at my house, he never spoke specifically about the generator; he always used indirect references, so that he could deny it if pressed."

"Strongarming wouldn't work on him," added Jacob. "He's a pillar of the community; more than likely the city counsel would side with him before they would you."

"Have you ever just considered a restraining order?" said Bonnie nonchalantly. "This guy's nothing but a bully, regardless of his standing in the community. And if he ordered the bikers to terrorize Sunni -- the bikers who, by the way, are now in police custody -- he's probably sweating bullets, wondering if they've ratted on him."

Clark picked up on her thought. "If Sunni got a restraining order against Larsen and his associates, that might be sufficient for him to back off."

"But wouldn't that mean you'd have to prove Larsen was a threat to her life?" asked Scott LaCroix.

"Perhaps." Clark suddenly smiled. "But we have ... avenues at our disposal that might be able to get us what we want. Let me make a call."

-----

The time was 10:30. While Clark took care of matters back at the winery, we had a few errands to take care of. The Black Diamond was now a bright yellow with black racing stripes, and the name Bumblebee in stylized letters across the hood and trunk.

After a quick phone call to a sleepy Chief Randolph, we drove to Sunni's house; we wanted to see if it had been damaged after last night's battle. Bands of yellow CRIME SCENE -- DO NOT CROSS tape were tacked across the open doorway. However, since Sunni had called the police and had informed them of what she was going to do, we had permission to break the tape and enter the house. The front door was still on the floor just inside the doorway; Dot and I stood it up and leaned it against the wall and made sure the floor was free of obstacles before bringing Sunni through.

Everything looked more-or-less like we remembered. We got out of the way as Sunni and Sequoia did a quick walk-through. Then, satisfied, the blind woman prepared some food for her guide dog, who hadn't eaten since they'd been rescued; he attacked the food as Sunni headed towards the bedroom. Dot and I were both impressed by how she had committed every inch of the house to memory, and moved through as easy as a fully-sighted person.

"Dot? Can I get your help?"

As my wife moved towards the bedroom, I decided to explore the workshop where the EMP generator had been built. I hoped that the restraining order would dissuade Larsen's pursuit of an invention that no longer existed, and would give Sunni a chance to live her life and grow in her faith.

As I paused in prayer, I had a sudden strange feeling, directing me to bring something from this room with us. Looking around the room, I allowed my fingers to touch the various surfaces. Stopping at a black zippered carrying case for CDs, I knew this was what God wanted me to take. However, not sure if He wanted a specific CD in the case or all of them, I opted for the latter. Since Sunni and Dot were still busy, I took the case out to the Diamond and put it in the trunk.

From Sunni's house we went downtown. I had some items to get, so I dropped Dot and Sunni outside the police station and headed down the road for my destination.

-----

Chief Randolph escorted the two women into a small room with a table and some straight-back wooden chairs. Another man accompanied them; he carried a notepad and a cassette tape recorder. Sunni sat at the table across from the man, while Dot took another chair against the wall behind her.

The other man introduced himself as James Hook, and went through the formal explanation of what they were going to do; his voice was very professional, calm and practiced. He would ask her questions, elaborating on her answers where needed. Sunni looked a little nervous, but she acknowledged his explanation. He informed her that the tape was running, and instructed her to give her full name and address, which she did.

"Now, in your own words, would you please describe what happened last night?"

Sunni took a deep breath. "Well, I'd gone to bed around ten last night, and I think it was close to midnight when the motorcycles woke me up. They-they frightened me, and I called my friend Clark."

"And who is Clark?" probed Hook.

"Clark Dent," she replied without hesitation. "He's a preacher ... a traveling evangelist. I met him last week when I was in Portland, Oregon, and they offered me a ride back here."

"They?"

"Clark and Perry Liston are both traveling evangelists. Dot is Perry's wife. I rode with them in their RV."

Hook nodded. "So you called your friend Clark."

"Yes. He told me to get dressed, and they'd be right over. I did, and I waited for him in my living room. I heard the motorcycles circling in the cul-de-sac. They were so loud ... it was very frightening! Two of them came closer and stopped in front of my house. Then I heard footsteps ... boots ... coming up the ramp to my door. The next thing I knew, there was a crash, and I jumped back; that's when they broke down my door."

"They didn't knock or give any indication that they were going to break down the door?"

"No; they just did it."

"Okay," acknowledged Hook. "Go ahead."

"Two men grabbed me."

"How did you know there were two men?"

"Two sets of footsteps. Two voices. Four hands grabbed my arms: the one on my left had large hands, and the one on my right had smaller hands."

"What did the men say?"

Sunni concentrated for a moment, her voice becoming a monotone as she recalled the details. "There was a lot of profanity. The one on my left said, 'This is her!' And the one on my right agreed." She paused. "The one on my left was taller; his voice came from higher up. The one on my right was more my height." She paused again and shook her head. "I don't really remember much after that. I think I passed out ... the next thing I remember was Clark's voice. He identified himself, and he was lifting me off the ground. He assured me everything was okay. I was in his arms; he carried me outside and put me in a car."

"Did he say anything about the two bikers?"

She shook her head. "No. He just put me in the car. Dot was at the wheel." Her arm gestured back to indicate Dot. "She identified herself, and told me to buckle in and hang on. I did, and we ripped out of there."

"Where was your guide dog?"

"Right with me, as always." Her hand went down to stroke Sequoia's back. "When Clark was carrying me out to the car, I called for him. He jumped in after I was placed in the car, and stayed at my feet on the floorboards."

"Where were you taken?"

"Mr. LaCroix's place -- that's where they're staying."

"And, just for the record, you intend to press charges on the men who broke down your door and assaulted you?"

She nodded swiftly. "I do indeed!"

Mr. Hook turned off the tape recorder. "Thank you, Miss Bradshaw. We'll type this up for your signature. Then you two can leave. In the meantime, is there something I can get for you ... water, coffee, donut?"

"No, thanks," she declined with a smile.

Mr. Hook left the room, and Sunni visibly relaxed. "I'm glad that's over," she said. "How'd I do, Dot?"

"You did fine," she replied.

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### The Bronze Saga #3: BRONZE AVENGERS

I swung the Diamond around and into the loading zone as I saw Dot and Sunni standing there. They climbed in, and we headed back for Sunni's house.

"Did you get what you wanted?" asked Sunni.

"Not quite. He's going to have to order some of the items, like the motion sensors and a couple of the cameras. But we came up with an idea to keep things covered for the moment. We'll install dummy boxes in place of the real cameras; as long as no one opens them up they'll fool anyone who tries to come to your door."

"Okay. Does Clark have the restraining order yet?"

"I don't know," I replied.

We pulled into the cul-de-sac. There was a car in Sunni's driveway. "Sunni, it looks like your friend Deek is here."

"Oh, no!" Sunni exclaimed. "He doesn't know what happened!"

We pulled behind the station wagon. The large boy was just coming out of the house, through the broken door, and saw us. He moved faster than I would've given him credit for, and met Sunni as she climbed out. He gave her a big hug as he said, emotionally, "My God, Sunni, I just heard! Are you okay?"

She reassured him with a hug. "Yeah, I'm fine. Perry, Dot, Clark, and Bonnie rescued me."

The big youth stretched a hand towards me. "Thank you, sir! Thank you!"

"Deek, does Rhonda know?" asked Sunni.

"Not yet, but I'll let her know you're okay. What happened?"

"Tell you what. Follow me into the house and I'll give you the condensed version. But please keep this quiet, okay?"

"Sure. Elbow?"

She took his extended right elbow and they headed towards the house. Meanwhile, Dot and I carried in the gear to make it appear as if she had a video surveillance system.

-----

Over the next two hours, we discovered that Deek Wilson was an excellent handyman. With only a little assistance, he had replaced the displaced front door, and together we made quick work of installing the surveillance system for the house. Periodically touching bases with Clark, we found out that the restraining order would be ready by the afternoon. I said we'd probably be done before that, have lunch with Sunni, and return to the winery.

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Chapter Fifteen

### The Bronze Saga #3: BRONZE AVENGERS

The time was 3:12. The Black Diamond, still in its yellow Bumblebee persona, was once more heading downtown. Clark and Jacob LaCroix sat in the front seat, while Bonnie Clayton sat in the back. There was very little nervousness, as they viewed the impending confrontation as if they were going into battle, armed and prepared.

As the Diamond pulled into the parking area, they noticed the heads of several salesmen turning in their direction, their feet pivoting in mid-step and gravitating towards them like metal filings to a magnet.

Their advance, however, was stopped by the presence of another man walking from the office to the parking lot. With thinly-disguised disappointment they returned to their previous positions.

"I take it that's Larsen," observed Clark.

"Yep," confirmed Jacob.

"You sure know who's in charge of this bunch," commented Bonnie. "Did you see the rest of those salesmen scatter when he appeared?"

As soon as Larsen recognized a familiar face, his smile doubled and he stretched out his hand in greeting. "Jacob! What brings you here?"

Jacob shook Larsen's hand, then indicated the others. "Frank, these are a couple of friend of mine -- Clark Dent and Bonnie Clayton. They're in town for a few days."

He shook hands with them, giving them the same friendly smile. "Welcome to Pine Corners, folks! I can see you've got a fine car there," he observed, looking over the Diamond. "Perhaps you're looking for a second car, say, a minivan? Minivans are great with the kids! You got kids?"

"Actually, Frank," interrupted Jacob, the tone of his voice somewhat less than friendly. "We're here to talk to you about Sunni Bradshaw."

Larsen's expression froze, then his smile vanished; his eyes narrowed slightly. "Nice girl. Don't see why you'd want to talk to me about her, though."

Clark picked up the narrative. "Her cul-de-sac was terrorized last night by some bikers who were having work done here. Sunni was also attacked. We wondered if you might be able to provide some information about them."

Larsen feigned shock. "Attacked? Is she all right?"

"She's fine," answered Clark with a cold smile. "The bikers are right down the street ... in jail."

Larsen's expression didn't move, but there was no true relief behind it. "That's ... wonderful. Where is Sunni now?"

"Safe," answered Clark, his gold-flecked eyes boring into those of the used-car king. "And she told us all about how you, Mr. Brock and Mr. Stern ... visited her."

"Really," said Larsen, starting to sweat. "This is all very interesting. Why don't we find somewhere comfortable to talk, like my office? Follow me!" He pivoted on his heel and walked quickly in the direction of the main building.

A minute later, past the secretary, the neon DO NOT DISTURB sign, and the locked door, they stood opposite Frank Larsen's desk. He gestured for them to have a seat.

"I'm truly sorry to hear about what happened to Miss Bradshaw, but I don't see where this involves me or any of my employees."

"Frank," started Jacob. "Sunni identified you, Mr. Brock and Mr. Stern. She told us about the threats you made against her."

Larsen was silent. It had taken him by surprise to find out that Crusher and his boys had been arrested. The fact that the police had not come to take him into custody meant that the big biker hadn't implicated him in their unsuccessful attack -- yet. He didn't know why Jacob and these two strangers were here, nor what they believed they could accomplish here. He saw the large metal cross around the neck of the bronze skinned man, and briefly wondered if it was for show or indicated something stronger. Either way, it made no difference to him, as he took a sip of his water and considered his next words carefully.

"Really. How very interesting. Let's say that I did visit her. Did she tell you what it was about?"

Clark said levelly, "You made her an offer for the secrets to her invention. You addressed the matter indirectly, just like you are doing now."

"Did she mention that her invention could make her very wealthy?"

"Yes," answered Jacob with contempt. "And you should be ashamed of yourself!"

"Why, Jacob?" He leaned forward in his chair, defying them. "For wanting to make a profit off of the idiots of the world who seem to have nothing better to do than parade up and down the streets making more noise than an artillery range? Heck, peace and quiet is one of the reasons I settled in Pine Corners in the first place! Why can't I make a profit at the same time?"

"What you're proposing is still against the law," stated Clark firmly. "And we want you to leave Sunni Bradshaw alone. Now."

"Or what?" replied Larsen sharply, becoming irritated at these intruders.

Jacob reached into his jacket pocket and came out with an envelope, which he put on the desk in front of Larsen. When he spoke, his voice was grim and professional. "Frank Larsen, I hereby serve you with this restraining order. From this point further, neither you, any of your employees, nor any of your representatives are allowed within 200 yards of Miss Sunni Bradshaw." He paused to let that sink in, then continued. "Furthermore, you are forbidden to contact her by phone, mail, or any other method of communication." He paused again. "If you violate this restraining order, legal action will be taken against you."

Larsen's eyes looked down at the paper as if it were a deadly cobra. Then he said, softly but defiantly, "You can't do this."

"Mr. Larsen," replied Clark. "We HAVE done it. If you care to examine the document, you will see that everything is perfectly in order. And if you have any questions, please contact our lawyer. He'll be more than happy to explain things." He placed a business card on top of the restraining order. The name on the card read

DOUGLAS MARTIN  
Martin and Associates  
Attorneys at Law  
New York City, New York

Larsen was dumbfounded. The blasted meddlers had found a way to keep him from his goal! They couldn't, he tried telling himself.

"Frank," said Jacob, the tone of his voice calm. "At first I couldn't accept that you'd be behind something like this -- I mean, we've known each other for years! But now I see you're not the man I knew, and ... I feel sorry for you."

"You feel sorry for ME?" he spat. "I don't want your pity!"

"Mr. Larsen," interjected Clark. "In case you may be entertaining the thought of slipping past this order due to Sunni's visual vulnerabilities, let me inform you of some improvements to Sunni's house. Earlier today, her house was wired for video surveillance, capable of providing a digital record of ALL visitors. Should you or any of your associates visit her, your actions will be recorded, and an alarm will summon the police."

"Please, Frank," pleaded Jacob. "Don't be stupid."

Larsen didn't view himself as stupid, and wasn't about to let these buffoons see him lose his cool. This was only a momentary setback, he reminded himself. In time I will succeed ... I will have her invention, with or without her cooperation. He smiled confidently. Nothing can stop me, he vowed. Nothing WILL stop me!

Meanwhile, the water in the glass next to Larsen began to ripple in concentric circles.

-----

Dot and I were in the living room area of Nomad. Coinciding with the meeting with Larsen, we were spending time in intercessory prayer. However, as concentrated as we were with our task at hand, we didn't realize our RV was slowly starting to sway back and forth.

-----

Up the hill, in the main LaCroix house, Charlene Cornwell had just served a glass of iced tea to Sunni Bradshaw, when she noticed an increase in activity in the guide dog.

"Mercy me," she exclaimed. "It looks like th' poor dog's gotta go outside."

Sunni called the dog over to her and stroked his back. "Is that it? Is that what you need? Yeah ... sure it is! Lemme just put on your leash ..."

The dog's head suddenly bolted straight up, and he gave off with a howl that surprised both women.

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### The Bronze Saga #3: BRONZE AVENGERS

At the USGS Seismic Monitoring Station, Rae Childers had just torn off a printout from her computer, when her ears picked up the rapid skritch-skritch-skritch-skritch from one of the seismographs. "QUAKE!" she yelled, rushing towards the device.

James Newman came into the room at a run. "Where?"

Rae quickly rattled off the location and magnitude. "It's a big one, Jim! And look at the magnetometer -- it's off the scale!"

"It's gotta be wreaking havoc with communications!" he replied with a profanity. "See if you can get through to the emergency centers in Foust Falls and Sterling, and I'll try Hayward and Pine Corners! GO! GO!"

The two geologists dived for their phones as the seismograph continued drawing its frantic trail across the graph paper.

-----

"DANGER!"

I heard it in my head as if it had been broadcast directly, and my eyes popped wide open. A moment later I felt the shifting of the rig, at the same time Dot did. We looked dumbfounded at one another for a moment, not wanting to accept what was happening, then a crash of an object in the RV brought us out of it.

"Earthquake!" I exclaimed.

"We've gotta get to higher ground!"

"I'll take Goliath!" I said, dashing for the stairs. As I held onto both railings, the floor now jerking back and forth, I had an odd flashback of being on the MAX light-rail train back in Portland, rounding a sharp corner.

"GOTCHA!" she cried, shakily getting to her feet and addressing the computer. "MYRNA! EMERGENCY EXTERNAL DISCONNECT FOR GOLIATH AND NOMAD, AND START ENGINES!"

"THANKS!" I called behind me as I reached the bottom of the steps and opened the door.

The ground was still moving, and I fought the fear as I moved around the front of Nomad to approach Goliath. Looking ahead at the access road, it looked clear -- thank God -- but there were signs of cracks in the pavement. As long as they stayed small, I assessed, we'd be fine.

I climbed into the cab, realizing as I settled into the seat that the shaking had stopped, and it was just my nerves experiencing an aftershock. "Thank you, Lord," I breathed, then addressed the computer. "Myrna, activate the intercom to Nomad, and see if you can make contact with Clark's cell phone!"

"Already beat you to it," came Dot's voice from the speaker, reminding me how well we worked together as a team. There was a distortion in the way her voice came over the speaker, but I pressed past it. "How's it look from there?"

"Good. Can you see the cracks in the road ahead?"

"Yeah."

"Excuse me, Perry," the computer suddenly interrupted. "I have not been able to establish contact with Mr. Dent's cell phone. Shall I will continue trying?"

"Yes, Myrna," I answered. "This is not good. Ready, hon?"

"Lead on, lover!" Dot returned. "I'll be right behind you!"

