

THE END

T H E B O O K

Part One

"...and then the end will come."

Matthew 24:14

J.L.ROBB

www.theendthebook.com

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THE BOOK

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Energy Concepts Productions books may be ordered through booksellers or by contacting:

Energy Concepts Productions
A Division of Energy Concepts
3328 E. Whippoorwill Drive
Duluth, Georgia 30096
1-770-476-0887

Web page: <http://www.energyconcepts.biz/style3/indexec.html>

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ISBN: 978-1-63068-033-6 (sc)

ISBN: 978-1-63068-031-2 (hc)

ISBN: 978-1-63068-032-9 (e)

Printed in the United States of America

Energy Concepts Productions rev. date: 10/01/2013



List of Main Characters

Alphabetical by First Name

Abe the Bartender: Key character. General Manager and bartender at The Divide Disco & Café.

Aboud Rehza: a.k.a Vinny, a.k.a. Ricky, a.k.a. Jean Philippe. In charge of U.S. Operations for Jihad's Warriors and various other Islamic Jihadist groups. Twin brother of Mohammed Rehza.

Aludra Khalid: Muhammed's sister. Lives with Muhammed, leader of terrorist Jihad's Warriors, in the Korengal Valley, Afghanistan-Pakistan border.

Amber Michelle: Investigative reporter with al-Jazeera USA.

Betty Davis: Also known as Betty Davis Eyes. Bartender at American Legion Post 251 in Duluth, GA.

Bill "Wild Willy" Briggs: Master of Nanotechnology, Georgia Tech Nanotechnology Research Center, Atlanta. Ex-U.S. Navy, CIA and Homeland Security. Works closely with Israel's Mossad. His cover is high dollar repo man.

Chad "Chadbo" Myers: Assistant Director, Near Earth Object and Heliospheric Laboratory, Goddard Space Flight Center, Greenbelt, MD.

Chuck Hutz: a.k.a. Hutz the Putz, a.k.a. UpChuck. After accident, speaks fluent Hebrew and witnesses to others about God while in a trance.

CJ: Bartender at American Legion Post 251 in Duluth, GA. Helped capture terrorist wannabe that attacked the Post.

Condi Zimmerman: Independent news anchor/reporter and Atlanta contract correspondent with FOX News Network and OLNN.

Dan Brunson: Nuclear physicist and public speaker.

Dennis Duncan: Geophysics Professor and public speaker.

Dmitry Ustinov: Chechnyan-Russian arms dealer. Brokered the sale of 5 high-yield nuclear weapons and delivery systems from Pakistan to Iran. Arranged high jacking of Nerpa 155 nuclear submarine.

Dr. Joseph Rosenberg, PhD: Public Speaker and Professor of Apocalyptic Religions, Candler School of Theology, Emory University.

Edgar Allen Poe: Homeless veteran who discovers terrorist plot.

Erica P. Robbins: Freelance reporter and U.S. War Correspondent.

Gray and Andi Dorey: Close friends of Jeff and Melissa Ross. Philanthropists and owners of Dine for Dollars.

Jack Russell: United States Senator from Cumming, Georgia and ranking member on the Military Finance Committee. Married to Samarra Russell.

Jeffrey “Jeff” Ross: Main character. Ex-husband of Melissa Ross. Father of three daughters, Jami and Jenni (twins) and Audry. U.S. Navy SEAL until discharged with injury after the Vietnam conflict.

Jill Haskins: Wife of Leon “Bubba” Haskins and Samarra Russell’s closest friend.

Judi Ellis: Director of Paleobiology, Emory Primate Research Center, Atlanta.

Judy Blanton: Lives in Lukeville, Arizona. Previous owner of J. Blanton concrete Company.

Kara Mulherin: Missionary to Haiti and future girlfriend of Scott Johnson.

Kari K. Vermi: News anchor with OLNN, Omega Letter Network News. Columnist with www.omegaletter.com

Kipper T and Missy T: Angels who appear in Jeff’s dreams.

Kyoto Kushito: Founder and Director of The Foundation, a shadowy, suspected worldwide terror think tank, based in the Hiroshima, Japan area. The Foundation funded the hijacking of the Nerpa 155 nuclear submarine.

Leon “Bubba” Haskins: Owns the largest minority contracting firm in Georgia and a tourist submarine facility at Lake Lanier Islands, Georgia. Married to Jill Haskins.

Mehdi: Chief of Security and Jihad Planner for Muhammed Khalid. Lives in Korengal Valley along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border.

Melissa Ross: Also Melissa Ross-Jeremias. Divorced from Jeff Ross, mother of twins, Jami and Jenni, and adopted daughter, Audry. Recently married Robert Jeremias, later killed in a plane crash. May have been raptured.

Mohammed Rehza: Ruthless Islamist in charge of European operations for Jihad's Warriors. Twin brother of Aboud Rehza (a.k.a. Vinny and others)

Muhammed Khalid: Islamic Jihadist and founder of the extremely secretive Jihad's Warriors. Lives in Korengal Valley with his sister, Aludra.

Naomi: Old Jewish woman who carries a cross necklace. Helps Aludra escape Korengal Valley through Tajikistan.

Pam MacLott: Owner of The Divide Disco & Café.

Richard "Rich" Badey: Investigative reporter.

Robert Jeremias: Missionary, philanthropist. Married Jeff's ex, Melissa Ross, before he was killed (or missing) in a plane crash.

Russ Ivies: Chief of Security, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Atlanta. Actor and producer. Suffered one of first Spanish Flu cases.

Samarra Russell, PhD: Director of Research of Communicable Diseases, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Atlanta. Married to Senator Jack Russell.

Scott Johnson: Assistant manager of The Divide Disco & Café.

Sheryl Lasseter: Director of the United States Public Relations Liaison. Works directly for the U.S. President.

Terry and Toni Fahey: Next door neighbors of Jeffrey Ross.

The Admiral: Justin P. McLemore. A graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy and retired four-star Admiral. Director of Near Earth Object and Heliospheric Laboratory, Goddard Space Flight Center, Maryland.

Three Wild Women: Wanda (Rhonda), BJ and Beverly from the Duluth American Legion Post 251, skilled in self-defense and sharp-shooting.

Vinny: A very bad man, his real name is Aboud Rehza, a product of wealthy Saudi parents. He and his twin brother, Mohammed, had been child prodigies and both speak several languages, fluently. A man of many aliases. Vinny resides in the United States after infiltrating across the Mexican border. Aliases include Vinny, Ricky, Jean Philippe, and others.

“And the gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.”

Matthew 24: 14

“The enemy of my enemy is my friend.”

Arab Proverb

PREFACE

Most folks believe that the world had a beginning and that it will have an end. Books have been written and movies made. Nostradamus, the Mayans and the Hopi Indians all indicated that the end would be December 21, 2012, according to their predictions.

There is another story about The End, as we know it, that predates Nostradamus and the Hopis by several thousand years. It did not mention 2012, but it did list many signs that will be present just before, signs that are happening at this very moment for those who care to see.

