

WITNESSES

THE TWO

THE
END

THE BOOK

PART FIVE

J. L. ROBB

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THE SERIES

PART FIVE

THE TWO WITNESSES

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FOREWORD

JL Robb gave me the distinct honor of writing a forward for his book, and the challenge of deciphering the correct words to compliment his massive effectiveness in writing. I am grateful to have done the task.

I met my wordsmith friend through a mutual treasured connection - a fine lady by the name of Lynn, and would never imagine being given the task of Publicist for the work of art that *The End The Book Series* has proven to be to a myriad of reading followers everywhere.

His books are on the verge of wild success, with a nail-biting, tantalizing, and scary goosebump prophetic story-line that he rips from the pages of apocalyptic truth of God's Word and incorporates into the lives of every day folks with which he intermingles. And who knew I would ever be one of those characters in the story line of this very book? A Princess even! So unworthy am I.

It's no surprise, and I have heard this personally with my own ears, that a reader gobbling up each page will find the news channels and headlines simultaneously announcing a world event that just unfolded slightly ahead of time in JL Robb's writing. This causes a certain addiction to chase the next book, and then the next, in order to find out "what happens" and for this fact alone,

there will be no disappointment but only a sequential set of oohs and ahs, as we follow the characters parlaying into the next adventure hot off the press of the publishing company.

Enjoy and imbibe deeply the analogous story to true life possibilities that makes the *other* most popular prophetic book series pale in comparison in the realm of excitement and adventure to what can be found between the book covers of *The End The Book Series*.

To my friend JL Robb, I wish you ridiculous success beyond your wildest dreams with all of the effort, time, and investment you have made to share the hope of Christ, and truth of what could and will be!

To God be the glory,

ReAnn Ring
PR and Media Personality
Safire Productions

NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

THE END The Book: Part Five- *The Two Witnesses*

THE END The Book Series is a fictional account of the predicted apocalypse as outlined in the Bible. Several readers have asked me, "Is this book true?"

It is true that the Biblical end will happen, but I have written this series as a counter-weight to the apocalyptic fiction coming out of Hollywood, like *Armageddon* and *2012*, that fail to mention God and His role in this approaching apocalypse.

Any similarities between things that are occurring now and things written in this series are purely coincidental. It would be impossible to write a "true" account of the Biblically described End Times.

The Two Witnesses is Part Five of the series and presents two strangers who suddenly appear in Jerusalem and start preaching on the ancient Jewish Temple Mount.

Many people know little if anything about the Two Witnesses mentioned in Chapter 11 of *Revelation*. They tell me that their teachers never mention it, and I wonder why these two men have not gotten more attention. They do a lot of stuff, and it's not good stuff.

Foretold to appear in the Last Days, these Two Witnesses are to preach in Jerusalem for 3 1/2 years on the ancient grounds of Solomon's Temple. The

Israelis and everyone else who hear what they say, will despise them. They talk in unison and have supernatural powers. Great story.

What would you do if you woke up one morning, turned on the news and found out the often-predicted end-of-the-world really *was* near? This time the story was true, and there was no escape. What would you do? Where would you hide? Could you somehow survive; and if so, what then? Would you fall in love? Take the kids to ballet lessons?

While those who already believe will find this a great thriller, the series is meant to appeal to those who don't believe or may be right on the edge. This is not for the faint-of-heart but is thought provoking. If only one reader digs out a *Bible* to check my references, the series will have accomplished its mission.

I hope you enjoy reading *The Two Witnesses* as much as I enjoyed writing it for you and for the glory of God, the father of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

J.L. Robb is an author and writer with a degree in Zoology from North Carolina State University. A U.S. Navy veteran and cancer survivor, he lives in the Bible-Belt with his two Great Danes and a kitty named "Glock." Robb is a member of Civitan International and The American Legion.

DEDICATION

I dedicate *The End The Book: The Series* to Almighty God and to my oldest daughter, Erica who motivated me to write several years ago. She has worked diligently ensuring that the series would be a success, designing book covers, web pages and numerous video presentations.

www.yoniartanddesign.com

"The second woe has passed; the third woe is coming soon."

Revelation 11:14

LIST OF MAIN CHARACTERS: ALPHABETICAL BY FIRST NAME

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

Aboud Rehza: Also known as Vinny. In charge of U.S. Operations for Jihad's Warriors. Twin brother of Mohammed Rehza who is in charge of European operations.

Aludra: Sister of Muhammed Khalid, Jihad's Warrior in charge of Afghanistan and Pakistan. She and her brother live in the Korengal Valley of Death, Afghanistan-Pakistan border.

Bill "Wild Willy" Briggs: Master of Nanotechnology. Ex-Navy, CIA and Homeland Security. Works closely with Israel's Mossad.

Bubba Haskins: Immigrated to U.S. after the Iranian Revolution of 1979. Real name is Mahmud. Owner of large minority Heating and Air Conditioning company. Married to Jill.

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. After auto accident, speaks fluent Hebrew and witnesses to others while in a trance.

Condi Zimmerman: Independent news anchor/reporter and host of The Condi Zimmerman Show.

Dr. Dennis Duncan: Professor of Geophysics and public speaker. Developed the Theory of Vacuous Spaces.

Dmitry Ustinov: Chechnyan-Russian international arms dealer.

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

Edgar Allan Poe: Homeless veteran who discovers terrorist plot. Becomes terrorism expert with Homeland.

Erica P. Robbins: Reporter and U.S. War Correspondent.

Farmer Jackson Kinsella: Owns large cotton farm in Clemson, SC. After an assassination attempt, terrorists stole the farm's crop duster for a planned chemical attack on Atlanta.

Gray and Andi Dorey: Close friends of Jeff Ross, philanthropists and owners of *Dine for Dollars*, a restaurant for the homeless or just the hungry.

Jack Russell: United States Senator. Ranking member on the Military Finance Committee. Married to Samarra Russell.

Jeffrey Ross: Ex-husband of Melissa Ross and father of three daughters; Jami and Jenni (twins) and Audry, his youngest. U.S. Navy SEAL until discharged with injury after the Vietnam conflict.

Jill Haskins: Wife of "Bubba" Haskins and Melissa Ross' closest friend.

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

Judy Blanton: Previous owner of J. Blanton Concrete Company, Lukeville, Arizona.

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

Kipper T and Missy T: Angels who appear to Jeff in dreams.

Kyoto Kushito: Founder and Director of The Foundation, a shadowy terror think tank, based in Hiroshima, Japan. The Foundation consists of disgruntled grandchildren of Japanese kinsmen killed by the U.S. nuclear attacks of World War II. Funded the hijacking of the Nerpa nuclear submarine.

Melissa Ross: Divorced from Jeff Ross, mother of twins, Jami and Jenni, and adopted daughter, Audry.

Mohammed Rehza: Ruthless Islamist in charge of European Operations for Jihad's Warriors. Vinny's twin.

Muhammed Khalid: Islamic Jihadist and founder of 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 and certain death.

Pam MacLott: Owner of *The Divide Disco & Café*, the South's only News Bar. The café becomes a meeting and planning place for those interested in combatting the Islamic takeover of America.

Robert Jeremias: Missionary, philanthropist. Married Melissa Ross after her divorce from Jeff. Disappeared in a plane crash during missionary trip.

Samarra Russell: Married to Senator Jack Russell. Past Director, Communicable Diseases Research Center, CDC. Responsible for theft of Spanish Flu virus.

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

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

Terry and Toni Fahey: Next door neighbors and close friends with Jeffrey Ross. Travel the country in their million-dollar RV.

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, BJ and Beverly manage American Legion Post 251. The three women are seen together often. Skilled in self-defense and sharp-shooting, they seem to attract encounters with street thugs and drunks.

Vinny: Aboud Rehza, a product of wealthy Saudi parents. He and his twin brother, Mohammed, had been child prodigies; and both spoke 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.

WHAT HAS HAPPENED SO FAR:

Part One

Jeffrey Ross is Duluth, Georgia's most eligible bachelor, but not by choice. Retired Navy SEAL and successful entrepreneur, he had been married to Melissa almost 25 years; and he thought everything was hunky-dory. They had beautiful twin daughters and adopted daughter, Audry and a nice home in a country club community, nice cars and toys, what could be wrong.

Melissa asked for the divorce, begrudgingly. She loved Jeff, but he didn't believe in God, never had; but what was worse was his ridiculing of believers. Over the years, her faith grew stronger and she enjoyed her church community; but she and the daughters enjoyed it alone. No way was Jeff going to step foot in a church.

The divorce and Melissa's subsequent remarriage had taken its toll; and while Jeff wasn't a broken man, he remained in the dumps for the next four years. The most eligible bachelor wasn't available. He was hoping his wife would come back.

Jeff made new friends and maintained most of their old friendships too, as did Melissa, including The Admiral, Sheryl, Chadbo, Wild Willy and Abe the Bartender.

Nine thousand miles away, along the border of Pakistan and Afghanistan, the Korengal Valley of Death festered with various jihadist groups, Muslims with a common cause: Kill the infidels. That would be everyone except them.

Jihad's Warriors, virtually unknown, unlike al Qaeda, had infiltrated the borders of Europe and the United States for years, decades. The U.S. border with Mexico was as porous as Swiss cheese; and jihadists had taken advantage with bribery and murder.

The Chechen jihadists from Eastern Europe looked, talked and acted as American as mom's apple pie. The Arab jihadists passed easily for Latino immigrant laborers, but these were not laborers.

The Divine Plan was to run America and Europe out of money. The warriors knew the West couldn't protect every single nursery school, church, synagogue, campground, shopping center, hospital and highway. It would be easy. Once economically destitute, the Islamic takeover of the world would finalize.

While Manhattan and Chicago remained the desired targets, security was tight. The Islamists would concentrate on the Bible Belt, more Christians that turn the other cheek rather than fight.

Jihad's Warriors were financed, not by Muslims so much as by a group of wealthy Japanese businessmen bent on revenge for the nuclear bombings of Nagasaki and Hiroshima during World War II. They were the grandsons and granddaughters of those burnt alive in December, 1945, the Baby Bombers. Money was no problem.

Jeffrey continues his pursuit of Melissa, now widowed, and can't help but notice all the people carrying *The End Is Near* signs. They seemed to be everywhere. Then there were the disappearing people, and Jeff remembered his mom's lectures.

"In the last days, sonny boy, people gonna be disappearin', yes they are. You start seeing folks vanishin' in thin air, you better find God. That's all I can say."

A creature of habit, Jeff had a routine that included the Dunwoody Starbucks every morning for coffee and the Atlanta newspaper. He was a news junkie. The Mayan Apocalypse was just around the corner, and people worldwide were preparing for The End. Ridiculous.

One warmer than usual spring morning, record heat the words of the day, Jeff enjoys his latte and paper when suddenly his world changes... again.

The brown cargo van circling the small shopping center explodes with vigor as America's first suicide bomber begins a wave of terror like the nation has never seen. Two minutes later another explosion several blocks away blows up a Dunwoody day care center. Forty-seven dead in a split second.

Jeff's Navy buddies, Chad Myers and The Admiral, work with the Goddard Space Flight Center in Maryland. Astronomy buffs, their primary concern was space objects on a collision course with planet Earth. Near-Earth objects, mostly small asteroids, had become more commonplace.

Unfortunately, news of the object most recently discovered would now have to be shared with the world as it made its way past Jupiter on a course that would hit Earth in less than a year. The object, still invisible to most telescopes, was dark, massive and unavoidable.

Sixty-five million years earlier, the dinosaurs and most living creatures had been wiped out by an asteroid only six miles in diameter. The Dark Comet was more than a hundred.

As the world reacts to the coming devastation, many begin to believe that the end really is near this time; and there was nothing anyone could do about it. There was little panic.

When Jeff's friend, Samarra receives a strange call, she returns home as instructed. She would follow the instructions as directed, or she would receive her son's head in a box instead of the finger she stared at in desperation. And she did.

Samarra's access to Atlanta's CDC biological disease labs made her job simple and soon the Spanish Flu, one of the great killers of all time, is loosed into an unsuspecting world. It was inevitable, millions would die.

In the Indian Ocean, a hijacked nuclear attack sub vanishes. The only remnants were an oil slick, clothing and assorted debris but not enough to indicate the submarine was at the bottom of the Marianas Trench.

As New Year's Eve approaches, Jeff and Melissa visit Grand Cayman Island to celebrate memories and await the coming comet. To most it seemed the Earth would end months before the predicted Mayan prophecy.

A few hundred miles east of Grand Cayman, on the island of Montserrat, the Soufrière Hills volcano erupts and is blown into the Caribbean Sea. The massive tsunami that is generated speeds across the ocean toward Puerto Rico, Jamaica and... Grand Cayman.

Part Two

Jeff returns from Grand Cayman Island alone. He and Melissa tried to escape the giant wave but were washed off the 4-story roof of their beachfront hotel. Melissa's body was never found, and Jeff mourns his loss. He had prayed they would reconcile, his first prayer since a child; and it looked like it might happen.

The New Year started off with a bang, literally, when the U.S. suffered its first nuclear strikes, one at the Diego Garcia island chain in the Indian Ocean that destroyed most of America's B-52 bomber force. The second destroyed the Buford Dam, Atlanta's fresh water supply.

The Dark Comet continued its journey toward Earth, two weeks until impact. Attempts to destroy the comet with the world's nuclear weapons supply failed to deter the coming tragedy.

The world became unified for the first time in history in their effort to stop the comet, and joyous applause erupted globally when the comet slammed into the moon instead of Earth. Unfortunately, the resulting debris from the lunar collision meant waves of meteor showers for Earth, many of which made it through the atmosphere, destroying numerous communities, including the Three Gorges Dam in China.

Thankful that the world was still intact, Jeff flies to California to buy his million dollar dream car, a one of a kind 1954 Cadillac Pininfarina Cabriolet. Maybe that, he hoped, would occupy his mind a while. Shopping was great for depression.

Upon arrival at the La Jolla Jetport, Jeff's tragic misfortune continues as he is struck with the deadly and pervasive Spanish Flu. During his hospitalization, he begins to have a series of strange dreams, dreams of small white churches in fields of blooming daffodils. Dreams of a tiny Arizona town named Lukeville.

The European riots had become infectious, and America's cities did the same as gasoline reached \$8.00 a gallon. The police forces, hampered by budget cuts and not enough employees, became brutal; and rioters were killed mercilessly.

The jihadists coordinated closely with a well-organized Christian militia under the philosophy of, *The enemy of my enemy is my friend*. Their common enemy was the U.S. government.