"Okay, Lord," I said under my breath. "Here we go."

The truck slowly moved ahead.

"Myrna, can you tell how firm the ground is ahead?" I asked, suddenly thinking of sinkholes.

"Yes. Relative density is unchanged."

"Good. Keep monitoring, and warn us if it changes."

"Acknowledged."

Traversing the small cracks in the pavement was easy, and we started inclining towards the next level up, the parking area of the information center.

I was getting ready to breathe a sigh of relief when we came upon several downed trees blocking the road. There had been a large evergreen that I recalled had been growing at an odd angle to the ground, rather than straight up. Now it lay across the road, four feet wide, its uprooted trunk fully exposed.

"Oh, brother," I muttered with a sick feeling. "Dot, can you see ahead of me?"

"Yeah. Any way to get around it?"

I looked to my left and right and shook my head. "On the left are more trees, and there's a sharp hillside on my right."

"Not good," she commented. "If only I had some C-4 plastique."

"Explosives, sir?" suddenly interjected Myrna. "Would short-range missiles suffice?"

I stared at the dashboard, my jaw gaping. "We have missiles on this rig?"

"Yes, Perry. Do you wish a summary?"

"Later." I paused. "Dot, did you know about this?"

"Not me," she replied. "I'd have suggested it if I had."

"Myrna, how many missiles would it take to clear the road ahead?"

"One, sir. Shall I?"

I smiled. "You may fire when ready."

### The Bronze Saga #3: BRONZE AVENGERS

"Fire one!" came the immediate response, followed by a thin trail of smoke from the grille into the melange of trees, and a sharp explosion that made me thank God for the Paradox shell and auto-tinting windshield. When the glass returned to normal, there was nothing left of the downed trees but lots and lots of splinters. Holding back my amazement, I pressed the truck ahead and drove into the parking lot of the information center. Scott LaCroix, dressed in his blue work smock, rushed to meet me as I climbed down from the cab.

"I heard the blast!" he exclaimed with surprise. "Was that you?"

"Yes. How are you doing?"

"I-I've never been through an earthquake before. I think I'm all right ... I'm not injured. There's going to be a lot of clean-up, though."

"You'll be fine," I reassured him.

Nomad had pulled in next to Goliath, and Dot was standing in the doorway. Her expression was urgent, and her arm was frantically pointing to the top of the hill. "PERRY! SCOTT!" she yelled. "THE HOUSES!"

We followed her direction. Of the two houses, the smaller one appeared untouched, while part of the roof of the other had caved in. Scott gripped my shoulder in reaction and exclaimed, "Charlene and Sunni!" Then he started sprinting up the hill.

"Wow," commented Dot.

"Grab the medic kit!" I said, following Scott at a jogging pace.

-----

At the moment of the earthquake, Clark's voice boomed: "SEEK COVER!"

The room moved with a mind of its own. Pictures fell from the walls, as did plaster from the ceiling, and crashed to the floor. Larsen had the best hiding place of the four, under his desk, curled in a fetal position waiting for the world to stop shaking around him.

After several seconds, the quake subsided, and they slowly got to their feet and dusted themselves off. Clark checked himself out, then swiftly gave Bonnie and Jacob a medical once-over. Jacob had been hit in the arm by a chunk of ceiling, and he rubbed it tenderly; Clark assessed that, other than a bruise, his arm would be fine.

Coming out from under his desk, Larsen ignored them completely and quickly wrenched open his office door -- it took two good pulls to free it -- and stepped into the outer office. His toe made contact with the fallen DO NOT DISTURB sign, and his secretary was dusting herself off after being on the floor under her own desk. She asked if Larsen was all right, and he snapped back, "Yes! Get my family on the phone!"

Dutifully, the secretary picked up the phone, listened, tapped the hook, then looked back at him with a disappointed expression. "It looks like the phones are out, boss."

Larsen grunted a profanity and barked, "Keep trying! I'm heading home!"

"Yes, sir!" she replied as he headed for the parking lot.

As he saw his car, he released an explosive profanity. A large light fixture had fallen, crashing through the front windshield and resting somewhere between the dashboard and the front end. Somewhere in there, he knew, was his engine.

He wanted to stop and mourn his loss, but he couldn't take the time. After a quick look around, he headed for a locked box with keys to the cars in the lot. Using his master key, he grabbed a handful of car keys and headed out to the lot.

Within a minute, he had found a working Ford sedan, and had left to find his family.

-----

The damage was extensive.

Buildings had lost bricks, windows had shattered, and dazed people who had never gone through an earthquake before were walking about wondering just what had happened. Many of Larsen's used cars had been struck by crashing light fixtures and debris thrown from buildings. Two salesmen were attending to a car fire, while another one pressed a red-stained shop towel to his forehead.

Clark pulled out his cell phone and tapped a couple of buttons. After listening for a moment, and looking at the display, he announced, "There is no signal."

"Huh?" asked Bonnie. "How can that be? That's a satellite phone, right?"

Clark nodded, continuing to check the unit. "Do you carry a compass?"

"Yeah." She reached into her waist bag, producing a dime-sized compass between two fingers. Handing it over to Clark, he placed it in the middle of his massive palm and said, "I thought so. Look!"

The needle of the small compass was spinning wildly.

Clark explained. "It appears that we are in the midst of a localized magnetic disturbance, probably due to the seismic changes in the area. I have seen this sort of phenomenon before, and it would explain the problems with the cell phone."

"How long does it last?" asked Jacob.

"There's no way of telling," Clark shrugged.

"I need to get back home!"

Clark was looking around. He spotted one of the salesmen, standing around in a half-daze, and they approached him. He looked at them and mumbled, "Can I help you?"

Jacob pleaded, "I need to find out if my family is okay. Can I barrow one of your cars for a couple of hours?"

The expression on the salesman cleared as if wiped clean. He nodded. "Where do you live?"

"LaCroix Winery." He gave him the roads.

The salesman crossed over to a box attached to a post, unlocked it, and looked around a moment before plucking a set of keys from a hook. He returned and handed it to Jacob. "This is to the Dodge truck. It's got four wheel drive. Can you handle a stick?"

Jacob nodded.

"Go!" said the salesman.

Jacob looked at Clark and Bonnie. Clark said, "Knowing Perry, he'll head here as soon as he's able."

Jacob said no more, but jogged to the truck, and was soon off the lot. The salesman had gone elsewhere, leaving Clark and Bonnie alone.

"Well, let's get the first aid kit out of the Diamond and start walking towards the center of town," said Clark, his voice determined. "I'm sure we'll find someone to help."

Bonnie nodded. "Agreed."

-----

It took us only a couple of minutes to reach the top of the hill. Scott, his legs probably well accustomed to going up and down from home to work, had already vanished inside the house. Dot caught up with me, and we trotted in synchronized step. As we gained altitude, I looked out at the landscape, trying to see the effects of the earthquake. The grapevines looked as if a great wave had passed over them, flattening them. And the hills were pockmarked with dark holes where the earth had collapsed underneath.

As we got closer, we saw that part of the roof of the main house had collapsed, but Dot had pointed out that it was above the bedrooms. "Unless someone was taking an afternoon nap, they escaped the ceiling caving in."

Somewhat winded but determined, we moved past the double front doors -- one of which had become unhinged in the quake -- and through the foyer to the living room. The place was a mess, with one window shattered and the floor heavily cluttered.

Sunni was curled up on the floor, her arms hugging her guide dog; Scott LaCroix sat on the couch next to Mrs. Cornwell, holding a bandanna against her shoulder. Dot swung the medic kit from her back and rushed to Mrs. Cornwell's side. Scott backed off while the stubborn housekeeper tried waving Dot off with her other hand. "Aye, it's nothing, dear! Ah just praise the Good Lord you both made it!"

I moved to Sunni's side, kneeling down and putting a light hand on her shoulder. "It's Perry," I identified. "You okay?" She turned and put her arms around me in a hug. "Yeah, I think so," she answered, calmer than I would've given her credit for. "How's Clark and Bonnie?"

"Don't know," I informed her. "Can't get through to the cell."

"Doesn't surprise me," she replied enigmatically. "I know this is going to sound really weird, but I felt something in the air when the earthquake hit. I think it was magnetic."

"And that would've affected our cell phones."

"It'll probably affect any communication that goes through the air. Charlene said the power's out."

"Yeah. I'm not sure about the regular phone lines."

"Okay, Charlene," said Dot as she finished tending to the injury. "You were right. It wasn't that bad. But still, keep it in the sling for awhile, okay?" She gave the housekeeper a look that closed off any rebuttal.

Mrs. Cornwell nodded, and Dot stood.

"Okay," I said. "If everybody's all right here, Dot and I are going into town to find Clark and Bonnie."

"Can I go with you?" asked Sunni, standing.

I glanced over at Dot; she just smiled. "Sure. Scott? Charlene?"

Scott shook his head. "If I know my father, he's already on his way back. We'll wait for him. But if you spot him on the way, let him know we're okay."

"No problem," I nodded.

-----

"Come quick! Come quick! They've got Andy! Somebody help!"

With the first cry from the woman standing in front of the police station a block away from them, Clark and Bonnie spontaneously kicked into a dead run. There were a few others gathered around the entrance to the small station when they arrived, but they parted after seeing the height of the newcomers.

Passing through the office area, they could make out what the emergency was. During the quake, one of the deputies got dangerously close to the bikers in the holding cells, and the one called Crusher now had him pinned to the bars in a potentially-fatal choke hold. He was surrounded by several armed men, but he used the trapped deputy as a shield as, swearing profusely, he yelled his demands, "Open these doors and let us out of here, or I swear I'll break this cop's neck!"

Clark looked over at the Chief, who hid his tension well. "I can't do that, Crusher! Now you let him go or we'll open fire on you and your men! Are you willing to see them all killed?"

Crusher, however, was not one to be persuaded. He tightened his hold on the deputy, causing him to gag and wriggle helplessly. After several minutes without change, it was clear to Clark that this situation was not going to resolve itself easily, and that it could end up with many people hurt or dead unless something was done.

Maneuvering himself next to the Chief, he stepped forward boldly and said, "Excuse me, may I offer another solution?"

All eyes looked at the stranger in their midst, and at least one pair of eyes recognized the speaker. "YOU! You're the one who put me here!" yelled Crusher, cursing and pointing at Clark with the other hand.

### The Bronze Saga #3: BRONZE AVENGERS

His rifle not wavering, the Chief looked over at Clark, who stood there calmly, and gave him a assessing once-over. Considering the accusation from Crusher, and the facts of how the bikers came to stay in his jail, he said, "You're the one who saved Sunni Bradshaw from these characters?"

Without hesitation, Clark nodded and replied, "Yes, sir, I am."

Okay, now her testimony makes sense, he thought. Then he listened to his gut and said, "Go ahead."

"Thank you," calmly replied Clark, taking a step towards the holding cell.

As he did, Crusher tightened his chokehold and loudly threatened, "You step back or he's dead in ten seconds!"

"No ... I don't think so," replied Clark in a voice so low it was heard only by those closest to him.

He took another step, his arms loosely down at his side, then moved so swift that people watching gasped. His hand reached out to the arm across the deputy's throat, and two fingers darted out to pinch a small piece of skin on the choking forearm.

Crusher's eyes suddenly opened wide and his mouth opened in a painful howl. At the same time, the muscled arm went completely limp, as if it had been pumped full of novocaine, and was easily caught by Clark's other hand. As it did, Bonnie simultaneously reached in and grabbed the deputy, pulling him out of harm's way and into the arms of other onlookers.

Clark lowered Crusher's dead limb and took a step back. With an expression of amazement and horror, the big biker cradled the arm in his other hand and opened his mouth to speak but couldn't. Then he regained his voice and yelled at Clark, "What did you do to my arm?"

Clark said nothing as the biker launched into a tirade of cursing that sent many of the onlookers backing off, offended by the language. Even the other bikers in the cell backed away, for fear of becoming the vent for their leader's rage.

After a minute, however, the biker's anger spent, Clark said very quietly and deliberately to him, "I can restore it."

The biker didn't respond immediately. He was breathing so rapid that people wondered if he would pass out from hyperventilation. His eyes mirrored desperation and hatred as he growled, "Of course I want it restored, you idiot -- NOW!"

Clark's face of flint never wavered, nor did he blink. After several seconds, he continued in an even tone. "I will restore your arm to normal ... ONLY if you and your men promise to behave. If you haven't noticed, this town has experienced a major earthquake, and we are in a crisis situation." He paused to let that sink in. "We don't need you or your fellows further complicating matters. If you choose not to cooperate, you can stay in those cells until someone can attend to you."

"And that could be quite a while!" interjected the Chief, catching on. "I'd listen to him if I were you!"

There was silence as Crusher held his helpless arm against his chest with the other hand. Then the hate in his eyes began to soften as he comprehended the reality of their situation. He turned to the others in the gang and asked them the silent question. One by one they gave their nods of assent. Crusher turned back and

### The Bronze Saga #3: BRONZE AVENGERS

straightened up, trying to give the impression of being in control. "All right," he said. "We'll cooperate. Now ... my arm?"

Clark made eye contact with the Chief, who nodded almost imperceptibly, but pivoted his rifle up to zero in on Crusher's midsection; the message was clear.

Stepping forward without hesitation, Clark reached out a hand, and Crusher placed the dead arm into it. Holding it carefully, Clark touched around an area on the forearm for a moment before pressing hard into a particular spot. As he massaged the spot, Crusher's formerly dead fingers came back to life, flexing a couple of times. As soon as he had enough muscle control to do so, Crusher pulled the arm back into the cell, his expression one of amazement and wonder.

The deputies started herding the onlookers out of the area, leaving only the Chief and Clark. Bonnie stood just outside, on the other side of the doorway.

The Chief turned the rifle safely towards the ceiling and moved closer to the cells, addressing the bikers. "Right now we're still assessing the damage from the quake, but I'm gonna ask you all a question: would you be willing to help us if we need it?"

He smiled at the expressions of support from the bikers.

"Yeah ... I suppose so," added Crusher.

The Chief nodded. "Thanks. I'll be back." Then he turned and left the room.

Clark gave the biker a final look and turned to follow. But before he could get to the door, Crusher called to him, "You -- wait a minnit!" There was no anger in his voice this time.

Clark stopped and turned. "Yes?"

"W-what are you?" he asked incredulously. "Are you a pro wrestler, or some kinda martial arts master?"

Clark smiled and walked over until he was face to face with the big biker. "No," he replied softly. "I'm a preacher."

Then, without waiting to see Crusher's reaction to his statement, Clark turned and walked out of the room, meeting Bonnie just outside the door.

"Nice exit line," commented Bonnie with a smirk, as they left the police station.

"Thank you," grinned Clark.

Outside, they saw the Chief standing in the bed of a pickup truck, addressing a group of people looking for guidance.

Clark respected Chief Randolph, even though they had barely met. He had handled himself professionally in dealing with the bikers, and now was delegating the citizens into groups -- checking the bridge and road into town, getting search and rescue tools from the local hardware store, or just going door-to-door through town to make sure everyone and everything was okay. And he was impressed by the people of this little town, who didn't put up an argument, but went about their assignments.

### The Bronze Saga #3: BRONZE AVENGERS

Clark and Bonnie approached the Chief once the people disbursed. He hopped down from the truck and reached out a hand. "It's Dent, isn't it? I gotta thank you for what you did back there. It could've turned real nasty if you hadn't stepped in when you did."

"It was nothing," he dismissed the compliment. "So where can we help?"

The Chief, fatigue starting to show in him, sat on the tailgate of the truck, crossed his arms in front of his chest, and took a deep breath.

"Looks like you need a nap," Clark offered sympathetically.

The other man shrugged it off. "Later," he replied. "Well, it's obvious that we've lost power and phone lines. And I wouldn't be surprised if the bridge is out, which cuts us off from the outside world." He paused. "It doesn't look good, does it?"

"It could've been worse," offered Clark. "Do you have a mayor?"

"Jeff Reed. Unfortunately he had business in Spokane, and is probably on the other side of the bridge. So it looks like it's up to me," he sighed heavily.

"What about medical support?"

The question brought him out of his minor slump. "If you're asking if we have a hospital, the answer's no. But we do have a local doctor that's A-Number-One: Marilee Felipé. She was here earlier, checking out those bikers to see what you used on them to put them to sleep for so long." He turned to Clark and stared. "What DID you use on them, by the way?"

Clark didn't flinch. "Tranquilizer darts."

"There weren't any marks."

"Special type, my own invention. They barely break the skin, and the drug is quickly absorbed into the bloodstream."

"Sunni said you two were traveling evangelists. Why does a preacher need a tranquilizer gun ... if you don't mind me asking?"

"Not at all," shrugged Clark. "We're on the road most of the year, so occasionally we go hunting for some fresh meat. All in accord with the local hunting laws, of course."

Chief Randolph nodded. "Okay; I do a little hunting myself. Elk, deer, whatever's seasonal."

"We were talking about your doctor," reminded Clark. "I've had some medical training. If your doctor can use an extra hand, I'm available."

The Chief looked at Clark with an appreciative eye. "So far things look light, but I'll keep you in mind. You're quite a talented person, aren't you, Mr. Dent?"

"Call me Clark," he smiled.

"Ike," he returned.

They leaned against the side of the pickup truck, and Randolph went through a mental checklist. "If the bridge is out, so's our power supply until we can get hooked back into the grid. We've got a handful of gasoline generators we can get together, but it's not going to do us any good in the long run."

