

Chapter 1

Sam glanced at his phone and noticed it was three o'clock in the morning. He looked around nervously as he walked down the deserted sidewalk. He stepped into a dark alley and waited with his hand on the grip of the pistol in the pocket of his hoodie. A dark sedan came into view around the corner at the nearest intersection, so he backed further away into the shadows. That car was familiar and not in a good way. Sam crouched down and drew his pistol and waited. He held his breath when the vehicle stopped just feet away where the alley intersected the downtown avenue. The front passenger window lowered and an arm extended outward holding a flashlight. Sam considered turning and running but did not relish the idea of being shot in the back. Flashing lights reflected on the back window of the sedan and the whoop from a police siren pierced the quiet of the night. The arm withdrew into the window and the sedan continued down the roadway with the cruiser behind it. Sam wiped the sweat from his brow with his arm and panted for air. A second sedan pulled up to the opening into the alley and waited. This was the car Sam had been waiting for. He breathed a sigh of relief, pushed the pistol back into his pocket and walked into the dim streetlight. Detective Dan Whitfield signaled with his thumb and Sam opened the rear door and climbed inside. Detective Shawna White turned and smiled at him, and then accelerated into the sparse traffic.

"Do you have any idea how close that was?" Sam asked.

"That's why we had the black-and-white with us, Sam," Dan replied. "This whole situation is spinning out of control, pal. Don't you think it's time you got away from here? We can find a place to hide you until this cools off."

"It's never going to cool off, Dan," Sam began. "In fact, it's just about to become radioactive."

Shawna eyed him in the rear view mirror and asked, "What's that supposed to mean, Sam?"

"What the hell do you think it means? I'm talking five suitcase nukes. They are crossing the border tonight and will be in position within a day or two. Then all shit's going to break loose."

"That's it!" Dan exclaimed. "You're coming in with us. This just went from simmering to a full boil. I don't care if you want to or not." Shawna put the light on the roof and turned on the siren as the car accelerated toward the main police station.

"It's too damned late for that, guys! We have to get the hell out of San Diego in twenty-four hours if we don't want to be flash-fried." He pulled on the door handle but nothing happened. "I'm serious, you two. I am not going to stay in this town. You have to let me go!" Sam was in full panic. Just as the car turned toward the police station parking structure, Sam pulled his pistol and pressed it against the back of Shawna's head. "Stop this car or I'll blow your brains out!" Shawna braked and the car stopped just outside the structure. He checked the handle and when the door opened, he removed the gun and said, "I'm sorry, but I have to find a way out of here and I suggest you do the same. Good luck." He stepped out of the car and hurried down the street. After fifteen feet, there was a burst of gunfire from a building across the street. He was hit in the chest, stomach, and head and fell dead to the sidewalk. Shawna and Dan jumped out and took cover in front of their car, examining the surroundings for a shooter.

"I can't see anything, can you?" Shawna asked.

"Nothing." They heard the screech of spinning wheels and saw a car a block away accelerating and turning a corner. "Shit!"

"What airline is it again, sweetheart?" Bill Watson asked his wife, Audrey.

"Frontier. I think that's Terminal 1 now," she replied. Bill took the exit ramp toward Lindbergh International Airport in his Toyota Avalon. "Sandi told me it was at the very end of the building."

"Okay, got it. Just a reminder that you have an open return, so just let me know or call the airline to book it when you're ready to come home, okay?"

"Honey, I really hope this doesn't take too long. Our daughter and Tommy have been having some problems since they moved to Montana, so I just want to help and make sure they work things out."

“I know. They’re good kids and I am sure it will be okay. Be sure and tell them how much I love them both,” Bill noted as he pulled up to the curb and turned off the motor. He pushed the trunk release and stepped out of the car, hurrying around to the back to extract his wife’s suitcase. He carried it over to her and set it by her side. “Have a safe flight!” He kissed her softly.

She took his hands and replied, “I didn’t want to tell you this, but I’m kind of freaked out about flying on September 9. Sunday is the fifteenth anniversary, you know?”

He hugged her tightly and said, “I’m very glad you’re traveling today and not on the eleventh. Don’t worry, it will be okay.” He kissed her again. “Do you have your ID and boarding passes?”

She pulled them out of her purse to show him and then stuffed them back inside. “Take care of my dog, honey.” She pulled out the handle on her roller-board, turned and walked toward the building. Bill sighed, returned to the rear of his car to close the trunk lid and then slid back into the driver’s seat. He looked for a clear spot and pulled into traffic. Then he pressed a few spots on his display and the hands-free began to dial a number.

“Hi Dad,” Sandi said.

“Good morning, sweetie-pie, I’m calling to let you know I just dropped your mom at the airport. She’s a bit nervous about flying so close to 9/11, so you should call and reassure her, okay?”

“Will do.”

“How are you two doing today?”

“Not bad, Dad, I think everything will be a lot better once I get a job. I’m climbing the walls alone here all day, and I guess I’ve been taking that out on Tommy.”

“It will all work out, honey. You two are wonderful people and every relationship goes through rough spots. Just love each other like I love you and this will pass.”

“Thanks, Daddy. I love you too. I’ll call mom right now.”

“Take care and let me know when she’s there safely. I love you.”

“I’ll call and I love you too. Bye.” The line went dead, replaced after a second by music over the sound system. Bill headed toward the freeway and his job down in Otay Mesa.

He was just entering Chula Vista on the Five South after passing through National City when a breaking news alert came over the radio. “This just in. The ongoing conflict between Iran and ISIL has intensified as Revolutionary Guard armored units have crossed the Tigris River near Basra. It is believed Iran may take control of the ISIL oil export terminal in that region within the day, which could drastically reduce the finances of that rogue state.

“Rebels continue to flock to the region to join ISIL, which now routinely enters the territories of Turkey, Jordan, Azerbaijan, and Armenia for terrorist attacks. Russian President Vladimir Putin has sent several divisions to the Caucasus to support the local governments.

“There are also rumors of ISIL fighters setting up training camps in remote areas of northern Mexico and southern Alberta for eventual attacks on the homeland. It is being reported that some drug cartels have been battling ISIL fighters, although the Mexican government has not confirmed or denied those reports.” The bad news made Bill too depressed to listen anymore, and he turned off the radio and thought about his family caught in these crazy times.

Border Patrol Supervisor Enrique Martinez raced his truck across the barren countryside ten miles west of Lukeville, Arizona. He was responding to calls from several other agents who had been monitoring the area. Apparently, they found several bodies at the international border. He reached the top of a low rise and began down the other side. In the distance, he could see two Border Patrol vehicles and three ATVs. Just on the other side of the border sat an armored personnel carrier and twenty Mexican soldiers. The group was standing near the bodies and seemed very tense. When he arrived, he turned off his vehicle, jumped out and headed toward the group. The soldiers and agents were standing twenty feet from a group of at least fifteen bodies, all of which had been decapitated. He felt the vomit rising in his throat at the sight and smell of the bodies. He walked slowly over to the soldiers and asked, “Do any of you speak English?”

“I do,” the single officer said as he extended his hand. “I am Lieutenant Marco Silva Diaz.”

“Enrique Martinez, Lieutenant. It’s too bad we meet under these circumstances. Does anyone know what happened here?”

“Unfortunately, yes, and this is just the tip of the iceberg. Did you notice that?” Marco said pointing toward a fence line one hundred yards deeper into Mexico.”

Enrique squinted to see more clearly and noticed the heads of the victims were on top of the fence posts. “Jesus Christ!”

“A local cartel discovered the terrorist camp in their territory, but underestimated their numbers. Five kilometers south of here there are dozens more bodies, some from each side. It would seem they fought there. Those men,” he noted, pointed toward the headless bodies, “must have tried to escape the fight into the US, but the terrorists caught up to them and then this happened.”

“What happened to the terrorists?”

“I’m afraid their camp is abandoned, and that can only mean one thing.”

“They came into the USA?”

The lieutenant nodded. “We cannot know for sure, but I would assume that to be the case, Enrique. But it gets worse, my friend. Come over here with me a moment.” The two men walked about twenty yards away to the armored personnel carrier. Marco opened a panel and removed a Geiger counter and switched it on. It made a low, slow, clicking sound. “Come on.” He began walking toward the pile of bodies. The clicks began to increase. They passed the rest of the men and the clicking intensified. He stopped ten feet from the bodies and the clicking was rapid and loud.

“Holy shit, they’re radioactive?” Enrique gasped. “What does that mean?”

“There is no way to know, but it cannot be good for either of our countries. I have already called for a hazmat team to clean the site up. You can imagine the other battlefield is even hotter than this one. I recommend that we all move back at least a hundred yards for now.”

Far up a nearby mountain, the fifty fighters crouched down in the dirt watching the group near the bodies. “Should we engage the enemy?” one of the men asked. They were all dressed in black with balaclavas concealing their faces.

“Don’t be stupid,” the leader growled. “Our job is far from here. If we attack, we will lose more men and may not be able to get to our objective on time. Phoenix is more than a hundred miles from here, and we only have twenty-four hours to get the bomb in place. The truck will be at the rendezvous point in two hours. We have to travel ten miles or more to be there. The driver has been told to wait no more than one hour, so let’s go.” The group stayed low to the ground as they continued uphill. Four of them were carrying a large crate with the others surrounding them. Once they topped the hill, they stood and began to hurry toward their destiny.

Bill Watson was sitting in his office reviewing financial statements on his computer screen. If he turned right and looked out his window, he could see the Mexican border less than a mile away, but that was typical for this industrialized area of southern San Diego. He glanced at the time on his telephone and thought his wife should be landing in Denver any time now. He was opening his web browser to get an updated arrival time when a news headline caught his eye. It said that a number of decapitated bodies had been found on the border between Mexico and Arizona and it was believed the perpetrators had fled into the United States. The story sent a shiver up his back. “Hey Bill, you have a minute?” asked his boss, Tom White, from the door. He looked up to see Tom standing in his doorway with a pretty young woman with blond hair and bright green eyes. He stood and offered his hand. “Bill, this is Mary Stewart. She’s starting today as a product manager. Mary, Bill Watson is our controller.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Bill,” she smiled.

“Nice to meet you too, Mary. Welcome to the team!”

“Thanks.”

Tom said, "Let's plan on the three of us having lunch today, okay? In the meantime, Mary, why don't you go back to your desk and get settled in. I need to chat with Bill a bit." She smiled and walked out of the office.

"Is something wrong, Tom?"

The manager closed the door and sat down. "Bill, did you hear about those dead guys in Arizona?"

Bill sat and replied, "Yeah, it sounds really gruesome. I bet it's one of those drug cartel battles."

Tom looked around suspiciously and then whispered, "I don't think so. I think it's Al Qaeda or ISIS. They're bringing their war here. I heard a rumor that the bodies were radioactive!"

"What?"

"Shit, I shouldn't be telling anyone this, but my wife told me an informant told them that five suitcase nuclear bombs are being smuggled into the country as we speak."

"Oh my God!" Bill moaned.

"And you know that San Diego and LA are perfect targets. Close to the border; lots of military bases. Things are about to go from bad to awful."

Bill smirked and said, "Don't you think that's a little melodramatic, Tom? I have to believe the FBI is all over this kind of thing."

"I hope so too, pal, but what if they miss one?"

Bill sighed. "God help us."

"I'll let you know if I hear anything else, okay?"

"Thanks, boss."

Bill's phone rang and Tom stood and walked out of the office. Bill picked up the receiver and said, "Bill Watson."

"Honey, it's me," Audrey replied. "I'm in Denver now, safe and sound."

"That's great! Thanks for letting me know. How was the flight?"

"The flight was fine, but frankly, some of the things I overheard scared the crap out of me."

"Like what?"

"There were two Air Force pilots sitting behind me, and they were talking about more incursions by Russian aircraft over Alaska and Canada."

"It's like everything is going crazy all over the place, sweetheart."

"What do you mean, Bill?"

"I heard on the radio that terrorists may have set up training camps in remote parts of Canada and Mexico. And please don't mention this, but Tom said his wife told him about suitcase nukes being smuggled into the US."

"I'm scared Bill. I don't know what to do!"

"Audrey, these things are just rumors and possibilities. We need to focus on the things we can manage. You go on to Montana and help Tommy and Sandi deal with their situation. We have to have faith that the FBI and police will stop anything really awful from happening. We'll just play this thing as it comes along."

"That's not very reassuring, Bill."

"I know, but it's all we can do right now."

"Yea, you're right. Well, they just called my flight for boarding, so I'll let you go now and call you when I get to Billings."

"I love you, sweetheart, and have a good flight."

"I love you too." The line disconnected.

An hour and a half later, Bill Watson returned to the office after having lunch with his boss and the new employee at a nearby Mexican restaurant. Mary seemed like a nice young woman. She had been out of college for a few years and recently took the chance to move from her native Iowa to California, trying to jumpstart her career. She seemed a bit shy, but Tom's easy wit had drawn her out. Bill was sitting at his desk again when his cell phone rang. He pressed the connect button and said, "Hello?"

A deep, gravelly voice said, "You and your family are in grave danger, Bill Watson."

Bill began to tremble and replied, "Who the hell is this?"

"Your world is about to change forever. I am a friend and I will help you."

"How do you know my family is in danger? Who are you?"

"You will learn very soon, Bill. Do a favor for a new friend, and I will reciprocate in kind."

"I don't know what you're talking about. Who is this?"

"If you want to survive, do a favor for a new friend. If you fail, you will die before the sun rises tomorrow, and without you, your family is doomed."

"Is this some kind of prank?"

"You will learn soon enough." The line went dead.

He was panting for air and looking at the phone in his hand when his desk phone rang and he jumped from the surprise. He wondered if it was the same caller again and thought about not answering, but then picked up the receiver. "Bill Watson."

"Hi, honey, Sandi just picked me up from the airport. I made it safe."

"That's great!"

"Bill, you sound kind of odd. Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. I just got a freaky prank call on my cell phone. It scared me a bit."

"Do you want to tell me about it?"

"I'm sure it was nothing."

"Okay, if you're sure. I'll call you later, dear. Bye."

