

A NOVEL

THIS PRESENT DARKNESS

Frank E. Peretti



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*To Barbara Jean,
wife and friend,
who loved me, and waited*

*For we are not contending
against flesh and blood, but
against the principalities, against
the powers, against the world rulers of
this present darkness, against the
spiritual hosts of wickedness
in the heavenly places.*

Ephesians 6:12 (RSV)

Late on a full-mooned Sunday night, the two figures in work clothes appeared on Highway 27, just outside the small college town of Ashton. They were tall, at least seven feet, strongly built, perfectly proportioned. One was dark-haired and sharp-featured, the other blond and powerful. From a half mile away they looked toward the town, regarding the cacophonous sounds of gaiety from the storefronts, streets, and alleys within it. They started walking.

It was the time of the Ashton Summer Festival, the town's yearly exercise in frivolity and chaos, its way of saying thank you, come again, good luck, and nice to have you to the eight hundred or so college students at Whitmore College who would be getting their long awaited summer break from classes. Most would pack up and go home, but all would definitely stay at least long enough to take in the festivities, the street disco, the carnival rides, the nickel movies, and whatever else could be had, over or under the table, for kicks. It was a wild time, a chance to get drunk, pregnant, beat up, ripped off, and sick, all in the same night.

In the middle of town a community-conscious landowner had opened up a vacant lot and permitted a traveling troupe of enterprising migrants to set up their carnival with rides, booths, and portapotties. The rides were best viewed in the dark, an escapade in gaily lit rust, powered by unmuffled tractor engines that competed with the wavering carnival music which squawked loudly from somewhere in the middle of it all. But on this warm summer night the roaming, cottoncandied masses were out to enjoy, enjoy, enjoy. A ferris wheel slowly turned, hesitated for boarding, turned some more for unboarding, then took a few full rotations to give its passengers their money's worth; a merry-go-round spun in a brightly lit, gaudy circle, the peeling and dismembered horses still prancing to the melody of the canned calliope; carnival-goers threw baseballs at baskets, dimes at ashtrays, darts at balloons, and money to the wind along the hastily assembled, ramshackle midway where the hawkers ranted the same try-ye-luck chatter for each passerby.

The two visitors stood tall and silent in the middle of it all, wondering how a town of twelve thousand people—including college students—could produce such a vast, teeming crowd. The usually quiet population had turned out in droves, augmented by diversion-seekers from elsewhere, until the streets, taverns, stores, alleys, and parking spots were jammed, anything was allowed, and the illegal was ignored. The police did have their hands full, but each rowdy, vandal,

drunk, or hooker in cuffs only meant a dozen more still loose and roaming about the town. The festival, reaching a crescendo now on its last night, was like a terrible storm that couldn't be stopped; one could only wait for it to blow over, and there would be plenty to clean up afterward.

The two visitors made their way slowly through the people-packed carnival, listening to the talk, watching the activity. They were inquisitive about this town, so they took their time observing here and there, on the right, on the left, before and behind. The milling throngs were moving around them like swirling garments in a washing machine, meandering from this side of the street to the other in an unpredictable, never-ending cycle. The two tall men kept eyeing the crowd. They were looking for someone.

"There," said the dark-haired man.

They both saw her. She was young, very pretty, but also very unsettled, looking this way and that, a camera in her hands and a stiff-lipped expression on her face.

The two men hurried through the crowd and stood beside her. She didn't notice them.

"You know," the dark-haired one said to her, "you might try looking over there."

With that simple comment, he guided her by a hand on her shoulder toward one particular booth on the midway. She stepped through the grass and candy wrappers, moving toward the booth where some teenagers were egging each other on in popping balloons with darts. None of that interested her, but then . . . some shadows moving stealthily behind the booth did. She held her camera ready, took a few more silent, careful steps, and then quickly raised the camera to her eye.

The flash of the bulb lit up the trees behind the booth as the two men hurried away to their next appointment.

They moved smoothly, unflinching, passing through the main part of town at a brisk pace. Their final destination was a mile past the center of town, right on Poplar Street, and up to the top of Morgan Hill about a half mile. Practically no time at all had passed before they stood before the little white church on its postage-stamp lot, with its well-groomed lawn and dainty Sunday-School-and-Service billboard. Across the top of the little billboard was the name "Ashton Community Church," and in black letters hastily painted over whatever name used to be there it said, "Henry L. Busche, Pastor."