"Shelter?"

"I was thinkin' about the school gym. A lot'll depend on how much damage there's been."

"May I offer an alternative?" The Chief nodded. "The semi truck I drove into town contains a large tent we use for evangelistic meetings. It has its own power source, lights and temperature controls."

The Chief raised an eyebrow. "I like it. Where is it?"

"At the LaCroix Winery; Jacob was letting us use his facilities. My partner and his wife are there, and I'd almost be willing to bet that they're on their way here now."

"Good! I'll figure out a place to put it!"

"Have you been able to use your portable radio?" Clark asked. "I suspect that wireless communications have been disrupted as a result of the earthquake."

He nodded. "I got static. If that's true, we're gonna need runners. I'll see if we can draft some of the kids with their bikes."

Just then a car swung into the area, which came to a stop near the pickup. "Chief! The bridge's collapsed!" the driver yelled. "We can't get out of town to get help!"

The Chief angled his head in Clark's direction. "Not surprised," he muttered privately, then called to the people in the car, "Okay, then. It's up to us to hold out until help arrives! We'll use the station as a command post." He turned to Clark. "When your tent shows up, set it up over there -" He pointed to a nearby side street. "We'll use it for an emergency shelter and makeshift hospital."

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## Chapter Sixteen

It was obvious that the driver of the pickup was trying to get my attention, as he flashed his lights and beeped his horn. He slowed down and stopped in the middle of the road, and waited for me. By the time I came alongside, he'd stepped out of the truck, and I recognized him.

"Jacob! Glad you made it!"

"You as well!" he returned. "How are Scott and Charlene?"

"Good! Your house took a little damage, but they're both fine! They're waiting for you. What about Clark and Bonnie?"

"Waiting for you back in town!"

"How are the roads?"

"Not as bad as I would've expected! You'll have no problem getting through!"

"Thank God," I sighed. "Same with the roads behind us! Where did you get the truck?"

"Loaner from a Good Samaritan at Larsen's! Have you been able to get through to anyone?"

I shook my head. "No! Sunni says there's a magnetic disturbance, caused by the quake, that's temporarily blocked the cell phones!"

Jacob nodded. "Clark deduced something along the same lines. How's Sunni?"

"She's okay! She's riding in the RV with Dot!"

"Good! We'll probably join you downtown in a little while, see what we can do to help!"

"Okay! Godspeed, Jacob!"

"You, too!" he replied, climbing into the truck. With a final wave, he moved on.

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Driving through downtown was easier than expected. The streets were clear, and the people kept to the sidewalks, wandering, heading downtown, like lemmings to the sea. Many showed stunned expressions on their faces, and there were a few nursing recent injuries. Observing the damage the quake had done to the older buildings and storefronts, I prayed that no one had been killed or seriously hurt.

I couldn't see Clark or Bonnie, and it hadn't occurred to me to utilize Myrna's sensors. I switched on the rig's external speaker and picked up the microphone. "CLARK! BONNIE! ARE YOU OUT THERE!" I paused a few seconds to see if there was any response, then repeated the call.

My efforts were quickly rewarded, as Clark's large frame emerged into the street, and he waved to further acknowledge my signal. As I approached, he jogged towards me and hopped onto the running boards of the truck with a beaming grin.

"Thank God you made it, brother!" he greeted, putting a hand on my shoulder.

"Same here! Is Bonnie okay?"

"Yes!"

"We intercepted Jacob on the way here; apart from a little damage at the house, everyone's fine!"

"Good! We've been working with Police Chief Randolph. We're going to use the tent for an emergency center!" He pointed to a side street a couple of blocks ahead of us. "Set up the tent on that side street! You'll find parking on the parallel street behind it!"

"Gotcha!" I acknowledged.

Clark stepped off the running board, and trotted back towards the RV. As I turned my eyes back to the road, Bonnie came within view; she crossed around the front of the semi, matching Clark's approach, and stepped onto the running board.

"Valet parking, sir?" she asked; she was slightly out of breath, but grinning broadly.

I smiled back, glad that she was all right.

The people moved aside to allow us through, and I easily cruised over to the parallel street to park. After sharing a quick hug with Bonnie outside of the cab, I retrieved the remote unit and guided the tent module into place. As I did, she started working at the side of the trailer, unloading the electrical cables and inside power components we'd need once the tent was inflated. She took a break as Nomad came around the corner and parked, and greeted both Dot and Sunni with enthusiastic hugs.

Clark walked over to my side, a half dozen citizens behind him. "We've got some help, courtesy of Chief Randolph," he informed me. "Half of the tent will be used as a med center for the doctor, and the other half as emergency shelter." He indicated the group of people behind him. "We're going over to the local hardware store to get some cots and other supplies we'll need."

With a word to the others, they headed off towards the hardware store.

Despite my limited view, I could see examples of the damage from the quake. One building had barely been touched, apparently losing only a few shingles from the roof. The business next to it, however, had been hit hard. The front looked like it had been constructed of melted clay and not brick, and had slid into a pile on the sidewalk; a crowd of townsfolk cleared debris from around the entrance.

I closed my eyes as I prayed for all those around me. I heard the steady muffled chugging of the compressor, and the birds flying about, and the sounds of the picks and shovels digging away the brick and mortar of the storefront. And I heard crying. Looking over in that direction, I saw a couple looking at their destroyed car; the chimney from one of the buildings had crashed through the roof of the vehicle. I wasn't sure if they were crying with grief over the loss of their car, or with shock and relief that they hadn't been in the car at the time.

I momentarily tensed as I felt an arm snake around my waist, then relaxed as I looked over to see my wife's smiling face.

"Easy," she comforted. "It's just me." She kissed me. "Did I mention that I'm glad you're okay?"

"You, too," I reciprocated.

Sunni and Sequoia stood behind Dot. "How can we help?"

"Tell you what. Let me give you the remote to the compressor. You monitor the inflation while Dot and I make sure there are no kinks or folds in the tent. Can you do that?"

"No sweat," she replied confidently, holding out her hand for the remote. "If I need you, I'll holler."

I placed the remote in her hands and gave her a quick orientation of the controls, then Dot and I set about to work with the tent.

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### The Bronze Saga #3: BRONZE AVENGERS

Marilee Felipé was short and stocky, but there was a fire in her eyes that couldn't be avoided. Her black hair was in a tight bun at the back of her head, as if it had been done hastily -- which it had. She had been in the lavatory when the quake shook her off the toilet and onto the floor, a detail she vowed never to repeat as she regained her professional attitude and came before Chief Randolph.

The Chief briefed her on the latest developments, and the use of the tent as emergency shelter. She recognized Sunni Bradshaw at the controls, and introduced herself to the couple working with the tent.

"Good to meet you, ma'am," the man greeted. "Since you're going to be working here, we were holding back on putting the cots, chairs, etc., in until we got your direction."

"Thanks, Perry," she replied. She asked him a few questions regarding capabilities of the tent -- overall dimensions, floor space, power requirements -- while she drew some diagrams on a notepad. Then she outlined how she wanted things organized, with regards to triage, treatment, and recovery/shelter. While Perry conferred with two other women, she walked over to a group of people waiting with cots and chairs. Addressing them by name, she first checked them out to see if they had sustained any injuries, then explained how she wanted things distributed. They understood her instructions, and she left them to do their work.

Walking into the police station, she could hear the profanity-laced comments coming from the two holding cells. She'd not determined what had been done to these men to render them unconscious for as long as they'd been; the blood samples had to be sent out for analysis, so it would be days before she found out the results. As if that's really going to matter, she thought as she walked over to the small Break Room and her first patients.

Their injuries were minor: a man with a hairline fracture to his upper left arm, and a girl with second-degree burns she got when a cup of hot coffee spilled onto her leg. Neither of the injuries had been life-threatening -- thank goodness -- but she had quickly taken care of them before returning to the tent.

-----

Chief Isaac Randolph watched the big bronze man with interest. Ever since finding out that he had been instrumental in rescuing Sunni Bradshaw from the bikers, and the way he quickly diffused the situation with Andy and Crusher, he was drawn to the unconventional preacher. He thought he'd seen something familiar in the man, something that nagged at the back of his mind. Eventually, he shrugged and just accepted the fact that this stranger had made a big impression on this small-town cop.

A flash of light drew him to the descending sun. He shaded his eyes, then looked over at the nearly-completed tent. He picked up the phone, then realized the futility of the effort and replaced the handset.

Walking down the street to the Hall of Records, he found the Asian-American Sato Takekawa hovering over the main counter, which was littered with city maps.

"You got them done, Sato?" asked Randolph.

"Yes, sir." He squinted at the flickering light from the group of emergency candles. "Just finished the last one."

"Good. Let's go."

### The Bronze Saga #3: BRONZE AVENGERS

They walked back to where the pickup truck, his soapbox of sorts, still was parked. There were many people around it, and he waded through them to the truck. He stepped up into the truck bed and one of his deputies handed him a bullhorn. He pushed the button on the back, making an ugly squawking noise that got everybody's attention. "Can I get everybody over here? Can I get everyone over here?"

The crowd flowed around the pickup truck. Randolph decided against the bullhorn; his voice carried well enough without it, and he preferred the personal touch over the electronic help.

He put his hands on his hips, Chuck Norris style, and made a slow circle as he panned the crowd, trying to make eye contact with as many people as possible. "Okay. Just in case anybody doesn't know what-all's happened, here's the summary. We've had a major earthquake. Power's out. So are phones. And the bridge is out, so we're on our own." He pointed at the sun in the sky, midway to the horizon. "And it's gonna be night before we know it, so we gotta act fast!"

He paused while there were assorted responses to his statements.

"There are people in this town who aren't here, who may be trapped or injured. Now, search teams have covered only a small portion of the total area of this town! There's still a lot left to go! Our first priority is to make sure that nobody in this town is overlooked -- nobody! So it's our job to go door-to-door ... canvass this town ... make sure everybody who can be accounted for is accounted for!"

He reached down, and Takekawa handed him one of the town maps; he held it high, for all to see. "We've split up the town into twelve sections. Each section will be assigned a team. Each team will have the equipment for search-and-rescue." He paused. "But first, I need all the kids in town who have bikes to come over here! I've got something very important for you to do!"

A few teenagers with ten-speeds, and some younger kids with mountain bikes walked around to where Chief Randolph indicated; their expressions mirrored curiosity and apprehension, but they were obedient. The Chief looked straight at them. "Y'all know the phones are out! So's our walkie-talkies! We have no way to communicate! That's why I need your help! You're going to be couriers between here and the different search teams. If they need something badly, they'll need you to get here as soon as possible and tell us, so we can get to them in time. Understand?" Heads nodded; a couple of teenagers squinted from behind their sunglasses, but said nothing. Randolph stood tall. "I need you. This town needs you. Will you help us?" There were assorted sounds of acknowledgment and agreement from the assembly of youths, with no dissenting voices.

Randolph smiled and gazed down on the assembled townsfolk. "Next -- I want you all to break up into groups according to the neighborhoods where you live. You know best who's in your neighborhood. The ones who are in your neighborhood are the ones who should be in your group. The ones who are not in your group are the ones who need to be accounted for!"

There were assorted rumblings of agreement to his logic.

"Okay! Let's start finding our neighbors and gather into groups. Once we're split up, I'll pass around the maps! Go!"

A few people stepped away from the group and yelled out an address, street, or the name of their neighborhood. Others gravitated out of the crowd towards them. And slowly it began to take shape. Order out of chaos. Chief Randolph continued standing in the truck bed, like a Moses leading his people to head into the wilderness. It was impressive. Spotting Clark Dent, he called him over and climbed down from the truck bed.

He spoke to him privately. "Clark, I don't know how long I'm gonna hold out, so I'm going to need someone to sub for me if I poop out. I want that to be you," he tapped Clark's chest. "When the people start heading out, I'm gonna catch me a catnap for a couple of hours. You'll be in charge. After that, if you still wanna do some searching, go for it."

"I'm honored."

Their heads turned suddenly at the sound of a loud conflict among the kids. With a sigh and a shake of his head, Chief Randolph walked into the group to settle matters.

Within fifteen minutes, there were twelve groups, each with a map and one or two bicycle runners. Additional pickup trucks and station wagons were borrowed from Larsen's car lot -- they still hadn't seen Frank Larsen since the quake -- and gear and people were loaded aboard. One by one they headed out. With the last ones, Chief Randolph leaned wearily against the outside wall of the police station.

Clark moved to his side and placed an easy hand on his shoulder. "Nap time, Isaac," he said softly. "I'll get you up in a couple of hours."

"No argument here," replied Randolph as he headed for the door. "Night."

Clark looked around the area. It was quiet, and there was little movement now that the search parties had disguised. As he looked to the horizon, realizing that he would be waking Chief Randolph around sundown, he heard Bonnie Clayton approach. She leaned back against the brick wall, one leg bent at the knee, the foot supporting her. "So you're now the man in charge, huh?" She grinned. "Slick. Planning on modifying the town charter?"

"No," he smiled back. "I think I'll just let things go as they are, and deal with the crises as they arise -- if they arise, that is. How's the tent coming?"

"Up and running. The doc has a few patients, but it's light."

"Hopefully it won't get busy before morning."

"Yep," she agreed. "Perry and Dot are helping. Since Perry knows how the tent works, he's making sure it stays up and running. Dot's in the RV; she's making sandwiches while Sunni keeps the coffee and cocoa flowing."

"Good." He paused.

"What's up?" she suddenly asked.

He looked at her. "What do you mean?"

"There's more than just town politics rumbling around in that head of yours. What is it?"

"It's petty, but concerns me. Chief Randolph asked me to wake him up after a couple of hours ... but he's exhausted. I'm considering letting him sleep longer. I admit, I want to be involved in the search, but there are ... other things to consider."

Bonnie looked disappointed. "If that's your decision, I may start wandering the neighborhood and see if there's any action."

"I wouldn't advise going out alone," he cautioned. "If you run into problems, you'll have to get out of them by yourself."

"Story of my life," she said under her breath. Clark heard her, but pretended that he hadn't.

They both became quiet.

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The sun continued to descend into the horizon. Someone had located several boom-mounted heavy-duty work lights left from a Washington Department Of Transportation road project. They were connected to a couple of gas-powered generators supplied from the hardware store, and placed around the tent; although their glow was a little eerie, they were a welcomed addition.

The casualties were mercifully few, and primarily came as a result of broken bones. Trucks and station wagons brought the injured directly to the tent. Doctor Felipé was as professional as an Emergency Room medic, single-handedly diagnosing and treating all who arrived.

Occasionally part of the team stayed behind to continue looking, paying close attention to isolated locations that were impassible due to trees across the roads, or mudslides blocking the way. These exceptions were reported back to Clark, who marked them down on his map. He intended to check them out personally once Chief Randolph was awake.

-----

The pickup truck slowly approached, its headlights on and a man and a woman crouched around something in the truck bed. Clark and Bonnie had been sitting on the tailgate of Chief Randolph's truck as it passed, simultaneously following in its wake. In the back was a man laying on an old Army cot, attended to by a woman in her mid-20's. The man had his head crudely bandaged, and he seemed to be mumbling something. The driver got out of the truck and headed for the tent. "He's been saying something about his family, but we can't get any details," the woman with them reported.

Clark and Bonnie leaned in closer. "My family ... where's my family?" said the wounded man.

Clark's deep, penetrating voice tried to break through, "Where did you last see them?"

His pained eyes met Clark's. "Home ... farmhouse!"

"Where is your farmhouse located?" he asked, while Bonnie unfolded the town map and shone a small flashlight on it.

The man responded, giving them his address. The young woman added, "I know that area. It's kinda isolated."

Bonnie spotted it on the map. "Here it is! It's about fifteen miles from here -- one of the roads that the search team couldn't get through."

"I'll wake Chief Randolph while you get the Diamond!" He handed her the keys. "Meet you back here!"

"Gotcha!" she replied, and jumped out of the truck.

-----

"There should be a turnoff just ahead and to the left. It's a private road."

While Bonnie navigated, Clark had a directional spotlight angled ahead of them. "There it is!" he identified, and made a cautious left onto the road.

They had gone a half mile before running into the problem that stopped the other rescue party: a large tree had toppled, making an impassible dam across the road.

"This is going to be interesting," commented Bonnie.

"No, it's not," calmly replied Clark, and pressed a button on the dashboard. "Cover your eyes!"

She started to open her mouth to say something, but the thin trail of smoke illuminated in the headlights cut her off. She just had enough time to turn her head before the blast. With a clap of thunder and a spray of wood chips, the tree became history. The Diamond eased ahead, and continued towards the farmhouse.

"Clark, you never told me this rig carried Sidewinders!" exclaimed Bonnie.

"There was no need for the information to be revealed," replied Clark.

"What if it had been a boulder, huh?" she challenged.

Clark dryly answered, "It just would've taken longer."

Bonnie panned the passenger side spotlight, and they knew it wouldn't be good before they reached the house. The structure was at an awkward angle to the foundation, and there was an eerie silence to the area. They parked the Black Diamond with its headlights facing the house, and climbed out of the car.

Bonnie reached into the back for the first aid kit while Clark panned his heavy-duty Mag-Lite around the area. They walked around the house for a few minutes before finding a way to get inside; it was low, and they proceeded carefully.

"Clark!"