"Bye, sweetheart," he finished and then set the receiver down.

Chapter 2

After work, Bill drove the ten miles to his home in Chula Vista, eager to be with his two small dogs, Chachis and Zelda. When he pulled into the driveway, the dogs began to whimper and yip, and he could hear them scampering down the stairs to greet him at the door. He unlocked and opened the door and the two dogs began to dance and twirl around his feet, anxious for company and a treat. They happily followed him into the kitchen where their determination was rewarded. After feeding them, Bill retrieved and opened a cold beer from the refrigerator, and then he sat on the couch in the family room and turned on the television in time to catch the evening news.

As Chachis sat on his lap and Zelda settled behind his head on the seat cushion, a reporter began the top story about the headless bodies found on the Arizona border. His cellphone vibrated in his pocket and he withdrew it and noticed his boss was calling. He pressed pause on his remote and then clicked connect. "What's up, Tom?"

"Sorry to interrupt your evening, but I just got a call from Mary."

"Is something wrong?"

"She called from the office parking lot. Apparently her car broke down there. She called AAA to tow it and get a ride home, but she'll need a ride to work Monday morning. As it turns out, her apartment is only a couple of blocks from your house. Could you do that?"

"Of course, I'm glad to help."

"Great, I knew you would. I gave her your cell number and said I'd call you and ask. She is kind of shy, don't you think?"

"It seems normal to me. She just started and met us so it's early to be asking for favors, but I'm happy to do it."

"Do you have something to write on?"

"Let me just open my note app on this phone." He tapped a couple of keys to open it. "Okay, go ahead."

"Her cell is 555-9723. It's the 619 area code. Just let her know, okay?"

"I'll call her in just a minute, Tom, but can I ask you a question first?"

"Sure, go ahead."

"It just strikes me as odd that a new employee would want to start on a Friday. Was that her idea or yours?"

"It was her idea, and I did think it a bit strange. But she said she was new in town and really wanted to get ahead of the game and even do some work over the weekend. Do you think it's a big deal?"

"No, not at all, I just thought it seemed unusual. Don't worry about it."

"Okay, it's over and done with now. Thanks for helping her out. Good night." The line disconnected.

Bill dialed her number and waited. After two rings, her voice said, "Hello?"

"Hi, Mary, it's me, Bill Watson. I just talked to Tom and I'd be happy to give you a ride to the office on Monday."

"Are you sure it's not too much of an inconvenience?"

"Not at all. Tom says I live only a few blocks from you."

"I live in the Sunbow Villas Apartments. Do you know where that is?"

"Yes, I do. I'll pick you up at about a quarter to eight on Monday, okay?"

"I'll meet you outside the gate then. Thanks a million. You're a new friend, but a good one."

"Thanks for the kind words. And if you need anything over the weekend, just give me a call."

"That's very sweet of you, Bill. Good night." The line disconnected.

He was about to start the program when he remembered the odd call he received earlier from the gravelly voiced stranger. "He said to do a favor for a new friend. Holy shit! How the heck did he know?"

He realized he was making something out of nothing and pushed the thought out of his head and pressed the start button.

Nothing on the news was any relief. It was confirmed that the bodies on the border were radioactive, although the source was unknown. There was another story about five Russian bombers that came within a few miles of the coast of the state of Washington. There had also been random shootings on US border stations on the Canadian and Mexican borders. International news was not any better. A column of Russian tanks and armored personnel carriers had crossed the border between Azerbaijan and Iran at the request of the Iranian government. ISIL units had moved into Western Iran over the last few days and were threatening several cities. The Turkish army had moved two divisions to their border region with the ISIL controlled areas of Iraq. ISIL had also taken credit for large terror bombings in Volgograd and Sevastopol in the Russian Republic.

Fed up with the news, Bill switched channels to watch sit-com repeats. He sighed and took a sip of beer, happy for the cheerful entertainment. He had almost forgotten the bad news when a special alert interrupted all channels. The scene changed to the White House where the president was standing at a podium with a stern look on his face. "My fellow Americans, I must report that the international situation continues to deteriorate quickly. You may have heard tonight about headless bodies found on our southern border. These victims had been subjected to high levels of radioactivity, although the source of that contamination is not yet known. ISIL remains a growing threat to the world, and their new alliance with Al Qaeda is quite troubling. I want you to know that our government is on top of these threats and doing everything possible to protect our great country, but it is possible that terrorist activities will occur in the homeland. Some of you may have heard rumors about suitcase nuclear weapons being smuggled into the country. I want you assure you that is not true. I am today ordering our armed forces, primarily the National Guard, to increase border and coastal security. This is being done out of an abundance of caution and there is no direct, credible threat at this time.

"I also want to challenge each of you to be aware of your situation at all times. If anything or person concerns you, it or they concern us as well. Tonight, we have implemented a new system using the telephone number 211 to report any such potential risks to authorities without overburdening the existing 911 system. All of our security depends on each of us doing our part, and I know I can count on you."

The president smiled broadly, "Finally, I just want to reassure all of you that there is no direct evidence of a specific threat. I understand my tone may seem ominous, but the fact of the matter is I believe this too will pass. Once the level of terror chatter declines and villains like Al Qaeda and ISIL are brought to justice, I can foresee a day when life will be normal again. Good night, and may God continue to bless the United States of America."

Bill turned off the television and gasped for breath. He was lost in the depths of the threats the president had just spoken about. His cell phone vibrated and he looked at the caller ID, and then pressed connect. "Hi, honey, I guess you saw that too."

His wife replied, "Bill, what are you talking about?"

"You didn't just hear the president's speech?"

"No, what did he say?"

"Things sound serious right now, but I believe him when he said things are going to get better. I'm sorry if I scared you. Why did you call?"

"Bill, a sheriff's deputy was just here. They are evacuating this town. It's something about a battle between a local right-wing militia and some terrorists who came across the Canadian border."

"What? I don't understand."

"Here, talk to Tommy. He's the one who spoke with the deputy."

There was silence on the line for several seconds and then his son-in-law's voice said, "Hi, Dad, sorry to call you about this. Apparently, several hundred terrorists crossed the border from Canada early this morning. The sheriff believes they were going to set up a training camp not far from here. They didn't know that the America First militia owns a lot of land nearby. When they met, all hell broke loose. The National Guard has been called and they are going to help the militia defeat the terrorists. The whole thing

is twenty miles from here, but our whole neighborhood is being evacuated to Billings. We'll call you when we get settled in a hotel, okay?"

"Okay, I understand, Tom. Please take good care of our family."

"Will do, Dad. Talk to you soon." Just before the line went dead, Bill thought he could hear rapid gunfire on the line. Bill redialed the number five times, but there was no answer. On the sixth try, a computerized voice said all lines were down and to try later.

Bill stood and began to pace back and forth, wondering what to do. It would take days to drive to Montana. No flights left Lindbergh Field this late at night. He thought about looking for a flight online, and oddly, the thought of Mary waiting for him Monday crossed his mind. "She'll get over it!" he exclaimed. Chachis and Zelda watched him carefully. He could feel his blood pressure rising and he began to pant for air. He picked up his beer and took a long drink. Chachis was begging to be picked up, so he complied and smiled when she began to lick his face. His heart rate slowed and he sat down, ready to check air fares when his phone rang again. He pressed connect without bothering to see who was calling. "Yea?"

"Bill, it's me," Audrey said. "I saw you were trying to call back. We're okay."

"I . . . I . . . I thought I heard gunfire when Tom hung up."

"It was some stupid kid across the street with firecrackers. We are fine. It will take an hour or so to get to the hotel, so please just relax."

A few tears leaked out of his eyes and he wiped them away. "I'm fine, honey. I was just so scared by the sound and then you didn't answer."

"I know and I'm sorry, but the network must have been overloaded or something. My phone didn't ring at all, and then I saw that you'd called."

"Just call me when you are settled in for the night, okay?"

"Of course, sweetheart."

"How is it going with the kids?"

"I can't really talk about that right now, but everything is going to be fine. While there's love, there's hope, right?"

"Thank you, Audrey."

"I'll talk to you later, Bill. Bye." The line disconnected.

Bill went to the kitchen and prepared a whisky over ice for himself and brought two treats for his beloved dogs. He sat down, took a sip, and looked for something funny to watch.

It was eleven o'clock and Bill Watson was asleep on the couch with his dogs doing their best to keep him warm. The television was playing reruns of some old television program from the seventies, but Bill was somewhere else in his dream. He was walking down a path between rows of gnarled trees that hung over his head like doom. He followed the twisting path until he came upon a small clearing where his path split into two. He stood at the crossroads and wondered which path to take. On the path to his left, he saw Chachis standing and wagging her tail. To the right, Zelda was jumping about on her hind legs, enticing him to follow her. He glanced behind himself and saw the path he had taken was cloaked in impenetrable fog. Directly in front, he saw a stone bench on the side of the path. An old man was sitting on the bench looking directly at him. When Bill looked at him, the old man smiled and motioned for him to join him on the bench. Bill walked over and sat down. He looked at the old man and noticed his deeply wrinkled face and eyes that were as black as coal. The man put his hand on Bill's knee. The hand was twisted with arthritis. He spoke in a deep, gravelly voice, "Thank you, Bill."

"For what, sir?"

"You have offered to help my darling child, Merihem. Unfortunately, the schedule must be accelerated."

"Who exactly are you, sir?"

"That isn't important right now, Bill."

"Okay, what am I supposed to call you, old man?"

“You can call me Lou. That is close enough to my real name. Or if you prefer, you can call me dad.”

“I’m your son?”

“You were adopted, right?”

“What’s your point?”

“Answer my question, Bill Watson!”

“Okay, I am adopted and I don’t know who my biological parents are. Are you saying you are my biological father?”

“Yes, and Merihem is your sister. Please treat her so and you will both survive the horror that is coming.”

Bill looked at the old man and wondered if what he was saying was true. “What horror are you talking about?”

“The world is on fire, my son. Whether you or I like it or not, the chalice has been handed to you to save the world.”

“I’m just an accountant at a small company. How am I supposed to save the world?”

The old man moved forward and kissed his cheek. He smiled sweetly and replied, “You are about to find out, my boy. Be brave and save us all.”

That vision melted away and now he was back in his bed. He felt his wife’s body pressed against him. His arms were wrapped around her and he nuzzled her neck. She rolled over to face him and was now Mary Stewart. She grabbed his head in her hands and pressed her lips to his. Instead of pushing her away, he gave into his passion and kissed her face and moved his hands over her willing body. She reached her hand down between his legs and he moaned softly.

Instantly, he was kneeling on the ground. His hands were tied behind his back and he wore an orange, collarless jumpsuit. Several men in black watched from a few feet away, and one was recording the scene on a video camera. There was a person standing by his side with one hand on his shoulder. The man’s other hand flashed in front of him, holding a long knife. The knife suddenly plunged into his neck and he felt the searing pain. He was gagging and choking on his own blood.

He sat up on the couch, soaked in sweat and gasping for breath. The two dogs were sitting nearby looking at him carefully. He reached down and petted both, and then got up to relieve himself and splash water on his face. After going upstairs to the bedroom, he looked at his phone and saw it was two o’clock in the morning. He climbed in bed and rolled onto his side, hoping for a bit more rest. Minutes later, he was fast asleep.

In his dream, Bill was driving east on Interstate 90, a few miles west of Billings, Montana. He reached the top of a small rise and slammed down on the brakes. Hundreds of cars were headed toward him, filling both sides of the highway. He turned the steering wheel hard to the left and the car careened into the median and came to a stop. His heart was pounding and hands were sweaty and shaking. “What happened?” said a voice to his right. He turned his head to see Mary Stewart sitting in the passenger seat.

A brilliant flash from behind them bathed the area in bright light. Bill looked in the rear-view mirror to see a giant fireball rising into the air over Billings. “I think a nuke just went off,” he replied just as the pressure wave pushed his car and the others ahead at high speed. Then the searing heat engulfed them. His skin felt like it was on fire and he watched the plastic dash begin to melt. Then the gas tank exploded. Bill knew they were all dead, but somehow he could hear sirens. Did he survive somehow, he wondered. There was a loud honking sound that woke him from his dream, although he was uncertain if he was really awake. The dogs began to howl and bark. Bill jumped out of bed and hurried to the front bedroom. Two police cars sat in the middle of the street. An officer got out of the lead vehicle and held a megaphone in his hand.

“This is not a drill!” he shouted. “By order of the President of the United States, this city must be evacuated immediately. There is a high threat of an impending attack on San Diego. You have twenty minutes to pack enough for a week away. Then you are to follow the emergency vehicles toward Interstate 8 and out of the city. Repeat, this is not a drill. More officers will be here soon to offer

assistance. God help us all.” He climbed back in his car and the two squad cars drove a block away and continued making the same speech.

Bill’s cell phone rang. He grabbed it and pressed connect. Before he could speak, Mary said, “Oh God, Bill, what are we going to do?”

“Mary, please try to stay calm. Throw some stuff in a bag and I’ll meet you in twenty minutes at the corner with Medical Center Drive, okay?”

“Do you think this is really happening?”

“I hope I wake in my bed in the morning and this was all a nightmare, but for now, pack and meet me there. If you have any non-perishable food or bottled water, bring it too. I’ll see you in twenty.” He disconnected the call and ran downstairs to find a suitcase. When he came back upstairs, he began shoving clothes into the bag as fast as he could. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Chachis lying coiled up and shivering. He picked her up and held her to him. After a moment, she began to lick his face. “It will be okay.” He petted Zelda with his free hand. “We’ll all get through this together.”

Ten minutes later, he went to the bathroom again, and then made certain the dogs did their business in the backyard before loading the clothes, some food, and the dogs inside his car. He rushed back into the house and grabbed a large bag of dog food, the treats, and two cases of water that were in the garage. He stood on the driveway looking at his house, wondering if he would ever see this place again. A car horn sounded and he turned to see his neighbor Jeff and his wife in their car in the middle of the street. “This is pretty crazy shit, isn’t it, Bill?”

“I still can’t believe it. Take care of yourselves.”

“You too.” Their car moved up the hill and around the corner.