They looked back. From this lofty hill one could look over the whole town and see it spread from city limit to city limit. To the west sparkled the caramel-colored carnival; to the east stood the dignified

and matronly Whitmore College campus; along Highway 27, Main Street through town, were the storefront offices, the smalltown-sized Sears, a few gas stations at war, a True Value Hardware, the local newspaper, several small family businesses. From here the town looked so typically American—small, innocent, and harmless, like the background for every Norman Rockwell painting.

But the two visitors did not perceive with eyes only. Even from this vantage point the true substratum of Ashton weighed very heavily upon their spirits and minds. They could feel it: restless, strong, growing, very designed and purposeful . . . a very special kind of evil.

It was not unlike either of them to ask questions, to study, to probe. More often than not it came with their job. So they naturally hesitated in their business, pausing to wonder, Why here?

But only for an instant. It could have been some acute sensitivity, an instinct, a very faint but for them discernible impression, but it was enough to make them both instantly vanish around the corner of the church, melding themselves against the beveled siding, almost invisible there in the dark. They didn't speak, they didn't move, but they watched with a piercing gaze as something approached.

The night scene of the quiet street was a collage of stark blue moonlight and bottomless shadows. But one shadow did not stir with the wind as did the tree shadows, and neither did it stand still as did the building shadows. It crawled, quivered, moved along the street toward the church, while any light it crossed seemed to sink into its blackness, as if it were a breach torn in space. But this shadow had a shape, an animated, creaturelike shape, and as it neared the church sounds could be heard: the scratching of claws along the ground, the faint rustling of breeze-blown, membranous wings wafting just above the creature's shoulders.

It had arms and it had legs, but it seemed to move without them, crossing the street and mounting the front steps of the church. Its leering, bulbous eyes reflected the stark blue light of the full moon with their own jaundiced glow. The gnarled head protruded from hunched shoulders, and wisps of rancid red breath seethed in labored hisses through rows of jagged fangs.

It either laughed or it coughed—the wheezes puffing out from deep within its throat could have been either. From its crawling posture it reared up on its legs and looked about the quiet neighborhood, the black, leathery jowls pulling back into a hideous death-mask grin. It moved toward the front door. The black hand passed through the door like a spear through liquid; the body hobbled forward and penetrated the door, but only halfway.

Suddenly, as if colliding with a speeding wall, the creature was knocked backward and into a raging tumble down the steps, the glowing red breath tracing a corkscrew trail through the air.

With an eerie cry of rage and indignation, it gathered itself up off the sidewalk and stared at the strange door that would not let it pass through. Then the membranes on its back began to billow, enfolding great bodies of air, and it flew with a roar headlong at the door, through the door, into the foyer—and into a cloud of white hot light.

The creature screamed and covered its eyes, then felt itself being grabbed by a huge, powerful vise of a hand. In an instant it was hurling through space like a rag doll, outside again, forcefully ousted.

The wings hummed in a blur as it banked sharply in a flying turn and headed for the door again, red vapors chugging in dashes and streaks from its nostrils, its talons bared and poised for attack, a ghostly siren of a scream rising in its throat. Like an arrow through a target, like a bullet through a board, it streaked through the door—

And instantly felt its insides tearing loose.

There was an explosion of suffocating vapor, one final scream, and the flailing of withering arms and legs. Then there was nothing at all except the ebbing stench of sulfur and the two strangers, suddenly inside the church.

The big blond man replaced a shining sword as the white light that surrounded him faded away.

"A spirit of harassment?" he asked.

"Or doubt . . . or fear. Who knows?"

"And that was one of the *smaller* ones?"

"I've not seen one smaller."

"No indeed. And just how many would you say there are?"

"More, much more than we, and everywhere. Never idle."

"So I've seen," the big man sighed.

"But what are they doing here? We've never seen such concentration before, not here."

"Oh, the reason won't be hidden for long." He looked through the foyer doors and toward the sanctuary. "Let's see this man of God."

They turned from the door and walked through the small foyer. The bulletin board on the wall carried requests for groceries for a needy family, some baby-sitting, and prayer for a sick missionary. A large bill announced a congregational business meeting for next Friday. On the other wall, the record of weekly offerings indicated the offerings were down from last week; so was the attendance, from sixty-one to forty-two.

