

The Gatekeeper

Prologue

Hindsight is a frightful affair. As I speak of the things I now know—the things I witnessed—even my words have a ring of irony. The death of innocence, the chaos, the pain, and yes—even knowing now the end of the matter, I still ask myself if I had it to do over again, would I pursue? Would I still desire to know her secrets?

This is her story—a tale of unrestrained lust and obsession, deceit and exploitation, and the havoc she wreaked in the careers and lives of men—foolish enough to venture too close to her web. It is a tale so bizarre I honestly don't know where to begin, and yet I must—I have to—that you may believe.

The truths I had embraced since I was a boy; the faith I was convinced I had; and even the things my eyes actually saw—all were fiercely tested when I found myself standing face to face with an evil so unimaginable that even now I shudder. Nothing—nothing but the grace of God kept me from becoming just another victim of this predator from hell—

—wrapped in the skin of one of the most beautifully seductive and alluring women I'd ever seen—

—when it came for me.

Excerpt from The Gatekeeper

Chapter 1 Steadman's Lasting Impression

“My son, keep my words, and lay up my commandments with thee... For at the window of my house I looked through my casement, and beheld among the simple ones, I discerned among the youths, a young man void of understanding, passing through the street near her corner; and he went the way to her house in the twilight, in the evening, in the black and dark night... With her much fair speech she caused him to yield, with the flattering of her lips she forced him. He goeth after her straightway... For she hath cast down many... yea, many strong men have been slain by her. Her house is the way to hell, going down to the chambers of death.”

Proverbs 7

Desiree's body twisted and turned beneath the sheets in constant motion as she struggled desperately to free herself from the disturbing images trapped deep within her subconscious mind.

“Mommy....Mommy, help me....please,” the little girl within her pleaded in a voice barely perceptible above a whisper. Unbidden tears traced a smooth course down Desiree's cheeks and quietly stained the soft satin pillow case beneath her head, leaving the only visual evidence of buried pain.

With legs drawn tightly to her chest in the once safe fetal position of her mother's womb, the little girl sought to make herself as small as she could in her bedroom closet, hoping against hope her stepfather would think she was gone. If only she could just disappear—if only.

Excerpt from The Gatekeeper

“Sweetheart, you don’t have to be afraid. God loves you so much.” It was the warm, reassuring voice of her deceased mother.

The girl turned, searching for the face of her mother. “Mommy—Mommy, is that you? Mommy, help me...please...please!”

Suddenly the door to her safe place swung open.

“There you are, Danielle! Come to papa,” he coaxed, his cruel voice sliding over her like filthy slime. Dropping to his knees, his hateful hands quickly reached for her.

“Mommy—Mommy, help me! Please! Please, Mommy, help me!” Danielle cried out with all her might.

“Shut up, ya little heifer,” her stepfather screamed—his voice menacing as the smell of the alcohol on his breath permeated her safe place. “Ya papa’s just gonna show ya some love, that’s all,” he said with a sinister laugh, grabbing her ankles and yanking her forward.

“No! No!” Danielle screamed and kicked with all her strength as he pulled her toward him.

“That’s it...that’s it,” he laughed. “Come on...come to papa—”

Bolting upright, Desiree’s piercing scream breached the thick curtain of darkness like a Banshee in the night. Her hair and gown were drenched with perspiration, and fear clung to her trembling body like a filmy sheath. She inhaled deeply, gasping, struggling for air again and again as one snatched from the murky depths of the sea—until finally she managed to catch her breath. Angrily she shoved her sweat-soaked hair away from her face, looked upward and screamed her pain loud and long until her throat finally surrendered.

Excerpt from The Gatekeeper

* * *

“Preacher D—Preacher D, throw me the ball! Throw me the ball!” Jeff hollered with hands out, calling for the pass.

Joshua Dawson dribbled the well-worn basketball behind his back, and even with Lucas all over him and swatting aggressively at the ball, still performed a sweet cross over. Lucas, a high school senior, was one of the area’s best ball players, and he knew it, so he was determined to defend his reputation in this two-on-two game against Jeff and especially, Joshua, the twenty-six year old director of the local youth center, warmly known by all the kids as Preacher D.