The Admiral's romance with Sheryl blossoms cautiously, at least until the kidnapping. That's when he discovered his real feelings, the ones he had sheltered for sixty years.

Recalling their private conversation, he wasn't really surprised that the President had sold out Israel; only, it wasn't Israel's God that was trying to kill everyone in America, it was Islam's God.

What was surprising, and shocking, was the rumor that there were thousands of infiltrators living and working in the nation's infrastructure: nuclear power plants, water treatment facilities, food distribution warehouses.

Vinny, a.k.a. Aboud, hasn't gotten any nicer as he continues to meet with his deputies at the concrete plant in Lukeville. The meetings, though brief, usually occurred on the Mexican side of the deep, underground tunnel connecting the concrete facility in Lukeville with the beer distributor on the other side of the border. Plans were made, plans of terror, death and destruction;

and the stored weapons and nerve agents were the vehicles Allah would use.

Wild Willy continues his work with Mossad and Senator Jack Russell, Samarra's husband. The nanotech spybots were no longer experimental and looked like assorted bugs, but Will was especially fond of the dragonfly style. Looked just like the real thing.

Samarra's case goes to the U.S. Federal Court in Atlanta. The charges are numerous, including international homicide charges for the tens of millions killed because of the Spanish Flu. During the trial, Samarra's senator husband is arrested in a San Francisco shower house with a young boy and charged with possession of child porn and sex with a minor. Senator Russell stated that he thought the boy was 12, the new legal age of consent in the United States.

After Jeff's recovery from the Spanish Flu, he continues to have the strange dreams about a couple named Missy T and Kipper T, reggae music and disco lights; and the room, the one with the dark door. *You don't want to go through that door.* Missy T made the comment numerous times.

Jeff's life, a life that's never dull, continues to change suddenly and often. He finds himself having second thoughts about the whole religion thing, at least sometimes. He really couldn't explain how the Gideons Bible kept showing up.

One day Jeff gets a call from Samarra. Her trial was over quickly, temporary insanity; and her penalty was light. She asked if she could visit, they had been friends for many years.

During her visit to Jeff's Sugarloaf estate, yet another megacryometeorite storm hits North Atlanta. Jeff's home is spared, but a young girl in a Porsche is killed in his neighbor's driveway. The large ice bomb that hit the new Porsche Spyder was estimated to weigh 120 to 150 pounds, larger than a beachball.

Samarra informs Jeff that she and Senator Russell are now divorced; and over the next few months, a new romance blossoms. There had always been something there.

The months passed swiftly, and soon Jeff plans a visit to his dive shop in Negril. Before going to Jamaica to check on the business, Jeff and Samarra become engaged, though a date is not set.

Jeff's journey to Jamaica is plagued with thoughts and confusion, not about his profound love for Samarra but about all the natural disasters going on. It was downright scary.

The Admiral told him about the large rock that appeared to be leaving the Moon's orbit, and he finds himself hoping to God that it wouldn't. He fell asleep and dreamed, dreams of earthquakes and volcanos, roaring seas and asteroids, drought and poisoned waters... and Melissa. He prayed in his dream, a prayer that Melissa hadn't suffered in the tsunami, that she had been killed instantly in the fall.

Part Three

Hailstorms are the talk of every news station it seems, as Jeff cruises the highways with his new Cadillac, listening to Al-Jazeera News. Millions of acres have been destroyed in Europe, and Northern California's crops are not spared. *Homeless and Starving in the U.S.A.* has become the chant of protesters as the hail batters crops and wildlife into the ground.

Two years after Melissa's death, Jeff finds love with a friend from the past; and his kids are receptive to the romance, amazingly. Amazing because Samara has been acquitted of stealing the Spanish Flu virus from CDC due to temporary insanity. That theft, now in the hands of the blackmailing Jihadist Warriors is doing its job well with estimated global fatalities now in excess of fifty million.

Vinny's (a.k.a Aboud) jihadist terror group continues to wreak havoc in the United States as his twin, Mohammed,

known in the small French town as *The Preacher*, wreaks the same in Europe. The penetration of France's largest nuclear power plant's automated facility management system was simple, and access to the plant infrastructure now rested in the hands of Mohammed.

Mohammed has a following of gullible Christians who bought his fakery; but then, he is a good actor. The basement of the small, stone church tells another story as he collects more and more propane tanks, one at a time from different locations. The church is a sitting bomb, but Mohammed loved explosions. It ran in his family. Soon enough he would meet with Dmitry to secure the procurement, now paid for in full by the secretive Japanese group, the *Select*. They hate Americans even more than the Muslims hate the Jews. Two billion U.S. dollars for five high-yield, thermonuclear weapons.

Jihad's Warriors have penetrated the Mexican border for several years, usually with the help of the drug cartels. Now that had all changed, and the border was more porous than Swiss cheese. The U.S. administration continues to be oblivious to the religion of Islam and seems to think all Muslims are Arabs. That's good for Vinny.

As the earliest hurricane in Atlantic history bears down on Florida, news from Goddard Space Flight Center and NASA is no better. The dark comet's collision with the moon at first seems like a silver lining, since it would have ended all life on Earth had it not been for the moon. The moon was now pink instead of white, and the surrounding rings of debris has a divine beauty of sorts.

The beauty quickly becomes a beast as Earth begins to be bombarded by debris, and meteorites hitting Earth become common news as flights throughout the world are in disarray with many airports closing intermittently. Some reports from China suggest the possibility that the lunar debris may be poisoning fresh water supplies.

Just north of Clemson, South Carolina, a cotton farmer's crop duster is stolen with plans to dust Atlanta's new football stadium during the Super Bowl. The dual-winged crop duster is one of a kind. Powered by Daimler-Benz, the Italian Fiat CR42B engine powers the plane to the horse farm north of Marietta in less than thirty minutes. There the banner will be attached advertising free beer at *Jamaica Joe's*.

Jeff's romance with Samarra blossoms quickly. The chemistry had always been there, even during her marriage to Senator Russell. When the good Senator is caught in compromising positions with young boys in bathhouses, Samarra's divorce follows. Jeff feels it is meant to be.

Excited about his wedding plans, for the first time in a long while Jeff finds himself deliriously happy. He leaves for Jamaica to check on his declining SCUBA business with plans to return during Christmas when he and Samarra will marry on the beach. The flight to Negril is non-eventful, other than a few meteors in the distant sky; and he checks into the Ross Suite at the Charela Inn. A message from Rosalie, the maid he had grown to know well, is disturbing.

Jeff's flight back to Atlanta does not ease his emotional conflict. How will he tell the kids? How will he explain to Samarra that Melissa is alive and well, rescued after the Cayman tsunami by Jamaican fishermen? How will he let them know that Melissa has no memory of them, or him and is preaching Jesus to a bunch of Voodoos or whatever you call them, in the rainforests of Jamaica?

It seems to Jeff that just as things finally start going good, God throws in a monkey wrench just to keep you on your toes. Only he still cannot get his arms around the concept of a god who is invisible but created everything. That story was unbelievable, but then a lot of his life is becoming unbelievable. If he could only see a sign.

Chadbo and The Admiral continue to carefully monitor all the things flying around Earth, dismayed that it was only a matter

of time before a big one hit the planet. There have been numerous close encounters with asteroids a couple of football fields long, but they are small compared to many they have discovered. Plus there is the unprecedented solar activity and stars that seem to be disappearing. The two men recognized that all stars eventually burn out, only stellar theory suggests that takes billions of years. Why would so many be disappearing at the same time?

The Mother's Day Massacre, as it is now called has caught everyone off guard. Random sniper attacks and bombings on Mother's Day claims hundreds of lives, mostly women and their children. A bombing by a Christian Militia group completely destroys Atlanta's Five Points Marta station and most of the travelers and MARTA staff inside.

As Jeff and Samarra continue to plan their New Year's Eve wedding in Jamaica, at the suggestion of Melissa, Dmitry Ustinov waits in a small Monaco café for The Preacher. The French military guarded the streets of Paris and other affected cities because of the failure of the Civaux Nuclear power plants. Israel is blamed for the intrusion into the plants' security systems, and anti-Semitism is out of control in all of Europe.

Dmitry warns Mohammed, explaining that the five thermonuclear weapons are extremely dangerous and much more destructive than the bombs of Nagasaki and Hiroshima.

"When these babies go off, Mohammed," Dmitry whispered, "you need to be at least thirty miles away."

Of course, as Russia's number one illicit arms supplier, Dmitry planned to be far, far away when St. Petersburg was reduced to cinders and ash. He loved the motherland, but he loved dinars more.

Though Dmitry knows little of Jihad's Warriors' plans, he does know that New Year's Eve in Times Square will be one to remember.

New Year's Eve on a beach in Jamaica turns out to be as surprising as the soon to be *Manhattan Event*, at least in Jeff's

mind. The marriage is perfect, the guests are perfect, even the Voodoo priest who accompanied Melissa is perfect, her latest conversion conquest.

Melissa's memories have returned for the most part, and she stands on the beach by the quiet surf, talking with her three daughters and pointing upward to a bright star in the clear, Jamaica night sky. Jeff glances upward at the star and was certain he saw slight movement. Maybe it was a plane.

In Manhattan, eight large, black Mylar balloons are attached to two, 2-kiloton briefcase nuclear bombs, a play being acted out in three other high-rise buildings surrounding Times Square. The suicide bombers high-five each other as the balloons are released from the Penthouse and into the dark night sky above New York City. When the eight bombs go off, they will be in the warm bosoms of seventy-two virgins.

Melissa gives the kids a big hug, turns and walks over to Samarra and Jeff. It is nearly midnight, and her head suddenly feels light. Her skin tingles and tiny goose bumps appear. She truly is happy for the newlyweds. She glances skyward, searching for the star and is startled to see how much closer it is. Maybe it's an airplane, she thought quietly.

As midnight approaches, less than five seconds away, Melissa kisses Jeffrey Ross on the cheek and squeezes his hand gently. The white light in the sky grows in intensity and moves high above the beaches of Jamaica's south shore; and the crowd stared, mesmerized or too frightened to move. Melissa's parting words will forever stay in Jeff's mind.

"Here's a sign, Jeffrey," and with that she rises into the air, quickly toward the white light, now more like the midday sun, and disappeared. The star quickly dimmed and then it too disappeared, and silence lingered with the small crowd. The Voodoo priest who spent the evening talking with anyone who would listen about "de Lady of de Sea" and how she saved him, vanished in an instant.

Part Four

As a group of large, Mylar balloons float over Times Square, the New Year's Eve celebration never turns chaotic as the nearly one million celebrants in the crowd below are vaporized in an instant, not the result of the Rapture but the detonation of several low-yield nuclear weapons, hanging below the large, helium filled balloons. Wall Street will never be the same, and ATMs across the country cease to operate.

A minute prior to the detonation and seen by only a few, some people in the crowd disappear, simply vanish; and this disappearance of people occurs all over the world. It is the beginning.

Heat records are broken daily and environmentalists continue to scream and demand more funding to prevent the warming caused by mankind. Only there is no more funding. The free world is in financial disarray, as Jihad's Warriors continue their battle to run the West out of money.

The continuing Islamic attacks have terrorized the nation and the world; and every three months, like clockwork, the death toll dedicated to Allah, rises.

Iranian nuclear sites come under nuclear attack from an unknown source somewhere in the Mediterranean Sea, only to learn that the sites were exotically constructed decoys.

If man's attempts at destroying civilization are not enough, nature's fury raises the human and animal death toll exponentially. Unprecedented hailstorms flatten entire villages, killing people and livestock, pets and plants as leaves and branches are stripped from trees.

Chadbo and The Admiral closely monitor numerous incoming meteors, one of which the world must destroy or be destroyed by the massive, arsenic laden rock. The strike is successful; and thousands of miles above Earth, the incoming

asteroid is destroyed. A large cloud of arsenic dust slowly descends on Earth, pulled by gravity.

Vinny and his Islamist gang plan small nuclear attacks along the West Coast but have no idea the West Coast will soon be no more, at least no more life.

A small asteroid makes its way from the moon's rings toward Earth but is given little priority. It is heading for the Antarctic with virtually no potential for damage.

Chadbo, concerned with possibilities, monitors the small space object and his fears are recognized. The asteroid explodes high above the Ross Ice Shelf, slamming a five-mile stretch of the shelf into the ocean. A large surface wave, a wave the size of no other, rushes northward toward New Zealand, Hawaii and the West Coast of the United States.

At 2,700 feet in height, the wave sinks a third of the world's navies and thousands of pleasure craft. Skirting along the California Coast, the skyscrapers of San Diego and Los Angeles are no match and collapse to what had been ground below.

In less than ten hours, millions have died along the coasts of California, Oregon, Washington and Alaska. The death toll in Japan, China, Indonesia, India, Australia and New Zealand top ten million and continues to climb. There are no longer Mexican resorts along the Pacific coast.

Jeffrey Ross and Samarra, now married, have had little honeymoon so far; and Samarra continues to recover from the strange bite. A physical toll has been taken, and she wonders if she will ever have her strength back.

Jeff rediscovers an EPROM that a homeless man gave him a couple of years earlier and finds there is a Christian extremist group in the mountains of North Georgia that appears to be working with the jihadists.

Well aware that he should take someone with him, Jeff heads to the mountains alone. His million-dollar sports car is later found in several pieces at the bottom of Tallulah Gorge.

PREFACE

Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." And they divided up his clothes by casting lots.

Luke 23:34

"Wake up Romulus."

Romulus stirred, and the early morning sunrise peeked through the window, the tattered curtain blowing in a mild but warm breeze. Small whirlwinds of dust danced across the barren fields outside.

"You will be late," his wife urged.

Romulus stirred again, slowly waking to a cloud of depression.

"And hold your tongue, Romulus; or you will be nailed to a cross like the Jew."

As his memories from the day before became clearer, a tear appeared at the corner of one eye and dropped to the cot below.

"He was only a man, I promise," and Athena leaned over Romulus' bed and kissed his cheek. "I have you some pomegranate tea."

This Jew called Jesus of Nazareth had been much more than a man, Romulus and his friend Antonius knew for sure. They had seen with their own eyes, miracle after miracle, things they had never seen from the Roman or Greek gods.

Romulus finished his morning tea, ate a chunk of bread and did what he did every day, guarded the streets of Jerusalem, Capernaum, wherever the Teacher traveled. He had nothing against the Jews of Judah, at least most; but some were never satisfied at anything. The whining was wearisome and resulted

in many of their deaths. Not many Roman Guards had the compassion of Romulus and Antonius.