Down the short and narrow aisle they went, past the orderly ranks of dark-stained plank and slat pews, toward the front of the sanctuary where one small spotlight illumined a rustic two-by-four cross hanging above the baptistry. In the center of the worn-carpeted platform stood the little sacred desk, the pulpit, with a Bible laid open upon it. These were humble furnishings, functional but not at all elaborate, revealing either humility on the part of the people or neglect.

Then the first sound was added to the picture: a soft, muffled sobbing from the end of the right pew. There, kneeling in earnest prayer, his head resting on the hard wooden bench, and his hands clenched with fervency, was a young man, very young, the blond man thought at first: young and vulnerable. It all showed in his countenance, now the very picture of pain, grief, and love. His lips moved without sound as names, petitions, and praises poured forth with passion and tears.

The two couldn't help but just stand there for a moment, watching, studying, pondering.

"The little warrior," said the dark-haired one.

The big blond man formed the words himself in silence, looking down at the contrite man in prayer.

"Yes," he observed, "this is the one. Even now he's interceding, standing before the Lord for the sake of the people, for the town . . ."

"Almost every night he's here."

At that remark, the big man smiled. "He's not so insignificant."

"But he's the only one. He's alone."

"No." The big man shook his head. "There are others. There are always others. They just have to be found. For now, his single, vigilant prayer is the beginning."

"He's going to be hurt, you know that."

"And so will the newspaperman. And so will we."

"But will we win?"

The big man's eyes seemed to burn with a rekindled fire.

"We will *fight*."

"We will fight," his friend agreed.

They stood over the kneeling warrior, on either side; and at that moment, little by little, like the bloom of a flower, white light began to fill the room. It illumined the cross on the back wall, slowly brought out the colors and grain in every plank of every pew, and rose in intensity until the once plain and humble sanctuary came alive with an unearthly beauty. The walls glimmered, the worn rugs glowed, the little pulpit stood tall and stark as a sentinel backlit by the sun.

And now the two men were brilliantly white, their former clothing transfigured by garments that seemed to burn with intensity. Their faces were bronzed and glowing, their eyes shone like fire, and each man wore a glistening golden belt from which hung a flashing sword. They placed their hands upon the shoulders of the young man and then, like a gracefully spreading canopy, silken, shimmering, nearly transparent membranes began to unfurl from their backs and shoulders and rise to meet and overlap above their heads, gently undulating in a spiritual wind.

Together they ministered peace to their young charge, and his many tears began to subside.

The *Ashton Clarion* was a small-town, grass-roots newspaper: it was little and quaint, maybe just a touch unorganized at times, unassuming. It was, in other words, the printed expression of the town of Ashton. Its offices occupied a small storefront space on Main Street in the middle of town, just a one-story affair with a large display window and a heavy, toe-scuffed door with a mail slot. The paper came out twice a week, on Tuesdays and Fridays, and didn't make a lot of money. By the appearance of the office and layout facilities, you could tell it was a low-budget operation.

In the front half of the building was the office and newsroom area. It consisted of three desks, two typewriters, two wastebaskets, two telephones, one coffeemaker without a cord, and what looked like all the scattered notes, papers, stationery and office bric-a-brac in the world. An old worn counter from a torn-down railroad station formed a divider between the functioning office and the reception area, and of course there was a small bell above the door that jingled every time someone came in.

Toward the back of this maze of small-scale activity was one luxury that looked just a little too big-town for this place: a glassed-in office for the editor. It was, in fact, a new addition. The new editor/owner was a former big city reporter and having a glassed-in editor's office had been one of his life's dreams.

This new fellow was Marshall Hogan, a strong, big-framed hustler whom his staff—the typesetter, the secretary/reporter/ad girl, the paste-up man, and the reporter/columnist—lovingly referred to as “Attila the Hogan.” He had bought the paper a few months ago, and the clash between his big-city polish and their small-town easy-go still roused some confrontations from time to time. Marshall wanted a quality paper, one that ran efficiently and smoothly and made its deadlines, with a place for everything and everything in its place. But the transition from the *New York Times* to the *Ashton Clarion* was like jumping off a speeding train into a wall of half-set jello. Things just didn't click as fast in this little office, and the high-powered efficiency Marshall was used to had to give way to such *Ashton Clarion* quirks as saving all the coffee grounds for the secretary's compost pile, and someone finally turning in a long-awaited human interest story, but with parakeet droppings on it.

On Monday morning the traffic patterns were hectic, with no time for any weekend hangovers. The Tuesday edition was being brought forth in a rush, and the entire staff was feeling the labor pains, dashing back and forth between their desks in front and the paste-up room in the back, squeezing past each other in the narrow passage, carrying rough copy for articles and ads to be typeset, finished typeset galleys, and assorted shapes and sizes of half-tones of photographs that would highlight the news pages.