Joshua was a good looking young man with dark hair and dark, sexy hooded eyes. Having been a **basketball** player most of his life, he knew how to maneuver his sleek, muscular body around the court. As a high school athlete several years earlier, Joshua had been a starting guard for Piedmont High all four years. By the time he was a high school senior, there was no doubt in anyone’s mind this gifted player with the winsome personality would continue his remarkable career playing college ball, that is, until he turned down three coveted NCAA Division II basketball scholarship offers from Central Missouri, North Dakota, and Philadelphia University and enrolled in seminary school. His father pastored the largest Baptist church in Bakefield, a relatively large town in East Tennessee with a population of approximately 130,000 people, so people always suspected the compassionate, young Joshua would one day follow in his father’s footsteps. He did—just a lot sooner than everyone expected.

“You know that ball’s mine, Preacher D!” Lucas taunted, rushing forward and intentionally shoving the young preacher with his body as he tried desperately to steal

Excerpt from The Gatekeeper

the ball.

“If it’s yours, Lucas, take it,” Joshua challenged as he dribbled the ball between his legs to bait Lucas and give him a taste of his own medicine. “You do want this ball, don’t you?” Joshua’s tone signaled the old “come and get it” dare as his eyes twinkled with mischief.

“Yeah—yeah, I want it, and I’m gonna get it too,” Lucas threatened, his eyes glued to the bouncing ball.

Suddenly Joshua charged straight at him and just before their bodies collided, Joshua made a reverse pivot and spun his tall frame around with lightning speed, leaving a surprised Lucas behind. However, instead of driving in to make the open basket, Joshua quickly passed the ball to Jeff.

“Yeahhh,” Jeff screamed, successfully catching the pass and grasping it firmly out of the reach of Tito’s extended hands. Tito quickly glanced over at Lucas, his teammate, while still maintaining a visual on Jeff. “Lucas...man, why you let Preacher D play ya like a fool?”

“Who you callin’ a fool, fool?” Lucas said, rushing over and playfully tagging Tito on the shoulder. “Switch off on Preacher D,” Lucas barked, quickly getting down on defense with his hands up in Jeff’s face. “Come on...come on, Mr. Mouth, let’s see what ya got. Yeah! Let’s see what ya got.”

“Come on, Jeff, come on, let’s see what ya got,” Lucas challenged, swatting at the ball.

Accepting the challenge, Jeff took off with the ball, dribbling toward the basket; however, a much faster Lucas quickly cut him off. Jeff made a last second attempt at

Excerpt from The Gatekeeper

crossing the ball over to change directions, but as he did, Lucas, finally rewarded for his efforts, reached in and stole the ball. He faked as though making a pass to Tito, but instead drove down court for an easy bucket.

“Game!” Lucas screamed as soon as his feet hit the floor after dunking the ball. Enjoying the moment he quickly gave another shout of triumph. “Game!” His scream this time was much louder as he relished the moment.

Tito rushed down court and the two celebrated their just barely earned victory, performing a jaunty “I’m cool” strut back up the court to face Joshua and Jeff.

“Now who’s the best?” Lucas shouted, poking his finger in the air as Tito laughed aloud, reveling over their victory.

“Man, you’re trippin,’ ya’ll only won by one bucket!” Jeff said, quickly firing back.

“One bucket...ten buckets, what’s the difference, a win’s a win!” Lucas laughed.

“And...a lose is a lose!” Tito said, intentionally placing emphasis on the word “lose.” Both Lucas and Tito burst into laughter.

Realizing their bantering might get out of hand, Joshua quickly turned to his teammate. “Jeff, he’s right, they won fair and square.” Then turning to Lucas, Joshua continued, “I got no complaints, my man, you kicked our tails,” Joshua said, smiling and extending his hand toward Lucas.

Lucas reached out and shook Joshua’s hand, apparently placated by Preacher D’s willingness to acknowledge the win.

“Preacher D, I gotta give you ya props, man. You almost made me break my ankles out there with that mean crossover of yours. I was peepin’ you, man. You could’ve easily gone in for the shot, but you didn’t. You kept the game alive just so Jeff

Excerpt from The Gatekeeper

here,” Lucas said, pointing toward Jeff, “...could get the last shot off for ya’ll’s team.”