The morning was already hot and Romulus sweated beneath his leather armor. After a brief walk he spotted Antonius standing guard on the road beside *Pomegranate's Café* and waved.

Peter and Andrew, the apostles they knew, entered the only door, heads held low to hide their red eyes. Many tears had been shed during the night.

Romulus noted their dismal moods and knew they would be in a booth drinking their Emperor's Pomegranate Tea soon, like the two apostles did almost every day.

Peter had become a friend of sorts after offering Romulus the drink of cold water at Capernaum the day Jesus was healing all the people. No one could know though, not of a friendship between a Jew and a Roman Guard. He *would* end up on a cross.

There had been no water that day, only empty kraters of clay. Then the miracle happened. The kraters suddenly filled with the clearest and coldest water he had ever seen.

"Good morning, Antonius," Romulus greeted.

"What is good about it, Romulus?"

The streets were nearly empty, much different than the day before; and the few Jews that ventured out seemed somewhat melancholy. Antonius wondered if maybe there were many more Jews that believed this Jesus was their messiah than the Pharisees thought.

"Maybe there will be no riots today," Romulus said and slapped Antonius on the back.

"Maybe rejoicing," Antonius responded.

He and Romulus thirsted for news about Jesus and walked inside *Pomegranate's*. They would need to get the news from the two apostles, only they could not sit down with them and have tea.

Peter looked up at the two guards when they came in, made eye contact with Romulus and then looked down. He and Andrew liked the two guards and were sure the guards believed that Jesus was who he said he was. He needed to get word to the two guards somehow.

Peter stood and walked toward the counter to order another tea and stumbled as he approached the guards, running into Romulus.

“Get off me you imbecile,” Romulus shouted at Peter, but there was no one else to hear, other than the keeper of the café.

Romulus grabbed Peter by his tunic and shoved him down the small, dark stone hallway and against the back wall. The guard’s strength was extraordinary as he easily held Peter six inches off the floor.

“Any news?” Romulus asked softly.

“Romulus,” Peter replied, “you have to get Antonius off guard duty at the tomb. It is very, very dangerous.”

“Dangerous how?” Romulus asked.

Peter thought he would not find the words to convince Romulus, they were so... crazy.

“Jesus,” Peter whispered, “is going to...”

“Speak, Peter,” Romulus said. “Jesus is ...”

“In three days, Jesus will not be in the tomb. He told us. He is coming back to life.”

“Do you believe it?” Romulus asked, but not incredulously. Romulus put nothing past the Teacher. He had seen too many miracles.

“I do not know,” Peter said, and he was saddened by his lack of faith. “I want to believe. How can a man be beaten to the point of death, nailed to a cross, stuck in the side with a sword and confirmed dead, rise again?”

Romulus had seen Peter the night before, after the crucifixion. What he had seen troubled him through the night. Peter had denied he even knew the Teacher, at least twice.

“So why should Antonius not guard the tomb from vandals? Many Jews would raid the tomb and steal the body if possible.”

“Because, Romulus. If King Herod discovers the tomb is somehow empty, and Antonius was a guard...”

“Of course,” Romulus said. He knew that would be certain death for his good friend, Antonius. What a scandal it would be if Jesus disappeared and reappeared.

“The things I can't deny outweigh
the things I can't explain.”

Author unknown

PROLOGUE

Jerusalem

“Your peace is a false peace, your treaty is a paper of lies. The world has turned against you, Israel; and your land will be pillaged again, as it has been in the past. Your arrogance has turned you from Yahweh, your God who brought you out of Egypt and to this very land so long ago.

“The Mahdi has fooled you, lulled you into your comfort zone. He talks peace but war is in his heart, the heart of perdition, from the *Bad Place*. His doorway is dark with the blood of martyrs in Jesus the Christ. How many will lose their heads before you recognize the truth? Why are you so stiff-necked? We tell you this...”

The two men in the new Temple Construction Zone did not shout, yet everyone in the large crowd could plainly hear, each in his own language.

“What’s the Mahdi, Father?” the young girl with black, wispy hair asked the man beside her. Perspiration dripped down his back, spotting the light blue, sleeveless T-shirt, a Bob Marley silkscreen on the back.

“I do not know, Sasha,” Kelly replied, swatting an insect of some sort. They were abundant in the heat, and swarms had become common.

Kelly had heard the name before but couldn’t place it, something to do with Islam he thought. This was the first trip to the Holy Land for him, though Sasha had visited before, last summer with her mother. Before...

“The Mahdi is also known as the Twelfth Imam.”

The woman’s voice came out of nowhere, as a whirlwind of dust swirled past the crowd. Kelly and Sasha turned to face the

voice and were met with a smile. The olive-skinned woman, young and beautiful, looked and sounded angelic, Kelly thought silently.

“My name is Aludra,” the woman said, extending her hand, “and who is this beautiful little angel?”

Aludra, insecure at one time due to her programming by her extremist brother Muhammed, had matured since her escape from Korengal Valley along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border. The last couple of years had been the best in her life, and she pondered her good fortune. She had never experienced what she would call *good fortune* when she believed Allah was the God of Abraham.

Insha’Allah, she thought quietly but now the meaning seemed more significant than it had a few years earlier. Though it meant God willing, as far as she could tell Allah was never willing. Islamic countries continued to prevail in third world regions; and the living conditions were always impoverished, except for the ruling class. It had always been like that, yet the Jewish nation and the Christian world seemed to languish in comfort, if not luxury. Poverty in Israel was surely nothing like poverty in Afghanistan.

“My name is Sasha,” the young girl said with a smile and a curtsy. “This is my father, Kelly K... All his friends call him Kelly K, so I do too.”

Kelly felt embarrassed as he wiped the sweat from his brow and subconsciously brushed his hair into place with his fingertips, only to be mussed again by the gusty wind. For a December morning, the temperature in Jerusalem hovered around ninety.

“Well Sasha, the Lord has blessed you with a beautiful smile,” and Sasha became an Aludra fan instantly.

“Would you like me to continue?” Aludra asked. “About the Mahdi, I mean?”

“Yes, yes, yes!” Sasha exclaimed and Kelly nodded in affirmation.

“The Mahdi is...” Aludra began.

Tourists filled the area, most holding umbrellas to provide some protection against the intense sun; and they flocked around the Two Witnesses who seemed to speak in unison, each tourist vying for a better spot. The witnesses were protected, but not by much. The area was cordoned off only by a flimsy fence, a fence that leaned in as the wind blew.

There had been assassination attempts; but the witnesses prevailed as though protected by God Himself, at least that’s what some of the Israelis were beginning to believe. The previous attempts on the two men’s lives were met with disaster, witnessed by the crowds of hundreds, if not thousands. The gunmen the previous year burst into flames before their assault rifles could be aimed.

Two nuns dressed in white, linen habits made their way toward the closest fence to garner a better look. The new Temple, now prominent in the background, seemed to glow in the bright, morning sunlight. There were no remnants of the Dome of the Rock mosque. After the earthquake finally destroyed the mosque and the Wailing Wall, the mosque disappeared into a large sinkhole. The Jews were blamed.

The crowd was quite congenial as they parted to let the two nuns, short in stature but stout, make their way to the viewing area; and the nuns smiled politely, their faces tan in the bright sunlight.

“The Mahdi,” Aludra continued, “is a belief only among one sect of Islam, the Shi’a, at least in the past. The other sect, the Sunni, believe the Shi’a are as much infidels as the Jews, Christians and everyone else.”

“This Twelfth Imam,” Kelly questioned, “has what function?”

“He is to show up within the Shi’a community when the world is at war, and he will save Islam from the evils of the infidel.”

“Like Jesus came to save the world?” Sasha asked.

“Well, not exactly but symbolically, yes. You are very precocious, Sasha. The Twelfth Imam is basically the Islamic messiah, according to Shi’a. The belief is that the Mahdi will lead the Shi’a to victory over the world and will be established as the only belief system. Anyone who doesn’t accept will be killed.”

“Beheaded,” Kelly said.

“Yes, and it’s been going on since Islam began fourteen hundred years ago,” Aludra said, thinking about brother Muhammed and his friends. It seemed they could not find enough heads to sever, and she hoped once again that her brother was killed when the Korengal Valley had been nuked. She hoped to never see his face again, the face of a brother she once adored.

“Maybe the Mahdi is the antichrist,” Sasha said, more mumble than statement.

Across the dusty construction zone, the crowd suddenly became quiet. Kelly noticed the two nuns, now kneeling by the fence and praying. The Two Witnesses were standing in silence, an oddity; because they usually preached 24/7, at least it seemed so.

The nuns began to sing and the crowd stepped back, giving others a chance to see; and finally the crowd joined in with *Holy, Holy, Holy; Lord God Almighty. God in three persons, blessed trinity.*

A sudden feeling, a darkness of some kind, swept over Aludra as she watched the crowd sway and others joined in. The nuns stood up and held their hands high toward the dusty, pale sky.

“Run Aludra.”

Naomi’s voice, only Naomi was dead, another victim of terrorism. Sasha and her father had not heard the voice apparently, as they too began to sing. The lyrics rang out over the Temple site, and for a moment Sasha thought it sounded like the Mormon Tabernacle Choir. It was beautiful.

Aludra had heard Naomi's voice before, after her death; but only in times of trouble. She grabbed Sasha's hand while punching Kelly in the arm, a punch that stopped his singing immediately. He saw fear in Aludra's face.

"We have to go," Aludra shouted and the people around her stopped singing briefly but then continued.

"We have to go, please; follow me," and Aludra pulled Sasha across the parking lot, more desert dust than asphalt, Kelly following quickly behind but was troubled by the sudden turn of events. The air was thick with dust, a result of years with no or little rain.

"Hurry," she shouted and they ran toward a small café a hundred yards away. If they could make it behind the café, they should be safe... but from what?

Aludra suddenly realized that she had no idea why she was running, other than Naomi's voice, a voice from the dead.

The crowd continued to sing and sway, and no one seemed concerned. Little attention was paid to Aludra's quick departure with friends in tow. Only one man seemed to notice, a man dressed in white shorts and a light blue T-shirt with University of North Carolina emblazoned on the front, sitting in the café and holding a newspaper.

The two nuns, waddling more like ducks than humans, were led by the crowd, closer to the Two Witnesses who remained standing but silent; and the crowd roared in approval, singing and swaying.

Aludra, Kelly and Sasha sprinted toward the café, and while their departure got little notice from the swaying crowd, it *was* noted by several Israeli Defense Forces members who turned to investigate.

Turning right, the three passed behind the café but not before Aludra glanced at the man in the light blue T-shirt; and the recognition was immediate. As the man stared, her heart began to pound like never before.

Across the field at the Temple Construction Zone, the nuns continued to lead the jubilant crowd in song, holding their hands up high.

Trying to decide whether to seek refuge behind the café where she had spotted her long-lost brother, she continued running down the dusty street, away from the Two Witnesses. Her last memory of Muhammed was that he was going to kill her for having a Bible.

Muhammed recognized his sister instantly as she ran around the café, a sister he never thought he would see again; and his heart jumped with joy. He couldn't wait to tell her the good news, that he had found the reality of Christ two years earlier. Not long after her midnight escape, Muhammed read the entire Bible.

The New Testament that Aludra had left for him, the one that fell open to the last chapter of Revelation, had changed his life. He stood quickly, not wanting to lose her again and left a twenty dollar bill on the table.

Aludra's heart pounded as she considered choices; but the choice was made for her as Sister Frances and Sister Teresa shouted at the top of their lungs, *Allahu Akbar*.



Southport, North Carolina

Sally J. Cooper, originally from England, lived along the Cape Fear River in Southport, North Carolina, about fifty miles north of Myrtle Beach. Like Myrtle Beach, South Carolina's largest golf course, Southport was blessed with its own generous supply of golf resorts. Million-dollar homes had blossomed in full by the time the recession hit, and hers was one of them.

"Mom, we're goin' to the river."

It wasn't unusual that Sally's two sons would go to the river during summer vacation. Schools were closed until October since the local shopping center was blown up April Fools' Day.

Why? She wondered. Why in the world would someone bomb Southport, or Surprise, Arizona for that matter? What was the point?

And now some guy in Israel was telling everyone he was going to turn the water to blood? What a bunch of idiots there were in today's world. She continued to sift her way through the latest TIME magazine

"It's not one guy, Mom; it's two guys," her sons would correct.

What-ev-er; one guy, two guys. What's the difference?

The boys loved to fish, like their dad who recently disappeared on a mission trip in Pakistan. Three Pakistan soldiers had been arrested and charged, but they said Frank had simply vanished while they were interrogating him about his Christian beliefs. Now the three soldiers had been sentenced to hang because they possessed Bibles and were converting to Christianity. She smiled a melancholic smile, thinking about Frank. He was raptured and saved three souls in the process.

"Be careful, boys," Sally said, slapping another grasshopper from her strawberry blond hair.

She couldn't remember seeing so many grasshoppers as there were the last few months. A cold breeze blew briefly from the north, and she was startled. It had been a long time since a cold breeze had blown through Southport, and she suddenly shivered. It felt refreshing for a change.

After reading yet another article about kids raping kids, she turned the page; and a photo of a Chinese river caught her eye. It was as red as blood. She earmarked the article for later reading.

Sally knew she shouldn't worry about the two teenage boys. They were outdoorsmen and watched all the Doomsday Prepper reruns, at least when the satellite signals could get

through. However, she was a worrier. Plus the Cape Fear River had an unusual smell the past few mornings.

“Don’t worry, Mum. We’ll bring dinner!” and the boys were out the door.

James and John Cooper, Cape Fear Prep School’s only set of twins, had celebrated their fifteenth birthday just two days before. Tall, lanky, blue eyes and floppy red hair, the freckle-faced twins were the talk of their school, not because of basketball or golf; but because they were so smart.

After the outbreak of rabies in Eastern North Carolina, the boys carried several cherry bombs and a sling-shot in their baggy pockets wherever they went. Both boys knew well the danger of cherry bombs, once legal. John nearly blew the trash bin up in a test, and Mum was none too happy.

Cherry bombs were red and round, about an inch in diameter and made quite an explosion for such a small firework. The drummer for *Who* had been banned for life from numerous hotels for blowing up toilets by flushing the waterproof cherry bombs and celebrating the explosions that ruined the plumbing.

“Do you have a lighter?” John asked.

“Yep. Never leave home without it,” James answered. “Actually have two.”

John recalled the last trip to the Cape Fear River. The boys had been fishing when several wild dogs approached a few of the dead fish along the shore, mangy and drooling. The cherry bombs had been their choice, not because of the explosive power but because of the tremendous *boom* they made. As the dogs devoured the dead fish, John had removed his slingshot and secured a cherry bomb in the small, leather pouch.