Bonnie had her light trained on the ground ahead of him, at a pair of legs surrounded by a calico skirt. The upper part of the body was obscured by a heavy pantry cabinet. Moving closer, Clark reached out and touched the leg. It didn't move. He felt for a pulse and confirmed the obvious. He started to say something when his sharp hearing caught something.

"Help!"

"It's a child," he softly exclaimed, turning his head to tune in on the voice.

"We can hear you!" called out Bonnie. "Keep talking!"

They followed the voice to an outside door into a basement. Their flashlights illuminated the figure of a small girl, no older than eight, huddled under a heavy work bench. She hugged a dirty white teddy bear to her chest, and it was obvious that she was terrified.

"Hi," said Clark, taking a step into the basement. "Are you okay?"

Her little head nodded shyly.

He took another step in. "My name's Clark, and this is Bonnie. We're here to rescue you. Can I come in and get you?"

"I want my daddy and mommy!" she pleaded.

"Your daddy's in town. He got hurt, but he'll be okay," gently informed Bonnie. "And I don't know where your mommy is."

Clark went along with the lie for the sake of the girl. "Can you move? Can you come out here to us?"

"I don't wanna! I'm scared!"

"Okay," calmed Clark. "Can we come in and get you?"

There was silence. "I'll take that as a yes," whispered Bonnie under her breath.

They carefully stepped down into the basement. They had gone only a couple of steps when they felt the sharply-increasing vibration below their feet.

Bonnie snapped off a profanity and barked, "NO!"

"Aftershock!" exclaimed Clark.

Fearing the worst, Clark acted quickly, dropping the flashlight and bracing his hands against the overhead beams. Feeling the stress of the weight of the house threatening to fill in the basement like a sinkhole, Clark used tremendous strength to keep that from happening while he desperately prayed for more.

Taking a shallow breath, he yelled, "Grab the child and take her out of here!"

Bonnie obeyed instantly, passing Clark and closing the distance to the work bench. She reached for the child, but the little girl reacted by pulling farther back, causing Bonnie only frustration. "C'mon, kid -- we're gonna get killed if you don't come here NOW!"

It wasn't working. The boards were starting to fall apart around his hands. "I can't hold it much longer!" he grunted. "Get under the workbench!"

Bonnie looked at the child, then at Clark. In one swift move she was at Clark's side, her hands next to his as she helped support the weakening ceiling.

"I've got it! Get under cover!" she grimaced with stubborn determination.

"No!" countered Clark.

"Don't argue with me, you big ape -- MOVE!" And she swept a foot into his midsection to emphasize the point. Realizing that resistance was futile, he dove under the bench and wrapped his arms around the child. "Bonnie -- c'mon!" he yelled.

Bonnie loosened her grip on the ceiling and prepared to throw herself towards the work bench ... but debris caused her to stumble short of the cover. She fell on her side, feeling a sharp pain in her ribs, landing at an angle that gave her a good view of the entire house caving in upon her.

Then there was darkness.

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## Chapter Seventeen

The aftershock lasted less than ten seconds. The tent jiggled like a jello ball. There was a momentary wave of mass anxiety as people reacted to the aftershock. Then it was over, and people started assessing the results of this latest event.

I looked around. "Has anyone seen Clark and Bonnie?"

I was answered with blank stares and shaking heads. I hadn't a clue where to start looking. I reminded myself, they were two extremely capable, resourceful people. I shrugged off my concern, chalking it up to needless worry.

Still ...

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So this is the afterlife, thought Bonnie. Darkness. A smell of dust -- fire and brimstone? It's a little hard to breathe. It doesn't follow what Clark and Perry had been saying, does it? She felt a heavy sadness inside of her, and wished she'd paid more attention to them when she had the chance.

Then she heard another cough ... no, two. One was small and high, like a child. The other was unmistakably Clark's. She was momentarily confused, then realized that she was not dead. She tried to move, and realized two important things in that moment: she hurt, and she really hurt. The pain in her side and legs caused her to momentarily forget herself and grunt several profanities. Okay, I don't think I need to try that again, she reminded herself.

"Bonnie?" came Clark's inquiry through the darkness, and she felt a hand touch her shoulder.

"Yeah," she grunted.

"You okay?"

"Define 'okay'."

"I pulled you under the work bench as the ceiling caved in. You were hit in the head just before that," he explained.

The little girl was now crying and coughing. Clark tried to comfort her. "It's okay. Are you hurt?"

She didn't answer for several seconds. Then she sniffled and said, "I want my mommy and daddy."

"I know. We'll see them soon," comforted Clark. "Are you hurt?"

"I-I don't know."

"Let me find my flashlight ... here it is." Then the light came on, diffused through Clark's covering hand. He aimed it up where the beam diffused somewhat against the underside of the work bench.

It wasn't very comforting, Bonnie thought. It only showed them just how enclosed they were, and how hopeless things looked. The work bench was only inches away from them, and there was a mound of debris where they had been standing only minutes earlier. She couldn't see where the wall was, let alone the stairs and door.

Her pain became more pronounced as she stirred to look around. There was a stabbing ache in her side; she remembered how she landed just before the ceiling caved in, and figured she'd cracked a rib in the process. Dumb, girl, real dumb, she chastised herself.

"Doesn't look like you're bleeding, Bonnie," reported Clark. "But I wasn't able to pull you all in before the cave-in. How're your legs?"

She didn't understand at first what he was talking about, until she tried moving her toes, then her legs. A wave of pain crashed around her, and she yelled out.

"Bad word!" identified Tammy at her exclamation.

"Don't move it," cautioned Clark.

"Duh!" grimaced Bonnie.

"Let me see if I can clear some room under here. I'm going to move the flashlight around."

The beam shone around them, and she was actually amazed that the pile of debris that was once the upper floors of the house hadn't flooded into their little shelter. Looking over at Clark and the girl, they both had streaks of dirt and grime on their faces and clothes; she figured she probably looked as bad to them.

"What did you do with the first aid kit, Bonnie?" asked Clark.

She pointed to a spot a couple of feet from the bench. Clark reached over and started clearing debris, tossing them to the side. After a few minutes in the confined area, he reached the kit, dusted it off, and opened it up. "Not bad. The case had a hard side; looks like only a couple of things didn't survive the barrage. Now let's see what we can do to take care of your leg."

He touched her left leg, causing her to wince in pain, "I wouldn't try that again if I were you."

"Sorry, but I'm going to have to, unless you want infection to set in."

"I could live with it," she lied.

"No you couldn't," he returned, ignoring her complaint and taking hold of her leg with a steady but easy pressure. As he turned it around under the cover of the bench, she gave in and started to pivot around. When he had her leg hovering over his lap, he lowered it.

"Okay?" he asked, releasing his grip.

"You have to ask?" she replied acidly.

He smiled. Finding a pair of scissors in the kit, he started to cut her torn pants leg from the cuff up. The ankle seemed to be all right, but they both saw deep bruising below the left knee. He didn't seem to react at the sight. "Okay," he said calmly, more for her benefit than his. "It looks like it's broken. I'm going to feel around the leg to determine just how bad it is."

He carefully probed the leg, finding no bleeding but definite fractures in the bone. In addition, he recognized his own injuries, especially his left shoulder; suspecting only minor damage, he still moved it carefully, favoring it. He found a couple of pieces of board in the nearby debris to act as splints, and some broken wiring to bind them to her leg. Bonnie gritted her teeth against the pain, while the leg was rendered unmovable; she put up a good front of being a tough guy, he commended.

Once he was finished with her, he turned to the little girl. He smiled at her, but she still sat silently staring ahead of her.

"My name's Clark ... Clark Dent. She's Bonnie Clayton. What's your name?"

She remained quiet. Clark was afraid she'd fallen into shock, retreating within herself, unable to face the reality of all that had happened. Then she blinked a couple of times and said, "Are you giants?"

Clark laughed in spite of the gloominess. "No, child, we're not giants. We're just very tall, that's all. Can you tell us your name?"

"Tammy," she said meekly. "Tamara Bernice Elders. That's what my mommy calls me when I've been bad. Have I been bad, Mister?"

He reached over and placed a large hand on her leg. "No, you haven't, Tammy. We're going to be okay, remember that."

"Oh, I know that," she surprised them by saying. "Now I can see your cross. Do you know Jesus?"

He had forgotten about the cross around his neck, now hanging at an odd angle. He grinned back at her and said, "Yes, Tammy, I do. Do you?"

"I go to Sunday School every Sunday ... an' Daddy an' Mommy talk to me a lot about Jesus an' Moses 'an' Daniel 'an' David. That's why I thought you and her were giants. Only giants could hold up the ceiling like that. That's why I was afraid'a you."

"But you're not now?"

"Nope. You know Jesus."

Clark was amazed at this little girl's faith, and it strengthened his hope as he shone the flashlight around their enclosure. He knew they were only a few yards from freedom, but there were tons of house debris filling in

those few yards. A collapsed heating duct seemed to be carrying air to them, so that wasn't a problem. Eventually someone would follow their trail and free them.

But he had his concerns. What if there was another aftershock that sealed off the duct and left them without air? Bonnie's injuries were serious, but not critical; what if that situation changed for the worse? He knew, as the girl, that God would get them out, but there still lurked doubts in the corners of his mind.

-----

It was the calm after the storm.

I climbed aboard Nomad with the intent of catching a few winks, but instead encountered Sunni. Her hands resting in her lap, she sat cross-legged in one of the chairs; her guide dog Sequoia was curled up on the floor a few feet away.

Her head turned at the sound. "Perry?"

"Yeah," I acknowledged. "Just came in for a catnap. Surprised you're still awake."

"Can't sleep," she sighed. "Have they been able to figure a way of getting out yet?"

I shook my head. "I don't think so."

She sighed again, a deep mourning sigh. One hand formed a fist, and rested uncertainly in the palm of the other. "I feel so HELPLESS! Y'know, a lot of people underestimate what a blind person can do. They write us off, figuring that just because we can't see, we can't contribute! Well, we can!" Her fist smacked against the arm of the chair. "I want to help, but I just don't know where!"

"I know what you mean." I sat down on the couch, grateful to be off my feet. "For example, I've known Mark and Karen for years, and I've personally seen their ministry at work. However, regardless of Karen's lack of sight, it doesn't stop her from being an equal partner in what they do. All they needed was to find a niche they both could fit into ... which they did."

Sunni nodded. "She told me a little about what they do. They stand and offer tracts, and people come up and take them -- isn't that right?"

"Yeah. Seems almost too simple to make sense, doesn't it? But Mark's told me that people who wouldn't normally take gospel tracts will oftentimes take theirs. And some who don't take tracts will come up to them and commend them for not being pushy. Mark told me that, one time, someone told him that he was the most respectful 'preacher' down at Saturday Market. Considering the location, that's quite a compliment."

"Karen, too?"

"Yeah. They just had to find their niche, and be faithful to it."

"What's my niche?"

"I don't know, Sunni," I replied regretfully. "Realize, you're just a baby Christian. You've got plenty of time to find your niche." I started to settle back into the comfort of the couch, and my thoughts started wandering. "I know one thing ... when you do find it, it'll be plain ..." I yawned, my mind drifting. "There won't be any secret codes to break."

### The Bronze Saga #3: BRONZE AVENGERS

Sunni's eyes suddenly went wide. "Codes?" she said with a special significance. Then she leaped out of her seat, waking both her guide dog and me. "Morse code!"

"What?" I blurted, somewhat groggy.

"Buddy and Wayne!" she exclaimed.

I shook my head to clear the fatigue. "Whoa there, Sunni! Time out! What are you talking about?"

She could barely contain herself, as she half-slid, half-hopped from one foot to the other, her hands rubbing together fiercely. "Buddy and Wayne are ham radio enthusiasts! They're always monitoring the bands! If I could send them a Morse code message, they can relay it!"

"Okay, but relay to who?"

She froze and faced me. "To the Bronze Avengers!"

"Okay!" I was starting to catch on. "What do you need?"

"A short wave set with a Morse code key! And some way of boosting the signal!"

"Done! Clark's got a short wave set in Goliath, and the rig's power source is impressive!"

"Take me there!" she ordered, more excited than I'd seen her since her conversion. "Sequoia, come!" The now-alert guide dog appeared at her side.

We quickly went across to the semi trailer, and I guided her to the short wave set; it was recessed into a wall housing along with other unfamiliar communications gear. As Sunni ran her hands eagerly across the equipment, I retrieved a stool to allow her to sit before them.

"Yes! Yes! Yes!" she squealed. "I shoulda known he'd have the best. This is the Porsche of ham radios! Thank you, Lord!"

"Where can I help?" I offered, wide awake and electrified at her excitement.

She didn't respond at first, making me wonder if she'd heard me. Then she suddenly said, "Help me find a couple of things! Where's the frequency control?" I stood behind her, looking over her shoulder, and spotted the dial. "Up about an inch, and left three," I directed. Her hands immediately went to the place and started to turn. "Tell me when I get to -" she asked, giving me a frequency number. I stopped her a few seconds later. Then her hand reached for the Morse code key, and began tapping in word combinations. I regretted the fact that I'd never found the need to learn Morse. I wanted to ask her what she was doing, but she looked too engrossed for me to interrupt for a translation.

Then she stopped and turned up the volume on the speaker, angling her head to try to pierce the static. After a few seconds, her hands returned to the Morse key and she repeated the sequence. Twenty minutes and several attempts later, she muttered, "Nuts! Knew it wouldn't be that easy!" Massaging her hands, she told me, "Perry, looks like I'm going to have to get that booster. Can you see if Clark's around?"

"Sure. Be right back!"

### The Bronze Saga #3: BRONZE AVENGERS

I left Goliath, and looked around the area. No one had seen either him or Bonnie in a good couple of hours, and figured they were still going through buildings. Reporting this to Sunni, she said, "Can you find A.J. Rimmer for me?"

I nodded. "Yeah! I think I saw him out there! Be right back!"

-----

I found the white-bearded Rimmer and brought him aboard Goliath. Sunni started immediately telling him of her needs, indicating that I could show him where to connect things. He nodded and left the trailer, returning a few minutes later with some electrical gear taken from his store, and an armful of power cords and couplings. Within ten minutes he had made the necessary connections, and adjusted the dials on a separate junction box resting on the floor. "Okay, Sunni -- try it now!" he exclaimed.

Returning to the Morse key, she quickly tapped out her message. She paused to listen for a response, found none, and tried it again. This time, however, her efforts were rewarded with a series of sounds.

"YES!" Sunni shrieked joyfully. "It's Buddy!"

"Can you tell me what you're saying?" I asked. "I don't read Morse."

"Yeah ... sure!" she answered, and gave me the running translation as she entered the words. "BUDDY ... BA EMERGENCY ... QUAKE HAS SEALED OFF TOWN ... NEED HELP ... PASS MESSAGE THROUGH TO BA ... CAN DO?"

The reply came back almost immediately. "SURE THING," translated Sunni. "HOW BAD DAMAGE?"

"POWER, PHONES, BRIDGE INTO TOWN OUT ... MAGNETIC INTERFERENCE PREVENT WIRELESS COMMUNICATION ... SOME INJURIES, NO FATALIES YET."

"MESSAGE RECEIVED. COMPROMISING LOCATION?"

Sunni stopped and angled her head in my direction. "Bronze Avengers, as a rule, usually keep their location secret," she explained with a sigh. "But I think I'm going to have to break that rule." She turned back to the Morse key and hesitatingly entered the information about Pine Corners.

"RECEIVED. ALSO CONSIDER ANY BA REGULARS MONITORING THIS FREQUENCY. I'LL GET ONLINE AND SEND OUT THE SOS. LEAVE FREQUENCY OPEN. HANG TOUGH. END."

Sunni acknowledged the transmission, smiled, and leaned back on the stool. "Okay, the message is out there. Now we wait and see."

-----

A few minutes later, the set came alive with Morse chatter. Sunni clapped her hands together and announced, "The message is starting to generate responses!"

"Sunni, can we get a message to a friend of ours? He's got a jet, and he can be here by morning."

"Yeah ... but Pine Corners doesn't have an airport."

"He doesn't need one." I smiled.

"Okay." Then she returned to the Morse key.

-----

They'd been in the caved-in basement for two hours now. The flashlight had been switched off to conserve batteries. Their conversation had lapsed into mostly silence. The little girl, Tammy, had fallen asleep after an hour, but now was awake and hungry. Clark wished they had included something in their First Aid kit, and made a mental note to get together with Monk, to work on updating the nutrient capsules he'd invented decades ago. He didn't wish to market them -- although he could very well do so through any number of dummy corporations established through Douglas Martin or Mitchell Drake. He'd consider it, he concluded.

In the meantime, how to distract a ten-year-old girl?

"Tammy, what's your favorite story from the Bible?" he asked.

"Huh?" she replied at first. Then a couple of moments later she said, "David an' Goliath, I guess. Or Noah ... or Joshua an' th' walls of Jericho ... or Jonah an' th' whale." She paused. "You know those stories, mister?"

"Yes, I do. And my name is Clark."

"Which ones do you like, Mister Clark?"

"Well, I like the ones you said. I also like Daniel in the lion's den, and Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego in the fiery furnace."

"Yeah!" she agreed. "Me, too! What about you, lady?"

Bonnie just grunted. Clark was grateful for the darkness, because Bonnie would've likely gotten angry at the grin on his face. Instead, he tried a different tack. "Do you remember the story about the earthquake?"