A police cruiser turned the corner at the bottom of the hill with its lights flashing. It stopped near where he was standing and the driver’s window opened. The officer said, “Is your house clear, sir?”

“Yes, officer. My dogs and I are alone here.”

“Better get a move on, sir.” The cruiser drove away.

He was about to get in his car when a thought occurred to him. He hurried back into the house and returned a minute later with several kitchen knives, a chilled bottle of orange juice, two rolls of paper towels and a package of toilet paper. Satisfied, he climbed in the car, closed the garage door and drove away.

A minute later, he turned his car onto Medical Center Drive and stopped along the curb where Mary stood crying. He opened the trunk and jumped out to help her. After loading her bag into the trunk, they climbed inside and joined the impossibly long line of cars headed east on Telegraph Canyon Road.

Two hours later, Bill looked blearily at his watch, which showed 5:15 a.m. He had just passed Alpine and continued eastward at a crawl. Both sides of the freeway were congested with vehicles headed into the mountains, hopefully to safety behind their stone walls. He glanced at Mary who was asleep with her head against the passenger window and Zelda was lying in her lap. Chachis had managed to squeeze herself between his lap and the steering wheel and snored softly. The first evidence of daybreak was lighting the sky to the east. He thought about the odd call he had received yesterday with the deep voice telling him to help a new friend if he wanted to live until morning. For an instant he thought he had dreamed something about that too, but the imagery in his mind quickly changed to the terrorist stabbing him in the throat, so he pushed those thoughts out of his mind. Now he began to wonder if he was far enough away from San Diego if a suitcase nuclear device did explode. He began to panic, breathing fast and his face reddening. Just ahead was the Highway 79 exit. A few other cars had pulled over for the occupants to relieve themselves in a few porta-potties that had been set up there by the highway patrol. He felt desperate to get off this highway as fast as possible. He signaled and pushed his way to the right, barely making the exit. He sped up the ramp and turned north on the highway. No other cars were on the road and he began to doubt his judgment, but continued north. As he passed the small town on his left, he glanced in that direction and noticed it seemed deserted as well. Clearly, the police did not think this place was safe either and he was glad for his quick decision to get away from the clogged freeway. When he

was clear of the town, he pulled over to the curb and began to look at the map on his navigation system. He saw that this road would take him to Ramona, and then he could take Highway 78 into the Imperial Valley and relative safety with an entire mountain range between him and the city.

“Bill, are you okay?” Mary said, stirring from her sleep.

“I’m okay, just very tired.”

“Do you want me to drive?”

He was not about to turn down that offer. He opened his door and took the two dogs out with him so they could relieve themselves and drink some water. While he waited with the dogs, Mary found a spot behind a bush where she could pee. Bill pulled out the chilled orange juice bottle and opened it, taking a long drink. When she returned, he gave it to her and went to find his own private spot. When Mary and the dogs were back in the car, Bill pushed most of the things in the back seat onto the floor, and then lay down as best as he could. “Mary, just follow this road until we get to Ramona. Take a right and go east on Highway 78. It will be a twisty road through the mountains, but will take us into the desert. If you need anything, please wake me up, okay?”

“Bill, thank you for saving my life.”

“You are quite welcome.”

“Sleep well.”

The two dogs climbed into the backseat and found places to lie next to their master. Soon, everyone but Mary was fast asleep.

In his dream, he and Mary were driving up the hill out of El Cajon. The freeway was completely jammed and no one was moving. He had his phone next to his ear trying to reach Audrey or Sandi to find out if they were okay. He kept redialing but the line was either busy or an automated voice said all lines were down. He was impatient to get out of here and began to honk his horn. Soon thousands of horns honked and still the traffic was frozen in place. There was a bright flash in his rearview mirror and the car lost power and stopped. His phone went dead and it became very quiet. Then he saw the massive fireball rising into the air from the other side of La Mesa. Mary screamed. He could see a wall of fire shooting down into El Cajon but couldn’t move. Cars began to explode and fly toward them from behind. Instantly, his own car flew into the air with the two dogs flying about the cabin and slamming into the ceiling, then the seats and then to the ceiling again. The car burst into flames. In abject terror, he woke up.

Now he was sitting on a chaise lounge by the side of the sea. A hundred feet down the beach to his left, he could see Mary walking toward him with his two dogs on leashes. She was wearing a red bikini. He looked to his right and saw a small table with two frozen margaritas sitting on it. An old man sat on a second lounge next to it.

Bill was about to ask the man to leave so Mary could sit when he stood up. “Come along now Bill. We have much to discuss.”

“Who are you?”

“Have you forgotten already?” he asked in a deep, gravelly voice.

“Father?”

The old man smiled and offered a hand to help him up. As he stood, he realized he was wearing a blue swimming suit. Mary came up to them and kissed each on the cheek and then sat down, taking a sip from her drink. “Don’t be too long, you two.”

Bill felt something in his hand. When he looked, it was two dog treats, so he offered one to each and then followed the other man down the sand. “Am I dead?”

The old man laughed. “No, son, you are sleeping in the back seat of your car as Mary drives east on the highway, just as you asked.”

“But what about the nuke blowing us up in El Cajon?”

“Bill, honestly, can’t you tell dreams from reality anymore? Okay, where were you when you went into the back seat to take a nap?”

“Just north of Descanso.”

“Not El Cajon, right?”

“But why did I dream that? Do you think Mary took a wrong turn?”

Lou put his hand on his shoulder and replied, “Mostly, dreams are just dreams. Sometimes they foretell the future. Once in a while, they include lessons we need to learn. What did you learn from your dream, son?”

“That there will be a nuclear explosion?”

“You already knew that, Bill. What did you learn about the explosion?”

“It killed the engine and my cell phone.”

“That’s better. If anything electronic is running at the moment of the explosion, those things may short out and never work again.”

“But how will I know when it will happen?”

“Because I will tell you.”

“Thank you.”

“Bill, it is going to happen any second now!”

“Now?” Rather than answer, the old man slapped him across the face as hard as he could.

Bill sat up in the backseat. “Mary, be calm but please slow down and stop as fast as you can.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Just do it, okay? Everything will be fine. Just pull over and stop.” She complied and came to a stop. “Now turn off the ignition.” She turned it off. He pulled his phone out of his pocket. “Now turn off your cell phone as quick as you can.” They both shut down their devices. “Do you have anything else electronic?”

“No, Bill. You’re scaring me.”

The horizon behind them became as bright as dawn for a second. It seemed like two sunrises, one in front and one behind, and then the one behind faded away. “The bomb just went off.” They climbed out of the car and could see the mushroom cloud peeking over the mountains to the west. “My God, I can’t believe it. It really happened.”

She took his hand in hers and asked, “How did you know?”

“Mary, please don’t take offense, but are you adopted?” He held her hand softly, still transfixed by the image of the massive cloud standing over the remains of his hometown.

“Yes, but why did you want to know?”

“I’m adopted too, and I think we might be related. I had a dream last night where a man said I was your brother.”

She giggled and said, “It was just a dream, silly.”

“Mary, just before I told you to stop the car, I had another dream where the same man told me exactly when the bomb would detonate.”

She pulled her hand free and walked away. After ten feet, she stopped and looked back at him. “Do you expect me to believe that?”

“Mary, let’s forget the related part for now, but I have no other explanation for how I knew when the bomb would go off. Let’s get back in the car and get out of here. For all I know, radiation is going to start falling on us any second.”

With everyone on board, Bill pulled back on the roadway and headed down the slope and into the Imperial Valley, with the Salton Sea glistening in the distance.

Chapter 3

Bill stopped the car again as they reached the floor of the Imperial Valley so his dogs could get some exercise. Mary had taken the opportunity to lie down on the backseat and get some rest. The road was deserted in both directions, making it seem as though they were the last people alive on the planet. He remembered that his boss, Tom White, had told him there were five suitcase nukes. If that was true, most of the country should be fine, although it was likely that terrorists had poured over the border during the aftermath of the nuclear attack. He turned on his cell phone and saw that he had a weak signal, so he dialed his wife's number. He was thrilled when she answered. "Bill, you're alive! Oh my God, we heard about the bomb in San Diego. Is the house okay? How are you? What about the dogs?"

He laughed and replied, "The dogs and I are doing fine. The police evacuated the city early this morning, so we're now in the Imperial Valley, heading east. I don't know how things are back home though."

"Well, it's just a house. As long as you are okay, everything will be fine."

"I'm heading toward Montana to be with you and the kids. How is everyone?"

After an agonizingly long pause, Audrey said, "Well, it's complicated, honey. We're being evacuated too. We're supposed to head to Cody, Wyoming. There is the threat of another bomb being detonated here tomorrow on the 9/11 anniversary."

"I had a dream about that!"

She chuckled and said, "So, now your dreams are coming true? Please."

"Bill, I found a radio station that's working!" Mary shouted from the car.

"Who's that, Bill?" Audrey asked.

"It's Mary Stewart, this new woman at the office. Her car broke down and when the evacuation order came, I figured I'd better help her out."

"Really?"

"What would you have me do, dear? Leave her there to be incinerated by the blast?"

"No, you're right and I'm sorry if I doubted you, but be careful, okay?"

"Yes, dear. I love you very much."

"I love you too. Tommy's calling me because we have to leave right now. I'll call you later." The line disconnected.

He led the two dogs back to the car and climbed in the driver's seat. "You should be able to use your phone now. I just talked to my wife."

"Okay, thanks. This is station KROP from Brawley." She turned up the volume.

"Sorry for the format change, folks, but the sheriff asked us to keep you informed about the news. It has been confirmed that nuclear bombs detonated early this morning in New York, Los Angeles and San Diego. Most of the residents had been evacuated, but it will be days before damage can be assessed due to the risk of radiation. A large group of terrorists were encountered in the Arizona desert late last night. It is rumored these men were on their way to Phoenix with another bomb. After a lengthy gunfight, the surviving terrorists escaped with their weapon of mass destruction. The army has been called in to find and destroy them before they can reach a metropolitan area. Our local news is not good either. Sheriff Jones reports that a violent gang affiliated with a Mexican drug cartel has seized control of Calexico. As we reported last night, a large terror army continues to control El Centro. Everyone is urged to avoid those areas and especially Interstate 8. Units of the California and Arizona National Guard are on their way to support our local law enforcement teams that are now battling forces attempting to move in our direction." There was a long pause. "Folks, Sheriff Avery Jones has just stepped into the studio. Here he is."

"Thanks Billy. Our men have engaged two bands of terrorists just east and west of the Brawley area. If you are armed, your help is appreciated. We recommend that everyone else evacuate the area

immediately. We are heavily outnumbered, but will do what we can to protect you. God help us all.” Bill turned off the radio.

“What do we do?” Mary asked.

“We’ve got to keep going. If we stay here, we’ll be dead. Mary, it’s up to you what you do, but I’m going to Wyoming to find and protect my family.”

She wiped the tears out of her eyes and replied, “Okay, I think we’re out of options too. Let’s go. I’ll let you drive.” The car sped east toward the Salton Sea. They had only traveled ten miles when the sound of rapid gunfire erupted to the south. A bullet hit the front fender and Bill slammed on the brakes. “Why are you stopping, Bill? We have to get out of here!”

Bill jumped out of his seat and ran toward the gunfire. Mary was outside the vehicle, shouting for him to return. A hundred yards ahead, he could see several police and Border Patrol officers firing on an advancing group of men wearing all black uniforms and masks obscuring their faces. His mind was filled with the images of the headless bodies and the dream of the masked man stabbing him in the neck. He could hear Mary shouting but knew he had to end this here and now. He prayed that Audrey would forgive him. A deep voice buried in his subconscious said softly, “That’s my boy!” He tripped over a rock and crashed to the ground. As he rolled over, he could see Mary running toward him. He wanted to tell her to go back, but instead jumped back to his feet and kept running. The group of terrorists was only a few hundred feet away and Bill was almost upon the police, only two of whom were still fighting.

One of the terrorists threw something toward the police who turned to flee. One officer was shot in the back and fell. Bill rushed past the other just as the grenade landed at his feet. He grabbed it and threw it back. The same terrorist was preparing to throw a second grenade when the one Bill threw stuck him square in the forehead. The man fell backward and the two grenades rolled into the center of the group and exploded. Bill fell to his knees, wheezing and panting for breath. It was eerily quiet. He looked behind himself and saw Mary comforting the last police officer who had been shot in the leg. She took off her blouse and wrapped it around his leg as a tourniquet. Bill looked at the dead policemen around him. There had to be twenty men and women who sacrificed themselves here. He fought the urge to cry. Anger began to surge throughout his body. He stood and walked over to the closest officer, a young woman who had been shot in the head. He knelt beside her and said a little prayer. He took her pistol and walked toward the enemies.

Most had been blown to pieces by the grenades. He checked each one for signs of life. He heard a low moan and spun around. The man who had thrown the grenades was beginning to stir. Bill was consumed with hatred for these evil men. He walked over to the man and pulled off his face mask. The man had been struck by shrapnel in the abdomen and was bleeding out quickly. Something snapped in Bill’s head. His blood was boiling and he couldn’t control it. He took the officer’s pistol and pressed it against the terrorist’s throat and pulled the trigger. Blood splayed across his shirt. The man had a knife in a scabbard on his belt. Bill pulled it out and looked at the razor-sharp blade. He knew what he had to do. He knelt down and slit the dead man’s throat.

“Bill?” Mary said. He turned to stare at her. “What’s wrong with your eyes? Are you okay?”

“You saw this too!” he growled. As he watched her face, he saw her eyes turn bright red. She leaned down and kissed his forehead, took the knife from his hand and severed the dead man’s head.

The wounded officer coughed and said, “Are you two okay?”

Bill opened his eyes. He was sitting against the rear tire of his car. The officer was sitting five feet in front of him petting the two dogs. “What happened? How did I get here? Who are you?”

“You don’t remember?” Bill shook his head. “I’m Deputy Sam Cunningham of the Imperial County Sheriff’s Department. You saved my life and killed those terrorists. Thank you.”