“Be careful,” James advised seconds before John dropped his only lighter into the waters of Cape Fear; and the river quickly washed the *Bic* downstream.

With slingshot in hand, John watched as the lead dog spotted the two boys along the edge of the water. The dog did not know

what a slingshot was nor the strange, long bamboo poles the boys held in their hands. With the four other dogs running behind, the pack charged along the river bank toward dinner. Drool and froth spewed from their mouths as the animals ran.

“Don’t panic, Little Brother,” James said with a nervous laugh, referring to John as his little brother; because he had been last out of the womb.

James flicked his bright yellow *Bic* and lit the waterproof fuse of his brother’s cherry bomb. The dogs were fast and now approached from less than a hundred feet. At least one was a spotted cocker spaniel, and the boys couldn’t believe their eyes.

John took aim, waiting for the fuse to burn; and with perfect timing let the small explosive launch toward the rabid pack. Landing a few feet in front of the charging dogs, the cherry bomb exploded with an unimaginable boom; and the pack dispersed in all directions.

“It ain’t a lighter if it ain’t a *Bic*,” James said; and the two boys laughed, but not too loudly.

Since that fishing trip the previous week, they carried multiple *Bics* and cherry bombs in their safety pouches, just in case. Today there were no wild dogs in sight, and both were relieved.

“Ewwww! What’s that smell?” James asked, holding his nose tightly, trying to keep any of the aromatic molecules from entering his body as he gagged.

“Smells like somethin’ done crawled inside you and died, sucka,” John said, also gagging.

Living along the two hundred mile Cape Fear River was adventurous for the twins. Passing through North Carolina and heading eastward, the river emptied into the Atlantic Ocean at Southport and had been the setting for the movie, *Cape Fear*, starring Robert De Niro in 1991. The river had its history of tragedies and disasters, and the twins had studied Cape Fear

River's history thoroughly. They knew this: The Cape Fear River had never been red like blood, but now it was.

Dead fish, frogs, turtles and birds lay rotting on the reddened shores of the near blood-red river; and the smell was unbearable, even with the wind blowing in the opposite direction. Many of the dead birds were vultures; and other scavengers lay along the banks, apparently victims of the rotting fish.

"Wow," was James' first word at seeing the amazing sight. "This is like the Bible!!"

As far as the eye could see, rotting corpses were strewn along the pebbly and sometimes sandy shore. Most of the fish, though deader than a doornail, succumbed with their mouths wide open, maybe trying to gasp for air. The gills seemed to be fused or melted; and the mottled gray scales were sporadic, almost like the fish had mange.

The boys covered their noses and mouths with the spare T-shirts they always carried, trying their best to avoid the putridity hanging in the now calm and much cooler air.

"Why is the water so red?" John asked, mostly to himself; but James answered.

"Must be the red tide. That happens sometimes."

John knew a little about red tides, but he recalled no occurrences of red tide this far up the river.

"Red tide is an ocean thing," John said. "It happens a lot in the Gulf of Mexico and lots of other places in the world. A few years ago, Bondi Beach in Australia turned bright red, even redder than this. Everyone thought it was blood."

"We better go, John," James insisted. "There must be toxic gas or something to kill all this stuff. Let's get outta here."

The boys took off through the reeds and semi-marshy terrain, trying not to bog down and holding their breath as long as possible. The stench was unlike any they had ever experienced, and the insides of their noses burned violently.

“My nose is burning like crazy!” James shouted and bloody mucus dripped from John’s left nasal passage. He began to feel light-headed and stumbled as they made their way home.

A cold breeze blew in from the north, and the temperature dropped dramatically.



Wuhan, China

Bill “Wild Bill” Robertson and his family visited China at least once a year, and Bill’s wife spoke the language fluently. As a past interpreter at the United Nations Library in Manhattan before Manhattan had been blown up, Vicky spoke several Far Eastern and Middle Eastern languages as well.

Though married only three short years, they were on the same wavelength and quickly became best friends. At thirty-three, Bill still had a head full of jet black hair; and Vicky could only smile, at his smile. It was always there, even now with the distress of the area surrounding them.

This visit was more business than pleasure, and the city of Wuhan along the Yangtze River was no longer hustle-bustle but a landscape of flattened buildings and boulders. Not a single bridge in a city of bridges remained, and any trees that had withstood the wave stood only as lonely stumps against a bleak but sunny early morning horizon.

“It’s awesome,” Bill said, studying the surrounding landscape, “The power of water.”

“The wave was big, Mr. Bill. Really, really big. This high,” the guide said, pointing both arms toward the low clouds moving in from the north. “It come like that, like those clouds over there.”

Though Wuhan was a wasteland, it had not been a month earlier on his last visit. As China’s economy prospered, unlike most of the world’s, Wuhan had become one of the largest cities

with a population in excess of thirteen million and a major port along the Yangtze. Bill was ready to do business.

“It is unfortunate that the city was only 130 feet above sea level,” Vicky surmised.

“Yes, Miss Vicky, the wave was half-mile high,” said the guide, again lifting his arms toward the clouds, now nearly overhead. The air chilled.

“The water looks like blood,” Bill said, and it did.

As far as the eye could see, though the river had never been clear, the water and the shores were Coca-Cola red.

“Red tide,” Vicky replied. “The annual red tides have come inland, because the water is now brackish. It was fresh water; but the wave brought salt water so far in, to the mountains I would guess, every inland lake in this area is now brackish, as well as undrinkable.”

The breeze lingered lightly in the air, and the smell of rotting sea life suddenly became unbearable. It seemed even the buzzards were avoiding the stench, other than the few along the banks.

“Oh my goodness,” Vicky said, covering her nose with her shirt.

“Yes,” the guide offered. “The stench is odorous. Some are fish and turtles, but many are human remains.”

Wan Hu, Chinese guide, looked lost as he gazed toward the coming storm, like a lone man in no man’s land. A book in a baggie floated down a small stream toward the three, dodging debris along the way.

“Do you ever wish you were dead?” the guide asked, his eyes beginning to moisten at the extreme bleakness of the moment. Only it wouldn’t be a moment; he knew that. “My mother lived in Hong Kong.”

“Oh no,” Bill said, knowing Hong Kong suffered the same demise as the city of Wuhan, even worse.

“No. No, she didn’t wash away in the wave; she disappeared New Year’s Day with her entire mission group. They were in the Himalayas helping the Nepalese dig out from the mud slide last month. But...”

The guide paused and wiped his eyes though he didn’t seem to be crying. Vicky could see his grief, and her eyes moistened as well.

“But what?” she asked.

A vulture flew overhead, eyeing his morning meal; but it would be a meal of death.

“But... she told me that two wise men would appear in Israel and people would start vanishing. She said it would happen quickly. The owner of the *Inn on the Hill* where the mission group took refuge from the recent snowstorms had to be restrained and is in a mental hospital.”

“What happened to him?” Bill asked.

The vulture circled the stream twice, interested in the small object floating downstream even though the object emitted no smell of death. The large bird was familiar with plastic though and had once nearly been a victim of a six-pack holder. He eyed the object cautiously.

“He said he was cooking roast beets and duckling for lunch, and the women were talking in the dining room. When it suddenly became silent, he walked out to the dining area and everyone had disappeared. In less than ten seconds he said.”

“Probably the rapture,” Vicky said matter-of-factly. “Or maybe not. If it is, it is much different than I expected it to be.”

Though the actual word *rapture* never appeared in the Bible, it was there all right. There would be a gathering of Christians in the air with the coming Jesus.

“Rapture is not even in the Bible,” the guide responded quickly, defensively. “I kept telling MaMa that, but she wouldn’t listen. She lived to please God and serve the poor, and she was

poor herself. I don't believe the story. Something happened, and the Nepal government is hiding the details."

"There is a scripture for that you know, what your mother did for the poor. Had she been a rich woman and helped the poor, it would have been great. But the fact that she was poor and could not afford to give but did anyway, that is much greater than great."

Wan Hu wiped his eyes, warily watching the rapidly moving clouds hanging low in the sky.

"I wish I had paid more attention to MaMa," the guide said. "I never read the first word of her Bible, though she was always encouraging me to read it. I am rebellious, I guess."

"Would you read it now if you had a Bible?" Bill asked.

"I would, yes," he said without pause.

"I will send you one," Bill said. "I have a friend who is a... well, he *was* a Gideon. He got caught up in that rapture that's never mentioned in the Good Book and disappeared in front of 280 people at a benefits banquet for autistic kids.

"Anyway, we were planning to ship five thousand Bibles to a missionary group in Pakistan, they needed Bibles in their Urdu language; but no one has heard from them since the wave. They are stored in my basement in Texas, along with other translations, including Chinese. Interested? My basement became sort of a storage area."

The vulture landed by the stream created by the wave and eyed the plastic baggie. Plastic would not normally be able to hide the aroma of a good meal. The vulture's sense of smell was miraculous in itself. Now however, any aroma escaping the plastic baggie was masked by the aroma of death along the Yangtze and beyond. As far as the vulture's eyes could see, it was a feast, a buffet of decay.

With remarkable speed the vulture struck and took off in what appeared to be a single movement, giant wings the size of

eagle wings flapping slowly, more like a ballet than a flutter, plastic bag held firmly in the powerful beak.

"I would like a Bible, yes. Thank you. No Bible available in China," Wan Hu said, now watching the large vulture fly toward the group, "but it would take a miracle I am afraid. I just cannot believe people can disappear and meet some guy up in the air somewhere."

"It's not 'some guy' up there in the air, Wan Hu. This story was written by the ancients, thousands of years ago. I will send you a Bible when I get home... do you still have mail service?"

"Limited service," Wan Hu replied. "Takes a few days longer. You know, Mr. Bill, I guess I just wish I had a sign or something that I could actually see. The Muslims in this area are trying to get everyone to join their religion, and much of my family is considering; but MaMa told me to beware of the false prophets that were to come after the death of Jesus, who may be a legend as far as I know."

The vulture pierced the plastic baggie with ease, the bird's jaws powerful enough to break bones, quickly surmising the object was neither dead nor food.

"You know, Wan Hu, Billy and I have known you many years; and you are a stubborn sort of guy. You should have listened to your mother."

Vicky didn't scold Wan Hu but made her point in a motherly fashion.

"You wouldn't know a sign if it hit you right in the head."

As the vulture gained altitude and released the disgusting plastic bag from its jaws, Wan Hu never saw it coming.

Thwack.

The object from above hit Wan Hu squarely on the top of his head, nearly knocking the small man out. Wild Bill and Vicky Robertson were as surprised as Wan Hu, and thunder sounded for the first time in the distance.

Stunned by the blow, the guide dropped to the muddy ground and rubbed the small knot now appearing on his skull. The blow had not been a *sharp* blow, but it had been attention getting.

Vicky bent over and retrieved the gallon-sized, double-sealed baggie from the ground and noticed right away it contained documents or a book of some kind. She opened the seal.

"Hmmm," Vicky uttered after removing the book, and opening the cover. Her pupils dilated briefly, and she felt faint. She closed the book and handed it to Wan Hu. "It is for you, Wan Hu."

The Chinese guide stood, wiping mud off the knees of his khaki jeans and felt a cold breeze as it blew across the gray-brown, barren landscape that had been a bustling city a month earlier. Vicky wiped a tear from her cheek and glanced toward the sky as the vulture gained altitude.

Wan Hu opened the book, which appeared to be right off the bookstore shelf, no dog ears or highlights; and he read the autograph. Goose bumps appeared, but not from the sudden chill; and he shivered as he read the autograph:

"This Gideons Bible is for you, Wan Hu. Read it and be saved for the next life. It is not mythology."



Elba Island, Italy

"The king is in," Mohammed laughed out loud. "The king *was* in."

The operation could not have gone more smoothly, he thought to himself, sitting in the comfort of his seaside villa on the shores of Elba Island, one hundred eighty miles west of Rome. The blue waters of the Tyrrhenian Sea sparkled in the distance, tiny diamonds of light dancing across the dazzling, blue surface.

Mohammed Rehza and brother Vinny were almost single-handedly wreaking havoc on the entire world. Jihad's Warriors had been described in the past as has-beens and a ragtag group of misfits who hijacked the religion of Islam. Only, he knew that was not true. They were *living* Islam; and those supposed Muslims that thought differently would die soon.

Mohammed was troubled by the absence of communications of any kind from his twin, but Vinny would sometimes go underground for months at a time. Vinny would be pleased with this sudden turn of events.

The king is in

He thought about that first text and the great jubilation he felt. That was less than 24 hours ago, and he sneered at the Vatican's so-called security. Getting in, out and away had been a gift from above, he was certain; and the brave Warriors worked with the protection of Allah Himself. Not a single soldier was lost or captured.

Sipping a cup of Madagascar Vanilla red tea, Mohammed's hand shook the shake suffered by many Parkinsonians throughout the world; and tea spilled over the rim of the Mt. Vesuvius Volcano mug. He was sure he was too young to have Parkinson's disease, but he was no fool. The symptoms were obvious.

The salty wind blew across his patio, and the stucco condominium shone as white as snow as the afternoon sun bathed the walls with Allah's light. Mohammed's phone whistled softly, a new text. Hopefully, he would be on his way to Libya soon, and he read the message.

King of the Sea is home- On the beach

Mohammed high-fived himself and phoned his driver. Ten minutes later, he was on his way south to Marina Di Campo. From there he would fly by private Gulfstream 72 from Elba Island to Tripoli. The six hundred mile journey across the Mediterranean Sea would take less than two hours, and he

silently prayed that the Warriors would wait for him. He wanted to see it *live* as it happened. What a coup.



The Divide Disco & Café

Duluth

“Hey Abe,” Jeff said. “Can you crank that up a little?”

Samarra and Jeff sat at the first high-top table on the second level, and the bamboo top had someone’s initials engraved, along with a heart. He held her hand as they sipped mint julips and chatted over a bowl of Georgia peanuts. Dark gray clouds lingered over Duluth, and a distant rumble of something shook the muggy, Georgia air.

“You bet,” Abe the Bartender said and grabbed the remote.

A lot was happening in a short period of time, and Jeff was glad Samarra survived the bite. It had been iffy at times, but now she was as good as new, as energetic as ever. Her quick wit was back, and he squeezed her hand softly. The twenty-four hour weather forecast flashed in red across the bottom. It seemed to always be in red nowadays, a warning of some kind.