This book is a fictional account, like the *Left Behind* series and other apocalyptic novels, that is based on the Books of *Revelation*, *Daniel*, *Ezekiel*, *Isaiah*, *Jeremiah* and other Biblical books of prophecy.

It is interesting that many people believe the Nostradamus stories but not the Bible's, though Biblical predictions (prophecies) have been tested and determined to be true, over and over and over again.

THE END The Book Series is a thriller and a love story, about Jeffrey Ross, the main character, who is an atheist and has been most of his life. Jeff always adored his wife, Melissa, and still did. Only now Melissa was the ex-wife who he still adored. He guessed she left because he wouldn't go to church. He was pretty flawless, he knew.

This novel is written for all adult *thinkers*, believer or non-believer, a book that may answer some of the questions posed by the likes of Bill Maher and other celebrities who apparently

claim atheism as their belief system, according to the following web site, www.celebatheists.com.

One of the things the Bible states in its predictions about *The End* is that it will be like it was in the days of Noah. People were partying and scoffing at believers, drinking and being merry and trying to make a fool of God. Then it started to rain.

That is happening today. Just as predicted, many people are narcissistic, lovers of themselves, lovers of material things and believe that mankind evolved from the single-celled amoeba, *not* created supernaturally.

Then the end will come. That's what it says, all through the Bible. There will be no laughing in those days. Quite the opposite.

Though this is a fictional account of how it *could* happen, it is based on years of research, not just from the Bible and the Quran but also from archeological research and discovery and the vast field of eschatology.

Follow Jeffrey Ross on the seven-year adventure of a life time, as Atlanta burns once again, not by the hands of General William Tecumseh Sherman but by the hands of imported and home-grown terrorists with a cause: Muhammad, The Prophet and the long awaited Twelfth Imam.

As the last days of Jeff's journey slowly emerge from beyond the horizon, the world will not be a place one would want to exist. It is described as the day of God's Wrath. You won't want to be here.

Dedication

I would like to dedicate this book to God, who inspired me to finally write something; and to my oldest daughter, Erica, who worked tirelessly designing our web page and helping me to stay motivated and focused on this series. It would have been impossible for me to do this without her.

Prologue

“...abandon all hope, you who enter here.”

Dante’s *Inferno*

Jeff walked across the asphalt parking lot, trying to avoid the rough, alligatoring pavement in grave need of repair, a victim of the failing economy and a tough winter.

He walked across the damp, concrete sidewalk, toward the Starbucks entrance. Swatting mosquitoes as he went, his only intention was to grab a latté, read the paper and get on with the day’s activities as soon as possible. Noting a brief flash of red, he looked left and saw the beauty in the Versace dress, or rather what was *inside* the red dress. I love red, he thought, and ran straight into the Starbucks doorframe.

Embarrassed more than hurt and surprised at the noise it made when one walks into a doorframe, Jeff acted as though nothing happened and hoped that no one heard the loud collision. The man and the girl-with-a-ponytail by the front window looked at him with concern but said nothing.

Jeff was a regular visitor to the Dunwoody Perimeter Starbucks, and Latté Lady saw Jeff crossing the Publix grocery store parking lot and had his Grandé Latté with one raw sugar, waiting by the time Jeff reached the register.

“Thanks Jenifer. Or Miss Attentive, I should say. You are an *amazing* woman with that latté machine. Wanna get married? I have a ring in my safe that has your name on the inside of that platinum band.”

“You are *such* a flirt!” She liked it. “What size is that ring? I have very small fingers that are strong enough to support huge diamonds.”

Grabbing his latté and a newspaper, Jeff winked at Jenifer and took a seat by the window with a gorgeous view of the Publix parking lot and the heavy Atlanta traffic. Maybe he would see the girl in the red dress, he thought to himself, and hoped she hadn’t seen him run into the doorframe. He felt a small knot rising from his forehead.

Taking his seat beside the concerned-looking couple, Jeff opened the *Atlanta Journal and Constitution* to begin his fill of the daily tragedies occurring around the world. Another earthquake, this one off the coast of Charleston, small but unusual. It sure seemed to Jeff that there was a whole lot of shakin’ goin’ on around the world. A glance out the window gave no glimmer of Ms. Versace.

“Nostradamus wrote that the world would end as we know it, in 2012. The Hopi Indians, who lived in the southeast United States, or what is *now* the United States, predicted a great worldwide, cataclysmic disaster at the end of time, *also* in 2012; and December 21, 2012, is the end of the Mayan Calendar. The Mayans were no dummies and were the most advanced society of the time when it came to studying the stars.”

Jeff didn’t mean to listen in on the conversation at the next table but couldn’t help himself after what he had seen a few months earlier in the night sky.

“Yeah, I’ve seen the documentaries on Discovery Channel. Do you believe all that stuff?” the young lady with the blonde ponytail asked the man, kind of a look of wonderment on her face that the professor-looking gentleman might actually believe the 2012 predictions. Though a little portly, Jeff thought the man looked distinguished, maybe even a rabbi though no yarmulke graced the back of his balding, gray head.

“Well, don’t bet the farm on it or start selling land. *The End* has been predicted many times throughout history, forecast on a regular basis since the first century A.D., shortly after Jesus was executed. The ancient Jewish prophets started predicting an end and a Judgment Day at least fifteen hundred years earlier.”

The professor-rabbi sipped what looked like a frozen mocha, thinking about the meaning of A.D. and why it was no longer used in textbooks, or any books for that matter. He knew why though. A.D. stood for *anno domini* and meant “the year of our Lord,” and B.C. meant “before Christ.” Nope, he thought, not much chance we will see that used again in this politically corrected world of shame-and-no-blame. The day was hot and sweat dropped on the man’s blue and white striped seersucker shirt, crinkly and wrinkly by design.

Jeff watched the chameleon in search of mosquitoes, laying-in-wait on the outside windowsill for a flying delight. It would not be a weight-watchers day for the chameleon, as the air was filled with newly hatched mosquitoes, thriving in mass production since the record rains and heat.

“Jesus talked about the *End Times* or *Last Days*, as did numerous other Biblical characters. His followers questioned him about this, wondering if the end would come in their day. Jesus told them he didn’t know but that it would happen. There would be ‘signs.’”

“I didn’t know that! Are you sure?” The young, freckly woman seemed surprised that Jesus would not have known, having been taught that Jesus knew all things by her Aunt Sammie, who had raised her.

“Go back and read your Bible, or Google it; and you will see what I say, it’s true.”

“No, no. I’m not doubting you Dr. Rosenberg. I just thought that Jesus *was* God and knew everything, at least that’s what I’ve always been taught at my church.” Blonde Ponytail looked

genuinely concerned that she had offended Dr. Rosenberg. “What did he tell his followers when they asked about the end?”

The man couldn’t be a rabbi, Jeff thought to himself, having been to a few bar mitzvahs in his time and raised as a child in a South Carolina “Jewish” neighborhood. Rabbis don’t talk much about Jesus; but there sure seemed to be a lot of talk lately about the end of the world, and *God is a Woman* signs were everywhere.