Bill noticed Mary waking up. She was sitting against the front tire. Her arms and hands were red with blood. He looked down at his own hands and saw them dripping with blood as well. “I don’t know what happened.”

“One of those bastards threw a grenade and you threw it back at them as he prepared to throw a second. The rest of them were killed by the grenade blasts.”

“Really?”

“Yes, sir. You really don’t remember anything?” Bill shook his head again. “Well, that’s when you and your friend cut off their heads and put them on that fence-line,” Sam said while pointing to a fence a few hundred feet away. Bill looked and saw the heads on the fence. Mary was looking at both of them in disbelief. “Don’t take me wrong, sir. I wanted to do the same thing after what they’re doing here.”

“You’ve been shot.”

“Yeah, your friend wrapped her blouse around my leg, but the wound wasn’t too bad. I’d give her the shirt back but it’s kind of bloody. You two also gathered all the guns, grenades, and ammo and put them in your trunk. It’s only been a couple minutes ago that you finished and sat down. Are you okay to take me to Brawley so I can see a doctor?”

Mary and Bill helped Sam into the back seat, and then tried to wash most of the blood off of their hands and arms. Within two minutes, they had pulled back onto the highway and accelerated toward the town. “Just tell us where to go, deputy.”

“Yes sir, but after what we’ve been through, please just call me Sam.”

“Thanks Sam and we are Bill and Mary. By the way, are you one hundred percent sure we did all those things?”

“No doubt about it, Bill. Were you a special ops guy at some time? You sure fought like one.”

“No, I was never in the military. I don’t know what came over us. What do you think, Mary?”

“I don’t know what to think. With nukes going off and terrorists invading, it seems like the whole world is on fire!”

Her choice of words brought back the dream Bill had before the evacuation and he shivered.

Two hours later, they were driving east again on Highway 78, heading back into the desert and toward the Arizona border. Sam was taken to an urgent care center to be checked out. Sheriff Jones was shocked by the story he told of Bill’s assault on the terrorists. He was also very grateful for the weapons and ammunition. He took Bill and Mary to a local coffee shop for breakfast, and then said goodbye as they drove off. He had left two semiautomatic rifles, two pistols and several hundred rounds of ammo in their trunk. They passed over Interstate 10 near Blythe. The freeway was clogged with cars heading into Arizona and hopefully safety. Bill was not interested in traffic so he continued north on the smaller highway. “Where are we headed, Bill?” Mary asked as she sat in the passenger seat rubbing Zelda’s ears.

“Vegas.”

“Don’t you think that’s a target for the terrorists?”

“I don’t know, but as we head toward Wyoming, we are going to pass by large cities from time to time. Hopefully, we will be past Vegas before anything happens.”

“Hopefully?”

“Mary, I don’t know what else to do. I’m guessing that the terror army will focus their attacks tomorrow, on the 9/11 anniversary. Once we’re beyond Las Vegas, there’s a lot of empty desert out here. I doubt they’ll be trying to find two random people driving along a deserted highway.”

“Don’t get upset, Bill. We’re both going through the same thing. I don’t know what to do either. Life isn’t supposed to be like this.”

“I’m sorry. As you said, this situation is bizarre. What we did back there was insane. I apologize if I’m quick tempered, but I just want to get back to my family.” He took her hand and said, “Am I forgiven?”

She squeezed his hand and said, “Of course, Bill, all is forgiven. What’s our next destination?”

“Needles. It should be an hour or hour and a half from here.”

“Okay, then I’m going to get some sleep,” she noted while letting go of his hand. She turned to the backseat and said, “Here, Chachis, come and sleep with us.” The dog jumped into her lap and sat down. Bill glanced over at the three sitting so comfortably and smiled. He hoped his days as a soldier were over now.

Twenty minutes later, a long convoy of military vehicles began to approach on the other side of the highway. There were dozens of trucks carrying soldiers. He had to pull onto the shoulder as several heavy trucks came along carrying tanks on their trailers. He smiled knowing that Sheriff Jones was about to get the reinforcements he needed. A few minutes later, the excitement was over and it was just his car and the open road. He could hear Mary's breathing and wondered what she was dreaming about, and hoping it was not the gravelly-voiced stranger who claimed to be their father.

After another hour, he approached a sign saying it was ten miles to Needles. His car traveled up a gradual slope. Just as it was about to reach the top and start down the other side, something caught his eye, glinting in the bright sunlight. He slowed down and pulled over onto the shoulder and then stopped, pushing the gear shift into park. He climbed out of the car and looked in the direction of the reflection he had seen. Unable to see any details, he opened the trunk and removed a rifle with a scope and peered through it. It seemed to be a pickup truck stopped several hundred yards off the roadway. Something was in the back of the truck under a tarp. It also seemed like something was lying on the ground next to it. He took the rifle and slung it over his shoulder and then rapped softly on the passenger window. Mary opened her eyes and lowered the window. "What's wrong, Bill?"

"There's a pickup truck parked over there," he said while pointing. "Something seems really wrong. I've got to check it out."

"Bill, are you sure?"

"I have this really bad feeling in my gut, Mary. It won't take too long."

"Do you want me to come?"

"No, I'm sure it's nothing. You stay here and keep an eye on the car, okay?" She looked terrified by the thought of being alone but nodded anyway. "It'll be okay. If something happens, just get the hell out of here." Before she could respond, he had turned on his heels and was moving toward the other vehicle.

Mary looked at her cell phone, but had no reception. She sighed and climbed out of the car and retrieved the two pistols, then sat on the hood and watched him move away. After a minute or two, she let Chachis and Zelda out of the car to snoop around.

About three hundred yards from his car, Bill climbed down into a small ravine. Before climbing back out, he looked through the scope again. It was definitely a body next to the truck. He scanned the horizon but could not see anyone or anything out of order. He climbed out of the ravine and began to jog toward the truck. He was certain that some poor hunter had a heart attack in the middle of nowhere and expired. When he was within a hundred feet, he could tell the body was lying in a pool of blood. He crouched down and checked in all directions but still could not see anything amiss. He hurried over to the body and felt for a pulse, but the body was already cold. He walked to the other side of the truck and found a second body. This man had been shot in the chest and was dead as well. He went over to the truck and looked under the tarp. There was a large metal crate about the size of a steamer trunk. He did not know what it was, but his mind was screaming that this was the suitcase nuclear bomb. That meant terrorists were nearby and would return. He wished he could warn Mary, but he could not take the time. If they returned, the bomb would be theirs again. He wondered what to do. He heard laughter from the other side of a small rise and he headed toward it.

As he approached the top of the rise, he got down on his hands and knees and moved forward very slowly. He peeked quickly over the top and then ducked back down. There were ten terrorists in a circle. In the center of the circle was a man on his knees with another terrorist standing next to him. His dream about being stabbed in the neck flooded his brain and he fought the urge to scream. He glanced again and one of the men was recording the events on a video camera. The man standing next to the victim was speaking in a foreign language. All of the terrorists wore face masks. There was no time to wait. The slaughter could begin any second. He leveled his rifle on the man in the center who now brandished a knife over his head. Bill held his breath and squeezed the trigger. The bullet shot through the area and stuck the man with the knife in the wrist, blowing his hand off. He grabbed the stump of his arm and

screamed. Bill fired again. The bullet stuck the man in the throat and he fell back dead. Bill fired again and again, but there was no way he could stop the others from killing their victim.

Suddenly, there was a blood-curdling scream as Mary rushed toward the men with a pistol in each hand. The terrorists ignored their victim and turned on her and charged. She fired as fast as she could with every bullet hitting its intended target. Bill fired as well. Within a few seconds, all the terrorists lie dead or dying. Bill jumped to his feet and rushed toward Mary and the victim. She had used one of the terrorist's knives to cut the captive's hands free and they were hugging each other and crying. One of the terrorists rolled over and leveled his pistol on Mary, but Bill fired first and the man's head exploded. When he reached them, he dropped the rifle and hugged the others. "My God, are you okay?" he asked both of them.

The victim kissed Mary on the lips and Bill on the cheek and then fell to the ground and sobbed openly. "Thank you. I knew I was dead. You two must be like Navy Seals or something. That was amazing what you did." He was trembling uncontrollably and then threw up.

Bill kicked some dirt over the vomit and squatted next to the man and said, "I'm very sorry, but we don't have any time to waste. I'm Bill Watson and this is my friend, Mary Stewart. It's nice to meet you."

"I'm J.C. Emmanuel. Thank you for saving my life. What's the hurry? Are more of them coming?"

"That I don't know, J.C.," Bill replied, "but we're not going to wait around and find out." Bill stood up and pulled the other man to his feet. "What's in the back of your truck, son?"

"What? Oh my God, I forgot, those bastards killed Ted and Rob. We were just going hunting and they shot them dead. What kind of animals were those guys?"

"J.C., what's in the back of your truck?"

The man shook his head and replied, "It's Ted's truck, but there was nothing in the back."

"Well, there is now, and we have to get it out of here. Let's go!" Mary gathered up all the weapons while Bill led J.C. back to the truck. When she arrived at the truck, J.C. was kneeling next to one of his dead friends sobbing again. "Mary, J.C. should go with you. Drive as fast as you can to Needles and then call 911 or stop a cop if you see one. I think the thing in the back is a suitcase nuke. I'll drive the truck but am going to stay away from the town in case it detonates."

"Bill, that's crazy!"

"No choice now, Mary. J.C. is in no condition to drive. I really don't think this thing is armed. Those bastards did not want to blow up the desert. They were saving it for Vegas or Phoenix; but I'm not going to take a chance of doing their dirty work for them, okay?" She kissed him on the lips and patted his cheek and took J.C.'s arm to lead him away.

"What about my friends?"

"J.C., you help me put them in the backseat of the truck. Then you two get the hell out of here."

After Mary and J.C. headed toward Needles, Bill drove the truck back to the highway. He was confused as to what to do. It was only a few miles to the town, but did not know how long it would take for them to get someone willing to take possession of the bomb. They had passed a sign saying it was ten miles to the town not long ago, and now he was wondering if that was far enough away if the thing did detonate. His cell phone rang and he almost jumped out of his skin. A chill ran down his back and his hands were suddenly clammy and his fingers trembled. He looked at the screen and saw the words "No Service" in the upper left. The phone rang again. He pressed the connect button and said, "Hello?"

The deep, gravelly voice said, "Don't worry son, I'll protect you."

He wondered if he had passed out somehow and was dreaming again. "Dad, is that you?"

"Yes, my darling son, it is me. Things are about to get very frightening, and you must lock away your fear and focus on your anger if you want to secure the bomb."

"I don't know what you mean."

"You will. Let your rage run free!" The line disconnected.

He stared at the phone for a moment, not certain what had just happened. When he looked up, he saw them. There had to be fifty or more terrorists, all wearing black and face masks. They were standing not twenty feet away in a semicircle around the truck. His heart was pounding and the sound of blood rushing in his ears was deafening. He grabbed the pistol on the passenger seat, but held it between his knees. The man directly in front of the truck began to speak in heavily accented English. "Who killed my men and what have you done with our sacrifice?" Bill did not reply, but brushed perspiration from his brow. "You know you will not survive this, don't you?" Bill shook his head and tried to look defiant. "The device will not detonate until we input the code, so our bullets will not harm it, but your body will be cut to pieces. Get out of the truck now and die like a martyr!"

Bill was panting for air and felt he was hyperventilating. He tried to calm himself, but knew his life would be over in seconds. Audrey, his daughter and grandchildren would mourn his death, but never find his body. This was it. The man was talking to the others in a foreign language and they leveled their rifles on the truck. Bill was overtaken with rage at the brutality of these monsters in human garb. This was his home, his country, and those bastards were here to destroy it. He prayed the bomb would detonate, incinerating him and sending them all to hell where they belonged. He glanced at his face in the rearview mirror and was shocked to see his eyes were glowing red. His skin was darkening and his face was twisting and contorting in front of his eyes. He heard ripping fabric and looked down to see large muscles breaking through the fabric of his shirt.

The terrorists opened fire and Bill dived for the floorboards. Bullets flew through the doors and windows and shards of glass rained down on him. Through the thunder of gunfire and shattering glass, he thought he could hear the terrorists laughing at him. His anger had won. All he could think about was slaughtering those bastards like the vermin they were. He screamed with a voice so loud that the truck and ground itself shook. Now he was in the air, somehow floating over the shattered truck that lay fifty feet below him. He noticed that the terrorists were running away as fast as they could. Bill smiled and knew he had won.

Bill woke to the sound of police sirens. He was lying on the front seat of the pickup truck. The sun was shining in his eyes. Somehow the roof of the cab had been ripped off. He glanced around and saw dozens of bullet holes in every direction and he was lying on top of a pile of broken glass. He sat up and reached for the handle on the driver's door to get out. When he touched the door, it fell off and landed on the road. He climbed out and watched two highway patrol cars headed toward him at high speed. He felt a strong breeze and looked down at his clothes that now hung from his body in shreds. He could see what looked like bullet holes in his shoes and trousers, but there was no blood. He examined his body for bullet wounds, but seemed to be in perfect condition, other than some small cuts from lying on the glass. The two cruisers pulled up next to him and stopped with their lights still flashing. The officers exited their cars and looked around at the scene. There was a large semicircle made from piles of shell casings. One of the officers came over to Bill and eyed him up and down, shaking his head. "Are you Bill Watson, sir?"

"Yes, officer, I am."

"I'm Officer Dan Moncrieff of the Highway Patrol. Your friends, Mary Stewart and J.C. Emmanuel said you were in possession of the tactical nuclear weapon. May I see it?" Bill led the officer to the bed of the truck and pulled off the tarp. "Ms. Stewart said you two rescued Mr. Emmanuel from a band of terrorists. Was that near here?"

"Yes sir, it was just over there," he said pointing to the site where he had first seen the truck. "I thought I'd better leave the bomb here rather than risk taking it into a populated area."

The other officer joined them shaking her head. "Dan, you're not going to believe this. There have to be fifty or more dead bodies out there. It looks like most of them were ripped limb from limb." She turned to Bill and smiled, "Sir, I'm Officer Denise Kirkpatrick."