"Was it about the two men in jail?"

"Very good, Tammy! Yes, the two men were Paul and Silas, and they were in a dungeon way under the ground."

"Kinda like this," she added.

"Yeah. Kinda like this. And do you remember what God did to free them?"

"Uh huh. He sent a earthquake, like what put us here. The door opened up so everybody could go home."

"But they didn't, did they?"

"Nope. Th' guard thought they did, an' he was gonna hurt himself bad ... but Paul told him they were still there. Boy, was he glad!"

"Yes, he was. And God protected them all; He's going to protect all of us, isn't He?"

### The Bronze Saga #3: BRONZE AVENGERS

"Yeah, I guess so. We're gonna get outta here, aren't we?" She was looking for hope.

"Yes, we are," said Clark with confidence. "It won't be long."

He heard a grunt from Bonnie, but no other comments until Tammy curled up next to Clark and went back to sleep.

"How can you give her such hope?" she whispered harshly. "I'm injured. I've got at least one busted rib ... and do you hear that rasp in my breathing? I wouldn't be surprised if I bruised a lung."

"I heard," replied Clark solemnly. "And you're probably right about the lung."

"As a mercenary, I've seen death, and I've been wounded a few times -- mostly flesh wounds. Nothing I couldn't walk away from, nothing really life-threatening. Having seen comrades killed in battle, I wouldn't be cocky about rushing into a fire fight, but I might consider myself to be on Lady Luck's good side in having endured so much. Let's just say that I'm afraid we're not going to get out of this one ... at least not me."

"Don't talk like that. We will get out."

"How can you be so sure?" she said, exasperated. "Faith?"

"There's nothing wrong with faith. And I have faith in the one who runs the universe. He never fails, and He won't let us die until it's our time."

"What about her --" She broke off the reference to Tammy's mother. "Was it her time?"

"Yes, it was. Don't ask me why, because I'm not God."

"Then you can't say it's not our time also."

He answered soberly, "No, I can't."

She was silent for a few moments. Then she said in a low voice, "So what happens then?"

Clark knew what she meant, and what he had to say. "The child is innocent; her place is already there, as is mine. But you've never accepted the gift of eternal life."

She curled up a little tighter where she sat, and turned away from them.

"Bonnie," he addressed her in a low whisper. "You've heard the words, you've seen the works. You have to make your own decision."

She sat there silently, looking into the debris just beyond their reach.

"Years ago ... my parents and my sisters planned to fly to California from our home in Louisiana. They wanted me to go with them, but I was a headstrong teenager with a new boyfriend and an independent streak a mile wide. They went on without me." Her voice choked with emotion. "Their plane had engine problems and crashed. Mom and Dad were killed on the spot, and my sisters died shortly after." She paused. "My new boyfriend couldn't think of anyone but himself, and so he left me two weeks later. I was alone to fend for myself. I depended on no one, made friends only for what I could get out of it."

Clark muttered a simple uh-huh to show that he was listening. But, just then, Tammy's voice came out of the darkness: "Are you scared, Miss Bonnie?"

"No -- I'm fine," she lied.

"I'm scared," the little girl admitted. "It's okay." There were several seconds of silence. Then: "Miss Bonnie? Hold out your hand."

Why? she thought, suspiciously. Then she stretched out her right hand, and something soft like a small pillow was placed into it. As her fingers closed around the bundle, she was able to make out the arms and legs.

Tammy had handed Bonnie her teddy bear.

"Her name is Charity," Tammy introduced. "It means love. When I'm afraid, I hug on her, and I know I'm loved."

Bonnie couldn't talk. She felt the stuffed animal, stopping at the face, and felt large, wide eyes. A lump formed in her throat, and a memory of another bear named Bright Eyes reappeared in her mind. After the rest of her family were gone, and her boyfriend had deserted her, she was taken in by her Aunt Mabel -- her father's sister -- in Chicago, and raised until she was of legal age to enter the Marines. One day young Bonnie returned home to find that all of her stuffed animals had been given away -- including Bright Eyes. Her aunt had tried to persuade her that she was a young woman, and that she had to step beyond her childhood. But she saw the animals, especially Bright Eyes, as one of the few links to her family.

She thought she had lost the memory of Bright Eyes, but Dot's little bear Grape Juice had brought them towards the surface, and this had finished the job.

Her eyes became misty, but Bonnie said nothing. On the inside, something very different was happening. Out of the whirlwind of her troubled soul, a small voice spoke to her. 'Talk to me, my child ... I will hear you ... I'll do more than listen ... I know just how you feel ... I'm here for you, and I'll never leave you ... never.' Her breathing increased, and the mist in her eyes turned into a flood through the gates of her heart. Part of her felt foolish, but it didn't really matter, did it? She tried arguing the point, but the voice inside her was stronger than her arguments ... or her fears.

And then, as if her own inner child, the one who knew what she needed to do, little Tammy said quietly, "Miss Bonnie, you wanna pray?"

Her mind tried to say no, that she was just being caught up in the emotion of the moment, but all her arguments were eclipsed by the statement, "Come to me, all you who labor and are heavily burdened, and I will give you rest."

Clark switched on the flashlight, momentarily stunning her. Then she saw the little hand covered in dirt held out to her. The tears flowed freely as she nodded weakly, and reached out and took the hand. As Tammy's hand closed around her fingers, Clark's hand reached out for her other hand. Large and muscled, it struck her as a humorous contrast to the simple child's hand. And she smiled as she looked up into Clark's eyes ... and felt the love from the source of that little voice that spoke inside her.

"I never ... paid attention to the prayers," she admitted. "What do I say?"

Clark smiled. "Just repeat after me ... I'll give you the words."

-----

Sitting in the living room of Goliath, I suddenly stiffened, and my eyes got wide.

"What was that?" I asked.

Dot had joined me and Sunni, as we waited for responses from her SOS She looked over at me and asked, "What was what?"

"I thought I felt something. Something involving Clark." I got up and took a step for the exit. "I gotta see if I can find him! You stay here and help Sunni."

"Sure," she replied.

-----

## Chapter Eighteen

Buddy Brannan closed the door to the bedroom, and walked down the hall to his study. He didn't have a problem with late nights, and his wife Melanie understood his activities with the Bronze Avengers. She'd kissed him and said she'd be praying for him ... then she left him to the task ahead.

Being blind, he didn't need room lights, but his study was awash with sound. His ears picked up the faint hiss from his short wave set, separating it from the sounds that reflected what was going on in the private chat area.

Brannan's mental picture of chat rooms had always been that of a sort-of virtual warehouse -- nice and spacious, large enough to accommodate everyone who wandered through. And within the warehouse were the private areas -- as small as closets or as large as banquet rooms. And this one was in his name.

One touch of the keyboard, and a rapid voice read off the names of the people present.

"Twenty-four," he said incredulously. "At this hour, and there's twenty-four." He smiled. "Well, let's not keep them waiting, shall we?"

Entering the room via his keyboard, he took his place at the head of the conference table and began typing.

"GOOD MORNING AND THANK YOU ALL FOR COMING. CONSIDERING THE TIME, I'M EXCITED TO SEE SUCH CONCERN." He paused. "AS YOU KNOW, ONE OF OUR OWN NEEDS OUR HELP. WINGBEAR LIVES IN PINE CORNERS, WASHINGTON, WHERE AN EARTHQUAKE HAS HIT. ALL COMMUNICATIONS HAVE BEEN CUT OFF, INCLUDING CELLULAR. WINGBEAR ABLE TO GET THROUGH TO ME VIA SHORT WAVE/MORSE CODE." He paused again. "SINCE WE ARE GOING TO BE WORKING TOGETHER, I SUGGEST WE SUSPEND ANONYMITY PROTOCOLS DURING THIS TIME. THOSE IN FAVOR?"

He waited for the reply, which did not take long. Translated into speech faster than most people could comprehend, name after name gave their approval to the motion. Smiling, Buddy returned to the keyboard.

### The Bronze Saga #3: BRONZE AVENGERS

"EXCELLENT. I'M BUDDY FROM SAN ANTONIO, TEXAS. WINGBEAR IS SUNNI. SHE TOLD ME THAT THE TOWN IS WITHOUT POWER, AND THE ONLY BRIDGE CONNECTING IT WITH THE OUTSIDE WORLD HAS COLLAPSED. SHE DOESN'T KNOW HOW MANY INJURED, BUT THE TOWN DOCTOR COULD USE HELP."

One reply came almost immediately. "I'M GLENN FROM DADE COUNTY, FLORIDA. MY WIFE DARLA AND I WERE AROUND WAY BACK THEN, AND WE REMEMBER DOC SAVAGE. AS MUCH AS WE WANT TO BE THERE IN PERSON, WE CAN'T. BUT WE HAVE MONEY FOR ALL THE SUPPLIES THEY CAN USE. WE NEED A WAY OF GETTING IT THERE."

Another person came in. His typing was slow, as if he was concentrating on each letter. Many long-time Avengers knew him well. His screen name was Badger44, and he had Cerebral Palsy. "I'M ROBBIE FROM WEST VIRGINIA. I'LL TAKE YOU UP ON THAT, GLENN. MY DAD WORKS WITH CARGO HELICOPTERS, AND I KNOW HE WOULD HELP. SO WHAT DO THEY NEED?"

Another person stepped in. "CARLA, HONOLULU. THEY'LL NEED GENERATORS, OR ELECTRICIANS TO HELP CONNECT THEM TO THE POWER GRID."

"STEVE, NEW JERSEY," introduced another. "HOW ARE THEY ON FOOD AND MEDICAL SUPPLIES?"

Good point, thought Buddy. "DON'T KNOW," he typed. "I'LL CHECK. BE RIGHT BACK." He left the area and turned to the short wave. A few minutes later he re-entered the conference room. "WITHOUT REFRIGERATION FOOD MAY GO BAD SOON. MOST OF THE INJURIES ARE MINOR, BUT THEY HAVE FOUR PEOPLE IN NEED OF A HOSPITAL. DEFINITELY NEED MEDICAL SUPPLIES AND ASSISTANCE."

Another person came in. "MORRIS, SPOKANE. I FELT THE FIRST SHOCK. NO DAMAGE HERE. I'VE GOT A FRIEND WITH NORTHWEST MEDICAL TEAMS; I'LL SEE IF I CAN GET HIS HELP."

"GRACIE, BAJA CALIFORNIA. MY BOYFRIEND WORKS FOR THE CORPS OF ENGINEERS. HE MIGHT BE ABLE TO GET USE OF PORTABLE BRIDGE LIKE MILITARY USES IN REMOTE LOCATIONS. ROBBIE, I'LL GET BACK TO YOU."

And on and on it went. Sounds and voices heralded people coming in, departing, and talking to one another. From coast to coast, and even overseas, total strangers banded together, combining talents and resources. All for Sunni and the people in Pine Corners. It was so exciting that Buddy found himself giggling at the responses. After awhile, he went to the short wave and sent off a message to Sunni: "HAVE NO FEAR ... THE BRONZE AVENGERS ARE HERE ... HELP IS ON THE WAY ... WHAT DO YOU NEED?"

-----

I started with the tent, asking the doctor if she'd seen Clark and Bonnie lately. She shook her head, "Not for some time. He was covering for Chief Randolph, but he came through here a couple of minutes ago. Try him."

"Thanks," I replied, and searched out the Chief. He was in the police station, just stepping out of the holding cell area.

"He hasn't checked in yet? Doesn't sound like him."

### The Bronze Saga #3: BRONZE AVENGERS

"Where was he last heading?"

"He was going out to one of the farms on the edge of town." He walked over to his desk and opened up the map. "He said the man was brought in with a head wound, and was concerned about his family at home. Okay, that's it -- the assigned search crew couldn't get through with their vehicle, so Clark and Bonnie headed out to give it a try. That was the last time I saw either of them."

"They may be in trouble, Chief. Can you spare some men?"

"Well, yes, of course! Let's see who's available!"

We started heading for the door when we heard a yell from the holding cell area. "Hey, Chief!"

Randolph called behind him. "Not now, Crusher!"

"Wait, man! If the preacher's in trouble, I wanna help!"

We both stopped in mid-step and looked at each other. I gave a shrug, and we went over to the holding cells. Crusher stood at the bars, and his expression was eager.

"You want to help?" asked the Chief. "No joking?"

"No jokin'! Lemme help ... please?"

It didn't take more than a couple of seconds for Randolph to nod and say, "Okay. That go for all of you?"

The other bikers hesitated only for an instant before Crusher's head spun around, giving them all a look that reminded them who was in charge. Then they nodded and gave in.

We got a couple of trucks, some tools, and a few more townsfolk to add to our rescue party. I broke Dot away from Sunni, who said she'd be praying for us, and hoped there would be new developments by the time we were back.

-----

The phone rang, and Clark Mayfair swore at it. Stripped down to his skivvies, he was just getting ready to take a relaxing shower after putting in some late hours working on his Osprey. The privately owned, specially-modified Boeing V-22 was in the hangar next to his new house, barely a month since they'd been finished.

He wasn't expecting any calls, at least at this hour. He picked up the phone. "Mayfair speaking," he barked.

"Mr. Mayfair? Do you go by the nickname of Gumball?"

"Yeah. Who is this?"

"My name is Buddy Brannan, sir, and I'm relaying a message from a man named Liston. Do you know this person?"

At the mention of Perry's name, he became instantly alert. He didn't figure Perry to be into practical jokes, so whatever was up had to be serious. "Yeah! He's married to my niece! What's the message?"

### The Bronze Saga #3: BRONZE AVENGERS

"Quote: 'We're in Pine Corners, Washington. Area hit by quake, only bridge into town is gone. Communications out due to magnetism. Everybody is well, but help needed for others. Come right away. Land next to tent downtown.' End message. You've heard about the quake?"

"Yeah," Gumball sighed. "They've been talking about it on CNN. Man, if they've gotten caught in that ..."  
He let the thought drift. "Okay. What was your name again?"

"Brannan -- Buddy Brannan."

"Okay, Brannan. Tell Perry that I'll head out in a few minutes, and should be there in -" He quickly calculated the time and distance, passing the information on to Buddy.

"Got it," he replied. "If you need to contact me, I'll give you my short wave frequency." He gave the numbers. "Godspeed, man," he finished.

"Thanks! Bye!" He hung up the phone, and thought a moment. The Osprey was fueled and ready, but it wouldn't do to have him fall asleep at the wheel. So he'd go ahead and take his shower.

But first, he thought, I need to make another call. I'm gonna need help, and I know just the right man for the job.

-----

We headed slowly down the road towards the isolated farm. A little way down, I spotted the remains of the large tree that had blocked the road. It looked like a splinter factory. I looked over at Dot and said, "Look familiar?"

"Missile," she replied without hesitation. "They've been through here, all right." And we continued on.

The sight of the Black Diamond, its headlights still illuminating the destroyed farmhouse, brought shocked gasps and muttered comments of dismay. If they had been anywhere inside when this had happened ... but, no, I couldn't allow myself to believe that. With our headlights illuminating the area, we climbed out and looked things over.

"Man, this looks bad," commented Crusher with a profanity.

I overlooked the pessimism -- even my own -- and stepped closer. I started calling out Clark and Bonnie's names. Others yelled for them, too, and I prayed there was someone there to hear it.

-----

"Yes!" Clark suddenly exclaimed. "They found us!"

"I don't hear anything," said Bonnie with a shake of her head.

"I do. Cover your ears, both of you -- I'm going to get loud!"

Bonnie and Tammy covered their ears with their hands. Then Clark took a deep breath and yelled like a roll of thunder, "PERRY! WE ARE HERE!" He paused a moment, then repeated it.

-----

On the surface, we all heard it.

There were assorted cheers from the group. Dot and I quietly thanked God, holding back the more-emotional response that was inside us. I yelled back, "WE HEAR YOU! WHERE ARE YOU?"

"BASEMENT!" came the reply.

There were tons of debris in a mound where the house had once stood, and I resisted asking him how they had survived. That would be for later, I noted to myself.

In the meantime, Chief Randolph had taken charge. With military efficiency, he ordered the driver of the other truck to head back into town and get the backhoe from someone whose name I didn't recognize.

"DENT!" yelled Randolph. "I'M SENDING FOR A BACKHOE! ARE YOU INJURED?"

"BONNIE IS!" came the reply. "BROKEN LEG, POSSIBLE CRACKED RIBS! STABLE FOR THE MOMENT! TAMMY AND I ARE WELL!"

"Tammy's the daughter," someone informed. "What about Mrs. Elders?"

Randolph relayed the question.

There was a long pause, then Clark called out, "SHE'S ... HOME."

With a tightening in my throat, I understood. I grieved at the loss of a life, but rejoiced that a soul had gone to be with Jesus.

Randolph ordered the truck driver to head out, then told the rest of us to start clearing things by hand -- as if we needed prompting, I thought. The big biker Crusher moved forward first, his leather-gloved hands working to clear the pathway. The rest of us followed with picks, shovels, and bare hands.

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"How do you feel?" Clark asked Bonnie.

Her head had been bowed, but now she lifted it to look into his eyes. Tears streaked her dirty cheeks, but she was smiling. "I think I'll make it," she said. "Can I talk to you about something?"

"Sure. Tammy, can we switch places? You can watch for any clearing."

She nodded. "Okay!"