“Jesus told them he didn’t know exactly when the date was, that only God knew. He did give them some signs to look for in the future, signs that would let us know that the end is near, signs that let the early Christians, who were all Jews of course, know that it would not come in their time, though they hoped for it.”

Jeff noticed the brown UPS cargo van. This was at least the fourth time it passed through the Publix parking lot, not that it was a big deal, only UPS drivers usually knew where they were going in the first circle or two. And something about the van didn’t look quite right. Trained as a Navy SEAL but discharged after an auto accident, Jeff was especially attentive to oddities.

“What kind of signs did Jesus give th...”

The explosion, loud and deafening, was preceded by an intense flash of bright, white light. As deafening as it was, the blast only broke the front windows of Starbucks. The tempered safety-glass shattered into what looked like a horizontal rain of crystalline stardust, blowing across Latté Lady and into the back wall, past the latté machine.

The drive-up window withstood the blast, but Miss Attentive, a.k.a. Latté Lady, a.k.a. Jenifer, visited the back wall with a vengeance, along with the glass shards. She lost her sight that day, as well as her olive skin that was now bright red with newly oxygenated blood.

Mr. Chameleon caught his last mosquito just seconds before the blast and joined Latté Lady against the back wall in a waltz of crimson with a slight tint of green, provided by the ex-lizard.

Jeff, Blonde Ponytail and Professor-Rabbi had suddenly become intimate in their encounter, as they all lay in a pile of debris, one on top of the other.

“We have to stop meeting like this,” Jeff told the young girl who recently was talking about the end of the world and now probably thought it had happened. She lay squarely on top of Jeff, who was lying across the legs of the good doctor Rosenberg.

Missing the humor, the shell-shocked, ponytailed girl slowly began to get onto all fours but collapsed almost immediately. Dr. Rosenberg was unhurt, other than being in shock.

Jeff helped the doctor and the ponytailed girl to their feet, urging them to get out of the building before it collapsed, dust and debris still falling.

Running through what had been the front door.. Jeff would not run into the frame this time since it was no longer there.. the three joined others in the middle of Ashford-Dunwoody Road, a road that had earlier in the day been traveled by visitors in horse-drawn carriages. The road was now a cloud of dust and debris.

“It’s started,” Dr. Rosenberg said with confident finality.

Jeff wondered what the doctor was talking about. He didn’t buy the end-of-the-world hysteria, nor did he believe in God; but he did believe that Islamic terrorists were intent on taking over the world, or at least the West, if not the world.

“What’s started?” asked Blonde Ponytail, a small droplet of red beginning to ooze from her chin where the glass shard had earlier penetrated. “What are you talking about?”

Before the good doctor could answer, the air vibrated and dust again stirred as the second explosion of the morning sprung to life with violence and vigor just a few blocks away, assaulting once again the inner ears of all those standing among the splintered Yoshino cherry trees that had once lined Ashford Dunwoody Road.



Nine thousand miles east of Atlanta, in the hills of Pakistan along the Afghanistan border, Muslims throughout the valley waited for the Great News. The valley was sparsely inhabited, but all the men were well-versed in Islamic radicalism and its philosophy of hate.

“Turn on the TV! Turn on the TV, Muhammed! Please!”

Mehdi ran into the well-hidden quarters of Muhammed and his sister’s home, built into the side of a mountain like many others and well-protected by the village elders. Like most homes in the Korengal Valley of Pakistan, just north of Peshawar, there were few, if any, luxuries, no iPods or flat-screen TVs; but there were satellite dishes everywhere, donning each shelter with a small, white saucer-shaped dome that glowed in the silver reflection of full moon light, a moon that was referred to as a Harvest Moon in the decadent United States, the home and the heart of Satan himself. The moon should not grace the Great Satan, at least in Mehdi’s mind, as it was a holy symbol in the religion of Islam.

“I don’t need to turn on the television.” Muhammed spoke, patiently, fatherly, to Mehdi. Mehdi was excitable, he knew. The smell of goats mingled and mixed with the bittersweet chocolate odor of the poppy fields nearby, the main source of finance for the militants, though they did not consider themselves militants at all. They were Allah’s army, Jihad’s Warriors.

With all the medicinal purposes of the noble and beautiful poppy plant, stoic pinkness on a three-foot stalk, these flowers would not be used for any noble purposes. As soon as the flowers turned to grayish pods, the latex-like outer skin would be cut with small incisions. The milky substance that oozed forth would dry quickly, transforming into opium, and then heroin, and then to the streets of London, Paris and New York City.

“No! No! It’s started, hurry. Turn on CNN so we can watch! We can watch Allah’s work!” Mehdi was at least as jubilant as excited, cackling like a wild hen getting ready to lose *its* head.

Muhammed’s two guests nodded in agreement with Mehdi, knowing that this was the day that would be the beginning-of-the-end for the great Satan and his puppets in Europe.

Spotting the worn and dented TV remote, a luxury they *did* have, Mehdi hit the ON button and waited. Finally, the twenty-seven inch tube-type television came to life.

“On a weather note, in the town of Nag’s Head, North Carolina, a hailstorm with grapefruit-sized hailstones, yep that’s what it says, has destroyed two piers and several homes and busine.....excuse me, we have *Breaking News*. Can this be right?”

The news anchor, always calm and meticulous in dress and appearance, looked disheveled, more than dismayed, maybe not believing his own eyes as he read the report coming across the prompter from Reuters and the Associated Press.

“Ladies and gentlemen, as much as we like to break a news story, I have been advised that we will take a commercial break while this unfolding event is verified. Please stand by, and we will be back in sixty seconds.”

As the screen turned to a commercial about the all-new Toyota Prius, guaranteed to stop when the brake is pushed, Mehdi could hardly hold himself together. Already high-strung,

his constant chatter really got on Muhammed's nerves; and today Mehdi was in rare form.

"Yes Muhammed, they surely *do* have some breaking news." They all laughed boisterously, except for Muhammed's sister who wondered why her brother and his friends only wanted to fight all the time. They were all obsessed with killing, if not Westerners then their very own brothers, just like it said they would in the first book of the Bible. Muslims are like that, she thought, at least the men. She knew by now that Islam really wasn't a "peaceful religion," with hatred spewed regularly from the clerics. The men really couldn't help it. They were brainwashed since birth to hate the Jews and Christians, and anyone else they mistrusted, which was almost everyone, including their own brothers.

Waiting anxiously, Muhammed, Medhi and the two soon-to-be-martyred visitors stood by patiently. The commercial faded to black, and the commentator reappeared above the large *Breaking News* logo that took up the bottom third of the television screen. He looked sick, Mehdi thought, a smile coming to his olive but acne-pitted face as he waited for news of the bombs. He wondered if the breaking news would be about the bombs in Europe or the ones in the U.S. It didn't really matter.

"Ladies and gentlemen," the anchor began, "We have a disturbing report, though we are still waiting on complete verification. This is what we know so far..."

Medhi was salivating like a Great Dane eagerly awaiting his tasty Beggin Treat. Medhi, however, was not salivating over fake bacon but the smell of the blood that would soon be flowing in the streets of the West.