“Atlanta should expect major hailstorms this evening, some hail as large as volleyballs. Expect severe damage in areas affected. Livestock and pets should be protected in reinforced shelters. High today, 114 degrees; Low will be 90. Keep your helmet handy, and a lightning rod. Dry lightning...”

A still shot of Vatican City suddenly appeared on the TV, and an OLNN News Alert icon glared from the screen. A three-tone blast, usually reserved for severe disasters or tornadoes, sounded from the speakers. The meager crowd in the restaurant became silent in anticipation, except for a shout in the back

suggesting the Vatican do some unnatural and impossible acts with itself.

Outside, a Duluth police siren faded in the distance as the black, Dodge Charger raced to yet another armed robbery at the Duluth Animal Hospital Research Center. The Research Center's experimentation with treatment of seizures via cannabis oil had made them a target. And if it wasn't for the police department, they would have been an easy target.

"Good afternoon. I am Kari Vermi, and this is the OL News Network."

Abe thought Kari looked sick or something. Her face was unusually pale, her red hair disheveled; and she looked like she might have been crying. Could be allergies, he thought.

"I have some terrible news," she began, and she was unable to hold back her tears. *"I'm so sorry,"* she said, embarrassed; and she wiped her cheeks with a wad of Kleenex.

Kari had grown up as a Catholic and even attended Lake Erie Catholic School for ten years, where she graduated two years early as the youngest valedictorian in the school's history. The school had even put up a billboard in Crystal Beach where she lived, not far from Niagara Falls on the Canadian side. That had really embarrassed her.

Over the next few years she drifted away from the church but never forgot her Catholic roots and always maintained her faith in God. Fame and fortune as an anchor on a leading news show never went to the young lady's head; and she remained humble, driving a Volkswagen Beetle and volunteering three nights a week to help the elderly.

"OLNN has received a disturbing video. It was sent to us from an Israeli news source, a source that has always proven reliable. If this video proves to be authentic..."

Kari married young and recalled the first time she met Mike, an OLNN video technician; and she turned to the left slightly, making eye contact with him as he stood by just off the set. He

gave her a big smile and a thumbs up. It had truly been love at first sight.

"... Armageddon is right around the corner. A group who has been identified as Jihad's Warriors Europe, the same jihadist group most believe is blowing up America every three months, has attacked Vatican City and kidnapped Pope Pius XIII."

The small crowd in *The Divide* let out a gasp, though the Vatican had been threatened many times.

"Screw the Pope," the noisy man in the back shouted, obviously not a churchgoing man. "Why didn't he disappear with all those Christian dudes?"

Bev looked at her three girlfriends sitting across the table, and glanced over at the man. She slid off her seat.

"Oh boy," Rhonda, said. "This might not be pretty. Bev's a Catholic."

Beverly, one of Duluth's famous *Wild Women from the American Legion Post*, made her way to the table at a good rate of speed for such a small woman, and the man assumed she was on her way to the ladies' room.

"Bev's ticked," Bettye said. "She has that little twitch going on."

Bev was not really in a good mood, what with all the stuff going on; and she hit him square in the solar plexus with her small but powerful fist. With a thud, the man hit the floor solidly as he fell from the high top chair.

"Get the hell outta my bar, dipwad," she said looking down at the man who was now pale as a ghost and visibly shaken. "And I will take this," she said taking his beer. "You've had enough. Next time I see you, I'm gonna be dragging your sorry butt to Mass."

The crowd laughed, not surprised at Bev's actions. She looked like a princess, but the Four Wild Women, who were the Three Wild Women until Bettye came along, were known well in the area. All were sharp-shooters and taught self-protection courses to women and children.

“Who the *hell* are you?” the man whimpered, his nose bleeding on the left side, injured in his fall.

“Oh, it don’t matter who I am,” Bev said helping the man to his feet and handing him his Panama hat. “I know you will remember my face.”

Without protest the man made his way toward the front entrance, mumbling along the way; and the crowd turned their attention back to the news about the Pope.

“... in the late-night attack. The Vatican’s Swiss Army Guard Barracks was destroyed, and many were killed in a matter of seconds. Several explosions have been reported, but details are still sketchy.”

Kari took a sip of her water, dabbed a tear, smiled at Mike and continued.

“Who the heck *was* that woman,” the man mumbled as he walked out the door.

“We are now going to show our audience the video, and I must warn you, though brief, it is very disturbing. The production, the graphics and the high definition is about as Hollywood as it gets.”

The Divide crowd mumbled in wait, glued to the numerous screens that were now displaying the news. The first scene opened to the music of R.E.M.’s *It’s The End of the World as We Know It*.

In the distance a crowd of people appeared walking along a sandy beach toward the camera. They were too far away to make any sort of recognition, and all but one were dressed in black.

Then, in a flash, the video jumped forward in time lapse; and the picture became clearer as the video went back to normal speed. Now there was someone in the front, dressed in a white tunic, who seemed to have the attention of the jeering crowd following behind. The crowd was spitting on the man in front who seemed to struggle. It looked as though he was carrying something big.

The video fast forwarded again, or at least appeared to do so; and the figures jerked forward like stickmen as a flock of black starlings zoomed overhead at super-speed.

The man in white became much clearer, and his robe or tunic *had* been white at one time. Today, in this video, it was white with irregular, red stripes. The men in black flew the Jihad's Warriors flag while at the same time beating the frail Pope Pius XIII like the Romans whipped Jesus, and he fell to the ground. The narrow swath of beach seemed to be the pope's Via Dolorosa.

"Renounce your Christ and accept Allah," the leader of the terrorist group shouted in Italian, looking down at Catholicism's holiest man, "and I will spare your life."

Pope Pius XIII lifted his head with great effort but no uncertainty and stared at the man whose entire face was covered in black wrapping except for tiny eye slits, and he shook his head in the negative.

"No," Pope Pius XIII rasped, not much louder than a whisper; and the numerous black flags whipped in the gusty winds. "But I did pray for you, that Jesus will forgive you; and you will not have to suffer the torment of Hell."

The tallest of the Jihadis jerked the pope from the ground, and Abe thought for sure that must have broken his pencil-thin neck but did not. One now carried the pope's large, wooden cross while another soldier beat the back of the heavily bleeding man; and again, he collapsed, his face buried in the sand.

The TV screen went black as the video ended.

Abe was absolutely certain the pope suffered the same ending as Jesus had nearly two thousand years earlier; and he hoped Pope Pius XIII would first die of a heart attack.

The *Divide Disco & Café* was as quiet as a church mouse; and the single, yellow daffodil, fresh out of the garden, stood stoically in a glass of water on the bar; then it wilted.

CHAPTER ONE

For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage one another with these words.

1 Thessalonians 4:16-18

Nine Months Earlier

“Gooooood morning, Arizona! It’s gonna be a most beautiful day in Tucson, just a little bit windy, you know what I mean? This is Juanita Garcia, and today’s weather will be like yesterday.”

Lucile, fresh out of her morning shower, listened to the small TV in her bathroom as she applied another dose of vitamin E oil to the small scar on her cheek. She liked Juanita, the newest intern-in-training with *The Weather Channel* and wished her grandson could meet her. She was sure they would be perfect together, guessing her age at late twenty-something.

“Windy, windy, windy... that is the soup of the day. Sustained winds about fifty-five with gusts, maybe eighty-five or ninety. But the hailstorms, that is what we need to look out for. Southern Arizona and North Mexico could see mega-hailstones today, possibly larger than yesterday. Some of those hailstones were the size of basketballs.”

Tumbleweeds blew across the open fields of Arizona’s deserts, clogging highways and confining residents to their

homes as homes disappeared under piles of the odd, brown plant.

Like all diaspores, the tumbleweed was the entire plant except for the root system. Once mature, the plant detached from the root and traveled via wind across large swaths of unobstructed land.

Some of the campgrounds at *Wallace's Lake* were under piles of tumbleweed, some thirty feet high. The winds remained relatively constant, varying slightly between strong and very strong. Gusts reached near one hundred miles per hour as the erratic jet stream modified the climate of the world.

Lucile walked down the servant's stairway and into the kitchen. She turned on the TV, tuned to the news, of course.

Wallace's Lake had once been a campground and RV park for the upscale camping community. *Prevost* and some older, vintage *Wanderlodge* RVs had been common visitors among the million-dollar Recreational Vehicles.

"Once we even had one of those new *Vantare Platinum Plus* getups visit," Lucile said, speaking to her guests over the news. "Now that was something else! Instead of pulling your car behind, this thing stored it underneath. The guy had his Mercedes sports car with him, slid out from beneath the bus. Paul said the dadblame thing cost nearly three million dollars."

"The latest statistics on the mysterious disappearing people now stands at an estimated one hundred million, worldwide. While many claim it was the even more mysterious 'rapture,' which is never mentioned in the Bible by the way, United Nations President Morsi stated yesterday that the people had not disappeared at all but were moving to the mountains to escape the rioting and the terrific hailstorms plaguing the planet."

"Lucile," Glenda said, sipping the hot cup of brew Lucile poured earlier. "Really? Three million dollars for a stinkin' bus? I bet they were some arrogant people."

“Princess ReAnn Ring from Holland has been found safe after the West Coast tsunami. On a visit to Los Angeles to promote the Charity for Children with Lyme Disease, Princess ReAnn was touring high in the California mountains when the wave hit. The government of Holland is donating five million dollars toward the recovery.”

“Not really,” Lucile said. “They were actually quite the nice couple, Toni and Terry Fahey from Atlanta, I think. They won the Mega Life Lottery, you know, that lottery that supports the National Healthcare Act?”

“The search for Aboud Rehza continues, but the Homeland Security Council is assuring us that the terrorist is most likely dead from rabies.”

“I think they won about thirty million after taxes and free healthcare for life.”

“Wow,” Glenda said. “And they bought a darned RV?”

“Rehza, also known as Jean Pierre, Vinny and other aliases, is said to be responsible for most terrorist attacks against the United States homeland during the past five years, including the destruction of Manhattan on New Year’s Eve. The death toll in New York has now passed 1.3 million, and Manhattan remains deserted.

“Like large areas of Paris and St. Petersburg that were also destroyed in the worldwide coordinated attack, Manhattan has been declared a National Memorial and is closed to the public.”

Glancing out the kitchen window, Lucile’s barn was invisible, hidden by the ongoing dust and tumbleweed storm. Trees fell in the distance, she could feel them hit the ground; and the Inn’s walls shook from the assault.

“Yep, that’s what Paul said, rest his soul. He was such a good man. Three million. It even had a spa.”

“The Pentagon has now acknowledged that more than a third of the Pacific Fleet has disappeared and presumed to be at the bottom of the seas after the unprecedented ‘surface’ tsunami.

“San Diego and Los Angeles remain mostly submerged. It is suspected that every port on the West Coast has been destroyed.”

The sides of the Inn shook again from a sudden gust.

“Yep,” Lucile said, “Bought the RV and split twenty million between Shriners Children’s Hospital and the Gideons Bible Society. Decided to do some volcano exploring and was on their way to New Mexico. Some kinda huge volcano there I never even heard of.”

“Now to the South for another mysterious disappearance.”

“The Duluth, Georgia millionaire whose super-expensive sports car was found last week in the bottom of a Georgia canyon, is still missing. Two bodies were...”

“Hey Lucile. Can you turn that up?”

“Now you’re a news junkie?” Glenda asked Maryellen, teasingly.

The two ladies had been friends for thirty-seven years. Since meeting in college, Glenda and Maryellen had bonded right away. The last few years they had never missed a Sunday service at the *Free Will Community Church* just outside Wichita and were active in the ministry. Glenda printed the menus for the weekly buffet for the homeless, and Maryellen helped in the Sexual Addiction Center which offered free counseling for the most difficult of all addictions to break.

The Center had been quite busy the past year with so many children wanting to change gender. Since the age for transgender operations without parental consent had been lowered by the courts to twelve years old, the caseload had changed dramatically.

“No,” Maryellen said after a pause. “I am familiar with this story, that’s all.”

Lucile Wallace owned *Wallace’s House*; and the bed-and-breakfast Inn overlooked Lake Wallace, a seventy-seven acre lake, undeveloped and normally pristine. Today the lake was

choppy from the gusty wind, and the water was discolored by the dust from the ongoing drought. She adjusted the volume.

“... and remain unidentified. The police report states that the two men apparently were either thrown from the car as it went off the highway or they were hit by the car. Tallulah Gorge is located in Tallulah Falls, a couple of hours north of Atlanta and is a thousand feet deep.

“Jeffrey Ross, the Duluth resident who owned the Rimac Concept One sports car has not been found; and some of his friends told OLNN that he was most likely raptured, the name given for the disappearances.

“Last month in an interview with the Omega Letter News Network, Ross stated that he saw his wife disappear, that would be ex-wife, right in front of his eyes on New Year’s Eve.”

“Welllllll, I’ll tell you one thing; that man was *not* raptured.”

“Now, how do you know that, Maryellen?” Lucile asked.

Lucile enjoyed her annual guests and had become good friends. With that said, Maryellen had a tendency to get on her nerves, a bit of a know-it-all and too judgmental. What especially got on her nerves though was Maryellen’s habit of always being right about so many things.

“I was thinking maybe we would’ve been raptured, but here we are,” Glenda said, sullenly. “Maryellen and I have discussed it a lot lately.”

Lucile pondered Glenda’s comment. Here they were, gossiping as usual; and she was right. None of them had disappeared. Lucile believed the Bible story, or at least she had, until all these people disappeared; and like Glenda said, they were still here.

“Pass me the *Sweet & Low*,” Maryellen asked.

... and stealing the *Sweet & Low*. Lucile knew Maryellen and Glenda didn’t consider stealing restaurant condiments as stealing, and Lucile never commented. That’s the way it was with many customers. Sugar is on the house. Take ten packets

home. And don't forget a couple of handfuls of breath mints on your way out. They are free you know.

"Because I lived in Duluth for a while," Maryellen answered. "His wife dumped him for a missionary or something, and he thought he was Mr. Stud Man. Him and his fancy cars and big house. Plus, he was always hanging out in this bar on the Town Green. Probably an alcoholic."

"It wasn't a bar, it was a disco café and restaurant, Maryellen. There you go extrapolating."

Maryellen gave Glenda the look, and Glenda knew not to pursue. Maryellen stuffed a few paper napkins in her purse.

"... a news leak from Homeland Security, Ross was being investigated for the death of Melissa Ross, though there were numerous witnesses to his ex-wife's disappearance. Ross was also being investigated as a possible link to a terrorist group from Europe and ..."

"Well!" Maryellen harrumphed, "Told you so. You heard it here first!"