Unable to resist another jibe, Lucas continued, “Problem is, my man Jeff here ain’t got no game!” Both Lucas and Tito burst into laughter again.

“Who you sayin’ ain’t got no game? I got game, fool,” Jeff quickly retorted, taking a step forward. “You the one ain’t got no game! Like you said, Preacher D schooled your behind!”

“Yeah, well, who’s the fool now, punk?” Lucas’ body language changed as the two young men measured off on one another.

In the midst of this testosterone exchange, Margaret, Joshua’s administrative assistant, made an appearance in the gym, stopping just a few feet away from the entrance. Joshua spotted Margaret and knew she had no interest in basketball so her presence meant only one thing—she had a message for him. He quickly turned his attention back to Lucas and Jeff.

“Guys...guys...guys!” Joshua said, waving his arms and stepping between the two young men. He decided this would be a good time to remind them about the rules. As Margaret waited patiently for Joshua to finish talking with the boys, she wished she had a dollar for every time she watched him mediate between hot-tempered young men. She knew Joshua would join her once he was certain everything was under control out on the court.

“What’d I say?”

No one answered as Joshua deliberately looked into the faces of each player.

“What’d I say?” Still, Joshua’s question was met with a stubborn silence. Joshua

Excerpt from The Gatekeeper

turned to Lucas, who possessed the most influence among his peers. “What’d I say, Lucas?”

Lucas smiled in spite of himself; he really liked and respected the preacher.

With a sheepish grin and his arms splayed innocently, Lucas answered. “You said it’s okay for us to compete, play hard to win, and understand at times it can get physical, but at no time are we to show unsportsmanlike conduct on the court, here at the center.”

“Thanks, Lucas,” Joshua nodded before turning to Jeff.

“What else did I say, Jeff?”

“You said we gotta respect one another if we wanna play here.”

“That’s right...that’s right,” Joshua agreed, looking around at each of the players.

“Tell me, is that what you guys were doing—respecting one another? Huh?”

“No sir,” Lucas shrugged.

“No sir,” Jeff mumbled.

“Guys, I appreciate your honesty.”

Smiling, Joshua turned to Lucas. “Man, you really got game!” Lucas smiled, obviously appreciating the props. “A guy’s gotta respect your skills when he’s playing against you,” Joshua pressed his point, “...but I hope you want ‘em to respect you just as much off the court as on the court. Not just because of the way you play, but because of the way you carry yourself.”

Joshua turned to Jeff, and Jeff, anticipating he was next on Joshua’s list of mini-lectures, threw up his hands and quickly conceded. “I know what ya gonna say!”

“Good, let’s hear it so I won’t have to say it,” Joshua insisted, folding his arms.

Excerpt from The Gatekeeper

“You was gonna tell me, ‘*Jeff, you’re an honor student....always have been. You’ve almost got a four-point GPA. Tell me, Jeff...*’” the young man said, mimicking his mentor as he poked his chastising finger at an invisible image of himself as Preacher D would do, “*...when you’re not sitting in a classroom, do you still think with your brains, or your fist? Oh, and by the way, Jeff, you’re too skinny to be fighting, so if I was you, I’d stick with the thing the good Lord made you good at,*” Jeff concluded with a slippery smile playing on his face.

All the guys burst into laughter at Jeff’s antics, and Joshua couldn’t help but laugh as well as the small moment of tension drained away.

“Lighten up, Preacher D, Jeff and I were foolin’ around just to get a rise out of you,” Lucas slapped Jeff on the shoulder and winked.

Joshua, still laughing, realized he’d been had. As he shook his head and walked off the court, he noticed Margaret giggling at the boys’ antics.

“Et tu, Brute?” Joshua said as he joined her near the gym’s entrance. “It’s bad enough they’re all laughing at me, but you...you’re supposed to have my back?”

“I’m sorry, Joshua,” Margaret said, refusing to suppress her amusement as she wagged her finger at him. “But you gotta admit, they had you going out there.”

“Yeah—yeah—yeah, you’re right, they did.”

“I’m so proud of you,” Margaret said, waxing serious. “You’re just like your father,” she continued with a warm smile.