"According to the Goddard Space Flight Center in Greenbelt, Maryland, there appears to be a large asteroid that is headed toward earth. It is not yet known if this asteroid, newly

discovered in the last 24 hours, will hit the Earth or if it will be a close encount...”

“What the hell?” Medhi interrupted the commentator. “What is this garbage?”

“Turn on FOX News, what channel?” Mehdi was clearly flustered, as were the others, knowing that at least 48 bombings should have taken place in the U.S. by now, at *least* 48, one for each contiguous state, maybe more.

“I hate FOX.” Muhammed had not liked FOX News since the 9/11 coverage made Islam look evil. He could not forget the 9/11 coverage FOX gave the Palestinians in Gaza and the commentary that followed. As the militants fired rifles into the air in celebration of the Great Collapse of the New York City skyline, FOX had been the only major network to cover the celebration in detail; and the coverage was not positive toward Islam.

Mehdi keyed the remote and picked up FOX in mid-sentence.

“.. on Peachtree Street. The first bomb, apparently inside what appears to be a UPS panel truck, blew up in front of the Georgia Pacific Headquarters building, shortly after the driver entered the side entrance. There is another report just coming in of explosions in the Dunwoody area, a North Atlanta suburb, and also at the Mall of Georgia.”

The four members of Jihad’s Warriors gave FOX a standing ovation that day, with Muhammed proclaiming his newfound admiration for FOX and its fair-and-balanced coverage. The foxy news lady continued.

“The second explosion occurred a few blocks from the first, targeting a children’s hospital. My God, who would target a children’s hospital? There have been no confirmed deaths at this time, but the toll is expected to be high. There are also reports coming in from Rome, Paris and London.”

Greta paused and stated they would be right back after the commercial break. Mehdi turned the TV off.

Had Muhammed, Medhi and the two soon-to-be-martyrs not been so impatient and had left the TV on CNN, they would have seen Wolfe's studio shake as though an earthquake had stolen into the studio to have a little Waltz with Wolfe. They would have seen Wolfe rushing to the window to watch the fireball rising from the distant streets. CNN would be at the scene in seconds.

CHAPTER ONE

“In the last times there will be scoffers who will follow their own ungodly desires.” Jude 1:18

Earlier

“I’ve been seeing that sign a lot lately,” Jeff said to no one but himself as he crossed Peachtree Street on his way to Georgia State University for his Advanced Astronomy class. Part of the women’s lib thing, he guessed. What a bunch of nuts!

The large placard read, *God is Coming and She’s Mad as Hell!*

There is no God, Jeff knew that; and if there was it sure wouldn’t be a woman. If God was a woman, nothing would ever get done, because *She* would be out buying shoes!

Except for a brief time during childhood, Jeff had never believed in God, though he didn’t really *not* believe in god either. He didn’t know if God should be a big G or a little g and didn’t really care. He was way too busy to worry about trivial things. The market was crashing, for God’s sake, again.

Jeff had several business interests, owned a couple of restaurants and a couple of SCUBA dive shops in the Caribbean, but when it came to astronomy, that was his hobby and obsession. He remembered his Mom telling him, “You have a one-track mind Jeffrey Ross!” And he did.

His graduate courses would help him achieve one of his life-long goals, to make a spectacular stellar discovery, maybe discover a comet or asteroid, though a comet would be a lot cooler.

Jeff wondered how Halley must have felt when a comet was named after him. Hmmm, he mused to himself, maybe the Jeffrey Comette? No, too French. Since 9/11, Jeff had avoided anything French, even fries and dressing, though neither had anything to do with the French. The Jeffrey Ross Comet would work.

Running up the stairs, almost late for class, he couldn't wait to find out if anyone else knew about the light in the sky he had seen last night. That's when he was in Villa Rica, a few miles west of Atlanta, at the Georgia State University Observatory. He'd already decided not to say anything about it, it had been so brief. A bright light in the sky; and then it just disappeared, gone in seconds. The multi-magnitude light, brighter than the flash of those old, blue flash cubes on a Brownie camera, a light that almost sucked him into its folds, actually cast his shadow on the grass below. Then it was gone, just like that.

Jeff had taken a couple of digital photographs during the 12 seconds or so he observed the light, a pin-point prick of extreme-whiteness. He could almost *feel* the light, the beam of photons traveling through distant space at eleven million miles a minute, hitting his skin with an invisible and usually indiscernible force. He could feel the heat evaporating the moisture on his arm. And then the cool chill, as the blip of light disappeared as suddenly as it was born. Was he actually feeling the light hit his arm? Not possible.

"I think I've just had a Kodak Moment," he said out loud, loud enough for the cicadas and other nocturnal animals in the immediate area to hear. There were no other people around.

In 11 years of studying the heavens, Jeff had never seen or heard of such a phenomenon. It could have been a supernova, he thought, but the characteristics weren't right. A supernova, the result of an exploding star, usually lasts for several days or weeks. Some astronomers held the belief that the "Star in the East" in the Jesus story had been a supernova; but then, that story was a myth.

Walking down the hall, on the way to room 111A, the astronomy lab, Jeff took a quick detour and turned left into the men's room. Avoiding the urinals, those wall-toilets he refused to use, they do splatter all over the place sometimes, he walked into the handicapped stall, inhaling the anesthetic aroma of *Texsize*, the smell provoking memories of his own home as a boy after Pearl, the cleaning lady, left. He liked the added space offered by the handicap stall, not so claustrophobic. Plus, you can't just go to the bathroom out in the open, in front of God and everybody, he thought. Bathroom stuff was private!

As he turned to exit the stall, he saw it, a sign taped to the stall door. "THE END IS NEAR... for real Jeffrey!" At the bottom of the sign it said to check out the website, shesmadashell.com.



Melissa Ross lived in a gorgeous cluster-home in Sandy Springs, a North Atlanta suburb not far from Dunwoody where she regularly shopped, with patterned concrete drive, botanical garden-like landscaping in the small but impressionable front yard and gated entrance.

She had been married to Jeff for almost twenty-five years, most of which were good years, but not all. They had been great friends at one time and travelled throughout the Caribbean, where they dove the coral reefs and walked in the sandy-white

surf, hand in hand. They were both beach people and had taken few trips to the mountains. Some people like mountains, some people like beaches; but hardly ever is one a mountain person *and* a beach person. She knew that was true.

“Mommy, is Jesus happy?” When Jeff and Melissa adopted Audry, they didn’t have a clue how precocious she would be, learning to read by age five. At six years Audry had memorized the multiplication tables, up to 20 X 20.

“What do you mean honey?” answering Audry’s question with a question.

“You know Mommy, is Jesus happy?”

“Of course he’s happy, honey. Why would you ask?” Melissa never ceased to be surprised by some of the questions posed by her seven year old.

“Well, I was watching TV, and they were talking about this man on there, you know, named Elton John, who said Jesus was gay. So I got Daddy’s old college dictionary and looked it up; and that man was right, except I thought everybody already knew Jesus was happy.”

Trying not to laugh out loud, Melissa opened the dictionary to see when it was printed, 1960.