They all laughed and raised their coffee cups in the air in a salute; but Maryellen did agonize over all the disappearing people, wondering why she and Glenda had been left behind. They were good Christians and dedicated a lot of time to the Freewill Church. Maybe it wasn't the rapture after all; maybe it was something else.

"God gave us free will," she remembered the pastor saying that day ten years ago on her first visit to the small church. *"That started in the Garden of Eden long ago. That means you have the freedom to be right or to be wrong. It is your call."*

But what was right and what *was* wrong? She and Glenda discussed the subject often and seemed to have a good handle on what was wrong. A lot of things had changed in the morality department. Homosexual was wrong, they both knew *that*; but now it was right. And whores and tax cheats weren't right with

God but were abundant and the themes of reality TV. Man's ways aren't God's ways. She knew that for sure.

"What was that?" Lucile asked with a sudden air of concern, glancing out the window.

In the morning brightness, a glimpse of movement caught her eye, the second time this morning. There had been cases of rabid animals in the area, and she kept a shotgun hidden close to the double-French doors as well as a package of powdered rabies vaccine, just in case.

"What was what?" Glenda asked, following Lucile's gaze.

A knock at the door, a weak knock and a shadow standing outside the translucent, etched glass. The three women looked at each other cautiously. They were a few miles away from civilization, and none heard a car drive up. Another knock.

"... friends questioned said there was no way that Jeffrey Ross had terrorist ties. If you remember in a story last month that appeared in local wire services, Ross was married to Samarra Russell the same night his ex allegedly disappeared.

"Samarra Russell, the ex-wife of Senator Jack Russell who is serving time for pedophilia with a minor boy, is the same Samara Russell who was tried for stealing the Spanish Flu virus from the CDC. More than fifty million have died worldwide, as well as much of the U.S. Navy Submarine Corps, from the flu."

Lucile moved toward the front door cautiously, the shotgun now out of hiding and firmly in her experienced hands.

"Who's there?" she shouted.

No answer; only another weak knock, now at the bottom of the door after the stranger had fallen to the deck. Glenda peaked out an adjacent window.

"He's layin' on the stoop," she said quietly. "At least I think it's a he."

With a swift move, Lucile trained the Remington 870 on the doorway and instructed Maryellen to open the door and move

out of the way. The door swung open, and the three held their breath; but their fear was brief.

The man with matted hair, collapsed and nearly unconscious, moaned incoherently. Lucile set the shotgun aside and leaned over the stranger, maybe forty years old. His breathing was shallow and putrid, but he hung on to consciousness by a thread.

Lucile removed the book from his hand, though it was a chore. The man had a death grip on the *King James Bible* and mumbled something about a wild dog in a cavern or tunnel.

“Have you been bitten?” Lucile asked, examining the man’s arms; but the man was too weak to respond.

The three women, motherly instincts in full gear, drug the sick man into the B&B; and Glenda went to the kitchen to get a pail of cool water. The man’s fever was high, but his skin remained free of perspiration. Lucile had seen the same symptoms when her husband died from heatstroke.

“Samarra Russell is now Samarra Ross and remains in Duluth Medical Research Center with some kind of insect bite. This story would be a great book.

“Yet another disease is stirring. A hotel in Las Vegas is now under quarantine after some of their patrons died during their stay. This story is a rumor so far and has not been corroborated.

“Now to other national news. The Supreme Court has ruled in favor of polygamous marriage. The decision had one dissenting Justice and a compromise limit of four wives or husbands per spouse was included in the language and applies to same-sex and heterosexual marriage in all fifty states. That limit of only four is being challenged.”

The ladies of *Wallace’s House* carefully moved their patient to the dark green, leather sofa, thankful that he was a small man; and the ladies cooled his face as he continued to moan and mumble incoherently.

“A small town in Connecticut has been wiped off the map by yesterday’s hailstorm, and flooding in New Jersey has now claimed

a hundred and ninety-six lives. An Ebola shelter was washed downstream along with contaminated clothing. The river's water continues to 'flow as red as blood' according to local citizens."

Rabies is what Lucile figured, and only one or two had survived the awful disease without vaccine. Fortunately for the man with the tanned skin and silver, matted hair, her weekly supply was refreshed yesterday.

Owning the small game ranch by Wallace's Lake made her privy to the powdered vaccine. The powdered version, still being evaluated in a research program at NIH, was dispersed prior to approval because of the unprecedented rabies outbreak in Canada, the United States and Mexico; and she was thankful.

A strong gust blew the front French doors open with a blast, and Glenda rushed to secure. Across the fields a whirlwind of dust topped a quarter-mile and dead beaver lay by the lake, joined by two large, carnivorous birds having dinner.

"What is your name?" Lucile asked several times; and the man mumbled something, though it wasn't clear. "Sir, it would be best for you to stay conscious. Sir? What is your name?"

Lucile stooped low with her ear just inches from the silver-haired man's lips.

"...several large explosions, possibly nuclear, may have destroyed Iran's main nuclear site and six key military installations. The Iranian Navy in turn, sunk an Israeli destroyer in the Persian Gulf. Troops from several nations have congregated in Damascus, and an invasion of Israel is feared. The Iranian President, insisting that United Nations President Morsi is the Twelfth Imam, is calling for an all-out war with Israel.

"Now this is where it gets interesting. The two strange witnesses at the Temple Mount in Israel have predicted the destruction of Jerusalem. Evangelical Christians around the world have denounced the predictions, saying God would never allow Israel to be destroyed.

“That’s the early news of the morning. This is Debbie Stegall, sitting in for the vacationing host, Kari Vermi. We will be right back.”

As the sick man lay quietly on the wide, green couch, he drifted in and out of consciousness; and the dreams in his head, known only to him, were almost too frightening to bear: wild coyotes on the attack in a dark tunnel below the Mexican border.

Glenda put the last clean glass into the cabinet as the women finished cleaning the large kitchen.

“Do you think he will make it?” Maryellen asked, clearly concerned.

“I don’t know,” Lucile replied. “It’s too windy to move him to the hospital, so we will have to comfort him as best we can until the dust storms subside. I will start the vaccine.”

“What if he doesn’t have rabies?” Glenda asked.

“Won’t hurt him, either way,” Lucile said, reaching into the refrigerated box to retrieve a dose of rabies vaccine. “As much rabies is goin’ around, a dose of vaccine can’t hurt. And besides, a man immune to wild animals would be a great catch.”

The three laughed and toasted, coffee cups held high.

“Did he ever say what his name was? He didn’t have any ID,” Maryellen added.

Lucile injected the sick man with the only dose of the liquid vaccine remaining, noting the small crucifix necklace and wondered if he was a preacher. She placed a small Band-Aid over the puncture, though no blood appeared.

“He mumbled something,” Lucile said. “Sounded like Benny or Vinty?”

“Rabies cases continue to increase in the United States, Canada, Mexico and much of Europe. It is being described by epidemiologists as ‘unprecedented.’ This is Debbie Stegall, so please stay tuned. When we come back?”

“Why would the Supreme Court legalize necrophilia? Believe it or not, that is a consideration now that pedophilia has been decriminalized.”

CHAPTER TWO

"... and a third of the creatures which were in the sea and had life, died; and a third of the ships were destroyed..."

Revelation 8:9

"So you thought that disappearin' thing was a joke, did ya?"

The voice echoed throughout the small church, white with white shutters and a spotless, white double-door at the front. The church sat in a field of bright yellow daffodils.

The contrast between the brilliantly yellow flowers and their blue-green leaves would have been stunning to anyone driving down Highway 85 toward Lukeville.

The landscape was clearly out of place in drought-ridden, southern Arizona; and other than the field of yellow jonquils, the landscape was brown and barren.

"Welllllll my friends, let me tell ya this. It weren't no joke. It was the folk who saw the star, don'tcha know. They recognized that bright light in the night sky, yes they did. They knew what it was, don'tcha know; they understood the sign."

Where am I? His mind was abliss with dizziness. Am I dreaming again?

He had heard that story, the one about vanishing people and spirits going to heaven without dying first, many times from his mother. He also recalled a bright light in the sky. His thoughts drifted as the preacher at the front, preached.

"You just wait, Sonny Boy."

"I know, Mom. People are going to start disappearing. Two women are going to be in a field doing whatever women do in a field, and one will disappear!"

He tried not to shout at his mother that day. She really wasn't the Holy Roller type, but she was definitely sold on God.

The enthusiasm was fine as a child, and he heard about the miraculous wonders of the last days, over and over again. Now he was seventeen, preparing to start college a year early and knew the story was pure mythology. He would try to humor her as best he could, but how could anyone think such hogwash?

"What were the two women doing in a field in the first place, Mom?" he would ask sarcastically.

"It was just an example, Jeffrey Ross. Don't you be sassin' the Lord's story. I guess I'll just keep prayin' you come back to your senses. This is not a joke. By the time you figger it out, Mr. Smarty Pants, it's gonna be too late."

"So you thought that disappearin' thing was a joke, did ya?" the preacher at the front repeated, and Jeff's eyes fluttered. He was not sure he had ever experienced the headache of all headaches as his head pounded away.

Struggling to see, it seemed like his eyes were open but everything was a foggy, opaque yellowish blur. For the first time he realized he was sitting instead of lying down, and the seat was uncomfortable to the derriere.

Though he didn't know it was a pew, he did know it was hard like many pews were... and someone was holding his hand. Maybe I *am* dreaming, he thought. That had happened before, way too often; but he definitely hoped he was not. Sometimes when they started like this, it was not a fuzzy-warm dream; and he quickly recalled his recent dreams of the *Bad Place*, a series of caves with lights provided by fire. He shivered out of fear as he recalled the bizarre moaning and grinding teeth of those unseen.

The hand-holder squeezed gently, and he found himself hoping it was a girl and not a guy. *Where am I? So warm.*

As hard as he tried, he couldn't seem to open his eyes completely and harsh rays of sunlight tried to sneak through tiny openings of his eyelids, the veins clearly visible through the pink flesh.

Maybe it's the star, he briefly considered; but the light wasn't *that* bright. Nothing in the night sky was as bright as the star, including a full, pink moon.

"What was it, Pastor Enoch?" the young lady in the front pew asked. "What *was* the light? Who saw it? I ain't heard nuthin' 'bout no lights in the sky e'cept all them shootin' stars."

Jeff's eyes struggled to open and focus on voices from the front that were invisible but familiar. He dared not look to the side, and a fear overcame him, a brief chill, then warmth returned as quickly as it had departed. *Was the guy up front talking about the light he had seen the night Melissa disappeared? Blip?* And he began to recall. An accident, a shooting, and then... nothing. A complete blank.

"It's the light of God, don'tcha know. That's what it is. Many have seen that-there light, but only a few of 'em done recognized it. That be the truth; and that my good friends, will set'cha free. Jesus told his buddies that, don'tcha know. The truth'll set'cha free. It will. Only a few done figgered out what it was, but you keep your eye out for that light. It's a sign, don'tcha know."

The young questioner, dressed like she was right out of a Roy Rogers cowboy movie in the '50s, was maybe seventeen. Her red and blue dyed hair hung limply in pigtails with blue and white ribbons, her denim blue skirt with white tassels and flannel shirt clearly out of place. She looked like a ragdoll with a tattoo, and her tattoo indicated she was a *Patriot*.

"All them Bible stories are true, don'tcha know. There was a flood, there was an Adam and then an Eve. You think Adam and Eve evolved, do ya? Nope, they did not. God made 'em, just like it says."

Jeff tried to focus, but dizziness was winning the battle inside his head. The headache was like nothing he had experienced. He tried to remember how he got wherever he was but could not.

If that guy says don'tcha know one more time, and then he remembered the "don'tcha know." It was Stuttering Stu... no, Stu killed himself in the school cafeteria. Who was this? He recognized the voice from a time past... but when?

Then it all began to come back. A little white church with the yellow daffodils somewhere along Lukeville Highway. Angels and demons... and a dark door leading to the *Bad Place*.

The hand holding his disappeared; and he felt a sudden chill. He looked to the right, cautiously; and there was no hand-holder, only a near empty church with a preacher and a Dale Evans juniorette. Three people in a small white church in a giant field of daffodils. He had a few questions for the preacher.

"I guess some of ya want to learn about the Almighty the easy way; ya just don't have *time* to do all that-there studyin' on your own, don'tcha know. Maybe a *CliffsNotes* version of some kind would work for ya. Am I right about that, Jeffrey Ross?"

In the distance, thunder boomed; and Jeff hoped it wasn't another hailstorm.



Wild Willy sat quietly at *The Divide Disco & Café* on the Duluth Town Green, waiting patiently for The Admiral and Sheryl. The afternoon was cooler than normal, at least the *new* normal; and the late afternoon sun shone brightly in a cloudless sky.

The past few days had been unusually stressful, even for Will; and his mood was... *what?* Maybe a bit melancholic? The rescue of Jeff's kids, though a success, resulted in a sprained hand and cracked rib; and now he had a cold he couldn't seem to shake. Age was beginning to take a toll as he reminisced about his days of two-hundred fifty pushups that were now long past. In his personal life however, things had never been so good.

The world was coming to an end, at least according to many; and he had fallen in love, finally. Islamic jihadism was taking over the world, and he had fallen in love with a Muslim woman. He could only smile at the ways things turned out, and he found himself wishing he had spent a little more time learning the spiritual world instead of the material world.

God worked in mysterious ways, Will knew that. Had the journey through *his* book of life not taken the twists and turns it had, he would not have met Aludra, the mysterious woman from Pakistan. That changed his life, at least the way he looked at life.

He had been wrong about so many things, including Islam; and he knew his parents, rest their souls, would not have approved of his Muslim girlfriend; but there could be no better heart.

“Willis,” she said after their third date, “Not all Muslims are like the ones in the headlines. Let me ask you this?”

“Go ahead,” he said.

“You like airplanes and cars and fast things. How many planes you read about today in the news that landed safely?”

“Say what?” Will asked.

“How many planes landed safely yesterday?”

“I do not have a clue,” Will said, thinking about the question.

“Exactly,” Aludra said. “Had one crashed, it would be all over the news. Land safely, nothing in news. Do you understand what I am telling you?”

Will thought about it and knew she was right. Bad news sells; good news does not. It was irrelevant though. She was baptized in the Jordan River yesterday, just like Jesus had been about two thousand years earlier; and now she was a full-fledged, card-carrying Christian. Who would’ve ever thought?

“Wake up, Wild Willy,” Sheryl said; and Will was startled that he hadn’t noticed them coming in. *Slipping?* He couldn’t let *that*

happen, or his days were definitely numbered. He massaged his sore hand.