“Yeah, well, I don’t know about all that. He’s not as easy to get over on as I am. Dad seems to always know what to say ...and when to say it. I wish I did have his wisdom,” he said, obviously uncomfortable being compared to his father, yet pleased by

Excerpt from The Gatekeeper

the compliment.

“Dear, your father’s a pastor. He’s supposed to possess those qualities.”

“You’re right,” he sighed.

“And you’re just like him,” she said, reassuring him of her sincerity. “Just look out there at those boys shooting hoops, at the other end of the court. They are— ”

“Margaret—Margaret...”

“Yes?”

“It’s shooting hoops,” he smiled, “...hoops, not loops.”

“That’s what I said.”

“Oh!” Joshua smiled, raising a submissive eyebrow. “Sorry for the interruption.”

“Those young men down there,” she continued, pointing in their direction, “...respect you and look up to you. You play with ‘em—sure, but you also take the time to listen to ‘em—talk to ‘em. And because of that, they listen to you. You give ‘em respect, and in return you get theirs. There’s something else you do. You always try to find the strength in each of ‘em, and when you do, you challenge ‘em to do something positive with it.”

Joshua smiled. Margaret had spent the last thirty-five of her sixty years working at the center. She had been there long before he came aboard, and he couldn’t imagine running the center without her valued assistance. Everything he knew about the center, he credited to Margaret’s knowledge and unselfish attitude because she was always willing to teach and share information with him. Her accolades meant a lot.

“Thanks, Margaret. I really hope I am making a difference.”

“Well, you are,” Margaret smiled, “...just like your daddy.”

Excerpt from The Gatekeeper

Joshua blushed in spite of himself.

“Oh...oh, I almost forgot why I came out here!” Margaret remembered, putting her hand to her mouth. “Don’t forget Pinkston’s office is supposed to call you this morning in about forty-five minutes.”

“Trust me, I haven’t forgotten.”

“Well...”

“What?”

“You remember the gentleman you ran into yesterday? You told him you’d meet with him this morning.”

“Wow, I’d forgotten all about that! Any way to reschedule him?”

“How? I don’t know how to reach him. You only gave me his last name. What’d you want me to do if Pinkston’s office calls, and you’re meeting with this Mr....Mr.—”

“Steadman. He said his name was Carl Steadman. Just interrupt us if he’s still in my office. Whatever you do, don’t let Pinkston’s office hang up before I speak with ‘em. You know how important that call is for us.”

“I do. You’re sure you want me to interrupt you if Pinkston’s office calls, even if you’re still meeting with Mr. Steadman?”

“Definitely,” Joshua said, nodding his head as he turned and headed for his office.

“Will do,” Margaret agreed, following in quick short steps behind him.

* * *

Excerpt from The Gatekeeper

"I swear, she's a creature of hell. Because of her, I've lost everything! Do you hear me—everything—my wife, my children, my job, my investments, my savings—everything! Everything's gone. I don't even know who I am anymore!" Distraught, Carl Steadman leaned forward, buried his face in his hands and wept aloud.

"Mr. Steadman—Mr. Steadman, calm down—please, everything's gonna be okay. Maybe—maybe all this can be worked out somehow, just try to stay calm," Joshua said, quickly reaching for a pitcher of water on his desk and filling a glass. He walked around to the front of his desk and waited for the man to compose himself. After a few seconds, Steadman grew quiet, but still had his face buried in his hands. Hoping to get the man's attention, Joshua cleared his throat.

"Sorry," Steadman said, looking up and apologizing as he wiped his eyes. "I didn't realize you were standing there."

"It's okay, really. Take a couple of deep breaths and drink some of this water," Joshua said, offering gently.

The man gratefully accepted the glass. "Thanks."

"No problem," the young preacher said as he walked back around his desk, sat down, and paused momentarily, studying the troubled man before speaking again. Steadman looked to be in his mid forties. His hair was brown, streaked with gray, and his hairline was receding. He stood slightly less than six feet, and his looks were average. His face was worn and haunted. His eyes shifted back and forth nervously as though mentally searching for answers—considering options. Whatever was troubling Steadman, it had him shaken to the core.

"Mr. Steadman, do you think you're ready to continue?"