“Well I guess you’re right Audry. Gay does mean happy.” At least it used to she thought. But that was then, and this is now; and Elton was not alluding to Jesus’ happiness, she was sure.

Can’t wait to tell Jeffrey about this one, and Melissa couldn’t help but laugh.



After the bathroom stop, Jeff headed to lab, booted up his computer and immediately searched for shesmadashell.com, and there it was.

Jeff wondered which “Jeffrey” the sign on the toilet stall door referred to. Surely it couldn’t have been me he thought. Could it?

Visiting the web site, he learned about a new *religious* movement with a Mother God, rather than God the Father. She *was*, before *Him*. Already convinced this was just another lunatic web page, he exited out.

Jeff thought it unusual, all the talk recently about the end of the world. The date, December 21, 2012, kept coming up. Seemed *too* precise. But there were also similar predictions from Merlin and Nostradamus; and the weather really was strange, to say the least.

Nostradamus gets a lot of press, he thought, along with the Mayans and the Hopi Indians. It seemed like every time he turned on the National Geographic Channel, Discovery or The History Channel, the world was soon ending. There seemed to be disaster and apocalypse and terror and crime and pedophilia and rapes and a lot of un-Godly stuff going on.

Jeff was a news-junkie, always had been, and was well aware of most of the tragedy that stalked the world. And then of course there was Mom. She seemed to always talk about the *Bible* and the end of the world. Used to scare the beejezus out of him. She would agonize about the earthquakes to come, the hailstorms, the plagues and famines, and God’s wrath that would surely follow. Only he did not believe in mythology, and that included God, or god. He wondered momentarily if all Mom’s preaching, and scaring, made him the doubter that he was.

Though a non-believer, Jeff had always been inquisitive and had read the *Bible*, or at least some parts, and had even read a little in the *Koran* and *Book of Mormon*. He knew that the *Bible* was, and is, the bestselling book in the history of mankind, but also the least read. It had sold many more copies than even the *Harry Potter Series*. For a brief moment, Jeff wondered if he

should open a *Bible* store; but the thought was quickly dismissed.

“You better mind your manners Jeffrey, or God will get your butt!” his Mom reminded him on a regular basis when he was little, usually right after threatening him with reform school if he didn’t clean up his room. He did worry about that for years, even lost sleep about it; but his butt remained the same. Skinny. And he doubted God, or god, more every day. Sometimes he thought God was as mean as his Dad.

Mom harped on the parts she liked and ignored the others, at least that’s the way it seemed to him. She never seemed to notice that it was written by *men*, for *men*, not women.

The *Bible* said that God created the world, and in *the end*, whenever that was, he was going to get so ticked-off at everybody that he would destroy the world, at least as it’s now known. Sounds pretty brutal for a “Loving God,” he thought, a god who apparently intended to turn everyone into crispy-critters.

“What a bunch of hogwash!” he said out loud. He knew we would still be around, doing the things that man does, millions of years from now.

Glancing out the window of the lab, Jeff saw the dark-gray storm clouds gathering to the west and wondered if this was going to be another hailstorm like the one last week. He had heard about softball sized hail but had never had the experience, thankfully. Then the hail started, just an occasional clunk-pop from two stories below the lab, as the stones of ice left their impression on the cars parked by the street.

As the intensity of the hailstorm increased, the dark cumulus clouds swirling high above, like a heavenly concoction of dark-gray cotton candy, were soon joined by sixty mile-an-hour winds and lightening the likes of which he had never seen.

With a loud clatter, the windows began to shred in spite of the safety-glass design; and everyone ran for the door in a mad exit, except the foreign student who had been sitting next to the western most window. A grapefruit sized hailstone fractured her skull. Not knowing that the young girl with the blue headscarf was already dead, Jeff turned back and ran to her rescue.

Grabbing the student by the legs of her blue jean laden body, Jeff pulled her from beneath the window, then lifted her fireman-style, already knowing that her limpness was not a good indicator of survival.

A'isha Hamdin Billingsworth had seen her last hailstorm, had been carried by her last handsome rescuer and would never visit her mosque again.

Classes were cancelled. The hail continued.

CHAPTER TWO

“Then the fourth angel poured out his bowl on the sun, and power was given to him to scorch men with fire. And men were scorched with great heat, and they blasphemed the name of God who has power over these plagues; and they did not repent and give Him glory.” Revelation 16:8-9

Goddard Space Flight Center
Greenbelt, Maryland

“**W**e’ve had a massive solar eruption Sir, a really big one, *and* proton-dense.” Chad wasn’t anxious, but his voice was just slightly louder than normal.

Chad Myers, the NEO consultant on call, seemed too calm to be really worried. Tall, slender and *very* laid back, The Admiral sometimes wondered if Chad smoked pot before he came to work. Nothing ever got him hyped-up. Since he was an independent consultant, there were no pee-tests to be administered, so The Admiral may never know. He didn’t really care. Based on Chad’s work record and the papers he wrote for Massachusetts Institute of Technology on the dangers of Near-Earth Objects (NEO), he could smoke anything he wanted.

“How big?”

The Admiral, stately and gray on top, looked like an admiral, walked like an admiral and projected the confidence of the top line-officer ranking of the United States Navy. He walked toward Chad's cubicle, gliding silently across the pale-gray conductive flooring in his special charge-neutral booties, an astrophysicist hurrying behind him, out of curiosity as well as necessity.

The Admiral didn't like the booties, similar to those worn by surgeons; but he knew they were necessary. One static-discharge and the computer network could be toast. Burnt toast. Booties were not the proper image for an admiral, they weren't even captain-like.

"I've never seen one bigger Sir, at least not in the record books. I know, I know, that's not long in the whole scheme of things. Didn't Carl Sagan say we were *billions and billions* of years old? Still, it's very unusual, a magnitude of this size, and the speed and density."

Walking into Chad's cubicle, walls a soft-gray padding to absorb sound, The Admiral, at six-foot-six, bowed out of habit to avoid the doorsill, even though the cubicle had none.

The Admiral was an astronomer, as well as a submariner, schooled at the U.S. Naval Academy and then Georgia State University in Atlanta, where he received his Masters in astronomy. He then spent 3 years at the Kitt Peak National Observatory, fifty-six miles southwest of Tucson. It was at Kitt Peak that the admiral-to-be found his interest in Near-Earth Objects and the extreme dangers they posed.

"If the average *Joe* had any clue how much stuff's zooming around up there, headed our way, he'd defecate in his doggone skivvies," he told his buddy Jeff Ross one night, after a couple of Black Russians and a dozen or so raw oysters.

Though the first weather satellites were launched in the sixties, solar flare activity had only been monitored, at least

closely, since the mid-seventies with the advent of the GOES satellite system.

The Geostationary Operational Environmental Satellite (GOES) orbits Earth in a geosynchronous orbit, an orbit that keeps the satellite over one specific spot, 24/7.

Unlike the space station and the space shuttle, which orbit Earth at a lowly three hundred or so miles above the deep-blue sea, the geosynchronous satellite is located seventy-eight times farther away at 23,500 miles above Earth, enabling United States science observers, meteorologists and military strategists to watch a single area, every hour of the day, every day of the year, spotting objects smaller than a young, yellow kumquat.