It wasn't easy, but the little girl climbed across Clark's lap, and he scooted his big frame closer to Bonnie. Now they were no more than a foot or so apart, and Bonnie seemed rather shy now.

"Is there a problem?" he asked in a whisper.

"Clark," she quietly asked. "Were you in love with Queen Monja?"

Clark's eyes opened wide with surprise. "Yes, I was."

"I thought so," Bonnie nodded. "At the funeral, when you and King Mordecai took her ashes to the top of the pyramid, I saw the look on your faces. You'd both lost someone very dear to you. That must've been very hard."

"It was. Monja and I were ... very close." He paused, staring into the darkness. "I've often wondered why God took her away, just at the time when we could've had a life together ... at last."

"Did you get an answer?"

He shrugged. "Maybe. Here I was, in suspended animation for fifty years, and everything was upside down when I came out, being forced to take on a secret identity. It's been very frustrating, and I've often wondered why God allowed this to happen."

"Why do you blame God? Don't you believe you control your own fate?"

He smiled. "At one time I thought so. But the Bible says, 'A man's heart devises his way: but the LORD directs his steps.'"

"Meaning?"

"Meaning that I can be fully determined to go from where I am to where I want to be, but God will move me WHERE He wants me WHEN He wants me, and sometimes I'll never know it until I'm there. I'll be going along, nice as you please, while He gives me a nudge here and a nudge there along the way. He'll even put it on my heart to change directions altogether! Since God knows what's around the next curve as well as at the end of the race, He's the best one to run the show." He paused. "I've seen too much just in the short time that I've become a Christian to convince me otherwise."

"But don't you wonder why God let Monja die just as you two seemed to be getting back together again?"

"Sure, who wouldn't?" He paused. "I also wonder what would've happened to me and those around me if I hadn't been placed in suspended animation? Would I have been prosecuted and imprisoned for the crimes I had been accused of? Would I still be alive now? And what of the others? Would they have drifted off in their own directions, putting the past behind them, and carried on? Would Ham still be alive? Would Pat still have both eyes?" He paused, his voice heavy with concern. "I know it's a moot point, since I can't change the past. But I do know that my life here, in this time, has changed others. If things hadn't happened the way they did -- for good or bad -- the hope of life eternal would've never come to Long Tom ... or Monk ... or Dot."

"Or Pat?" she added slyly.

"Or Pat," he sighed, and looked into her eyes. "Or you."

"Or me," Bonnie nodded. "More than likely. My life has been hell-bent for self-destruction, ever since my family died and I didn't."

"Don't condemn yourself. I've been down that road, and it's not worth the heartache." He paused and leaned in, speaking softly but intensely. "You are alive. We are alive. And now we have to make the best of the life

we've been given. Somehow, I sense a purpose for me beyond what we're doing now, but I haven't a clue what that is. I thought that was a happy ending with Monja ... but I was wrong."

Bonnie changed the subject. "Were you and Monja ever ... lovers?"

"If you mean, did we ever consummate our love?" he asked with a thin smile. "No, we did not." He paused. "I could not afford the luxury of a personal relationship with any woman. It put them at risk from my enemies."

"Even in the Valley?"

"You got in. Others have. It was something I accepted in my life."

Now Bonnie faced the darkness and opened up. "I've never been much for long-term relationships. I was more the one-night-stand, love-em-and-leave-em type. I couldn't get hurt that way." She paused. "Then I met you. You treated me like a lady ... and like a warrior. And there's a love in you that only now I understand. You make me feel special."

"You are special," he returned. "Bonnie, have you ever heard a song called, 'I Am A Rock, I Am An Island'?"

"Simon and Garfunkle? Lotsa times! It's a classic!"

"So am I."

She grinned. "Sorry. What about the song?"

"When I first heard it, it deeply disturbed me. I could see myself in the song, hidden away among test tubes and gadgets, not letting myself become exposed long enough to be vulnerable. It's a very sad song."

"Yeah," she nodded. "But you're not the only one who can relate to that song. After my family died, and I was all alone, I didn't want to have anything to do with people ... at least, nothing I wasn't in control of. I put up a wall of macho, and allowed access to only those I wanted to, for only as long as I felt safe. Yeah, I know how you feel."

"I will admit, I've come a long way since becoming a Christian, but that song was a mirror to me, showing me that I still had walls up, walls that kept me ... safe. They also kept me ... alone."

"Me, too." She put on a smile. "Tell me, Clark, do you think there could be any chance that we two could drop our walls of security, and get to know one another better?"

Clark returned her smile in the glow of the flashlight. "I would like that."

Bonnie leaned closer to Clark's head, and their eyes met. Then their lips touched tenderly in a kiss. After a few moments, their heads separated.

"I ... love you, Bonnie," whispered Clark.

"I love you, too," she replied.

They kissed again, while Tammy looked over with a suppressed giggle. Bonnie turned a little, wincing in pain at the movement, cuddled up against Clark, and closed her eyes with a smile.

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## Chapter Nineteen

It took twenty minutes for the backhoe to arrive. In the meantime, we had cleared off as much as we could by hand and towing with the Diamond and the other pickup. We recovered the body of Mrs. Elders; it was reverently wrapped in a tarp, placed in the pickup truck, and driven back to town.

From Clark's cues we were able to locate where they were buried, and uncover their position.

Now standing away from the work bench, Clark carefully lifted Tammy Elders into the waiting arms of Chief Randolph, who carried her over to a couple of middle-aged women who bundled her up in a blanket and put the little girl in their car.

As they drove away, Clark assisted Bonnie up to me and several others who carefully placed her on a stretcher in the bed of the returned pickup. Bonnie's surprise hug around the neck reassured me that she would be just fine. After a few minutes securing her in the pickup, Dot and half of those present climbed into the truck and slowly pulled away, leaving just myself, Chief Randolph, and the bikers.

Two vehicles remained by the farmhouse: a pickup truck and the Black Diamond. Since there were more than enough people to handle matters, I stood by the Diamond and watched with curious interest as the biker Crusher reached down into the hole and assisted Clark to the surface.

"Didn't think I'd see you here, Crusher," he said, coming alongside and steadying himself.

The big biker slapped away dust from his jacket, glancing back at the rest of his men -- who were just within earshot. "I just didn't want you dyin' on me," he growled loudly. "You might'a come back to haunt me!"

Chief Randolph came over to Clark and shook his hand, saying how good it was to see him alive and in one piece. Then he headed for the other truck. Crusher looked over at me, then to the rest of his gang. "Guys!" he yelled, waving them on. "Get goin'! I'll ride back with him!" He jerked a thumb at Clark. "And don't any of you cause any trouble, got it?"

The bikers yelled something back, then joined the Chief in the other pickup truck. With a wave at us, they slowly made their way around and headed out the access road for town.

As soon as they were out of range, Crusher turned back to Clark and said, "You know that was just bull, didn't ya?"

Clark smiled and nodded. "I did. Why?"

"Because you're different, man! You're no Bible-thumping yahoo hypocrite! You're ... you're real! And I wanna ..." He hesitated. "Can we talk again sometime?"

Clark held out a hand. "Anytime."

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### The Bronze Saga #3: BRONZE AVENGERS

The pickup truck carrying Bonnie, Dot, and the others came into town and headed straight for the tent. A couple of station wagons were parked close to the entrance, and a man with a pair of binoculars was scanning the skies. Suddenly he lowered them and ran into the tent, yelling, "Doc, it's here! It's here!"

Doc Felipé started barking out orders to some people in the tent, who quickly carried four stretchers to the waiting cars and sped away. Standing at the door of the tent, we all could now hear the chopping of blades and saw the form of the helicopter descending towards the far end of town, where the station wagons had also been heading.

She took a deep breath and looked over at Dot. "Somebody got a message to the outside," she explained. "Go ahead, bring her in and put her on the examination table. I'll be right back!"

The stretcher was carried over to an area behind some movable screens, and Dot stayed at her side while the others moved on.

Dot took Bonnie's hand. "How are you doing?" she asked.

Bonnie smiled. "I'll be fine, sugah. Thanks."

"So what happened?"

She related the story of finding the little girl hiding in the basement, how she and Clark had held up the ceiling during the aftershock, and how she eventually got caught when everything finally collapsed. Dot winced sympathetically.

"Not good," she summarized semi-critically.

"Well," Bonnie said tiredly. "At least I can say that something good came out of this ... no, two."

"Like what?"

She smiled up at Dot. "I'm one of you now."

"Huh?"

"I guess I hit what you'd call my crisis point, and God was able to get through. I'm a Christian now."

Dot's eyes went wide and she exclaimed, "Praise God!" Then she leaned down and hugged Bonnie; she tried returning the hug, but was not in the best position to do so.

"You said there were two things," inquired Dot, newly excited. "So what was the other?"

Bonnie smiled again. "Clark."

Dot peered down for a moment, then the light of understanding appeared in her eyes. "You ... and Clark?"

She nodded. "I love him, Dot. And now I know he loves me."

Dot continued the thought. "He didn't want to say so because you weren't a Christian. Just like Perry and I were." She paused. "You two aren't getting married, are you?"

She shook her head. "Didn't get that involved, sugah."

Dot leaned down for another hug, this time more gentle, more compassionate. "I'm happy for you both, whatever the outcome."

"Thanks."

Then the doctor came back, with a look of relief on her face. "Okay, let's see what's wrong with you. Dot, would you give us a few minutes?"

"Sure." Dot gave Bonnie's hand a quick squeeze, and backed off. "Need anything, Doc?"

Merilee looked back, then said, "I've been running on adrenaline and caffeine for most of the night. How 'bout getting me some more coffee?"

"Gotcha! Back in a few!" And she retreated from behind the partition.

-----

It was hard not to notice the Life Flight helicopter flying away, and I wondered if that was a result of Sunni's communication with the Bronze Avengers. Leaving the biker Crusher to return to his gang at the jail, we walked over to the tent and looked in. There were a few people still inside, most of them resting on cots and being attended to by friends or relatives, or Doctor Felipe's two assistants.

Dot was sitting on one of the chairs off to one side. We called her name as we approached, and she looked up and smiled at us. We took a couple of seats next to her, after she gave Clark an emotional embrace.

"The Doc's working on Bonnie now; she'll be fine," updated Dot. "She told me what happened ... and what happened."

Her smile in Clark's direction confused me. "Okay, I know I'm missing something you two obviously know. What is it?"

There was silence, as neither wanted to be the first to tell me. Then Clark said, "While we were buried, she went through some heavy soul-searching, and made her decision for Christ."

"Well, praise the Lord!" I exclaimed, then toned down my voice after realizing how loud I had become. "That's great!"

"But that's not all," started Dot. "She and Clark -"

Clark quickly rose from his chair. "Has anyone checked on Sunni?" he interrupted. "Is she all right? This will take a few minutes, so why don't we see how she is!" And, in several quick strides, he was out the door, leaving only the breeze created in his wake.

Dot and I looked at each other.

"What's up with him?" I asked.

Dot leaned in with a smile and took my hand in hers. "Love."

A moment later it all made sense. "Oh, wow! All right!"

And, still holding hands, we followed Clark.

-----

We stepped aboard Goliath to find Sunni sitting on the couch in the living room, talking to an old man I hadn't seen before. He respectfully stood in our presence. By his appearance I guessed him to be in his 80's, but the gracefulness in his movement could've put him easily twenty years younger. He wasn't very tall, but stood with posture borne of dignity. We walked towards one another as Clark moved over to Sunni.

Identifying himself to her, Clark braced himself for her exuberant reaction. With almost cat-like reflexes, the blind woman launched herself from the couch to the source of the sound, wrapping her arms around him in a death grip bear hug. "Oh, I'm SO glad you're okay! Romney told me you and Bonnie were caught in a cave-in!" She backed off after a few moments and rested against the arm of the chair.

"You might want to introduce me, my dear," suggested the old man

"Yes, of course! Everyone, this is a friend of mine, Romney Wordsworth. He's the librarian in town."

Everyone gave their greetings. Being closest, I offered my hand and tried to make small-talk. "So you're the librarian. Must be interesting."

"Yes. I used to work for the state, but they got a new system and decided to terminate me."

"Labeled you as obsolete, huh?" I commented.

"You could say that, yes," he replied with an impish grin. "I like it much better here."

Sunni spoke up. "Romney's been helping me out. Clark, I used your short wave set to make contact with the Bronze Avengers -- I hope you don't mind."

"Not at all," replied Clark. "I see you had success."

"And then some! Once I made contact with the Avengers, they wanted to know what we needed. I found Romney outside and drafted him."

"So now you know about their group," I asked him aside. "What do you think?"

"It's all quite fascinating!" he answered, picking up the story. "I had injured my hand, so I really wasn't in any condition to dig around with the younger ones, so I wandered around here, searching out where I could be of use. I saw Sunni outside of this truck, looking quite disoriented, and so came over to her and identified myself."

Sunni continued, "Romney became my temporary set of eyes, and was able to find out what was needed. He also touched base with the Chief to inform them of the helicopters and suggest using the street as a helipad."

"Sunni, that was Deputy Platte's idea, not mine," he corrected.

"Oh, sorry." She paused. "The response has been more than I could've imagined! We've got three -- count them, three -- cargo helicopters on their way, containing food, water, medical supplies, and a ton of portable generators! Oh, and Perry -- Buddy was able to get ahold of your friend Gumball."

I explained to Clark, "I figured we could use his help."

Clark nodded. "How soon will they be here, Sunni?"

She shrugged. "Don't know."

Just then, we heard a weak knock at the trailer door. Dot, being closest, answered it. Still dressed in the green surgical gown, her hair loose and stringy around her shoulders, stood Merilee Felipé. "I just finished with Miss Clayton," she announced. "She's fine. She's sleeping; I've got one of my assistants watching her. I needed to get away from there for a few minutes anyhow, so I thought I'd come over here to let you all know how she's doing." Her shoulders sagged, as if she'd run completely out of energy. "Got a place I can sit?"

Dot quickly said, "Sure!" Gently guiding the exhausted woman over to the couch, we watched as she settled. As her weight sank her into the couch, and her head rested on the back, her body seemed to deflate, and she released a sigh we could all relate to. We all were waiting to see if she would fall asleep. After a few seconds, however, she raised her head and sat up a little.

"I haven't worked a night shift this hard since residency," she commented with a groan. Then she took a deep breath and turned to face us all. "Like I said, Miss Clayton's fine. I won't bog you all down with technical terms. Apart from the usual cuts and scrapes, she suffered a broken leg, a few cracked ribs, and a bruised right lung -- nothing life-threatening. Right now rest is the best thing for her. Me, too, but I'll hold off a little longer." She paused. "Anyhow, she's a healthy woman, and she should be back in action within a couple of months."

"Will she need a wheelchair?" asked Clark.

"At first, until the damage to the ribs clears enough to let her tolerate crutches." She paused again to breathe; we all felt the fatigue of the last twelve hours. "So who called for Life Flight?"

"That would be me," answered Sunni.

She let out a laugh. "I knew it! If anybody could've gotten through, I would've put my money on you! Thanks!"

Sunni lowered her head. "It's okay. I just wanted to help, and I'm glad it worked."

"Well, it did!"

Clark sat down on the couch near her and put a hand on his shoulder. "I hate to burden you further, Doctor, but I believe I have injured my shoulder. Could you have a look at it?"

Her weary countenance cleared at the need of another, and she sat up and probed his muscular shoulder. After a few moments of asking him where he felt pain, she nodded and said, "Yes, there's definite tearing. Not too serious, but enough to keep your arm in a sling for awhile. Let's go back to the tent, and we'll take care of it. Gimme a hand, will you?"

### The Bronze Saga #3: BRONZE AVENGERS

Clark stood and reached down with his good arm, helping her up. She stretched a bit as she slowly moved to the exit. "Thanks for the use of the couch," she told Clark with an appreciative smile.

As the door behind them closed, I felt another yawn coming on, and decided to give into it. "I'm going to see what I can do about getting a couple hours sleep before the next crisis. Get me up if you need me, okay?"

"Sounds good," added Dot. "I'll join you. Sunni?"

"Pass. I'm going to stay here and keep watch on the short wave, just in case something comes in. 'Night!"

"Romney?" I asked.

The old gentleman shook his head. "I'll keep Sunni company for a while longer, thank you."

Dot and I left the big rig.

-----

#### Chapter Twenty

The sun was just over the horizon when we heard the familiar whine of the Osprey's engines approaching from the east.

Clark sat in the Diamond, next to the makeshift helipad. The voice of the computer suddenly announced, "I have an incoming transmission from Blue Thunder, sir."

"Put it through, Myrna."

The familiar voice of Monk Mayfair's firstborn son identified himself and his aircraft, then paused for a response.

"Gumball, it's Clark! You're coming in loud and clear! Welcome to Pine Corners!"

"Hey, Doc! Good to hear from you! I thought some magnetic whasis had silenced wireless communication."

"It seems to have cleared."

"Great! That you down there?"

He got out of the car and waved his good arm. Then he leaned back into the vehicle and said, "See you soon!"

"Roger and out!"

The Osprey made an easy circle over downtown, while many looked upon the unique airplane. Then it changed from horizontal to vertical flight and smoothly maneuvered over the helipad. With a slow descent and an easy touchdown, it landed. A moment later the helmeted pilot exchanged raised-hand waves, and the engines cycled down to silence. A set of steps extended from just below the door to the pavement, and the door cracked open.