In the back, amid bright lights, cluttered worktables, and rapidly moving bodies, Marshall and Tom the paste-up man bent over a large, benchlike easel, assembling Tuesday's *Clarion* out of bits and pieces that seemed to be scattered everywhere. This goes here, this can't—so we have to shove it somewhere else, this is too big, what will we use to fill this? Marshall was getting miffed. Every Monday and Thursday he got miffed.

"Edie!" he hollered, and his secretary answered, "Coming," and he told her for the umpteenth time, "The galleys go in the trays over the table, not on the table, not on the floor, not on the—"

"I didn't put any galleys on the floor!" Edie protested as she hurried into the paste-up room with more galleys in her hand. She was a tough little woman of forty with just the right personality to stand up to Marshall's brusqueness. She still knew where to find things around the office better than anyone, especially her new boss. "I've got them right in your cute little trays where you want them."

"So how'd these get here on the floor?"

"Wind, Marshall, and don't make me tell you where *that* came from!"

"All right, Marshall," said Tom, "that takes care of pages three, four, six, seven . . . what about one and two? What are we going to do with all these empty slots?"

"We are going to put in Bernie's coverage of the Festival, with clever writing, dramatic human-interest photos, the whole bit, as soon as she gets her rear in here and gives them to us! Edie!"

"Yo!"

"Bernie's an hour late, for crying out loud! Call her again, will you?"

"Just did. No answer."

"Nuts."

George, the small, retired typesetter who still worked for the fun of it, swiveled his chair away from the typesetting machine and offered, "How about the Ladies Auxiliary Barbecue? I'm just finishing that up, and the photo of Mrs. Marmaselle is spicy enough for a lawsuit."

"Yeah," Marshall groaned, "right on page one. That's all I need, a good impression."

"So what now?" Edie asked.

"Anybody make it to the Festival?"

"Went fishing," said George. "That Festival's too wild for me."

"My wife wouldn't let me," said Tom.

"I caught some of it," said Edie.

"Start writing," said Marshall. "The biggest townbuster of the year, and we've got to have something on it."

The phone rang.

"Saved by the bell?" Edie chirped as she picked up the back-room

extension. "Good morning, the *Clarion*." Suddenly she brightened. "Hey, Bernice! Where are you?"

"Where is she?" Marshall demanded at the same time.

Eddie listened and her face filled with horror. "Yes . . . well, calm down now . . . sure . . . well don't worry, we'll get you out."

Marshall spouted, "Well, where the heck is she?"

Eddie gave him a scolding look and answered, "In jail!"

2

Marshall hurried into the basement of the Ashton Police Station and immediately wished he could disconnect his nose and ears. Beyond the heavily barred gate to the cell block, the crammed jail cells didn't smell or sound much different from the carnival the night before. On his way here he had noticed how quiet the streets were this morning. No wonder—all the noise had moved inside to these half-dozen peeling-painted cells set in cold, echoing concrete. Here were all the dopers, vandals, rowdies, drunks, and no-goods the police could scrape off the face of the town, collected in what amounted to an overcrowded zoo. Some were making a party of it, playing poker for cigarettes with finger-smearred cards and trying to outdo each other's tales of illicit exploits. Toward the end of the cells a gang of young bucks made obscene comments to a cageful of prostitutes with no better place to be locked up. Others just slumped in corners in a drunken stew or a depressed slump or both. The remainder glared at him from behind the bars, made snide remarks, begged for peanuts. He was glad he had left Kate upstairs.

Jimmy Dunlop, the new deputy, was stationed loyally at the guard desk, filling out forms and drinking strong coffee.

"Hey, Mr. Hogan," he said, "you got right down here."

"I couldn't wait . . . and I *won't* wait!" he snapped. He wasn't feeling well. This had been his first Festival, and that was bad enough, but he never expected, never dreamed of such a prolonging of the agony. He towered over the desk, his big frame shifting forward to accentuate his impatience. "Well?" he demanded.

"Hmmm?"

"I'm here to get my reporter out of the can."

"Sure, I know that. Have you got a release?"

"Listen. I just paid off those yo-yos upstairs. They were supposed to call you down here."

"Well . . . I haven't heard a thing, and I have to have authorization."

"Jimmy—"