Goddard Space Flight Center, located just a few miles north of Washington, D.C., was the main monitoring-central for all geosynchronous satellites dealing with the weather, astronomical activity and solar study. The military and CIA monitored the rest. In conjunction with NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory (JPL) in California, Goddard also kept a close eye on Near-Earth Objects.

Between the weather watching and the raising of two teenage daughters, Goddard had helped Admiral McLemore to understand patience. Things usually happen very slowly in the world of astronomy, he knew. Usually. He also knew that anything could happen in the sky, night or day.

"How long before it affects us?" questioned The Admiral. "How fast is it going?"

"It's going Sir, about a million miles an hour, fast but not unheard of. It's high-density Admiral and should be here in about ninety-six hours. It will be affecting all the satellites within thirty-six hours. I'm not sure the satellite-deflector shields will work. I suspect some satellite damage. I think it's unavoidable."

Chad, always the same demeanor, leaned back in his gray vinyl chair with his left foot on the desk, barely missing the stale hamburger from yesterday, operating the wireless mouse and keyboard like Stradivarius crafting the exquisite lines of a soon-to-be violin in seventeenth century Italy.

Justin McLemore was not one to panic, or he wouldn't be The Admiral, nor would he have been crowned an Honorary Knight by the Queen after helping England capture their most-wanted terrorist, Khalid Mehsud. Admirals were not easy to come by, especially of this quality.

Trained in the Navy as a UDT member, the younger McLemore had seen duty in Viet Nam and Iraq, twice, and a few places no one knew about. Nor would they ever, at least if it had to come out of then Lieutenant Junior Grade McLemore's mouth. Members of the Underwater Demolition Team, the predecessor of the Navy SEAL program, *never* talked.

The United States Navy started the UDT program during World War II, an elite force to combat the enemy through waterborne aggression techniques. UDT members introduced combat-swimming, long-distance swimming on the surface, as well as SCUBA. The Admiral remembered the nine-mile swim that was required in training and was glad it was a long time ago.

"When you say *big*, what do you mean? Give me a worst-case scenario. Pronto. Educate me. You have three minutes, maybe less."

The Admiral was not demanding but expected a job to be done, in fifteen seconds or less. Plus, Justin McLemore had known Chad Myers for seven years and could tell that something was on his mind.

"Sir, all I can say is, this is a highly-charged flare, very proton-dense and is traveling directly toward Earth at 630 kilometers a second. That's more than a million miles an hour.

The Earth is ninety-three million miles away from Ole Sol, so do the math. Ninety-three hours, less than four days.

“When this thing hits, there will be blackouts in a large part of the world; because this is definitely going to Kentucky-fry some power grids.

“If we redirect the satellites and the deflector shields hold better than they did in 1985, we will save many. The military satellites will probably do well. They have some kind of top-secret shielding.” Chad waited for The Admiral’s reaction.

Picking up the secure-phone, Admiral McLemore called his good friend, General Thurman, at the Pentagon.

“Houston, we got a problem.” The Admiral didn’t need to identify himself, as he and Roy Thurman had been golfing buddies for many years. “We need to turn and shut down some satellites. Can you give Sheryl Lasseter a call? We need to all meet, pronto.”

Ninety three million miles to the vertical, the mother of all solar flares was being born in the womb of the sun, agitating deep inside the inner-solar core at a temperature of more than twenty-five *million* degrees, an event that would be, like a new movie, coming soon and would far out perform the present flare, rocketing toward a direct hit with Earth in less than four days. It would make its appearance next year during solar maximum.

Chad’s cell phone rang, breaking the tension, the melodic chime indicating a friend. He recognized Jeff Ross’ number.

“Hey homeboy! What’s up? I can’t really talk. We have a slight criiiiiis, if you know what I mean,” drawing out crisis as though it was a four-syllable word. “The sun is burping, big time.”

“Hey Chad, how’s the wind blowing? We need to talk ASAP. Has anyone mentioned a bright flash in the sky last night? Anything unusual?” Jeff was unaware of the flash going on at the sun’s surface.

“Nope. Not that I’ve heard. The only flash I know about is the one that’s happening on the sun. And the wind is light blue and very mellow. I’ll call you back when I can. The Admiral would say hello but he’s redirecting satellites. He said he would be in Atlanta in a couple of weeks and was meeting you at Park Place for a drink. Gotta go.”

The line went dead, and Jeff wondered what it must be like to see the wind.



Raleigh was hot this late spring day. Unbelievably hot, especially for Easter weekend. The capital of North Carolina, Raleigh had been hot before, but man, it was sure hot today, Chuck thought, trying to remember if it had ever been this hot in his whole life.

Chuck Hutz lived in Raleigh but worked in Research Triangle Park, North Carolina’s *brain tank*.

Chuck was a short and portly little man, had that Danny DeVito look but with reddish hair and pasty skin. He had very little charm, less wit and was at least a universe away from being a part of the Research Triangle Park peer group. Chuck was not brain tank material. He had a mouth like Eddie Murphy’s in the seventies, though thanks to his next-door neighbor Ophelia, he was doing better. If Eddie could clean up *his* mouth, so could he.

Chuck had very few friends and was known by most as UpChuck or Hutz-the-Putz, at least behind his back. He didn’t understand why people didn’t like him and just figured they were screwed up, like the world.

“He makes me sick!” were the exact thoughts of Helen, who lived across the street from Chuck. “That’s why I call him Upchuck, and if’n he don’t lyke it, he can kiss my fat butt!”

Helen didn't have a fat butt, but she sure had a way with words and pretty much spoke for the community. At 83, she had lived long enough to say whatever was on her mind; and she always did.

Still a driver of a 1998 Oldsmobile Behemoth, at least it seemed that big to all her neighbors, Helen often told Ophelia she was going to "run his ass down" the next time she saw Chuck driving down the street with that loud rap-crap playing on the radio. Ophelia, a proper sort of elderly Southern lady, prayed for Helen and her misguided vocabulary, hoping that certainly Judgment Day would remember the wonderful things she had done.

Chuck didn't think much of his nosy neighbor Helen but thought Miss Ophelia seemed pretty nice. Driving his cobalt-blue Buick Riviera, from another era, Chuck would always crank-up-the-volume when he saw Helen in the yard and throw his arm up, a friendly wave as he passed by. One day he was sure she flipped him the bird as he looked in his rear view mirror, and he wondered how someone so old and mean could look so healthy and spry.

Walking to his locked Riviera, Chuck was already running late for work at the new RTP Ford and Mercury dealership on Highway 54. It would be the second late day in the first week of his employment.

His light blue, short-sleeved shirt, the buttons nearly popping under a pressure that the average button is not accustomed, was already damp from the early morning heat. The shirt stuck to his back, irritating the infection. A week before, Chuck's girlfriend, finally convinced him to have his quite hairy back, waxed.

Within two days, where the follicles once wore the smooth, straight shaft of a single strand of hair, the newly-damaged follicles on Chuck's pasty and broad back began to itch, and then ooze. The oozing meant he would have to wear his sport

coat all day, to hide the stains on the back of his damp, blue shirt.