The waitress who was not really a waitress but a server, approached from the back of the bar serving station, a single pink drink on her tray. She sat the pink lemonade on the high-topped table and a small, coral dish with three olives, just as the man had ordered. Will introduced the new “server” to The Admiral and Sheryl.

“This is Mandy,” Will offered, and The Admiral shook her small, dainty hand gently, thinking her smile could melt a battleship. “And do not call her a waitress. It’s illegal or something. She is a ‘server.’”

The Admiral and Sheryl looked at Will, puzzled.

“Really,” Will said. “*The Divide* put an ad on the radio looking to hire some waitresses and was nearly sued. Apparently, waitress is no longer cool, kind of like stewardesses used to be stewardesses but are now flight attendants. Waitresses are now servers. Don’t forget.”

Mandy had never met the two but had heard of them often since taking the new job at *The Divide*. The pay was low, but she had no complaints. The people were nice and the tips were great; and Abe the Bartender was not only handsome but knew a lot about a subject she knew little about, God.

“Oh,” Sheryl said. “Mandy Candy?”

Mandy blushed and hoped no one noticed.

“Abe told me about you, young lady, and is most impressed, I must say. Said you were a quick learner. Abe the Bartender is not an easy man to please, so you must be special.”

“I heard that,” Abe shouted from the bar and was glad *The Divide* had maintained a clientele as people continued to flow through the entrance and toward the free buffet bar.

Many if not most businesses around Atlanta had closed since the dam was blown up. Things just never recovered, and the Flu hadn’t helped. Many Atlanta streets that once bustled with

traffic were now littered with trash, human and animal waste and numerous homeless folk.

There were no street preachers anymore, and Abe wondered if they had disappeared with the rest of the people. In the Duluth Town Green along Main Street, there were no more men wearing sandwich boards stating "The End is Near" so maybe their end came to fruition.

Steeverino's on the Green still served the finest pizza around, only there were few people now that so many were moving to the mountains. *Sassy Girl Designs* maintained a brisk business, secured by a loyal clientele and unique apparel.

Abe guessed people were just scared; why wouldn't they be scared? North Georgia mountain real estate was booming like a giant wildfire in California, but that wouldn't save the people from the asteroids. Abe wiped the bar down, subconsciously.

"Well, thank you," Mandy said. "I guess if he can deal with me for a month, he can deal with anyone. I get kind of moody sometimes."

Sheryl smiled at the young lady and noted the small crucifix tattooed on her wrist, small but distinct and bright red. She ordered a pink lemonade, and The Admiral ordered his regular: Bloody Mary, celery salt and Tabasco.

"And he believes in God, too," Mandy whispered, before turning to leave.

"Is that unusual?" Sheryl whispered back.

"Yes, very," Mandy said, looking over her shoulder. "Very."

Abe had mentioned the Gideons Bible episode to Sheryl and The Admiral. That Bible seemed to turn up in all sorts of places and must be a divine sign in some way, they all decided. How could it not be?

Five years earlier the Bible had mysteriously appeared in Jeff's overnight bag after a trip to Jamaica, and they all knew Jeff wouldn't have done *that*. He didn't believe in God back then, thought it was mythology; and he was adamant about the

subject. That's what led to Jeff's divorce, Sheryl knew; they all knew.

With a small smile forming at the corners of her mouth, Sheryl remembered how they all had a good laugh about it and how perplexed Jeff was, trying to analyze, as he always did, how the Gideons Bible could have possibly made it from a nightstand drawer into his bag. In retrospect, she thought, that may have been the turning point in his life.

"Then all of a sudden," Mandy continued, "this Bible just appeared beside me the first time I ever walked in this place. I came in with TJ the cop, had a drink and there it was. Autographed to me."

Mandy left and headed to the bar, shaking her head.

"Still no word on Jeff?" The Admiral asked Wild Willy.

Sheryl's face was abnormally pale, considering the heat records that continued to be set; and Will thought she might be sick. And being sick in this day and age was not a good thing.

"No. It's been a week..."

"Ten days," Sheryl corrected.

A glitter of sunlight reflected off the diamond on her finger like the disco ball hanging over the empty dance floor, and she pondered whether she and Justin would ever say "I do" in front of a priest, so many priests having disappeared.

"Yeah, I guess it has been ten days," Will acknowledged. "Time just seems to be zooming by at an enormous speed."

"What do you think happened?"

"I don't know, Justin," Will answered, using The Admiral's name for the first time in years. "I don't know, but I do know Jeff; and he could turn up tomorrow. He is very resilient."

"If no one has found his body yet, I agree," The Admiral said. "Who do you think the two guys were that drove Jeff's Rimac off the Tallulah Gorge Bridge?"

Will didn't think anyone would find Jeff's body, because he had spent two days looking since returning from Las Vegas with the three girls. Driving to a campground near the sight of the accident, he had released two of the Israeli nanodrones, compliments of his *sources* in Mossad.

The tiny drone spies, the size and appearance of dragonflies, photographed in visual and infrared. Of the twelve nanodrones he had been *gifted*, he knew the two dragonflies would do best, considering the wind.

The wind was the enemy of drone flight technology, especially gusty wind; and there was a lot of that going on lately. The unusual jet stream activity had made a mess of the wind, with normally windy places like Chicago now experiencing only slight breezes, if any. Other areas had unprecedented winds, and there was that word again. *Unprecedented*. It was turning up all the time it seemed.

The dragonfly was unique in many ways in the world of insects, and Israel had taken full advantage of such. From the animal order *Odonata*, the dragonfly's head was mostly eyes. Each of the two compound eyes consisted of about thirty thousand individual tiny eyes or lenses. The main function of the insect's brain was used to process information from the two eyes which offered near 360-degree vision.

The dragonfly was unique in its movement and speed of movement among all animals with the exception of the hummingbird. Each of the dragonfly's four wings operated independently, allowing movement in all directions, including backwards. The area of lift provided by the large wings not only allowed rapid acceleration but also allowed the insect to battle the wind.

"Don't know," Will answered The Admiral, wondering how the two strangers played into the tale, "but there's a story there. Do the police know if the two guys drove the car off the bridge? I heard they may have been hit, but since Jeff wasn't found..."

The Israelis had produced a nearly exact duplicate. Each Nano-DF was equipped with thirty thousand almost invisible cameras in each of the two eyes. The wind was combatted, at least as much as possible, through the nuclear powered, fully-adjustable wings. Will had been hard-pressed to tell the difference between the spybot and the real dragonflies in the trial tests a year before.

Because of the microscopic nuclear power plant in each Nano-DF, radiation was virtually undetectable and the dragonfly could fly forever.

“The police aren’t saying for sure, but I know the County Sheriff,” The Admiral said. “Met his daddy in the Navy, a guy named Corley. I gave him a call once the phone lines cleared, and he said they were ninety-nine percent sure the two guys stole the car. Sheriff Corley told me the dual skid marks were not from the brakes. Apparently they didn’t know how fast that thing could accelerate, lost control and there you go. End of story... except, where is Jeff?”

Will had discharged the drones to search five square miles of Tallulah Gorge Park and the surrounding area. The drones flew under the canopy of the forest, detecting their way through the trees and foliage with sensor technology the rest of the world knew little about; but the Israelis were way ahead of the rest of the world in nanotechnology and its aspects for defense. Or offense if necessary.

“And they found blood on the steering wheel,” The Admiral continued. “Running tests now, and said it would be another three weeks. Everything is backed up.”

“Well, we’ll just see about that,” Sheryl huffed, picking up her iPhone. “Let me give the governor a call.”

The blood was something new, Will thought. It would be interesting to watch this story’s finale. He had seen many stories with tragic possibilities play out in his and his friend’s lives, like Sheryl’s kidnapping; but somehow they seemed to turn out better than would be expected.

“How many ships did we lose?” Will asked The Admiral, changing the subject.

The Admiral stared at the four women, dressed to the nines, sitting in the upper level of the restaurant-discotheque where a rowdy crowd had gathered. A glass dropped to the hardwood floor beside the faux fireplace and shattered.

Abe set a Bloody Mary with Tabasco, rimmed with celery salt, and a pink lemonade on Mandy Candy’s server tray. He motioned for the new bar-boy to get a broom and clean up the broken glass. It seemed people were drinking a lot earlier, and a lot more than they had in the past. Abe could understand why that would be.

The world was in a precarious place. He knew the predictions about the days ahead and had hoped he wouldn’t be around for the events to come. Jesus had even warned his own apostles about this time, urging them to pray they wouldn’t have to go through it. And now here *he* was, going through it so it seemed.

“Still being assessed,,” The Admiral replied, “but the Ruskie lost most of their entire fleet, except for submarines that were deep under the surface and ships in other parts of the world. The Chinese have released no info, but intelligence says their navy was pretty much wiped out.”

“So what do you think?” Will repeated. “The entire Pacific Fleet?”

“Let me address that,” Sheryl interrupted. “I had a video conference with the President and the Joint Chiefs early this morning. Most of the Pacific and Indian Ocean fleets have been destroyed, including ours. More than two hundred ships including three aircraft carrier groups, are nowhere to be found. Debris from a U.S. Navy destroyer was found twenty-seven miles inland in South China. Many bodies are washing ashore in Asia, India and Japan.”

Sheryl scanned the room, though the information was not classified.

“San Diego, for the most part, at least as far as the Pentagon is concerned, is negated. Most of the military aircraft stationed along the West Coast were evacuated, but the Naval and Marine bases were no match for the wave. This happened from San Diego to Alaska.”

Wild Willy always maintained his calm demeanor, even in the most difficult of situations; but his surprise was evident. One wave in a single day had destroyed most of the world’s navies? The economic consequences would be severe, maybe irreversible.

“If that isn’t enough bad news,” Sheryl said, “much of the world’s farming belts are in the plains and lower lying areas. Any of those farming regions rimming the Pacific are no more. Starvation will become even more rampant.”

“Yeah. And cannibalism,” Will added glumly. “Wars are gonna be a lot different with the loss of all the ships, and I got a bad feeling that the Big One is right around the corner. The weight of all that water may have stirred a few faults.”

Mandy smiled as she set the lemonade and the Bloody Mary on the high top table for eight.

“Yes, and according to those two guys over in Israel,” Will piped in, “We haven’t seen anything yet.”

“What two guys?” Mandy asked, recalling a news blurb.

“The Two Witnesses,” Sheryl said. “They are mentioned in the Bible, *Book of Revelation*. I suppose it is possible that they are the witnesses, with all that’s going on in the world. They are predicted to appear out of nowhere when the last seven years are here.”

Who knows, Sheryl thought. Who *really* knows?

“You should see those witnesses, or whoever they are; they pull no punches,” Will said. “They claim to be able to call ‘fire down from heaven’ and make water turn to blood. Like Moses did. Only, it hasn’t happened yet.”

“It will happen, Will,” Sheryl continued. “‘Yet’ is the key word. Just wait. They are supposed to preach for three and a half years. The Bible is very specific about the timing.”

“God years or human years?” Will asked. “Time seems to vary between human thought and God thought.”

“Actually,” Sheryl continued, “It spells it out by number of days.”

A ruckus on the upper level got the group’s attention, and Will rubbed his sore hand in anticipation. *The Divide*, unlike many bar-restaurants, had no reputation of fights or controversy until the last few months it seemed; and Will felt a fight coming on as profane accusations flooded the air. He wasn’t sure his hand could take another encounter.

The patrons became as quiet as mice as the two men on the upper level cursed the four women for turning down their invitation to dance. *Whore* and *tramp* screamed from the mouths of the two, and spittle formed along the lips of the taller man. Their faces raged red.

Abe hit the 911 button, and a signal arrived immediately at the Duluth Police Station, less than a half-mile away. Abe grabbed his 4-iron, and that was when the upper level went bonkers.

“You want to dance, Big Boy?” the smaller of the four women asked as she sprang from her seat, fajita skillet in hand.

With one swift move, Bev slammed the iron skillet into the tall man’s left knee; and with a thud he fell to the floor writhing in pain. A siren approached from the distance.

The second man, shorter but fatter, grabbed the chair that Wanda was in, spinning it violently and throwing her to the floor. The fight ended shortly thereafter when the other three women came to Wanda’s rescue.

Before Abe, Will and The Admiral made it to the steps to the upper level, both men were screaming in pain. A swift kick to Fat Boy’s groin had been perfectly placed by the lady named Bettye

Pritchett when B.J. hit him squarely in the chest with possibly her best ever karate chop. The four ladies calmly sat down as the two men crawled toward the steps and the 4-iron in Abe's hands.

"Don't think you're gonna need that," the tall man with spittle said in a raspy whisper, dragging his broken patella behind.

In some ways it was a lucky day for the two hooligans, as TJ the Cop and another officer handcuffed the two. The guy could have a broken head instead of a broken knee, and TJ figured the men had no idea who they were fooling with.

As the crowd settled, The Admiral asked, "Who are those women?"

"They're the Four Wild Women from American Legion," Mandy said calmly. "Abe told me all about them."

"In other news..."

With the ruckus now concluded, Sheryl focused on the news coming from the flat-screen overhead.

"Aboud Rehza, also known as Vinny, is nowhere to be found after his escape from the federal maximum security prison for terrorists in Colorado. Authorities claim that Rehza is not a lone wolf terrorist but is the man behind the nuclear destruction of Manhattan on New Year's Eve and the Buford, Georgia dam a few years ago. Rehza is also suspected of involvement in the Spanish Flu virus theft from CDC.

"Federal agents, it has been leaked, are watching several known Islamic villages that have been established over the past few years in different parts of the Pacific Northwest and Texas. These 'villages' are said to be governed under strict Sharia law, and Rehza may have associate contacts in some of these villages.

"Though the search for Rehza is ongoing, Homeland Security believes he is dead from rabies. Let's hope so."

"I have a question for you, Wild Willy," Sheryl said.

“Shoot,” Will responded.

“How did you rescue Jami, Jenni and Audry? You haven’t mentioned Las Vegas.”

After a brief search for his phone, Will said, “Watch this.”

CHAPTER THREE

“God must really love you, Jeffrey Ross.”
The warm hand squeezed gently, reassuringly. It was Missy T. He recognized her voice immediately and knew he must be in trouble of some kind.

“How long have I been here?” Jeff asked. “Am I dead?”

“No; no. You’re not dead, Jeffrey; but you almost were. Yep, Kipper T and I saved your butt again. We cannot keep doing this. You are not the young man you once were.”

Jeff liked Missy T and Kipper T; had from the get-go. His two guardian angels, so he learned.

“If you were dead, Jeff, you wouldn’t be here.”