Excerpt from The Gatekeeper

“Yes...yes, I think so,” the man replied softly.

“Okay. Yesterday you told me you desperately needed my help. If I’m gonna be of any help to you, I’m gonna need you to help me first understand what has happened. If you’ll do that, I promise you I’ll do everything reasonably possible to help. How’s that?”

“Thank you,” the man nodded gratefully before gulping down the last of the water and returning the glass to Joshua’s desk.

“Would you like some more water?”

“No—but thanks.”

“Okay then, the beginning.”

“Ah, yes, the beginning. Where do I start?” the man said, rubbing his head anxiously as though trying to decide. “Trust me, preacher, you’ll think I’m crazy, but I swear to you what I’m about to tell you is the truth.”

“Well, Mr. Steadman, you know what they say—sometimes truth is stranger than fiction.”

“I’ve changed my mind; can I have some more water please?” Steadman said, picking up the empty glass.

“Sure ...sure,” Joshua agreed as he reached forward, taking the glass from the man’s hand and pouring water into it. Handing the filled glass back to his nervous visitor, the young preacher leaned forward, rested his elbows on the desk and gave Steadman an inquiring look.

“Okay, Mr. Steadman, you were saying.”

The man gulped his water, and then slowly set the glass down. Suddenly, he

Excerpt from The Gatekeeper

bolted up from his chair. Joshua reacted quickly, shoving his seat back and standing, not knowing what to expect.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry, preacher. Coming here was probably a big mistake. You can’t help me. No one can,” he said, shaking his head as he paced back and forth in front of Joshua’s desk, “It’s too late. It’s too—”

“Mr. Steadman—Mr. Steadman, please...please, listen to me, sir,” the young preacher coaxed softly, his right hand extended and beckoning. It was obvious the man was at the very limits of his emotions, so spooking him was the last thing Joshua wanted to do.

“Mr. Steadman, I didn’t ask to meet with you. Sir, you asked to meet with me, and you said you needed my help. I’m more than willing to do what I can, but you’re right, I can’t help you—no one can, sir, if you won’t say what’s troubling you. Please... please, Mr. Steadman, sit down,” Joshua said calmly, gesturing toward the chair.

“Please, sir, let me help you.” Slowly, Steadman slumped back into his chair and immediately buried his face in his hands. “I can’t imagine the turmoil you’re dealing with inside, sir, so...just please...talk to me.”

“Yeah, but she does,” Steadman said barely above a whisper, as he sat up in his seat with tear-filled eyes glued to the floor. “She knows what’s inside all of us.”

“You said she knows what’s inside all of us. Mr. Steadman, who is this ‘she’?”

“Honestly,” the man said, quietly chuckling to himself, “...I don’t know,” his eyes still glued to the floor. “I thought I did, but honestly I don’t know.”

“Beg your pardon?” Joshua asked again, uncertain he had heard the man correctly.

Excerpt from The Gatekeeper

“I don’t know who she is ...or what she is,” Steadman said looking up at the young preacher. “I only know what I’ve seen—what’s she’s told me, but I don’t know it to be true. What I do know is my eyes don’t lie, and I tell you this woman’s a creature from the very pit of hell, who’ll suck the very life out of you until there’s nothing left—no family, no friends, no job, no self-respect, no future.”

Steadman paused momentarily and quietly chuckled to himself again. “Funny thing is, preacher, you see it happening to you ...you actually see it coming, and you don’t even care.”

“Does ...this woman have a name?”

“She goes by the name of Desiree,” the man answered quietly, a sad longing in his voice. “I believe it’s Latin or French or something. It means—”

“Desired...yes, I know.”

“Correct,” the man said softly. “Desire—she’s the personification of it.”

“I see,” Joshua said, nodding.

The man’s expression quickly changed. “No, preacher, you don’t see! You can’t possibly see or understand.”

“Fair enough, Mr. Steadman. So why don’t you help me to see ...help me understand,” Joshua urged in a low, compassionate, and encouraging voice. “What does this Desiree do for a living?”

Steadman chuckled. “She damns men’s souls.”

“Really! Sir, I think that’s a personal choice each of us has to make. Don’t you?”