“My God,” he said out loud, glancing to the right and noting the temperature on the wall-mounted outdoor thermometer that was shaped like a lily pad. Chuck didn’t remember ever seeing the pointer at one hundred sixteen degrees, *ever*.

Opening the Riviera’s door, the blast of heat slapped Chuck in the face as surely as he had often been slapped in the face by his oldest brother when he was a kid. The black interior of the Riviera felt like Hades itself, sans sulphur, not that Chuck actually knew what Hades was like and probably would never know. He was, after all, saved and went to the Presbyterian Church on Hillsborough Street almost every Sunday.

Grabbing the steering wheel to pull himself in, he planned to start the car and let it cool for ten or fifteen minutes.

“Jeesuss that’s hot!” In a split second Chuck knew he had made a big mistake. His muscles reflexed in the instant it took for the pain neurotransmissions to traverse his body’s neural-axon network, to the brain and back; but as fast as that transmission was, his palms were scorched, raw from the burns.

“Don’t you use the Lord’s name in vain Mr. Hutz!” the words rushing from Ophelia’s kitchen window like the smells from her homemade yeast rolls.

Jerking away, Chuck lost his balance and fell toward the black, asphalt driveway. His natural reflex was to catch himself with his hands, and he did. The one hundred thirty degree black surface seemed almost soft as his palms made their landing under the falling two hundred and thirty pound UpChuck. The damage to his palms was complete, and now there would be two infections to worry about.

“This is a really crummy day so far!” he shouted toward Helen’s house, not wanting to offend Ophelia; and with his tongue, he licked his raw and burning palms, trying to cool them

with the only wetness he had without a clue as to how nasty his tobacco-chewing mouth really was.

Chuck flossed occasionally but not often, so between the chew, the drinking and the sweets, and lack of proper mouth sanitation, the infection began to set in, bacteria and other microbes, not seen by the unaided eye, partied on the plains of Chuck's ruined hands and broad back, multiplying in a frenzied, bacterial foxtrot only a microbe's mom could love.

This day wasn't nearly as crummy as it was going to get.

CHAPTER THREE

“There will be ... great signs from heaven.”

Luke 21:11

At six-foot two, Jeff Ross had an athletic build, a tanned body and at one time, sandy blond hair. Now he was just glad to have hair at all, as the bald-fairy had been visiting on a regular basis over the last year. Still, he had very little gray, except for the slight-gray invasion of his sideburns.

Jeff looked like a golfer, wore the proper, spiffy attire and occasionally the Ivy League caps and knickerbocker-style pants of the late Payne Stewart, one of the world’s great golfers from the past, at least in Jeff’s mind. Thoughts of Payne Stewart and his tragic demise still stirred Jeff, wondering how in the world could Payne’s private jet have crashed on a bright, sunny day? He was sure that Payne would never have succumbed to the indiscretions in his life that Tiger had suffered, though he still had much admiration for Tiger Woods. He only wished he could have seen one golf tournament, Tiger Woods and Payne Stewart, one-on-one.

On his way home from a golf outing at The Sugarloaf Country Club in Duluth, twenty miles north of Atlanta, Jeff spotted Melissa, his ex-wife, pulling out of the post office. Melissa did not see Jeff as he merged his just-acquired 2011 Nissan GTR behind her.

Most people, at least men, would have noticed the dark-gray GTR in the rear view mirror, 485 horsepower twin-turbo V-6, able to leap tall Porsches in a single bound. But not Melissa, who could care less about those testosterone-driven boy-toys.

Entering the countryside, apparently on her way to Lake Lanier, the most visited Army Corps of Engineers project in the nation, where Melissa and her *new* husband shared a summer home on the shores of the man-made lake, Melissa's green Range Rover was no slacker with the new LR8, 510 horsepower engine, exceeding the power of Jeff's Macho Machine, at least that's the way *she* would see his brand-new car.

Jeff picked up his Blackberry, intending to let Melissa know he needed to talk to her desperately when, from the periphery of his left side window, he saw the large Amtrak Superliner barreling toward the intersection at Peachtree Industrial Boulevard. Jeff estimated the train's speed at seventy-five and wondered why the crossing-lights weren't on, nor were the barriers descending to the traffic-blocking position.

Melissa wasn't going to make it, as Jeff sat on the horn of the dark-gray GTR. What the GTR had in speed, the horn lacked in decibels; and Melissa did not hear the horn.

Palms now sweating all over the new, leather steering wheel, Jeff ever so briefly wondered if Melissa was listening to her iPod head phones, something he used to constantly complain about when they were married.

As a runner, Melissa thought nothing of inserting her state-of-the-art *Ear Buds*, iPod's latest earphone technology, and heading out on a six-mile run. Jeff wasn't much of a runner but would often follow her in the car to make sure some whacko didn't grab her, sneak up from behind, though of course no sneaking would be necessary. She would never hear the stalker-killer, because she was listening to Beethoven on V103's Classic Favorites.

Today Jeff didn't have to worry about a serial killer sneaking up on Melissa, because the Charlotte-Atlanta Superliner was about to take care of that fate. Melissa's new *Ear Buds* did a great job of blocking out external sound, just like the advertisement stated, and she never heard the Superliner's horn either.

The Superliner engineer must have seen that the green Range Rover had no intention of stopping, not realizing Beethoven's Symphony #5 was about to reach climax. The engineer's P5 horn system was loud, but it could have been louder except for the federal government's regulation limiting the decibel level at 110, not a lot louder than a leaf blower.

By now Jeff was at full sweat mode; and apparently Melissa had noticed the dark-gray sports car following her and accelerated, leaving Jeff in the dust on Water Works Road.

When the locomotive of Amtrak's finest slammed into the Range Rover, it was simply a matter of physics from that point on. Hitting Melissa broadside in the driver's side, Melissa was relishing the last few seconds of her most favorite symphony as the flagship of the Rover line burst into a wedge of bright-orange flame as it traveled down the tracks, forming a horizontal cross-bar, similar to the crucifix she had just seen in the Passion Play, wrapped around the front of the massive engine, molded to the engine's outer structure as tightly as OJ Simpson's glove that didn't fit.

The emergency braking system, already activated by the engineer, stopped the train about a half-mile down the track, Range Rover still wrapped around what had been the shiny, silverish engine, only now it was charbroiled, along with the Range Rover.

Jeff pulled off the road, knowing in his heart and mind what was to be, when a propane tank Melissa had picked up for the

grill, exploded with a mighty blast and fire storm, flames leaping higher than the adjacent Sugar Hill water tower.

The ringing didn't register at first, Jeff running toward the conflagration that had been Melissa, the ex-wife he still loved with all his heart, only now his heart was empty.

The second ring stopped Jeff in mid-stride as he rolled over in his king-sized bed, grabbed the landline phone, dropped it, found it and answered.

"Jeff, are you awake? I know it's early buddy, but I forgot to call you back yesterday. It was a hell of a day at Goddard is all I can say. Jeff, are you there? It's Chad."