The voice was Kipper’s.

The hard-drive of Jeff’s memory whirred into action as he recalled that day of near death. He hadn’t even known it was happening, death that is, nor could he figure out why there were so many little white churches sitting in fields of the yellowest daffodils he had ever seen.

The Spanish Flu had almost killed him, and he didn’t see the irony at the time... that his near-death experience, instead of killing him, actually saved his life, his eternal life he now realized and was still amazed at his transition, and the speed at which it happened.

It was then, when he nearly died from the flu, that he met Kipper T and Missy T, pale skin with dark hair and the bluest of eyes. He should have known then that they were angels. They sort of glowed, just a wee bit. But then, at that time in his life he didn’t believe in angels.

“We’re your guardian angels, Jeffrey.”

He remembered that comment from Missy T, thinking for sure he must be delirious. It turned out he *was* delirious at the time, at least the Jeff that was in intensive care; but the Jeff who was in the ever-expanding restaurant along Highway 85, just north of Lukeville, was not delirious. A mystery, for certain. Another one.

“Yep,” Kipper T said, “most people only get one; but for some reason God decided you needed two.”

“You must be a bad boy,” Missy T had chimed in; and he guessed in many ways he was a bad boy. That’s when Missy T introduced him to her brother, Enoch. Enoch was a stutterer, a severe stutterer; except when he preached.

“Alalia syllabaris. That’s what they call it,” Missy T explained. “Stuttering. It’s a speech disorder, not a disease. You can’t *catch* it.”

Stutterstew.

Jeff recalled his junior high school buddy, his best friend. His name was Stewart, and Jeff had gotten in his share of fights, defending his friend from the kids who made fun of him. They ridiculed and called him Stutterstew.

“What’s your mom havin’ for supper? Stutterstew?”

And the kids never knew the hurt it caused. They really didn’t mean it, just kids being kids; but he had never been that way, making fun of people. However, they realized it later that day in the school cafeteria, Stutterstew hanging by his skinny little neck from the rafters.

“We were only teasing,” Mary Jane screamed, falling to the gray tile floor by the teacher’s dining table and sobbing. “He was only fourteen.”

“For Pete’s sake,” Jeff had cried. “Look what we’ve done.”

Jeff turned away from God that day in that cafeteria, though he was already having doubts; but he knew full well a loving God would not do to Stutterstew what had been done. One of life’s

many learning experiences he guessed and drifted back to the present, leaving the clouds of reminiscence in the distance.

“Is this heaven?” Jeff asked Missy T, looking around the small church.

“And behold,” Pastor Enoch preached to the small flock. “We have seen nothing yet.

“Times of darkness lay ahead,” Enoch preached, “and the *bowllllls* of God’s anger will be poured out on Earth, Sun and Moon, don’tcha know. The stars will disappear, yes they will; and the sun will turn black. The moon will be as red as blood. Then what’cha gonna do? What’cha gonna do when you find out it’s all true. The end is upon us my friends, and pay heed to the witnesses.”

“No. Not heaven... but almost,” Kipper T answered. “It’s kind of like we are on tour... *don’tcha* know.”

Kipper T winked and smiled broadly; and Jeff and Missy laughed out loud. That’s when Jeff’s headache became worse.

“I heard that back there,” Pastor Enoch shouted from the pulpit. “Don’tcha know.”

“Do you remember what happened to you?” Missy T asked. “Don’t you have a headache?”

Jeff lifted his arm, realizing for the first time how bad it hurt; and his hand probed the left side of his skull. He felt a small indentation, a small indentation that had not been there the last time he checked.

“Ow. Holy Shmoly that hurts.”

“Yes, I bet it does,” Missy T said. “You got shot, twice. Probably just as well you don’t remember. It was a lot worse when you got here.”

“How long *have* I been here?” Jeff asked again.

“About a day, our time; about ten days, your time.”

A day? Jeff thought, thinking a head wound couldn’t have healed that fast. No way.

“Ya’ll pay close attention to Elijah and Enoch, those two preachers in Jerusalem,” Pastor Enoch shouted. “When they speak, fire rains down from the sky, don’tcha know. Now, can you imagine that? No rain from heaven but fire instead. And then they going to change the water to blood, and the waters will be poisoned by the arsenic from Old Man Moon above.”

“What happened?” Jeff asked.

Recall as he might, he could remember nothing about getting shot.

“God does that to you,” Kipper T said.

“Does what?” Jeff asked.

“Kills the pain. One of his great gifts. The body’s miraculous ability to mask pain when injured severely, kind of like the body’s own morphine system,” Missy T added. “You’re not as young as you used to be. I keep telling you that.”

“You stopped to rescue a lady on your way to the North Georgia Mountains,” Kipper said. “Two guys were assaulting her, and you pulled over to help. Just like you were a twenty year old soldier. I was really proud of you, and you scared the you-know-what out of the two men, only they really were not hoodlums.”

“The two guys shot me?” he asked.

“The lady shot you, twice. Once in the head and once in the arm,” Missy T explained, giving Kipper *the look*. “And don’t listen to Kipper T. You’re old, not twenty-something.”

Jeff tried to digest the information. Why would the victim shoot him?

“The two men were her sons, and they were having a family squabble. They thought you were dead and stole your car, which is now in a warehouse being analyzed by the car’s manufacturer. Why do you need a million-dollar car, Jeffrey?” Missy T asked. “You could’ve helped a whole lot of people with a million dollars. What’s wrong with a Chevy?”

“What happened to my Rimac?” Jeff asked.

“Well, the two men didn’t know how to drive an electric car,” Kipper T said. “Once they figured out there were no gears to shift, they gave her full acceleration.”

“And what happened?” Jeff said after a pause, a worried pause.

He was well aware of the Rimac’s enormous power, and he was sure those two kids had no clue what a thousand horsepower could do with no restraining gears.

“Drove straight off the bridge. Landed in the bottom of Tallulah Gorge, not too far from the fancy-dancy, million-dollar sports car,” Missy T said with a scowl.

“You need to pay close attention to this quote, Mr. Jeffrey Sports Car Man Ross.”

Sometimes Missy T pulled no punches. Jeff learned that in their first meeting and prepared himself for whatever was to come.

“From everyone who has been given much, much will be required.”

Missy T quoted the scripture, looking him squarely in the eyes.

“Do you know who said that?”

“No,” Jeff replied. “Not really.”

“Good,” Missy T said. “You can look it up in that Gideons Bible that keeps showing up.”

The young girl dressed like Dale Evans or Annie Oakley, he couldn’t figure out which, was mesmerized by Pastor Enoch’s teaching and remained attentive, almost like a groupie.

“So what does the quote mean?” Jeff asked.

Missy T and Kipper T exchanged glances as Pastor Enoch spoke of coming plagues, earthquakes and war the likes of which man had never witnessed before.

“It means stop spending your money on frivolous cars. You think electric cars don’t pollute the air? Where do you think the electric company gets the electricity to charge your car batteries?” Missy T asked.

“God has allowed you a lot of financial wealth. He is not against money. Money is a test; so if you want to pass the test, Mr. Mensa, you better be generous.

“God gave King Solomon lots and lots of money. Look what he did with it. He built stables of gold and had wives galore. He built temples to other gods, a total no-no. This was not what God intended, as Solomon soon found out.”

Jeff’s thoughts were divided. He heard Missy T’s message, and he did try to be generous; but he couldn’t help his disappointment at the loss of his *Rimac Concept One*. He had always been a car man and wondered if maybe it was genetic. His father was a car man too.

“So when do I get to go back?” Jeff asked. “And what do I tell everyone?”

What *would* he tell everyone? Where would he say he had been for ten days? And for the first time in the small church, his thoughts, dreams or whatever was happening in his life, drifted back to Samarra. Would she live or die?

The more Jeff’s faith strengthened in a God he never believed existed, his travail got worse.

“Don’t worry, Jeff,” Missy T said. “We will take care of that. But stop trying to rescue people all the time. The world is a different place than it was six months ago, and we are always with you. By the way, Samarra will be fine.”

“The test of God is on mankind,” Pastor Enoch shouted from the front, “and a bunch of you out there in the world gonna fail the test, don’tcha know. You who say, ‘I would never betray God or his Son’ or ‘I would gladly give my life for the Lord’ are gonna get the chance to prove that claim, don’tcha know. Get ready.”

“Always?” Jeff asked, troubled. A blush washed across his face. “Even, well... like even when I shower or shave or...”

“Are you always going to be around to rescue me?” Jeff asked.

“We will always be here,” Kipper T said. “Those are our instructions.”

“So,” Jeff asked, wondering how he would ask the question, “Do you always see me? I mean, like when I’m dressing and stuff?”

“We live in a different dimension than you,” Kipper T said; “and no one can see us except who we are assigned to watch over. We do not ‘watch over’ you 24/7 but come to your rescue when in need. Or when we need to talk with you.”

“*You don’t have much time, Mr. Ross,*” Enoch said, looking directly at Jeff.

“Don’t have much time for what?” Jeff asked Missy T, worried.

“Oh, don’t worry,” Missy T said. “That’s just Enoch... don’tcha know.”

“You take that wafer, Mistuh Ross. You digest that wafer, and you will see what I’m talkin’ ‘bout. You said you wanted a CliffsNotes version of the mighty word of the Lawd,” Enoch shouted at the top of his lungs, “And this here is it.”

“Yeah, so you better be good, Mr. Mensa,” Missy T said, handing Jeff three small wafers the color of graham crackers.

“Eat one now, Jeff. Save the other two until the *right time.*”

Jeff placed the small wafer on his tongue and the taste was both bitter and sweet. He felt no different when the wafer dissolved.

“What will the wafer do?” Jeff asked.

“Exactly what Enoch said,” Kipper T commented. “Exactly what Enoch said. CliffsNotes.”

Missy T began to sing.

"We know when you are naughty. We know when you are nice. We know if you've been good or bad..."

And then they vanished, just like Melissa had vanished New Year's Eve; and he suddenly found himself in a white, sterile room, like a hospital room.

"Mr. Ross?" the nurse asked.

His eyelids fluttered, then opened; but the glare from the small, fluorescent ceiling fixture assaulted his senses and his eyes shut quickly.

"Mr. Ross," the nurse repeated. "Do you know who you are?"

Jeff forced his eyes open once again,

"How did I get here?" Jeff asked Nurse Bivens and thought she looked vaguely familiar.

His head was spinning, and he suffered a sudden bout of nausea. He had no memory of how and when he got to wherever he was, and a salty-sweet taste lined his mouth.

"Don't you worry, Mr. Ross. We called the Duluth Police and they're comin' to pick you up tomorrow. Did you know your car went over the bridge at Tallulah Gorge?"

"Where am I?"

"We found you in the woods," she said and smiled graciously. "Do you know how you got in the woods, Mr. Ross? We are pretty remote out here. Thank goodness you had your wallet."

"No. No, I don't remember how I got here. And yes, I know who I am. Where is this place?" he asked, scanning the pale blue walls of the small infirmary. "My car is in Tallulah Gorge?"

He lay comfortably in a hospital bed, but it was the only bed in the facility and was elevated slightly. The smell of smoke permeated throughout.

"We're not far from Tallulah Falls, just up the road a bit," Nurse Bivens stated, "and yes, that is smoke. Forest fires."

Jeff rubbed his lips with his tongue, and the taste was like none he remembered. Sort of salty; sort of sweet. Kind of like

Cracker Jacks with a touch of bitters, and he wondered where *that* came from. His mind searched, but his recollections were few. What in the world was he doing in Tallulah Falls?

“Some folk blamin’ it on that Christian militia group up the mountain, but I figger it’s a camper.

“These migrants to the mountains we all of a sudden have don’t know nothin’ about campin’,” and Jeff turned to see who was speaking. He didn’t recall seeing anyone else.

“Dr. Dan Redman, meet Jeffrey Ross,” Nurse Bivens said.

The two men shook hands, and Dan stared at Jeff’s eyes.

“Not flirting, Mr. Ross; just checking those pupils. They were purty dilated. Don’t worry, big guy. I’m gettin’ ready to marry that purty little lady over there.”

Nurse Bivens blushed and smacked her husband-to-be with a Duke University Medical Center towel.

“Looks like you got hit in the head with somethin’; any idea what?”

“Not really, Dr. Redman,” Jeff answered. “Not sure why I would even be injured.”

“DanMan.”

“Pardon me?” Jeff asked.

“Just call me DanMan. All my friends and both enemies call me DanMan, so I reckon you might just as well do the same.”

“Dan’s the local veterinarian too,” Nurse Bivens piped in.

Jeff looked at the doctor, a little amused; or maybe a little frightened.

“You’re the vet? And you’re taking care of me?” Jeff asked, laughing.

“Yep,” the doctor said. “That’s why they call me DanMan.”

“That’s right, Mr. Ross. They used to call him Dan the Man ‘cause he’s so talented...”

“And smart,” said the doctor.

“I was gettin’ to that, honey!” she said, smacking him again with her Duke towel. “And he’s smart.”

Jeff enjoyed the banter and thought about Samarra. They bantered a lot, something friends do; and he hoped she would have no further relapses from the bite.

“When do I get to go home?” Jeff asked.

“Soon as you want,” DanMan said. “Police’ll be here tomorrow. Pro’bly need to go soon, ‘fore the fires get worse.”

“Has there been any news about the Two Witnesses?” Jeff asked, licking the salt-sweet taste that had suddenly reappeared on his lips.

“What Two Witnesses?” DanMan asked.

Jeff felt light-headed again and wondered where the question came from. What was he asking?

“The Two Witnesses in Jerusalem,” Jeff continued, confused at his words but could not stop. “The two men speaking on the Mount in Jerusalem where Jesus once preached.”

Dr. Redman was a bonafide believer, went to the small mountain church when he could. It was busy being the only people doctor and animal doctor around; but even when he could not make the Sunday Church meeting, he was confident in his faith.

“Hadn’t heard anything about them, Mr. Ross,” Nurse Bivens said, frowning at her soon-to-be husband. “We best get you home, sir. We have friends in Duluth who are camping here, and you can ride back with them if you don’t want to wait until tomorrow.

“If the smoke gets up,” the doctor said, “it could be a week before we make the trip unless they end up evacuating everybody. We get a lot of animals and people coming in with respiratory problems.”

“No,” Jeff said, holding up his hand. “No problem. I will ride with your friends...”

“Actually they’re family,” Dr. Dan said. “I have family all over that place. You sure you feel okay? That wound on the side of your head is kind of peculiar. Same thing happened to your arm. Almost looks like bullet wounds, but they wouldn’t have healed this fast.”