"Bill Watson. It's nice to meet you."

"What exactly happened here?" Bill told them about the encounter with the terrorists. Both officers took notes but shook their heads with each unbelievable revelation. "So, you're saying you were

inside the truck when they fired upon it? That doesn't seem likely. There is no way you could be alive after that."

"All I remember is I was down on the floorboards and glass was raining down on me. I must have blacked out, because then I dreamed I was floating above the truck. I thought maybe I had died and my soul was leaving my body." From the other direction, two armored personnel carriers starting to move toward them.

"Mr. Watson, who or what made those men retreat, and what killed them?"

"I don't know. Like I said, I think I must have passed out."

The other vehicles stopped, blocking the highway. Forty soldiers came out and formed a circle around the group. The single officer joined Bill and the police. "I am Captain Steve Pastor, US Army, and I am taking command of this area." The officers introduced themselves and explained what they had learned and the captain's eyes widened with each new event. He went over to the truck and examined the device in the bed. "Yea, this is a Soviet era twenty megaton nuclear device. I have two helos inbound from Twentynine Palms to take possession. I suggest that you leave the area as soon as possible. Mr. Watson, I will need a number to contact you if we have more questions." Bill pulled his cell phone from his pocket and noticed a bullet hole through the center. "Was that thing in your pocket?" Bill nodded but kept looking at it dumbstruck.

"Captain, Mr. Watson has told us a lot that we don't yet understand," Denise said. "We'll take him into Needles where his friends are waiting for him. We will get cell phone numbers from them and forward them to you. Mr. Watson, it may be some time before you can get a new phone unless you go to Las Vegas." The air was pierced by the low whump-whump sound of the helicopters as they crossed over a nearby ridge. "We will leave the area for you sir. Please be advised that there are two victims in the back of the truck as well as fifty or more terrorist casualties in the area." The captain nodded and then Bill and the police got into the cruisers and headed north.

Bill sat in the back seat while Denise drove. He felt a kiss on his cheek and turned to see Lou sitting next to him. "You did very well, son. I knew you could do it."

"Can't she see and hear you?"

"No, normal minds are capable of blocking out things that are incomprehensible as a way to maintain sanity and accept that physical reality is genuine. I think you did that yourself."

"What do you mean?"

"Son, you did not pass out, and your spirit did not rise above the truck during the assault. It was all you."

Bill swallowed hard and looked down at his hands, but they were no longer his hands. They were huge with long talons on each finger. He bent his head to look into the rearview mirror and saw the face of a monster, with fangs, pointed ears and blood-red eyes. The old man touched his shoulder, and Bill was normal again. "I don't understand."

"All things in time, my son. There is no hurry." The old man faded away as the cruiser pulled into the station and parked.

Chapter 4

After filling out paperwork at the Highway Patrol station, Bill was reunited with Mary and J.C. at a local eatery. He sat at their booth and shook their hands. They both looked at him with horrified faces, seeing his clothes in shreds. "I feel a lot better now," he opened. "The army has taken the nuke by now so we don't have to worry about that particular device. And J.C., I'm sorry about your friend's truck."

"We heard that another group of terrorists attacked you. What happened? Were you hurt? It looks like you went through a paper shredder," Mary asked.

Bill pulled the cell phone from his pocket and showed it to them as well. "There were a lot of bullets, but somehow I didn't get hit."

"Thank God for that!" J.C. exclaimed. "The truck was just a truck, but I'm still in shock about Ted and Rob. I had to let the troopers call their wives; I just couldn't. It was too soon and I just didn't know what to say."

"Bill, I hope it's okay, but I told J.C. we'd give him a ride home. He lives in Henderson, Nevada which is next to Las Vegas," Mary noted.

"Sure, that's no problem, Mary. Can I have my car keys? I want to get some different clothes; I don't think these can be saved."

It was two o'clock in the afternoon when they climbed back into Bill's car and headed north toward Las Vegas. Mary was sitting in back with the two dogs and J.C. sat on the front seat watching the desert pass by. Bill was consumed with the images of the terrorist attack. He could not understand how a bullet could have torn through his trousers and smashed through his cell phone without harming him. The cab of the truck had looked like Swiss cheese and yet he had no pain and no recollection of escaping other than the brief feeling of floating above the truck and watching the terrorists run for their lives. He also had no idea how the roof of the cab had been ripped off. In his mind, he could see the torn steel edges which were not cut by bullets. The highway patrol officer had said the terrorists appeared to have been ripped to pieces. That was another quandary. Then he remembered looking at the monster claw hands he had seen in the mirror as the cruiser pulled into Needles. It was too confusing, so he decided to stop thinking about it altogether.

"Bill, do you think you could drop me off at the Bellagio on the strip?" J.C. asked.

"Sure, but I thought you were from Henderson?"

"Yea, but my dad has a suite of offices at the hotel and I'd like you to meet him, if that's okay?"

"No problem for me. What do you think Mary?"

She had looked up from the magazine she was reading and said, "I'm not really in the mood, if that's okay. You two just leave me in the car with the dogs and I'll be okay. Please don't take offense, J.C." He frowned at her but then turned back to look out the window.

Bill was surprised by her attitude. He glanced at her in the rearview mirror, but then decided she was just in a bad mood and would likely come out of it before they made it to Vegas. "So, J.C., what do you do for a living?"

"I work in the family business. I suppose you could say I am in human resources. We're always looking for people who are a good fit with our business, so that keeps me moving around."

Bill noticed that Mary was watching J.C. intently. He wondered if she had feelings for J.C., and perhaps that was why she was upset that J.C. wanted to introduce him to his father and had not mentioned her. "What kind of a business is it?"

J.C. chuckled and replied, "I suppose you could call it a conglomerate. We are into all sorts of things." In the mirror, Bill could see that Mary was scowling at the other man. She caught Bill's eye in the mirror and smiled sweetly. Something about J.C. was making her very uncomfortable and he wondered what it could be, after all, she had been the one to offer the ride in the first place. "What do you do, Bill?"

"I'm a controller for a small company; at least I was before the nuclear attack on San Diego. I don't know if there's anything left now. And Mary had just started with us yesterday."

J.C. turned toward Mary and said, “Wow, that’s a real coincidence, isn’t it? I guess it was fate that brought you two together and led you to save me too. Amazing!” She flashed a quick smile and went back to her reading. “Bill, our meeting might have been precipitous after all. We can always use good people. I’ll mention that to my dad.”

“Thanks, but let’s not jump to any conclusions just yet. All I want to do is find my wife and family and make certain they are safe.”

“I understand completely.”

Just after four o’clock, Bill pulled his Avalon into the front drive at the Bellagio Hotel on the Las Vegas Strip. Valets opened the doors and one immediately recognized J.C. “Welcome back, sir,” he smiled.

“Steve, I think the lady will stay with the car if that’s okay,” J.C. replied.

“Sure, we’ll pull it to the curb and leave the key with the lady.”

Bill and J.C. walked through the front doors and headed toward a bank of elevators. “Does your family own this hotel, J.C.?”

He chuckled and said, “No, but that would be nice. It’s just a suite of offices, but I’m sure we can get you a complimentary suite for the night if you like. You and Mary both look really tired.”

Bill yawned and replied, “We’ll think about it. We left home at three o’clock this morning, so it’s been a really long day. We’re both a little scared of staying in a big city with all the craziness going on right now.”

“Okay, it’s up to you, but I think Las Vegas is probably safe.”

“Why? This place is a real den of iniquity. That would be a perfect target, don’t you think? Hey, didn’t we just walk past the elevators?” Bill felt a hand grab his arm and turn him around. Mary stood in front of him and threw her arms around his neck and nuzzled her face against his neck. “Are you okay?”

She kissed his cheek and whispered into his ear, “Don’t believe everything you see, Bill.”

“I don’t understand, Mary.”

She pressed her lips to his, smiled sweetly and replied, “Just don’t believe everything you see or hear, okay?” Bill nodded. She let go of him, turned and headed back toward the front doors.

Bill did not understand her actions or words. He shook his head and turned to see J.C. unlocking a large wooden door. There was a single elevator car behind the door. “Wow!”

“Yeah, private elevator, isn’t that cool? We don’t want to interfere with the hotel’s staff and guests.” The metal door slid open and the two men stepped inside. Bill turned to face the door and could see Mary fifty feet away frowning at them. J.C. closed the wooden door, and then the elevator door closed and the car began to rise. “Our floor is pretty high, so it will take a while.”

Three minutes later, the car was still rising. Bill turned to look at J.C. and said, “This must be the slowest elevator on earth, J.C. The hotel isn’t that tall, is it?” The other man just smiled. The car stopped and the door opened. Bill turned around to exit and stopped in his tracks with his mouth open.

Now he knew what Mary had meant. Rather than a hallway in the hotel, outside the door was a glass hallway leading both left and right. Through the glass, he could see Earth sitting below them. They had to be hundreds of miles above the surface. “J.C., what’s going on? This isn’t real. Is this some kind of illusion or what?”

J.C. walked out of the car into the hallway and turned to the other man. “Bill, think what you want. If you want to believe this is a wraparound painting, that’s okay with me, but what you are seeing is reality.” He motioned with his arm and said, “Come on, dad’s waiting.” He began to move to the left down the hallway.

Bill closed his eyes and looked again. He was still in space. He looked for the button to go back to the ground floor, but there was no control panel at all. “Bill, come on, stop wasting time!” He inched forward until he could look out of the car and down the hallway in both directions. It seemed to be made of glass and stretched in both directions as far as he could see. “Come on!” J.C. exclaimed. Bill took a

tentative stop onto the glass floor and it seemed strong enough to support his weight. He stepped out of the car and looked down on the planet beneath him.

“This is quite the illusion, J.C. How much did this cost?” He heard the elevator door close and looked toward it. There was no door, only the endless pane of glass. “Mary was right, this isn’t real. I don’t believe it.”

“Fine, don’t believe it, I don’t care. Just come along.”

Bill caught up to J.C. and they continued down the corridor for several minutes. Bill was finally satisfied that he was looking at a video projection on the glass and not reality. J.C. stopped abruptly and turned to Bill and said, “Okay, we’re here.”

Bill looked at both walls and saw only the unbroken glass. “Where?” J.C. reached out toward the wall to his right and a doorknob formed in front of his hand. By the time he grasped it, a wooden door stood piercing the glass. “That’s pretty cool.” J.C. opened the door, revealing a large office. Several large picture windows were covered by heavy drapes. There was a massive wooden desk, credenza, and chairs to his left, and a large seating area with a table, two couches, and two chairs to his right. Behind the furthest couch was a wall of bookcases pierced by a bar with two stools.

A man was standing at the bar pouring liquor into three glasses. He turned and smiled at his visitors. “Please come in and have a drink,” he said. The man appeared to be around sixty years old with gray hair and a neatly trimmed beard. He picked up the three glasses and set them on the table and approached them. He extended his hand and shook Bill’s. “It’s a real pleasure to meet you, Mr. Watson. My name is Dom Emmanuel. I heard you’ve had a busy day.”

“It’s nice to meet you Mr. Emmanuel.”

Dom pointed to one of the couches and said, “Please just call me Dom and have a seat.” As Bill moved away, Dom hugged his son and whispered something in his ear. Then the two came over and sat on the opposite couch. He picked up one of the glasses and extended his arm for a toast. “Here’s to our health!” They tapped glasses and sipped the whisky.

“Dom, J.C. said you wanted to meet me. Why?”

The old man chuckled and smiled at him. “You’ve had quite a day, son. Can you explain all the things that have happened to you today?”

“What do you think happened to me?”

J.C. and Dom exchanged a knowing smile. “Let’s see, first you were startled out of bed by the evacuation order. Then you stopped your car at the precise moment to keep from having it knocked out by an EMP. Then you twice attacked groups of terrorists like a madman, killing and then beheading them all. Finally, you hid in a truck from terrorists which was then riddled with bullets without any injury to you. Then you morphed into a monster and ruthlessly slaughtered them all.” He turned to his son and said, “Am I leaving anything out, J.C.?” The other man shook his head.

“Hey, I didn’t behead any of them the second time. That isn’t true!”

“Okay, to be honest, your sister did that,” Dom agreed. “Did I get anything else wrong?”

Bill sat rocking back and forth with his head in his hands. “This isn’t possible. How can you know any of that? I don’t even remember a lot of it.” He felt a hand on his back and jumped. He looked and saw that Dom had moved over to sit next to him.

“It’s okay, Bill. We are your friends; at least we want to be. Tell us about the man who has been helping you.”

“You know about that too?” Bill asked and Dom just smiled back at him. “He said his name was Lou and that he was my biological father. Is that true?”

“I suppose in a way it is true, but in another it is not.”

“Is that supposed to be an answer, Dom?”

“Bill, you and the rest of humanity view reality through a narrow lens based on knowledge passed down from generation to generation along with your own framework of the current state of science. From our perspective, reality is not so cut and dried.” He stood and looked down on him. “What did you think of the hallway?”

The sudden change of topic shocked Bill out of his confusion. “That’s quite a video system you have out there.” The other men began to laugh. “Now you’re going to tell me it’s all real, isn’t that right? Well, I don’t believe it!”

Dom grunted and walked over to the door and pulled it open. Instead of the hallway, there was now a sandy beach just outside the door. Low waves lapped up on the sand and he could hear seagulls calling in the distance. “Is this more video?”

“Of course it is,” Bill scoffed.

“Then come over here and prove it by stepping outside for a minute.”

Bill looked at J.C.’s expression but could not tell what he was thinking. He rose and walked over to the door. The scent of the sea was intoxicating and he moved his foot as if to take a step outside. Dom’s hand was in his back, shoving him out and causing him to fall face-first into the sand. He heard the door slam shut behind him. The sand was real, but that would not be hard to do. He stood and turned to where the door had been, but there was nothing there. He reached out with his hands, certain the door or wall would be there, but it was just air.

“Are you okay, buddy?” said a voice to his right. He turned and saw a small bar with a thatched roof only ten feet away. A young man with long blonde hair stood behind the counter. Bill looked around again, but was still on the beach. Past the first few palm trees, a line of tall hotels hugged the beach. Bill walked over and sat on a tall stool. “What’ll it be?”