### The Bronze Saga #3: BRONZE AVENGERS

The first figure that stepped down from the aircraft would've probably shocked most people, convincing many that a gorilla was loose in their streets. Clark, however, approached the simian curiosity with a surprised smile and a hug that carefully avoided Clark's bad arm.

"Monk!" greeted Clark. "Not that I'm not pleased to see you, but what are you doing here?"

"Gumball called me in after he got the relay from Perry! Figured I might be of some help."

"Y'know, you might be at that."

"What's with the sling?"

"Bonnie and I were caught when an aftershock brought a house down around us; she got the worst of it, and I injured my shoulder."

"Knowing you, big guy, you were probably doin' something heroic like tryin' to hold up a ceiling," Monk commented nonchalantly.

"CLARK!"

They both turned towards the sound. The pilot, dressed in jeans and a denim shirt, was helping an older woman out of the Osprey to the ground; she had yelled his name, and was now giving him an enthusiastic wave as she closed the distance and maternally hugged him.

"Now what happened to YOU?" she asked, giving him the look a disobedient child would see in a parent.

He smiled back and said, "I hurt my shoulder. Lea, what are you doing here?"

"What, my son calls us in the middle of the night to tell us that you're in the center of an earthquake zone, and wants only Andrew to join him?" She stood defiantly. "I don't think so!"

Both Monk and Gumball, behind Lea, nodded in enthusiastic agreement.

"Well, then, let's bring you up to speed on things. Perry and Dot are visiting Bonnie in the tent."

-----

"Grandma!" exclaimed Dot as she sprinted to Lea's open arms. "What are you doing here?"

"And pass up a chance to see my favorite granddaughter? I don't think so!"

"Perry," greeted Monk, as we exchanged hugs.

"Hadn't expected to see you two here, Monk, but I'm glad."

I reached out a hand to Gumball. "Glad you got my message. I'd thought that we'd need you to carry some of the wounded to a hospital elsewhere, but that was before someone else contacted Life Flight. Has Clark briefed you on the situation?"

"Not yet," said Monk.

I grinned to myself, picturing Sunni's reaction. "Boy, are you in for a treat!"

-----

Romney was just leaving when we came aboard Goliath; he had had a long night, and was going home to a well-deserved sleep. We thanked him and watched him walk down the road.

Sunni had been resting with her head on the sidearm of the couch, but she came awake at our presence.

"Nice digs, Clark," said Monk appreciative.

Dot made the introduction. "Sunni, I'd like you to meet my grandfather ... Monk Mayfair."

"Good t'meet'cha," he said, giving away his location.

Sunni's reaction was predictable and spontaneous, and Monk never knew what hit him. They both tumbled back into a chair, Sunni holding onto him and burying him in flattery. "Oh, Mr. Mayfair, I can't tell you how much it means to meet you ... I mean, you're one of Doc's men, one of the Fabulous Five ... this is such an honor ... I mean, to know that Doc was alive was one thing, but now to meet you, I don't know what to say ..."

"You're doing just fine, kiddo!" defended Monk, once he got his wind back. "But I'd really appreciate it if you'd get offa my chest."

Sunni jumped back. "Oh God, oh God, oh God, oh God, oh God! I'm so sorry!"

"It's okay, it's okay!" Monk grinned. "You must be Sunni Bradshaw."

"Yeah -- yessir!" she stammered and stepped backwards into Clark's arms.

"It's okay, Sunni," said Clark in a calming tone, guiding her to an empty spot on the couch. "Here, have a seat."

Lea came over to her and reached out, taking Sunni's hands. "I'm Lea Mayfair, Monk's wife. God bless you, dear." She then followed up with a hug and a kiss to the blind woman's cheek.

Another hand touched her arm. "And I'm Clark Mayfair ... I'm the Gumball your friend Brannan contacted."

Clark stood while the rest of us took seats. "Well, there's not much that I can add to the basic facts about the earthquake," he said. "In fact, you being on the outside may have provided you with more information than we have. Probably the only thing we can add is the fact that the quake produced some sort of magnetic disturbance that made all wireless communication ineffective, and seems only now to be subsiding. Sunni was the only one who was able to punch through. Sunni, would you continue?"

The blind woman was momentarily taken by surprise at being called on. She hesitated only an instant before speaking. "It really wasn't much, actually. I just boosted the signal on Clark's short wave set, and used a simple Morse code message to get through to my friend Buddy. He made the contacts from there."

"Three loaded cargo helicopters are on their way here now," specified Clark. "Gumball, you might want to move your plane to the parking lot of a friend of ours. He has a winery east of town. I can direct you."

"Gotcha," replied the pilot.

"So who's this group that got it all together so quickly?" asked Monk.

There was silence for several seconds. "Sunni?" asked Clark.

"Go ahead," deferred Sunni.

"Monk, there's an underground network that calls themselves the Bronze Avengers. They've been doing good -- in my name -- for several decades."

"The Bronze ... Avengers?" repeated the simian chemist, rubbing his chin. "Why does that sound familiar?"

"Andy!" interjected Lea. "Phoenix, 1986! That young man who approached you at the convention!"

The light came on in Monk's eyes. "Yeah! Yeah!" he squealed. "We wuz in Phoenix at a chemists' convention, and this kid practically mugs me in the parking lot. Big fan! Well, as he's rambling on, he starts pouring his guts out about this thing called th' Bronze Avengers -- just about wore out both of us before we could break away. So now you're telling me the kid wasn't crazy, that there is such a thing as the Bronze Avengers?"

"Yes, sir," replied Sunni.

He slumped back in his seat. "Blazes!" he hissed.

Sunni felt a nudge at her leg, and reached down to stroke Sequoia's head. She suddenly realized regretfully her negligence of her guide dog's needs, and spoke softly to him as she took his leash, "I'm sorry, boy. Let's take care of that, okay?"

"Dot?" she addressed aside. "Have you seen Sequoia's harness?"

"Sure, right here." She placed it in Sunni's hands, and it was quickly put on the guide dog. Then she stood and excused herself, and left the large trailer. She moved around, allowing the dog a little freedom, and found a patch of ground nearby with some grass and foliage.

She heard a brief sound from one side. Then, suddenly, without warning, she felt hands grabbing her from behind. One gloved hand clamped over her mouth, and she felt herself being dragged into the bushes. She was terrified, and wanted to scream out, but her attacker was stronger.

Then came the voice. It was a low, menacing whisper. "Don't move, Bradshaw!"

It was Larsen.

"You think you've won, but you haven't," he said, his words almost a growl. "My home, my business, all in ruins because of this earthquake; I have nothing! Before the earthquake I might've given in to your little restraining order, but now I have nothing to lose. My business is everything. I need your invention in order to survive. I will have your invention, Bradshaw -- count on it. I will eventually get your secret -- one way or another. There's nothing you or your friends can do to stop me. Remember that!"

### The Bronze Saga #3: BRONZE AVENGERS

She was released in one final violent gesture, shoving her to the ground. No longer needing to be secretive, Larsen ran through the bushes and away. Sunni paused only long enough to know that she was still alive. Then she let out an ear-piercing scream that got the immediate attention of all those nearby.

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Dot and I came aboard Nomad, where the rest of the group was already assembled. Behind us was Jacob LaCroix, who had just arrived into town. Sunni, still somewhat in shock from her experience with Larsen, was in Lea's comforting arms.

All eyes turned to us as we approached. We shook our heads, explaining, "No sign of him. He probably had a car waiting."

"Yes," agreed Clark, standing near one of the windows. "Myrna, secure!"

"The vehicle is secure," replied the computer, to the astonishment of all but us three.

Clark introduced Jacob as he stood near the back of the room, then began the meeting. "This all began as a result of an invention created by Sunni," Clark began. "She invented a practical EMP generator."

Monk released a low whistle. "Blazes!"

"Through a series of ... Incidents ... the machine's existence came to the attention of the local used car dealer, Frank Larsen. He wanted the machine for his own financial gain, and refused to believe that Sunni had destroyed it and all documentation associated with it."

"But Sunni has the knowledge in her head," concluded Monk. "And that's what this guy wants now."

Clark nodded. "Exactly. All this earthquake has done is to put things off. When this crisis is over, he'll be facing a major economic loss, and he will be even more rabid to get Sunni's information."

"Take me away from here," she pleaded. "Why I can't just move, change my name?"

Jacob LaCroix spoke. "I know Larsen. If there's something he wants badly, he'll not give up until he has it."

"I can take care of that ... the old-fashioned way," commented Monk, planting a meaty fist into the opposing palm.

Sunni giggled, "Yes!"

"No, brother," commented Clark. "Remember, we're here to love."

Monk grinned. "What, ain't you ever heard of tough love?"

We all shared a good laugh. Leave it to Monk to be the class clown of the group, I thought, feeling the tension of the situation dissipate in the moment of levity. Even Clark played along, assuming the role of straight man with a deadpan expression for a few moments. But even he couldn't hold it in forever, as he gave way to a loud guffaw.

After a few minutes, we returned to the discussion at hand.

### The Bronze Saga #3: BRONZE AVENGERS

"Right before the earthquake hit, we presented Larsen with a restraining order. That doesn't seem to matter now. He said he had nothing else to live for, so what will a restraining order solve?"

"NO!" stormed Sunni angrily, standing and pacing. "I won't give him the information -- I'd rather die!"

Nobody noticed Clark's eyebrows raising a degree.

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#### Chapter Twenty-One

The second day since the earthquake passed without further aftershocks.

The supplies brought in from the cargo helicopters were more than sufficient for their needs. Generators were expertly linked and scattered throughout the town, returning power to homes and businesses. The magnetic disturbance grew fainter hour by hour, restoring wireless and cell communication.

Later, a skycrane helicopter -- also from the same mysterious source -- flew in a transitional structure that bridged the gap between Pine Corners with the outside world. Gumball worked with the latter crew, shuttling in building supplies and engineering workcrews. Because of their combined efforts, the bridge into Pine Corners was restored after only two days.

In town, crews of volunteers and imported workers cleared away debris and did their best to assess and repair damages from the quake. There were no more injuries, except where loose masonry would fall on an unsuspecting and unprepared worker; these injuries were not serious, much to Doc Felipe's relief. The greatest danger in the days following the earthquake was fire, in the form of hotspots which would apparently flare up spontaneously, demanding immediate attention.

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"Sunni? What's this for?"

"You know I became a Christian while I was in Portland," she reminded them. "Well, since then, and especially since the quake, I've been seeing just how little I've given you about contacting the Bronze Avengers. Deek, you've got a computer; no reason why you shouldn't be able to contact them yourselves. Well, there's all the information you need. The other stuff ... well, Rhonda, I know you've always liked those things, so I just thought I'd give 'em to you as a gift. My way of saying thanks for being my friends." She moved closer and initiated a group hug.

"Well, thanks, Sun!" replied a confused Deek. "I wish we'd have been here, but, like I said, we were in Foust Falls doing some shopping when the quake hit; we were trapped on the outside until they got the bridge rebuilt and opened traffic."

"No problem. I'm just glad you both are okay."

"You, too," added Rhonda with another hug.

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"Bonnie?"

"Yeah, Dot?"

"I got something for you." She took a small bag from behind her back and handed it to the brunette. She opened it, and took out the small brown teddy bear. It had big black dots for eyes, and a bow tie made from a red ribbon.

She smiled. "He's terrific! Thanks! Does he have a name?"

It was Dot's turn to smile. "I found him among the rubble of one of the stores; eventually he would've been trashed. But I rescued him, for you. So his name is Redeemed ... because he, too, has been saved."

Bonnie looked over the teddy bear, and her chin began to quaver. A mist appeared in her eyes. Then she reached down and gave Dot a big tearful hug. "I love it. Thanks."

-----

Monk met Clark at the side of Bonnie Clayton.

"Clark! I really hate to bail on ya, but I just got a call from Katie. They need me in New York right away."

"That's fine," replied the big bronze man. "We'll be moving on in a couple of days anyway."

"Sorry we couldn't have spent more time with ya, Bonnie, but we'll make up for it. Thanksgiving's only a couple months away, and we're seein' what kinda bash we can put together. You an' Patty are both invited, o'course. Think about it, okay?"

"Sure," replied Bonnie with a smile. "Anybody ever tell you you're cute?"

Monk flashed a grin. "Alla time, darlin'! Alla time!" He turned to Clark. "And you -- you take care of that shoulder, okay?"

"Yes, mother," smirked Clark, imitating a voice both men remembered from an old radio comedy series.

Monk returned the smirk, then hugged them both, and headed out to the car that would take him to the waiting Osprey.

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Chapter Twenty-Two

It was a tragic ending.

We were preparing to leave the next day, and were refilling the propane tanks on the vehicles when it happened.

Pine Corner's only gas station was owned and operated by Tyler ("Ty") Williams. It consisted of a large lot split into two sections. The one section had the gas station with its three pumps and one-bay garage for general maintenance. The other section was an open field containing two storage sheds and a large propane tank.

### The Bronze Saga #3: BRONZE AVENGERS

We had parked the rigs off to the side of the second section, and were talking to Mr. Williams when he suddenly spotted a plume of black smoke coming from one of the sheds. We sounded the alarm and summoned everyone around us to fight the small blaze. Since the power hadn't been restored, we organized a bucket brigade and had the fire out within a few minutes.

Standing around, tired from the exertion and reflecting on what had happened, we were startled when someone suddenly pointed and yelled, "Look!"

We all turned to see the lone figure wandering aimlessly across the other field, arms helplessly seeking before her, her face a mirroring terror and confusion.

"It's Sunni Bradshaw!" someone exclaimed. "Where's her dog?"

Many of us yelled her name, including Clark and me, but she appeared not to have heard us as she moved closer to the big propane tank. We started going into the field to bring her back, when we saw the smoke appear from just behind the tank. An instant later it became a jet of flame.

Clark and I put on the speed, while those behind us frantically yelled for her to stop -- but it was too late! There was a blinding flash, and the concussion of the exploding propane tank threw us back to the ground with a low whooshing sound. I covered my head with my arms to protect it from the heat, and heard exclamations of panic from the group at the edge of the field. Then, after a few seconds of silence, I felt a blanket cover me and hands slapping my body; although I didn't feel it, I assumed my clothes had caught on fire.

"You okay?" asked someone.

"Yeah," I said, not sure if that was accurate. People helped me to my feet, and I wrapped the blanket around me. I looked to my left, where others were tending to Clark. His arm hung at his side, and he looked about as good as me. Then I looked behind me, at the source of the explosion. There was nothing left but burning grass, twisted metal, and splinters. More people tried to contain the fire. The two sheds that had been near the propane tank were now gone.

And so was Sunni.

Dot rushed to my side while someone yelled for the doctor. Our rigs were moved, and a firebreak was formed around the section. The fire was eventually extinguished, and Chief Randolph looked over the scene with one of his deputies.

A short while later, the Chief addressed the crowd that had grown from a dozen to over fifty, and grimly confirmed the obvious. "There's no sign of Sunni Bradshaw ... not even traces of bone. As close as she'd been when the tank exploded, I can only conclude that she was instantly cremated in the blast."

Tears spontaneously erupted throughout the crowd, as the emotions broke free. Chief Randolph was somber-faced as he dismissed his men and walked to his car. Holding back the emotion, I hugged Dot, who sobbed into my shoulder, and led her away to the Nomad.

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Power returned to Pine Corners later that day.

### The Bronze Saga #3: BRONZE AVENGERS

News had spread that there would be a memorial service at the local community church, for the three people who had lost their lives as a direct result of the earthquake. Sunni Bradshaw would be included in that service.

The small Baptist church was filled with those who had been affected by the tragedies of the past few days. Tammy Elders was there in a black dress, her father holding her tight and trying to maintain his composure. We took seats and watched as the pastor of the church directed things. It was a good service, filled with words of comfort and hope for the living, and various townfolk were allowed to stand up front and offer a personal testimony to those who had died. There were tears all around, and it seemed to bring this little community closer together in their grief.

Jacob LaCroix identified to us three people -- a woman and two children -- as Frank Larsen's family; they appeared uninjured from the earthquake. Not surprising, the used car king was not in attendance. Clark silently signaled me, and we quietly excused ourselves from the church.

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LARSEN'S KAR KINGDOM was deserted; the business, like almost all others, was closed for the memorial service. The damage was still there, to the cars in the lot, and to the windows of the buildings. But there seemed to be no one there.

In the office, a solitary figure sat mourning his life. Atop the desk, no longer needing to be hidden in his desk drawer, was the bottle of anonymous alcohol. Next to the bottle, like a familiar stranger, was a pistol. He had kept it in another desk drawer for protection, and now he was planning on using it for self-extinction.

His shoulders slumped in resignation; he picked up the .38 snubnose, looked it over, and spun the cylinder. All the chambers were occupied, even though he doubted that he'd need more than one. Then he took another draw on the glass of liquid courage.

He didn't hear the approaching footsteps. But he did hear the voice, low and calm. "Don't do it. It's not worth it."

He looked up and saw the big bronze man standing in the doorway, his stance relaxed, his hands resting in his pants pockets. It didn't surprise Larsen that the other man had gotten this far without being heard. But it wasn't going to stop his plans.

"Yeah, sure," Larsen mumbled, setting the gun down but not out of reach. "Easy for you to say. Your business isn't in shambles around you. You're not facing a Federal rap. Your wife won't leave you if you go to jail. Everything you ever worked for isn't gone."