Jeff didn't recognize his friend's voice at first as his heart raced and the sweat continued to pour from his skin.

"Jeff? Wake up man. What's wrong?" Chad heard the phone drop.

"Chad? I'm sorry Chad." Jeff now waking, he slowly realized that the frightening scenario he had just experienced was only a dream. And he was happy that it was a dream, for he could not bear to lose Melissa, or Audry. He couldn't even remember if Audry was in the Range Rover.

"Are you ok?"

"Yeah. Sorry. I just had the worst dream of my life, it was way too real. What's up?"

"I'm flying into Atlanta. Can you pick me up?"

Jeff, still having a little trouble concentrating, was shaken by his near-reality dream, wondering why he hadn't been concerned that Melissa's new husband might have been in the Rover. He hoped, but didn't pray, that it wasn't a premonition of some kind. He had those sometimes.

"Chad, please. Don't get me in that Atlanta after- Easter weekend traffic. It's bad enough normally. Can't you just take MARTA? I'll pay the three bucks if you're broke."

When Jeff moved to Atlanta from Charleston, S.C., MARTA was the new transportation concept to reduce the legendary Atlanta traffic. That was in the late seventies, and Maynard Jackson was mayor of Georgia's capital city, modern not by design but because the "Old Atlanta" had burned to the ground, thanks to General William Tecumseh Sherman, September 2, 1864.

Atlanta was rebuilt on top of the Old Atlanta and now stood as a jewel on the horizon of Southern cosmopolitanism, modern buildings and gorgeous *large* trees, not the water oaks with hanging Spanish moss like those in Savannah and Charleston, but nice none-the-less, adorned her streets with flowers and spring pollen galore.

"What does MARTA mean?" Jeff asked the taxi driver, a Liberian according to the ID plaque mounted on the front dash.

"Moving Africans Rapidly through Atlanta," the driver said, emotionless; so Jeff didn't really quite understand what he had just heard.

"What? I know it doesn't stand for *that*?" The black driver laughed out loud.

"I am just kidding, monsieur. It's a joke around here, told by the white people. We still think it's funny, and mostly true, I have to admit myself."

Jeff liked the accent, maybe even more than he liked the Island accents of the Caribbean and Bahamas. He didn't like the comment however and knew, had the Liberian thought about his ancestors, their suffering and indignities, he might not be joking about MARTA. Jeff wondered if the driver even knew that Liberia was born out of the African geography, purely for the freed slaves who wanted to go back home, but didn't know or remember where home was.

"So what does it really mean?" Jeff asked again.

“Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transportation Authority, or something like that,” and Martin the Liberian laughed again.

One thing for sure, MARTA had not worked, because Atlanta traffic was worse than ever. Chad interrupted Jeff’s thoughts.

“OK, if you don’t want to *personally* pick up your old friend, let me rephrase that, your *long-time friend*, then I will do the MARTA thing. I should land about 4:30 this afternoon.”

“When you get on the train, call me. I’ll head to the Dunwoody Station and will meet you at the front entrance, not the side.”

Jeff hated the side entrance, because he would have to park his new GTR and walk to the entry; and that would invite the door-ding demon to leave his mark. Seemed to Jeff that some folks just lived to let their kids slam the door into your brand-spanking-new car. It never failed.

“Okie dokie, I’ll call. We have a lot to talk about?” Chad was upbeat, maybe, or nervous, though Jeff had known Chad Myers for years and had never seen the guy nervous, except one time years ago, about anything.

“Like what?”

“Well, like your flash in the sky that no one saw? Or the huge flare headed our way in less than three days? Or the newly discovered, soon-to-be Near-Earth ‘Objet,’ also headed our way?”

“Objet?” Jeff liked the way Chad could segue from English to French. “What kind of ‘objet?’”

“Like the kind of object we have not seen before, very stealth-like, maybe composed of graphite because there isn’t a lot of reflectivity, and *very* large.”

“Great!” Just what we need, Jeff thought, a broken worldwide economy and now a killer, desolation-driven asteroid headed for Earth. Super.

“You are always the bearer of bad news, my friend. I will see you this afternoon, and you have a lot of nerve expecting me to drive to Hartsfield- Jackson Airport in four-thirty traffic!”

“Jeff, don’t forget to bring some ladies with you. Have you told all the girls in Atlanta that I’m coming to town?”

“Not yet Chad. I just don’t want all those women driving by my house all day, looking for Wild Willy Briggs! We would end up with a bunch of cat fights in the middle of Sugarloaf Parkway.”

Like his friendship with The Admiral, Jeff’s friendship with Chad went back a long way, since the Navy days. Chad was unusual in several ways, but one thing especially unique was Chad’s ability to actually see the wind, wind-intensity varying by color.

“The colors are almost transparent,” Chad would later explain.

While stationed in Yokosuka, Japan, Chad Myers, Bill Briggs and Jeff met at the Officer’s Club one evening after stopping a bar fight, something that happened a lot more than one would think, in an *officer’s* club.

Jeff had a bloody nose and suturable lip after the fight, though he kept saying, “You should see the other guys.”

Chad had to admit, the four other guys looked a lot worse, having started the fight with a few racist comments toward not only Blacks but also Hispanics, something that Jeff had not considered officer-like and was eager to let the butt-heads know better as he presented Etiquette 101 with a solid-right to the solar plexus of one bigot, only to have the other three butt-heads jump on him. Bill Briggs and Chad Myers had come to his rescue.

Jeff had always been a pretty good fighter, having boxed a few rounds in Officer’s Candidate School and having a little redneck in his genetic makeup. He was, however, not good

enough to take on four drunk soldiers who were not conscious of pain.

Bill (William), Chad and Jeff became friends that night and began hanging out together almost nightly, chasing the girls like all good sailors do.

Yokosuka had plenty to do and lots of pretty little Japanese ladies, maybe not quite ladies, hanging around *anything* Navy, hoping for marriage to an American soldier, sailor, marine; made no difference. Yokosuka was good duty, the largest U.S. Naval base in the overseas world and the centerpiece of the Pacific Fleet, but it was not known for its nightlife, at least in the sixties.

The most active local bar was *Tommy's Bar & Grill* and was frequented by sailors and marines, which of course led to an abundance of fighting. Jeff, Chad and Bill were a part of that group, not usually the fighters, just the drinkers.

One evening after leaving at closing time, on the walk back to Jeff's car, a 1966 bright- orange Volkswagen Karmann Ghia, all three laughing at how ugly the car was, Chad stopped in his tracks and looked west. The night was dark, though not moonless, and quiet as a mouse.

"We gotta get the hell out of Dodge," was all Chad said, scanning for places to get out of Dodge and in *to*. Jeff would remember years later this night, the only time he had ever seen Chad Myers in an anxious state-of-mind.

Bill and Jeff looked at each other in confusion, not knowing what Chad was talking about as Chad's eyes continued their scan of surrounding structures. There were no sounds, not even night birds or the crickets, which was highly unusual.

"There's a wind storm coming, take my word for it. Follow me." And Chad took off, heading back to *Tommy's Bar & Grill*, Jeff and Bill in hot pursuit.