“What’s good around here?”

“Man, on Maui, it’s got to be a Mai Tai.”

“Okay, I’ll have one of those. By the way, what time is it?”

“Two-thirty in the afternoon, but it’s never too early to party here.”

“Okay, thanks.”

“Can I ask you a question, buddy?” the bartender asked. Bill nodded. “Is there something wrong, pal? I saw you a minute ago. You looked lost.”

“I felt lost, but I’m okay now.” The barman moved away and started to prepare his drink. Bill sat quietly, wondering what had happened. This had to be a dream. He was in the Bellagio Hotel, then in outer space and now on the beach in Hawaii. He hoped he would wake up soon, but then again, this dream was pleasant enough. The barman brought over his drink and set it down. Bill took a sip and said, “Thanks. That’s perfect.” He had decided to go along with the dream and let his body wake up when it chose. After a few minutes, a tall redhead in a tiny ice-blue bikini began to approach up the beach. She caught him staring at her and smiled and he blushed slightly and turned away. A minute later, she sat on the stool next to his.

“Hi, Bill, it’s nice to meet you,” she said. “Can I buy you another drink?”

He turned and gazed into her brilliant green eyes. “How do you know my name?”

She turned to the barman and said, “Troy, another drink for my friend and champagne for me.”

“Sure thing, Faith,” he replied.

“Bill, Dom Emmanuel is my father. My name is Faith. I came to take you back when you’re ready.”

“I’m ready now. I’ve had enough of this silly dream.”

“This is no dream, Bill Watson, no more than when you destroyed the terrorists and saved countless lives today. You’re just confused.”

“Well, there is no arguing that! I have no clue what’s going on. Why don’t you tell me?”

“Very well, if that’s what you want? Troy, hold those drinks, we’ll be right back.” She grabbed Bill’s hands and they disappeared.

Faith and Bill stood on the edge of a tall cliff, surrounded by dozens of waterfalls. The sound of the water crashing into the base of the falls was deafening. They were at the top of a U-shaped valley, where the cascades fell down into a deep ravine. He could feel the spray of water on his face and the

stifling heat and humidity of the air. “Wow! This place is amazing! How did you get the effects in this simulation?”

Faith laughed. “So you think this is an illusion too?”

“What else could it be, Faith? Where would you have me believe I am now?”

She put her hand on his shoulder and said, “I would say this is Iguazu Falls in South America, but calling it an illusion is true as well.”

“Listen, all of this mumbo-jumbo is starting to get on my nerves. Is this some real waterfall or just a game you are playing on me?”

She frowned and replied, “First of all, this is not a game. Those terrorists were doing their best to kill you. This is most definitely a waterfall, as real as any you’ve ever seen, but both of the situations were illusions as well.”

“Huh?”

“It seems I have to demonstrate this again!” she exclaimed as she pushed him into the torrent of water. Almost instantly he went over the edge and plummeted toward the river at the base of the cliff. He screamed and flailed with his arms and legs and then slammed into the water. He fought to find the surface and discovered the water was only three feet deep and tasted salty. He stood up and looked at the Maui beach a few yards away. Faith was sitting at the bar again chatting to the barman. Bill’s clothes had changed into swimming trunks. He trudged through the water and up onto the beach where she handed him a large towel. “Did you have a nice swim?”

After drying himself, he sat on the other barstool just as Troy set a fresh Mai Tai down in front of him. He put his hand on Faith’s knee and she smiled sweetly at him. “Everything is an illusion, right?”

She threw her arms around him and squeezed and then whispered in his ear, “I’m so proud of you, Bill.” She kissed his cheek. “Enjoy your drink.”

He took a large gulp and asked, “If reality is an illusion, Faith, then is nothing real?” Troy laughed and Faith frowned at him.

She took a sip of her champagne and replied, “All of the really important things are real, like love, tenderness, family, and faith. The world around you is a tool to allow you to manifest those things.”

“Ah, I see,” he replied. “Well, actually, no I don’t.”

“Don’t feel bad, Bill. You see things the way you are supposed to see them, the way your eyes were meant to see and your ears were meant to hear. But something strange has happened. Even my uncle is trying desperately to understand the horrors this planet is facing right now, and usually he is the cause!”

“What does all this have to do with me?”

“Let’s go back to my dad’s office. He is the best person to speak of this.”

“Okay, how do we do that?”

“Kiss me, Bill.”

“Uh, you know I’m a married man, Faith.”

“I’m not asking you to date me or fall for me; just a little peck on the lips will do the job.”

“How can kissing you do that?”

She put her hand on his cheek and replied, “It is an act of faith, Bill, to demonstrate that you believe in me. Don’t be afraid, I won’t bite.” He leaned toward her and she closed her eyes. He touched his lips to hers.

“That wasn’t so bad, was it?” she smiled.

He opened his eyes to find them sitting on the couch in Dom Emmanuel’s office. He was wearing his normal clothes and she was wearing a business suit. “Wow!”

J.C. and Dom were sitting on the couch on the other side of the coffee table. “Well, tell us about your little adventure. What did you learn?” Dom asked.

“It hasn’t really sunk in yet, but something about how our feelings are real, but the world around us is only an illusion. Is that right?”

“That’s not bad,” Dom laughed. “Unfortunately, it’s easier to say than to actually know and accept. But that’s enough for now. With what you already know, you can be assured that there will be no

nuclear explosion here tonight, so I recommend that you and your guest stay in the hotel and start your adventure anew tomorrow. I've already prepaid a two-bedroom suite and fine dinner for you two."

Bill stood up to leave and said, "Now that you mention Mary, she told me not to believe everything I see or hear here. Is she right or you?"

"Bill, you just said that the world was an illusion, so I suppose that makes her correct. She fears us but does not yet know I am her uncle and wish her only the best. Perhaps that fear is irrational, but then again she is human like you and suffers the same lack of perspective. Your road trip should give you both the opportunity to examine what you believe to be real. We'll see you soon."

"If Mary is my sister, does that make you my uncle too?" Dom smiled and nodded. "Okay, do I just go out the door?"

"Why don't you try it?" Dom said.

Bill walked over to the door and pulled it open. The curving walkway next to the hotel entrance was outside. "Bye now," he said and waved and then stepped outside and closed the door behind him.

When Bill found Mary in the car, she was asleep, so after he woke her, he had no trouble convincing her to stay at the Bellagio and sleep in a real bed. As special guests of the Emmanuel family, the hotel staff went out of their way to coddle the dogs as well. At dinner that night, Bill was at first hesitant to tell her about his meeting with Dom and his children, but ultimately relented as he now had some verification that she was indeed his sister. He woke at seven o'clock the next morning to find Mary already getting prepared for the road. He took a shower and got dressed and they had breakfast at the hotel buffet. By ten o'clock, they had pulled out of the hotel and headed north again. Since there was no evacuation order, freeway traffic was normal, so they took Interstate 15 north toward Salt Lake City. There would be several hundred miles of small towns and long stretches of open space, so they felt comfortable they could avoid any more incidents. Bill called Audrey before they left the hotel. She, Sandi, Tom and the kids were leaving Cody and heading to Jackson, Wyoming, hoping to find better accommodations while avoiding large cities. Bill did not mention Dom Emmanuel. Such conversation over a phone would sound like the ravings of a lunatic.

Two hours outside Las Vegas, Mary suggested a bathroom break and Bill pulled off at the first exit with a gas station. While she was gone, it struck him that he had not put gas in his car since he left home early yesterday morning. He glanced at the gage and it showed full. "Oh crap! Now the damned gage is broken." He drove to the nearest available pump, ran his credit card and started to fill the tank. It stopped after a few cents. "Huh? That can't be right." He started toward the store to complain about the broken pump when it hit him. If everything was an illusion, then gas was an illusion too.

Mary walked past him as she returned from the restroom and asked, "Is everything okay? Are we gassed up and ready to go?"

"Yes we are," he said, fighting the need to rationalize the situation. "Let's hit it."

An hour later, they had just passed through the St. George, Utah, environs and continued northeast into the center of the state. Mary's cell phone rang and she answered it. Bill glanced over at her and noticed she was very quiet and listening intently and nodding her head. She disconnected the call and sighed. "Bill, can we please stop at the next exit?"

"Are you okay? Who called?"

"He said he was our father."

Bill shivered and looked forward. He could feel his hands becoming cold and moist. "Did he have an odd deep, gravelly voice?"

"Yes. He said he needed to speak to us. There is supposed to be a small diner just off the highway at the next exit. He wants to meet us there."

"Is that all he said?"

"No. He said I should ask you to look at your gas gage."

Bill looked down and saw that it still showed full, but as he looked, it began to drop quickly until it was almost at the empty mark and the yellow fuel warning light came on. "This can't be good."

“What happened?”

“The tank was full the last time we stopped, and the needle just dropped to empty while I was looking at it.”

“Is it broken?”

“No, that would be too easy.”

“I don’t understand.”

Bill turned on his turn signal and moved onto the off ramp. “I think we’re both about to learn something and it won’t be pleasant.”

“Let’s get back on the highway, Bill. I’m getting a really bad feeling about this.”

The car stopped at the end of the exit ramp. A small road ran in both directions perpendicular to the freeway. A few hundred yards down the road to their right, a small dive restaurant sat alone at the side of the road. A small neon sign said ‘Lou’s’. “Okay, Mary, I’m going to get back on the freeway.” He pressed down on the accelerator to get onto the on-ramp, but the steering wheel turned right as he struggled to keep it straight.

“Bill!”

“The freaking car is driving itself! I can’t control the wheel or the pedals!” The accelerator sank to the floorboards and the car screeched away from the intersection, leaving patches of rubber on the roadway. Bill watched the car race forward as the speed approached seventy miles an hour. Mary screamed and Bill wrestled with the wheel. The brakes squealed and the wheel turned in his hands, causing the car to spin around several times until it came to rest in a parking space in the empty lot. Both of them were wheezing for breath as the cloud of dust settled around them. The doors flew open, their seatbelts unbuckled and both were pushed out onto the pavement. The car backed away and zoomed out onto the road, leaving them behind. Within a minute, it had disappeared over a rise in the distance. “I guess this is the place,” he joked as he stood and then helped Mary to her feet. “Let’s go see what Lou wants.”

“How do you know his name?”

“He told me.” She just looked back at him without a reply. Bill opened the door and they stepped inside.

The inside was bare wood that looked old and desperately in need of a coat of paint. The floor was covered by a layer of sawdust. There were several simple wooden tables and a few booths along the front and one side of the dining room. A jukebox stood against a third wall with the restroom doors on either side of it. A small dance floor separated it from the tables. The other wall was dominated by a long bar and ten stools. The wall behind it was full of shelves filled with liquor bottles and a massive mirror that was cracked in several places. An older heavy-set woman stood behind the bar, wiping away the dust with a rag. She smiled at them but said nothing. There were several small light fixtures over most of the booths and tables, but the lighting was quite dim.

Bill took Mary’s hand and led her over to the bar, standing in front of the barkeep.

“Bill and Mary, it’s so good to see you again,” the woman said.

“Do I know you?” Mary asked.

“I think Lou wants to see us,” Bill interjected.

“In due time, sonny. How about a drink while you wait? The chicken wings and nachos are great here. Are you two hungry?”

Bill looked at Mary and could tell she was terrified and looking to him for help. “Sure, we’ll have a couple of beers and some nachos.”

“Great, I’ll get right on that,” she said. She went over to a small window hidden among the shelves of liquor and shouted, “One order of nachos, Lou, and get on it!”

The deep voice replied, “Coming right up!”

She came back and filled two pint glasses with beer and set them in front of her guests. “Take a load off. You can sit anywhere you like. I’ll be right back.” She turned and headed toward the restroom.

They sat on bar stools next to where they stood and took a sip of their drinks. “What do you think happened to your dogs and the car, Bill?”

“I’m sure we’ll get everything back when Lou is finished talking to us. Please try to relax.”

“I don’t know how you can be so calm at a time like this!” she exclaimed.

“Mary, I know it’s strange, but remember what happened yesterday. We killed dozens of terrorists and cut off their heads. Shit, I’ve never fired a rifle in my life and I was like a sniper. Something really weird is happening and I don’t think we have a choice other than to go through this and see what comes next.”

What came next was the piercing sound of engines outside the building. Bill rushed over to a booth and pulled open the curtains. Dozens of motorcycles were parking in front of the restaurant. Soon it seemed like there were hundreds more. Bill rushed back to Mary and held her hand. “Let’s try to stay calm.” She glared back at him.

The door opened and men in black leathers began to file inside. Each was quite large and muscular, with most having long hair held back by bandanas and heavy beards. All had holstered pistols on their hips. “Well, what do we have here?” one of them laughed as more and more entered the room. Soon, more than one hundred bikers filled the restaurant, forming an impenetrable wall between Bill and Mary and the front door. Bikers sat on the stools on either side of them while two more stood less than three feet in front. “What the hell are you two doing in our place?”

The biker next to Mary ran the back of his hand down her cheek and licked his lips. “This one’s a keeper, Jonas.”

Bill started to move toward him but the biker seated next to him pushed him down on the stool and held him in place. “Chivalry is dead, pal, and you are about to join it.”

The barmaid hurried out of the restroom and stood behind the bar. She barked, “Leave my customers alone and get out of here!”

The leader of the bikers pulled his revolver from the holster and slammed it down on the bar between Mary and Bill. “And what do you intend to do about it, old lady?”

In a quick single motion, she withdrew a shotgun from under the bar, cocked it and shoved it into the leader’s face. “How about this?”

“My boys will kill you and them, and then burn this dump to the ground. If you’re so tough, pull the trigger, you old bag!”

The man next to Mary put his arm around her shoulders and smiled. Bill sat frozen, desperately wanting to help Mary, and wondering why his super powers had not kicked in.

“Old bag? How dare you call me that, Jonas? No beer for any of you and just wait until your father hears about this!”

The leader frowned and stuffed his pistol back into its holster. “Ah, Mom, you know I was just playing?”