"I know exactly what you're going through," Clark said slowly. "I have been there. I have been in prison, and everything I had was gone when I got out. My friends had scattered." He paused. "One of my closest friends tried to hold my business together while I was gone, but it was too much for him. He took his own life ... just exactly like you are. I never had a chance to say goodbye to him."

"Yeah ... well." Larsen took a sip from the glass, and made a face at the effect of the alcohol. "I'm done for. There's nothing for me here. Maybe it'll be better on the other side."

"Hardly," replied Clark, somberly. "If you only knew what really waited for you on the other side, you wouldn't even consider doing this. But that's a moot point. You say you have nothing to live for. But what if

you're wrong? Would your wife and family desert you so easily? And what would they think when they found your body here? Did you give them a chance to say goodbye? Do you care that little about them?"

Clark's arguments were disturbing to Larsen. He poured a bit more from the bottle and took a large swallow. He closed his eyes and let the alcohol burn his stomach. When he opened his eyes, the big man was still there; he hadn't moved.

"Shouldn't you be at church?" he said, acknowledging Clark's suit. "That blind woman was my last chance, and she goes and gets herself blown up!"

Clark ignored the comment. "Is self-destruction the easy way out?"

"Right now it's my only option. Are you going to try and stop me?"

"If you mean, am I going to try and take the gun away from you? No. You'll just find another way to kill yourself. You need to give the gun up. You need to make the choice of life or death."

Moments passed in silence. The bronze man casually moved over to an upturned chair, picked it up and dusted it off, and sat down a few feet from Larson's desk. He leaned back and stretched out his legs, crossing them at the ankles.

"You're just going to sit there and watch me as I blow my brains out?" Larsen asked, incredulously.

Clark's expression was carved granite. "Why not? Make you nervous?"

"No ... no, it doesn't. Just don't try to stop me."

"Wouldn't think of it," he said calmly. "I'm just a witness, that's all."

He picked up the gun again, held it in his hand. "You said your friend killed himself with a gun?"

Clark nodded. "Locked himself in his study just like you ... with a bottle of booze and a pistol."

"He had ... a family?"

"Sent them out of town while he did it; they didn't have a clue. And he sent a letter to a friend telling him where to find the body. He died all alone."

Larsen looked at the glass with an empty feeling. "What happened to the family?"

"The wife ... the widow ... never recovered. She abandoned their young son and ran away." He paused. "Another couple, also close friends, raised the boy."

"True?" he said, horrified.

"I personally know the couple who raised the boy, and many of the people involved. By the way, the grownup son was killed in 1975 by a drunk driver -- leaving a wife and a daughter of his own."

Larson sat back in his chair. "It all seems such a mess. But what choice do I have?"

"There have been a lot of men who have found freedom behind prison walls."

Larsen released a tired sigh. "Now you're talking religion."

Clark shook his head. "I'm talking Jesus Christ. Religion is generic ... Jesus Christ is the real thing, the personal relationship. Want to know more?"

"Can -- can he keep my family together?"

"Yes. But that depends on your family."

He nodded. "Tell me more"

-----

Frank Larson was happy at last. His future was uncertain, but his hope was finally secured. As a Federal marshal put him into the back of the sedan, he looked back at Clark and smiled. Another marshal placed the bagged revolver in the trunk of the car and joined his partner up front. They left Pine Corners quietly, without fanfare.

I wandered over to Clark's side and said, "Praise God it worked out okay."

"I'm just glad he didn't try anything stupid, regardless of our little ace in the hole."

"For sure." I patted the metal box at my hip. "Larsen's gun wouldn't have worked even if he'd tried; I wonder what the feds will think when they discover the firing pin has been burned off. Thank God for Long Tom's little zapper."

"Amen."

-----

"Step on it, man! Maybe there's something we can salvage of her stuff!"

Stern turned his car towards the cul-de-sac, bouncing over a crack in the road and sliding to the right. He uttered a profanity as Brock exclaimed, "Hey! Keep it on the road!"

"I'm tryin' to! Here's the ... place?"

"Oh, great!" groaned Brock at the sight.

The car stopped in the cul-de-sac, in front of a pile of rubble that had once been Sunni Bradshaw's house. As they stood dumbfounded, one of the neighbors walked up behind them.

"Isn't it tragic," she said, her voice cracking. "We got back from the memorial service and discovered this. The police said the gas had never been turned off after the earthquake ... they say you're supposed to do that in case the power goes out, I think. Anyhow, apparently the gas was still on and it just built up and up until something caused it to go off. Did you boys know Sunni?"

"Uh ... yeah," mumbled Stern.

### The Bronze Saga #3: BRONZE AVENGERS

"She was such a sweet girl. Well, I'll let you have some privacy." And the old woman turned and walked back to her house.

Brock and Stern looked at the rubble, then Brock took a step forward.

An hour later, filthy and exhausted, the pair sat on the front lawn. Both exchanged muttered curses.

"Nothing! Absolutely nothing!" Brock slapped at the dust on his shirt and coughed a couple of times. "She said it was all gone. Maybe she was telling the truth."

"I don't know," Stern sighed. "If that's so, and now she's dead, then the boss sure won't like it."

"Do you think they'll blame us for what happened?"

"I don't know," Stern repeated. Then he took a deep breath and pushed himself to a standing position. Turning about in a full circle, looking up at the sky, he let out a sudden belly laugh.

"What was that all about?" asked Brock, looking up with confusion.

"Oh, I was just remembering a scene from an old movie I saw." He stretched as he explained. "The bad guys had backed the good guys into a corner, and their situation was just plain hopeless. The main character tried desperately to raise their spirits, but it wasn't working. Finally, he threw up his hands and declared, 'It just doesn't matter!' His point was that, since there was no way out, you might as well have a good laugh in its face!" He paused and offered a hand to his life-long friend. "Look, my place is still intact. What's say we go over there and have a couple of beers? As for this -" He shrugged and grinned. "It just doesn't matter!"

Brock looked at the hand, and the grinning face. "You are a mental case," he commented, reaching up.

"Perhaps you're right. Does it matter?"

"I guess not."

And the two friends shared a laugh, walked back to the car, and left the cul-de-sac behind.

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Jacob LaCroix had witnessed many things in his lifetime, but these past few days had been the most amazing. Learning that not only was Doc Savage alive, but he hadn't aged a day in fifty years, and now he's a Christian evangelist -- that was enough for one lifetime. But then going through an earthquake, and his parking lot used for a helipad, and now this last stop before Clark and Perry headed out of town towards their next destination.

He laughed at how God had blessed him over and over.

The RV named Nomad and the semi-trailer aptly named Goliath were parked side-by-side as the brown station wagon arrived. A tall boy and a blonde girl climbed out as Clark stepped down from the truck. He greeted them both as Perry and Dot joined the group.

"Why did you want to see us?" asked the boy Deek.

Perry answered, "You two are good friends of Sunni. And you're also members of the Bronze Avengers."

"Were friends," soberly corrected the girl Rhonda. "And she told you about the Bronze Avengers?"

"Yes," he nodded. "And I meant to say you 'are' friends."

On cue, Clark walked over to the door of the RV and opened it. Deek and Rhonda looked at the vehicle with expressions that went from puzzlement to shock, and then their faces exploded with tears of joy.

"I know you're here, guys -- I can hear you crying!" She held her free arm out. "So, you got a hug for the corpse?"

Deek and Rhonda rushed to her, mobbing her with hugs and tears, repeating, "You're not dead!"

"No, I'm not dead," she responded with a tearful grin. "It takes more than a propane explosion to put me away."

"But everyone saw you ... die," squeaked Rhonda.

"I can explain that," said Perry, as he put his hand to his ear. "Go ahead."

Suddenly they saw Bonnie Clayton, standing about ten feet from them, smiling and waving at them while balancing on crutches.

Then Perry looked at Dot and nodded, instructing Deek and Rhonda, "Watch!"

Dot walked slowly and deliberately towards Bonnie, who partially opened her arms for a hug. Dot also spread her arms ... and walked right through Bonnie. On the other side, she stopped and turned around, executing a neat bow. Bonnie then vanished as if she'd never been there.

"A hologram?" said Deek.

"Exactly!" replied Perry. "Inside the trailer is something along the lines of an imaging chamber. We modified it to project a holographic image of Sunni into the field. Then we detonated the propane tank."

"You blew up the tank?" exclaimed Deek. "Why?"

"Whoa, Deek!" said Sunni, putting a hand on his shoulder. "I chose to do it this way! Larsen wouldn't give up on me -- not while I was alive! We needed a way of doing this that wouldn't leave a body! No one was hurt but Clark and Perry -- and they volunteered! Nobody else got near enough to run the risk of being hurt! As for the cost -- it's already been taken care of!"

Perry added, "Clark and I knew what to expect, so we were able to take the punch, so to speak."

"But they took Larsen away," argued Rhonda. "Nobody's after you now, Sunni. Why can't you come back?"

"Because what I know others might eventually want, and I don't want them to come after me or those whom I love to try and get it out of me. We'll all be safer this way." She paused. "Don't worry, I plan on keeping in touch with you both through the Bronze Avengers. I'll be out there."

They gathered in a group hug. "But wait!" exclaimed Sunni. "I've got something I need to show you!"

### The Bronze Saga #3: BRONZE AVENGERS

Sequoia directed her to the RV, where she called up to Clark. The big bronze man joined her outside, and they walked over to Deek and Rhonda. "Guys, you're gonna think I'm crazy, but it's true -- I swear on my own grave -- this is the man! This IS Clark Savage Jr.!"

They hesitated a moment. Clark commented, "I don't think they believe you."

"Can you explain it to them?"

"Yes." For the next few minutes, Clark explained the full story of his capture, hibernation, awakening, and life up to this point. Rhonda paid close attention to his story, but Deek shifted his attention from Clark to Sunni to Perry to Dot and back again. After he finished his story, Deek said, "Well, sir, your story's very nice and all that, but I'm going to need some concrete proof before I believe you are truly Doc Savage."

"Deek!" exclaimed Sunni. "What are you saying?"

The boy took a step back, away from all the others. "No offense, Sunni, but you're basing your ... belief in this man's claims on no more than faith."

"Yes, Deek -- blind faith!" she returned, spitting out the words. "Faith that comes from the heart -- something I didn't have before, but I have now! It's the same with my faith in Jesus Christ -- I never witnessed his life on Earth, his crucifixion, or his resurrection -- but I know that I know that I know that Jesus Christ is God! And I know that this man is Doc Savage!"

Every jaw went slack, and every eye faced Sunni, and there was silence. Then Perry said, simply and quietly, "Amen."

Sunni turned in Rhonda's general direction and asked her, "What do you say?"

Rhonda was torn, it was obvious. Her eyes went back and forth, between the man she loved and her friend. Finally, her head lowered, she said, "I don't know, Sunni. I ... just don't know."

"Deek, Rhonda," said Clark, breaking the tension. "You don't know me. It's okay if you don't believe me; in your position, I wouldn't believe me either." He paused with a smile. "Sunni asked to be able to see you again, explain what happened, and let you know she's still alive. Sunni is very excited, and wanted to share that with you."

"Okay. But what about your family?" asked Deek. "Shouldn't they know?"

Sunni sighed and soberly said. "Why? In their eyes, I've been dead for years. All this does is close the account."

"So what will you do?" asked Rhonda.

"Well, you know Long Tom Roberts, right?" They nodded. "Well, he has an adopted daughter who has a place in Lincoln City, Oregon. She's also got the electrical touch her father had."

"Like you," added Rhonda with a smirk.

"Like me. Anyhow, since Long Tom died last year, she's had this house all to her lonesome. They've set it up so that I'll stay with her. Just think of what kinda electrical stuff we could come up with together!"

### The Bronze Saga #3: BRONZE AVENGERS

"Sunni," asked Deek, moving in close. "I'm sorry for blowing up. I was just keeping an eye out for you. I want you to be safe, and happy."

Sunni placed her hands on his face, pulled him down, and kissed him on the cheek. He blushed, and wrapped his arms around her in a hug. Rhonda came close and added her arms to the embrace. After a few moments they separated, and Deek walked over to Clark. He extended a hand to the big bronze man.

"I'm sorry for my rudeness, sir. Over these years, Sunni has become very precious to me. She's like the sister I never had. And I get very protective when it comes to her. Now she's in your hands -- please take care of her." His eyes were misting over.

"I will," affirmed Clark. "Here is my card. Contact me anytime."

There were final tears, and hugs, and soon the two big vehicles were pulling away from the parking lot.

-----

As we drove through town, we noticed how things were beginning to return to normal. A store was replacing the glass in its display. Traffic lights directed the meager flow of cars and pedestrians. A work crew loaded debris -- loosened from the quake and having fallen overnight -- into a dump truck. Otherwise, it looked like business as usual in this small town.

We pulled up near the police station and Clark announced, "I'll be a few minutes."

He climbed out and walked through the doors. From inside the RV, we noticed the increased agitation in Sequoia and knew the reason why a moment later -- the boom box sound system preceded the passing of the car, as the heavy bass rattled us all. As it passed, Sunni commented caustically, "Where's an EMP generator when you really need one?"

-----

"Clark! Good morning! You all on your way out?"

He met the handshake of the police chief. "Yes, Ike."

"Here, let's talk in my office. Where're you heading?"

"The Oregon Coast. Ever been there?"

"Naw. I prefer the mountains to the coast." He closed the door and sat behind his desk; Clark remained standing.

"Sounds quieter than yesterday. You took my advice about Crusher?"

Chief Randolph nodded. "I've got them checked into the hotel. We agreed that they would stay in town and work off their sentence. They're hard workers, I'll give 'em that!"

"Very good. Here's my card, with my phone numbers. Please pass it over to Crusher."

He took the card. "Sure thing."

### The Bronze Saga #3: BRONZE AVENGERS

Clark offered an envelope. "This should help in rebuilding. If anyone asks, it was given by an anonymous donor."

"Just like the help we got after the quake. By the way, how's Sunni doing?"

"Fine. She wanted me to thank you for your part in our little drama."

"I admit, at first I thought you were crazy. But I had to come to the same conclusions as you. I'm just glad it's over." He paused, and his eyes brightened. "Oh, you might be interested in hearing, Larsen's place is going to become a co-op of sorts, owned by all the salesmen and not just one. It's an odd idea, but it just might work."

"Interesting."

Chief Randolph rose from his desk. "Doc?" he addressed in a low, respectful voice. "I just wanted to thank you for being here when you did. And I'm personally glad you're back in circulation."

"Me, too," replied Clark. "Keep in touch."

The two men exchanged a final handshake, mutual respect showing in their faces, and Clark walked from the Chief's office and back out to the truck.

"Okay." He settled into the seat, and looked over at Bonnie. "How's the leg?"

"Fine, sugah, as long as you don't hit any big bumps."

"I'll do my best. Myrna, systems check?"

The computer replied, "Systems are go, sir. GPS monitor displaying quickest route to Lincoln City."

Clark smiled. "Thank you. Take a rest; we'll let you know when we need you."

"Shutting down."

We started moving. Suddenly, Sunni's voice came across the intercom: "Are we there yet?"

We all laughed.

From Nomad, Perry said, "Git'm up, move'm out ... back on the sawdust trail."

"Amen," answered Clark.

And the two vehicles left Pine Corners, Washington.

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Epilogue

ONE MONTH LATER

### The Bronze Saga #3: BRONZE AVENGERS

The sun was high in the sky, above the deserted helipad. On the pad was a helicopter bearing the Patricia, Inc. logo. A pilot waited patiently for the solitary couple to make their goodbyes.

Clark and Bonnie faced one another, their hands joined between them. To even the casual observer, the love they had for one another was evident.

"Are you sure I can't change your mind?" asked Clark.

"Sugah, I'd love nothin' more than stayin' here and workin' at your side. But that's not what God's got in mind for me -- at least not now."

"Tell Pat I appreciate her extending your leave."

"Well, it wouldn't do for a Chief of Security to be laid up and unable to run, would it?" She now wore a plastic walking cast, with no need for crutches or even a cane.

"You sure you'll be okay?"

She let go a short laugh. "Sugah, remember, she had a health spa on the island! You can't swing a stick without hitting a physical therapist!" She paused. "Don't worry 'bout me ... I'll be fine." She paused again, lowering her head and searching for words. Then she looked into his eyes. "Dot used t'play this one song, and I guess it 'bout says it all. 'I know the road He chose for me is not the road He chose for you. So as we chase the dreams we're after, pray for me, and I'll pray for you -- pray that we will keep the common ground.'" With moist eyes, she smiled and continued, "'Pray for me, and I'll pray for you -- and one day love will bring us back around -- I know that love will bring us back around ... again.'"

And she kissed him. They embraced a long time before they could let go.

As they separated, Clark said, "I love you, Bonnie."

"I love you, too, Clark. How's about a last prayer together before I head back to the Island?"

And with their hands held tight, their heads bowed and their eyes closed, they placed each other at the foot of the cross and walked away.

END STORY

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TO MY READERS: I INVITE ANY SUGGESTIONS and/or IDEAS YOU WOULD HAVE FOR FUTURE ADVENTURES. CONTACT ME VIA EMAIL AT SKYLAB@E-Z.NET.

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### The Bronze Saga #3: BRONZE AVENGERS

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Mark Eidemiller -- February 1, 2003