“I used to. But at some point in time I believe we can unwittingly give up our right

Excerpt from The Gatekeeper

to make that choice. It's no longer ours to make but the one to whom we've given our right."

"I don't believe that, Mr. Steadman."

"From where you sit, I understand why you don't. Neither did I ...until I met Desiree. For her... men'll give anything—anything at all to please her. Cars, jewelry, real estate, their fortune...all hers ...and she doesn't even have to ask. They'll gladly give it—forsake their marriages, walk away from their children, abandon any vestige of dignity and respect they once had—all for her."

"Sounds like men worship this woman. At the least, they're dangerously obsessed with her."

"Precisely, preacher, now you're getting the picture. She's the goddess of lust."

"So, tell me, sir, if this is all true—if she's destroying your life, your family, your future, why have you continued to see this woman?"

"Because...because I can't help myself! No man who gets involved with her can. It's like she takes any will to resist totally away. I wake up thinking about her. I go to bed thinking about her. Nothing...nothing else in my life matters anymore... she consumes my thoughts...my days," the man explained, dropping his head in shame.

"Mr. Steadman," the young preacher said softly, noticing the wedding band on the man's finger. "Sir, are you still married?"

The man looked up, "Yes...uh, no. Uh, well ...my wife took the kids and left me a week after I met Desiree. I'm...really ashamed of what I put her through—put my family through. But...but I couldn't help myself—even when I knew I was losing control, I was totally helpless, unable to resist her. I've lost everything—everything I tell you!"

Excerpt from The Gatekeeper

A quick knock followed by the sudden opening of the door drew the men's attention as Margaret stuck her head inside the office.

"Please pardon me for interrupting, but Joshua," she said, "...you have a very important call on line one."

The young preacher looked at Mr. Steadman and then at Margaret.

"Margaret, just take a message, please. Whoever it is, tell 'em I'll have to call 'em back."

Margaret smiled understandingly but added, "Joshua, it's Mr. Pinkston's office, calling about that project, and you've been trying to reach him for days."

"I understand, Margaret," he said, looking at her pointedly, attempting with facial expressions to let her know now was no time to interrupt. "Just tell 'em I'll call back when this meeting is over, or if Mr. Pinkston's not in his office, please have them to leave a number where he can be reached."

"Well ...okay," Margaret said, looking confused before pulling the door shut, and then suddenly remembering something at the last moment, she stopped and stuck her head inside the office again.

"Almost forgot. I'm getting ready to run out and grab some lunch. Joshua, can I bring you or—"

"Mr. Steadman, Carl Steadman," Joshua said, reminding her.

"Yes, can I bring either of you anything back?"

"No thank you, ma'am," Steadman said quietly. "Kind of you to ask though."

"You're quite welcome, sir," Margaret smiled. She glanced at the young preacher. "Well, Joshua, what about you?"

Excerpt from The Gatekeeper

“Nothing for me, Margaret. Thanks, I’ll grab something later.”

“Well, okay then, I’m off to lunch, and I’ll be back around—”

“Margaret!” the young preacher interrupted.

“Yes?”

“Remember, Mr. Pinkston’s office is still on the line,” he said, forcing a smile.

“Oops, I forgot! Sorry, I’ll take care of it right away, and I’ll see you in a little bit,” she said, waving and shutting the door.

The man looked expectantly toward the door as if waiting for Margaret to reappear and then turned back to the young preacher.

“Where were we?”

“Your wife left you and took the kids, and you were saying how sorry you are about hurting them,” Joshua said, reminding him.

“Yes. Yes, of course,” the man spoke softly, again lowering his head as he struggled to explain to a perfect stranger how he destroyed his family for an extramarital affair.

“Mr. Steadman, don’t give up hope—reconciliation may still be a possibility. Sir, if you could just give me some information about your wife and kids—names, where they are and how to reach her—we can get in touch with your wife and, if she’s agreeable, perhaps get the two of you in counseling.”

The man chuckled aloud in response to Joshua’s suggestion, his eyes focused on some unseen spot on the floor.

“Mr. Steadman,” the young preacher said, trying to get the man’s attention, “...would you be interested in giving counseling a try if I can convince your wife to

Excerpt from The Gatekeeper

participate?”