The angry stare on her face melted as she put down the shotgun and then she began to laugh. Immediately, the bikers began to laugh as well. The two sitting next to Bill and Mary stood and walked away, joining the others at tables or booths. Bill and Mary exchanged bewildered looks. “What the heck just happened here?” Mary gasped.

“I don’t know. I thought I was going to have a heart attack.” He turned to the barmaid and asked, “What’s going on here?” She said nothing but looked to her right. Bill followed her glance and saw Lou coming out of the kitchen with a large plate of nachos. He motioned for Mary and Bill to join him at a booth. As he walked toward it, the bikers got up and moved elsewhere. Mary and Bill joined him and sat down. A moment later, a biker came over with a pitcher of beer and three glasses, set them down and walked away. Across the room, Bill could see several bikers pouring beer for their compatriots. Three more were in the kitchen preparing food for the group. “This is the strangest place, Lou.”

He frowned and replied, “Why don’t you both just call me dad? My name really isn’t Lou, but it sounds sort of like it. Dad is certainly true though.” He extended his hand to Mary and said, “Merihem, it is so good to see you.”

“It’s Mary, sir,” she said as she shook it.

“Okay, have it your way, Mary. Please have some food. I’m told my nachos are great, but it’s mostly my children who say that.”

Bill took a chip and tasted it. The cheese, meat, beans and peppers were wonderful together. “It’s great, Dad.”

“So, you think this illusion is strange, Son? Would you say it was stranger than your visit with Dom Emmanuel?”

“You know about that?”

He frowned at him and said, “I’m surprised you’d ask such a question, Son. He is my brother after all.” He noticed Mary staring at him. “Go ahead, Mary, spit it out. I know you’re dying to ask me.”

“You are the Evil One, aren’t you?”

He chuckled and Bill shuddered at the thought. “Humans are so simplistic in their reasoning! You create these theories based on the way you choose to see the world and then start labeling everything and everyone. It stands to reason that since you were raised by humans that you’d have been indoctrinated into their silly ideas.”

She pulled her crucifix from under her blouse and held it up to him. “Get back demon!”

He clutched at his heart and moaned, “Argh! You got me!” Then he burst into laughter. The bikers were laughing too and Mary blushed and tried to shrink down in the booth. “Mary, please don’t be upset. I didn’t mean to make fun of you or anything of the sort.”

Mary had pressed herself against Bill and tried to hide her face behind his back. Bill comforted her and said, “It’s okay, Mary. This man is our father and only wants to help.” He put his arm around her shoulders and held her tightly. “Dad, your niece Faith said something yesterday that I still don’t understand.”

“She is such a sweet girl. Please go on.”

“She said that you and Dom were both trying to figure out why these horrible things keep happening and that usually you cause them.”

Their father ate a chip and took a long drink of his beer. “Yea, it is strange that some force is unleashing all this terror on the planet and I didn’t do it. Dom and I sensed a change some time ago, and that is precisely why you and Mary are here now. His family and mine seem helpless to solve the riddle, and so we put you two on Earth to figure it out.”

“We’re not humans?” Mary squeaked at last.

“Dad, I have a wife and a child. How can I have kids if I’m not human?”

“Bill, if everything is an illusion, why couldn’t you?”

Bill’s head snapped back as if he had seen a ghost. “So you’re saying humans aren’t human at all. They’re illusions too.”

“I never said that, Son, and frankly we don’t have time to argue about such things. The facts are that the world and people behave as reality. A terrorist could cut off your head and your body would surely die. All the people of Earth are in real danger. Now you and Mary have to go figure out what happened and why, and then find a way to stop it.”

“We’re all counting on you, brother,” said a voice and Bill turned his head to see all the bikers gathered around their booth.

“And we are going to help you,” Jonas smiled.

“Bill, your car is outside now,” his father noted. “And yes, gasoline is an illusion too, as is the car for that matter. You and Mary need to continue on to find your family. They will all be in mortal danger in the near future, and will need you to save them.”

“Please don’t forget my grandchildren,” the barmaid said as she joined them at the table.

“Don’t worry, Cora, I won’t forget,” Bill’s father said. “Mary and Bill, tomorrow morning, a group of terrorists are going to attack a large daycare center in Provo. They intend to either behead the children or sell them into sex slavery. Drive there now and spend the night at this hotel.” He handed them

a piece of paper with the name and address. "I've already booked two rooms for you. Be outside the daycare center by nine o'clock in the morning and stop them any way you can."

"Who could behead children?" Mary groaned.

"They must be bat-shit crazy," Jonas offered.

The old man took Bill's hands and said, "There is more, but it is still in doubt, and you need to know that the leader of the terror army knows who you two are. Go now, it's a long drive north." After they stood to leave, Bill hugged his father, and then his brothers joined and they all said their goodbyes. Minutes later, they were back on Interstate 15, heading into the vast emptiness of central Utah.

Chapter 5

After a couple of hours, Bill glanced into the backseat and noticed that Mary was asleep with his dogs again. Seeing his reflection, Chachis got up and hopped into the front passenger seat where he could pet her. He glanced at his white poodle, and rubbed her ears with his free hand. "That's a good girl." She climbed over the center console and found a spot in his lap to lie down. Bill kept petting her gently and watching the almost empty roadway ahead of him. He reckoned they were about halfway to Provo, causing him to reflect on their new mission. Images of beheaded children flooded his mind and he fought to suppress them. He focused on the road and tried to keep from thinking such horrific thoughts again. He knew that he and Mary could stop it or, at least, he hoped they could.

When he glanced in the rearview mirror again, he saw three black SUVs approaching at high speed. They were in the left lane so he stayed well to the right of his lane so they could pass. He reasoned the trucks must be Federal agents on an urgent assignment and let it go at that. Chachis began to growl. Zelda had awoken in the backseat and began to yip nervously. Mary opened her eyes and asked, "What's wrong?"

"I don't know what's gotten into the dogs," he replied. He glanced in the rearview mirror just as the first of the SUVs passed them on the left. The other two were about fifty yards behind him, with one in each lane. But there was something else too. It had to be a reflection of the glass, but he could see a right angle of intense light, as though a light shone behind the top corner of a door. The front SUV was now in his lane about twenty yards ahead and was gradually slowing down. The second was almost beside them and the third only ten yards behind. They were blocked in. Bill looked frantically about and noticed a thin hand with long fingers extended from the angle of light, reaching for Mary. Zelda lunged at the hand, grabbing onto two fingers and not letting go. It was suddenly intensely cold in the cabin as the three trucks began to slow, forcing Bill to slow down as well.

"Bill, what's happening?" Mary shouted. Then she noticed Zelda holding onto the hand and screamed. The sound frightened Zelda and she released the hand which instantly slipped behind the angle of light which then disappeared. "My God, Bill, what was that thing?" The side windows of the SUV on their side lowered and two masked men in black uniforms pointed automatic rifles at them. "Bill, don't stop! They'll kill us for sure."

Bill glanced at her in the rearview but noticed only how his own eyes were glowing red again. He could feel his muscles pressing against the fabric of his clothes and he was gasping for breath. Chachis had moved to the passenger seat and he glanced to see if she was fine. Her eyes glowed as well and she had doubled in size. All four vehicles had pulled over onto the shoulder and now were stopped. Mary was crying, but Bill could not comfort her. This was not the time for such emotions. The fifteen men from the SUVs were standing on the passenger side of his car, motioning for them to exit. Zelda growled and it was a terrifying growl. He glanced at her and she was now the size of a bull mastiff.

One of the men spoke in a heavy accent, "Mr. Watson, we know what you have done and now you will all pay with your lives."

Bill opened the driver's door to get out. Mary shouted, "Don't do it, Bill!" But he was already outside. The terrorists stepped back slightly at the sight of his red eyes and changing appearance.

"You have one chance to repent!" he growled in an inhumanly loud and sinister voice.

"Kill them all!" the terrorist leader shouted.

The two passenger doors opened on their own and the dogs attacked the terrorists like a pack of starving wolves. The terrorists fired on the dogs, but the bullets did not seem to affect them. Bill jumped and found himself floating in the air. He dived into a group of terrorists, pummeling and kicking them relentlessly. The leader jumped on his back and began to stab him in the neck, but the knife could not cut his leather-like scaly skin. He jumped into the air and flew back over the freeway and dropped back-first onto the pavement, crushing the leader's body against the concrete. The remaining terrorists fled toward the mountains and he moved to stop them when an odd shadow passed over him. A second winged

monster hovered fifty feet over his head holding an SUV in each hand. Mary flung the two vehicles at the retreating men, crushing them under the weight. Bill stood panting for air with the anger pulsing through his body. After a moment, Mary and his dogs stood in front of him. They were back to normal, but he was still filled with rage. “Bill, it’s okay now,” Mary said calmly.

But it was not quite over yet. There was something keeping him in this form. He glanced down at the body of the terrorist leader. He was shocked to see that same angle of light next to the body. An odd form moved out of the leader’s body and began to crawl through the open door. Bill reached down and grabbed the shadow of a creature and pulled it away from the angle of light which instantly disappeared. The creature squealed in anger and fear as he examined it. It was about three feet tall and very thin, with greenish-gray skin. It was nude but did not have any gender, just smooth skin everywhere. Its hands and feet had long digits with curving talons for nails. It hissed at him and bared its three-inch fangs. “What manner of foul beast are you?”

The creature hissed and then replied in a high-pitched hissing voice, “Your time is at an end, spawn of Satan. Your world is our world now.”

Bill’s eyes glowed so brightly that red light illuminated the creature and it shrieked in terror. Bill snapped its back and it fell limp. He reached down and grabbed the terrorist leader’s knife and chopped off its head. He tossed the body off the side of the road and then flung the head far into space.

Bill was his normal size again. Mary approached and put her arm around his shoulders and kissed his cheek. “What do you think that thing was?”

“I don’t know, but could you feel the hatred and anger coming from that miserable creature? I could feel the violence and horror exuding from its skin. Now I understand why Dom and our father are concerned. That thing was not from this universe.”

“How is that possible? Where else could something be from?”

“I don’t know either. That’s just the feeling I had when I held it. Did you see the angle of light it was trying to crawl back into?”

“Yea, that was really strange. Do you think it’s a portal to another universe?”

“That would make sense, I guess.”

“Bill, I think we will eventually have to go through one of those to find out what’s happening.”

“I think you’re right. Let’s get out of here. We still have to get to Provo tonight.”

“Bill, that terrorist called you by name. That means they know who we are and will try everything they can to kill us and our families.”

He kissed her cheek and said, “Sis, you’re right, which is why I have to find my family before they do. You drive, okay?” She nodded and they climbed back into the car and drove away.

When they arrived in Provo, they went to the daycare to check the area and to get precise directions from their hotel. After dinner, they went to the lobby bar in the hotel to have a nightcap. They sat at a small table away from the few other guests. “Bill, did you know you were adopted when you were young?”

“No, my parents waited until I was a teenager to tell me. They didn’t want me to have a stigma or something.”

“Mine didn’t need to tell me. I was five when my mom died in a car wreck. I have no recollection of my father from my childhood. I hated him so much for deserting us, and I always hoped to find a brother or sister out there someday.” She held his hand. “And now I have a brother.”

“And a father,” he added. She frowned and pulled her hand away. “I didn’t mean to upset you, Mary.”

She leaned toward him and whispered, “It’s not that, Bill. My adoptive parents are very religious. Now I find out my father is the Devil. I’m not sure how to process that. You remember what we did to those terrorists. It’s like we’re devils too in a way.”

Someone pulled a chair up to their table and sat down. They turned and saw it was J.C. Emmanuel. “Hi, guys!”

“J.C., what are you doing here?” Bill asked.

“I just wanted to answer Mary’s question.”

“Huh? How did you know?” she asked.

“Illusions, right?” Bill guessed.

“Yea, something like that,” he chuckled. “You have to understand that this open cooperation between my father and yours is unusual, but not unheard of. This same kind of thing seems to happen about once every thousand years. The most horrible things start happening all over the world. At first, your father gets the blame and he is glad to get it. But then things get worse and worse until he has to admit it was someone else. Each time it happens, we get closer to the cause, but we still haven’t gotten there. That’s why you two are the ultimate act of cooperation.”

“Ultimate act?” Mary quizzed. “What do you mean?”

“Well, your father is from one side, and your mother was one of ours.”

“My mother was an angel?” Bill gasped. J.C. nodded.

“But my mother died in an auto accident,” Mary noted.

“That’s true, but she should not have,” J.C. replied. “This current phase of evil began about one hundred years ago. My sister Prudence volunteered to be your mother, but obviously, we could not raise you. We needed human parents to make sure you two could remain hidden. After she gave Bill to his adoptive parents, she cried for months and changed her mind about having a second child. She grieved over the separation for more than twenty-five years before she relented and had you, Mary. Her one condition was to raise you as a human and be your mother. Both of our fathers begged her to reconsider, but eventually they gave in. Then five years later, there was the auto accident where she died. You have to know that should be impossible. We still do not know how that happened.” He sat back and sighed, glad to have that burden off his chest. Mary was crying and Bill sat dumbfounded.

“I know how it happened, J.C.,” Bill replied. The other man stared at him blankly. “There is another plane of existence. I believe it bumps into this one every so often, maybe every thousand years, like you said. When that happens, these evil monsters can open doors between the two universes and slip through. We saw that today!”

“What did you see?”

“It was like an angle of light. I saw one in my car and a hand came out to grab Mary, but my dog attacked it. Then later, after our fight with the terrorists, I saw another next to the dead terror leader’s body. Something was crawling out of his body and trying to slip away into one of those angles. I grabbed it. It said our time was over and it was their time to rule. Then I killed the miserable bastard.”

“That was that awful head you sent to my dad?” J.C. asked.

“I threw it to him? I just threw it away. I didn’t know what happened to it.”

“This is all too hard to believe. I don’t know what to say,” J.C. mumbled.

Mary put her hand on his and said, “Bill and I have to go through one of those doors to stop this.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea, Mary.”

“I don’t think there’s any choice now,” Bill replied.

Mary poked her head through the open door between their adjoining rooms at seven o’clock the next morning. Bill was sitting on his bed with his cell phone against his ear. He looked at her and smiled, signaling he needed five minutes. She nodded and returned to her room to finish getting ready. “Yes, honey, we’re in Provo, Utah. It should be about a six-hour drive once we get going, but I have to handle something here first.”

Audrey sighed and replied, “What do you have to do there? I didn’t know you knew anyone in Utah.”

“It’s a bit complicated, but I promised to do a favor for my father.”

“I know you said you met your biological father. I am very happy for you, but it seems convenient that he is already asking you for favors. What are you supposed to do for him?”

“Please don’t take this wrong, but I think it’s better if you don’t know just yet.”

“Bill, all of this is starting to scare me. Tommy showed me an article on the Net yesterday giving someone with your name credit for stopping an invading terrorist army in the Imperial Valley. Was that you?”

“Yeah, it was.”

“Bill, are you crazy? You could have been killed. They had a report from a police officer who had been wounded there that you decapitated the dead terrorists. Is that true too?”

“What do you want me to say?”

“Honey, I think there is something you’re not telling me. None of this sounds like the gentle man I married. What’s gotten into you?”

“Audrey, please try to be calm. I don’t think a telephone call is appropriate for this discussion. I want to tell you everything face to face tonight when I get there.”

“Bill?”

“Honey, please, let’s not talk about this right now, okay? You won’t like anything else I could tell you. If we’re next to each other, it will make more sense. Please?” She disconnected and he tossed his phone onto the bed. “Dammit!” He sat there just staring at the phone, upset and angry that she had hung up on him.

“Bill, what the hell just happened?” Mary said from the door, pulling her suitcase behind her.

“Were you listening to my phone call?”

“No, of course not. What happened to your phone?”

He glared at her and looked at his phone and back to her. “What?”

Mary walked over and picked the device from the bed and held it toward him. “Bill, you never went to the store in Vegas to get a new one. Did you forget that just two days ago, there was a bullet hole through the middle of this thing?” He stared at her open-mouthed, unable to find any words to say. She began to laugh and he joined in. She tossed him the phone and said, “Illusions, right? Let’s go have some breakfast so we can take care of those kids.”

It was 8:40 a.m. when they arrived near the daycare center, well ahead of their deadline. As they started to exit the car, three SUVs parked along the curb pulled away at high speed in different directions. A young woman ran screaming out of the building holding her neck as blood gushed out around her fingers. Bill ran across the street toward her. Another car approached him and honked its horn. Bill jumped into the air, kicking off against the hood of the car and landed on the sidewalk near the bleeding woman. He knelt down next to her as she gasped for breath, choking on her own blood. He pushed her hand aside by his and looked into her eyes. He heard her say, “They took them. God help us, they’re going to kill the rest,” but her lips did not move. Bill removed his hand and saw that her neck wound was healed. She coughed again and then sat up as though nothing had happened. Just then, Mary sprinted by with pistols in both hands and ran into the daycare. The woman whispered, “Thank you.”

“Call 911. My friend and I will help. How many children were taken?”

“Six. There were two in each car. My God, I think they’re going to sell them as slaves or rape them. They’re just little girls, only two or three years old.”

“Have faith, Cindy. We will fix this.” Bill kissed her forehead and ran back across the street to his car and opened the door.

“How do you know my name?” she shouted but he did not reply. She took her phone and dialed.

Chachis and Zelda sat patiently on the front seat. “You both know what to do, okay?” Bill asked. The dogs nodded and jumped out of the car.

Mary smashed down the door to the main room, crushing one terrorist under it. She glanced around the room to assess the situation. There were at least fifty children and fifteen terrorists. Two beheaded teachers lay dead in pools of their own blood. Two terrorists at the far end of the room each held a small boy with long knives against their throats. She could feel the anger growing inside her and prayed it would be enough to save these children. “Mary Stewart, we’re glad you could join our little party. Where is your friend, Bill Watson?” one of the men holding a knife to the throat of a child said.

Mary felt like she was on fire, so full of hatred for these monsters. That was when she noticed the angle of light near the leader's head. He began to laugh. "This child will die because of your failure Mary! Now is our time to rule." He held the knife high, ready to plunge into the little boy's throat. She jumped into the air, firing on the terrorists, hitting each in the throat as she flew forward. The children began to scream and run about as the dead and dying terrorists fell around them.

Chachis was running down the street, but was no longer the toy poodle she had been a minute ago. Now she was as large as a rhinoceros, running fifty miles an hour through the streets of the city. Zelda was equally huge, except she ran in the opposite direction with the SUV a few blocks away. Bill was flying over the interstate south of Provo as the last SUV sped away at top speed. Within a few minutes, he was directly above it and began to laugh.

The terrorist swung the knife downward toward the child's neck, a look of glee in his eyes. The blade was an inch from its target when Mary's arm grabbed his. He looked up at her glowing red eyes and screamed. She ripped off his arm and threw it out the window. Then she shot him in the forehead. The other had released his prisoner and ran for the exit. She fired at him, hitting the back of his head and he fell dead to the ground. Mary panted for air, the level of excitement now ebbing. She found herself surrounded by crying children who were too afraid of her to move. She tossed her pistols out the broken window and sat down on the floor, and was immediately enveloped by the children, hugging her and trying to be near her. Several SWAT officers rushed into the room.

One of the SUVs sat at the traffic light, waiting to turn left and make its way out into the desert and safety. The two men sat in front with two small girls in the backseat crying. "Don't worry, children, we will find you good husbands." The two began to laugh. A giant monster landed on the hood, smashing the engine compartment and twisting the frame so that the rear wheels lifted off the ground. The men screamed as the monster swiped at the roof and ripped it off. They fumbled for their weapons and the beast attacked the driver, biting his head and shoulders off and spitting them out onto the roadway. The passenger jumped from the vehicle, but the monster landed on top of him, ripping him to shreds with its long claws.

The two girls were crying and trying to disconnect their seatbelts when the right passenger door opened and Chachis jumped onto the seat next to them and began to lick their faces and yip happily. Two police officers arrived to check on the gruesome scene.

The second SUV rushed up the side of the nearest mountain toward the rendezvous point where a helicopter was waiting. "The buyers are anxious to see our product, sir," the driver said to the man next to him.

"Good, but we have more to do. There are plenty of potential buyers for product such as this," he replied as he looked at the two crying girls in the backseat. The driver slammed on the brakes, causing his boss to snap around in his seat. "What the heck is wrong with you?" The driver did not respond, but pointed out front where a huge beast stood in the middle of the road. "What in the name of God is that?"

"I don't know sir, but I think we should back up."

"Screw that, I'm going to kill that damned thing," he said as he exited the cabin and pulled his pistol from its holster. He slammed the truck door, leveled his gun and fired at point-blank range.

The monster shook its head, and then opened its mouth, unleashing a blast of flame, consuming the man in seconds. When it stopped, the charred skeleton collapsed to the ground. The driver jumped out and ran away screaming as the two girls sat crying in the back seat. A passenger door opened and Zelda jumped up on the seat and began calming the girls. Zelda looked out the rear window to see a highway patrol cruiser heading their way with its lights on. The driver was looking back to see if the beast was chasing it and ran directly into the path of the oncoming car and was hit. She started licking the girls' faces and they squealed with delight.

The last SUV was weaving through traffic, flying down the highway at full speed. Bill dived down and grabbed the roof of the SUV and lifted it off the ground and flew away toward Utah Lake. He circled to gain altitude while the driver and passenger fired at him through the roof of the cabin. When he reached one mile above the lake, he ripped off a rear passenger door and pulled out the two children in one of his

massive, clawed hands. They screamed in terror at seeing the giant winged demon. He let go of the SUV and it dropped out of sight. He flew north back toward the city, using his thoughts to calm the girls. A few minutes later, he landed a block from the daycare center. After morphing into his normal form, he held their hands and led them back to the building to rejoin Mary.

After being questioned by the police, Bill and Mary headed north toward Wyoming through Idaho and hopefully the end of this terrible journey. They made a pact to never tell anyone the specifics of what had happened at the daycare center. Fortunately, the children forgot what they had seen almost immediately. Bill remembered what his father had said about human minds being able to block out unfathomable events to protect their sanity, and wished he could be so lucky. While he was thrilled to be able to help the children, the horror and violence of what he had done would mar him for life. He glanced at his dogs sleeping on the backseat and wondered what they had been through. The police who returned them said the dogs were sitting in the back seat of the SUVs, playing with the children, and yet, horrible destruction and death was all around.

Meanwhile, Mary sat quietly in the front passenger seat, trying to come to grips with the violence of the morning. Her adoptive parents were very religious and feared if they ever learned her true lineage, they would be terrified and never want to see her again. “Bill, I don’t know how to deal with having that thing as a father. Does it bother you too?”

He sighed and replied, “In a way yes, but then there’s nothing we can do about what happened before we were born. And you heard what J.C. said last night, right? We were born specifically to end the horrors that we are facing now. That was the ultimate cooperation between Heaven and Hell. Until I morph into that other thing, I feel like any other human, at least I think I do.”

“Sometimes I wonder what would have happened if I chose to start at the office on Monday rather than Friday. You’d probably be dealing with all this alone, and I would have been killed in the nuclear explosion. Right now, I don’t even know why I chose to start on a Friday.”

“Yea, Tom and I talked about that too. At the time, I thought it was weird, but now I know it was fate.” She stared at him. “Think about it, Mary, you and I were born to stop those creatures from coming from the other dimensions. After all of that cooperation and the sacrifice of our mother, I don’t think such a thing would have been left to chance. If I hadn’t met you on Friday, I probably would have seen you standing on the curb crying in the morning. I would never have driven right past and left you there. There was no way we were not going to be together.”

“Oh my God, Bill, I completely forgot to tell you something that happened in the daycare center!”

“What was it?”

“When I burst into the room, I noticed one of the angles of light near the lead terrorist.”

“Did you see one of those monsters?”

She sighed and replied, “No. That’s when I jumped into action and might have missed it while I was shooting at the terrorists, but I did feel something.”

“What?”

“I’m probably wrong, and it’s just sounds crazy to say.”

“Just say it, Mary. I won’t judge you.”

“I think I felt our mother on the other side, calling out to me. I don’t think those things killed her. I think they took her with them.”

“But what about her body? They did find and bury a body, right?”

“Yes, but I was just a little girl, and those things are vile and evil. I think they substituted someone else for our mother.”

Bill looked ahead through the windshield and said, “Well, now we have another reason to step through that door. Then we’ll find out for sure.”

Bill pulled off Interstate 15 at Idaho Falls and took Highway 26 toward the Wyoming border. There was a restaurant near the exit, so they pulled into the parking lot to take a restroom break and get a

bite to eat before making the last leg of the journey to Jackson. The hostess led them to a booth, and then Mary excused herself and headed to the restroom. Bill sat down and looked through the menu. It was only mid-afternoon so the place was mostly empty. He looked at his phone and noticed several calls from his wife while they had been traveling without cellular service. He dialed her number, but she did not answer. Now worried, he dialed Sandi and Tom's numbers too. Neither of them answered either. He began to panic and was about to head for the car when he heard someone come up to their table. He looked to his left to see Dom Emmanuel and his father standing there, looking downcast. "I'm sorry, but I've got to get out of here. Can you two take care of Mary for me?"

Bill's father put his hand on his shoulder and replied, "Son, you're not going anywhere right now. We know what happened." Both men sat down on either side of him.

"Bill, when the hotel housekeeper entered your family's room to clean up, she found your two grandchildren all alone inside and crying," Dom related. "There was a message written on the walls in blood. It demanded that we sacrifice you and your sister or else your family and all other life on earth will be extinguished."

"What?" Mary gasped as she stood tableside.

Dom climbed out of the booth and hugged her tightly. "My dear, please know that we are all working to stop this, but frankly, this is why we created you."

"Who exactly are you?" she asked.

"Mary, this is our uncle, Dom Emmanuel," Bill answered.

Her eyes opened too wide and she squeaked, "But if he is your brother; that means you are. . ."

Dom kissed her cheek and said, "Let's keep that our little secret for now, okay?" He helped her to sit and slid in next to her, holding her hand. Mary was blushing and looking downward.

"Dom, I'm ready to give up my life for my family. Without them, I have nothing," Bill said.

Lou put his arm around his shoulders and said, "Son, please do not be naïve. You have seen what those creatures have done. There is no reason to believe they will abide by that pledge."

"Are you ready to order?" said a waiter standing by their table.

"Sure," Dom replied. "Let's have a sampling of your appetizers and a round of sodas, please." He winked at her and she blushed and hurried away. "Your dad is right, Bill. These creatures are evil, but not stupid. They know what you two can do and why you are here. If we do the job for them, they win without a fight. But realize that your lives will be in constant mortal danger when you step through that door. They will do all they can to kill you, but you have the power to win. If you die there, it will have been for a good reason. You have a chance to save the world!"

"Now we just need to find one of those things and force open the door," Lou said.

"Yes, that is first," Dom agreed. "Our plan is to head to the Middle East, where the terror army home base is located. Those things might avoid this country, but they must stay with those evil men to keep them hating and fighting. Your father and I will each send a thousand of our children to help keep the doorway open after you two pass through. There must be a way to get back. If it closes, you may be lost forever."

"Uncle, the last time I was near one of those doorways, I got the feeling that my mother was alive on the other side," Mary interjected.

"Hmm. That's an interesting thought. I never imagined that, but I certainly hope it is true. Tomorrow we will all leave for Syria, and hopefully our march to victory can begin."

"You're coming with us?" Bill asked.

"No, that would make it too easy for the creatures here. But your father and I will send our best sons with you. You both remember J.C. and Jonas, right?"

"What do you think it will be like in that other reality?" Mary asked.

Dom thought for a minute and replied, "I suppose there is no way to know, but if Bill's family and your mother are there, you should be okay. Since you aren't human, a change in atmosphere or gravity should not affect you at all." The waiter placed the food and drinks on the table and then walked away. Dom raised his glass and said, "Here's to your victory!"