Steadman looked up, his inner pain and outward shame nakedly revealed in his face—his eyes brimming with tears. “Listen, preacher, I know you mean well. You’re a good person, I’m not. It’s too late for me. Too late for many of us who’ve been foolish enough to get caught in Desiree’s web.”

“Sir, it’s never too late—never. If you love your wife and kids, there’s still hope.”

“Preacher, I love my wife...and my children. But if you were able to somehow give me back everything I’ve lost – my wife, my children, all my money, the jewelry, the job, even the self-respect, ...I’d gladly give all that and more, all over again, just to be with Desiree.”

Joshua couldn’t believe his ears. He found himself momentarily speechless. How could anyone who wasn’t hopelessly insane, he wondered, allow himself to become a mindless slave to a woman like this? Appealing to Steadman’s remorse over hurting his family was obviously not working, so Joshua tried another approach. “Tell me, Mr. Steadman, why’d you choose to get involved with this woman in the first place?”

“That’s not how it works, preacher. I didn’t choose her, she chose me,” he said, pointing his finger at his chest. “She knows exactly who to choose. I told you, she knows what’s inside us, and every man she chooses winds up like me. She knows it when she selects us as her next victim. By the time we realize what’s goin’ on, it’s too late; we’ve passed the point of caring.”

“So, why do you think you and these other men were chosen?”

Steadman smiled to his shame. “Because we set ourselves up to be chosen.”

Excerpt from The Gatekeeper

“How do you mean?”

“According to Desiree, each of the men she chooses has at least two things in common. We all evidently have this proclivity, or ...shall we say, this tendency to indulge our sexual appetites. We don't deprive ourselves of our fantasies. You know—for those of us who are married, a little affair and rendezvous from time to time—adds a little spice to life. After all—we're men—right? We live for the thrill of the chase...and the catch! And then we move on for the next thrill. Besides, you know what they say, what the wife doesn't know, won't hurt her.”

The man paused momentarily, his eyes nervously shifting as though reflecting back.

“Mr. Steadman, you said two things.”

“Yes. The second one is ...like all the others, I have a fat bank account...or at least I did.”

The young preacher leaned forward, resting his arms on his desk. “Hmm, I see. Well, you said earlier I'd think you were crazy. I don't. I think you're a man who needs prayer ...and help—that is, if you're willing to accept it.”

“It's too late for that! I'm too far gone.”

“It's never too late,” Joshua said, disagreeing in a firm voice. “You can be freed from your bondage to this woman.”

The man smirked. “Are you not listening? I don't want freedom, preacher. I want more time with Desiree. Problem is—she doesn't want more time with me. Still think I'm not crazy?”

“Afraid not. Like I said, you need a lot of help...and prayer.” Joshua reiterated,

Excerpt from The Gatekeeper

unable to help but noticing the emptiness in Steadman's eyes.

"You can save your help," the man answered bitterly, "...and your prayers for yourself, preacher! Trust me, you're gonna need 'em."

"What do you mean?"

"There's only one reason I'm here. I want you to stop this predator before others like me fall victim to her."

"Sir, I hardly think I, or anyone else for that matter, can go after this woman just because she's promiscuous."

A stiff sneer appeared and just as quickly disappeared from Steadman's face. He realized the preacher still did not understand. "Preacher, listen to me," Steadman said, standing up and leaning over the desk, his eyes dark and hard, his presence and emotions invading Joshua's personal space. "I really don't know if I can get you to understand what you're dealin' with here."

"Try me," Joshua said, urging the man, although his heart flinched at Steadman's cruel threatening look. It was painfully obvious to Joshua he was staring into the eyes of a man who had absolutely nothing left to lose.

"I'm not talkin' about some promiscuous woman," the man shouted. "I'm talkin' about a living, breathing, creature of the damned," he said, dropping back into his chair heavily as though all his strength had drained from his body with each word he spoke.

"Sure, at one time she may have been a woman, but this messenger, this— this...demon, or whatever this thing is inside her has turned her into something far different than anything I've ever seen, and probably far different than anything you've ever dealt with before. You talk about prayer and help, preacher; you'll need all the

Excerpt from The Gatekeeper

22

prayer and help you can muster up for yourself.”