

Chapter 92

Jibril knocked on the door to Ibrahim's bedroom.

“Come my brother, prayer is better than sleep.”

It was how every morning began for Jibril. He would set his wristwatch alarm to 20 minutes before dawn. At home, each mosque had a crier who would wake the faithful. When they were in a foreign land, that responsibility fell to Jibril.

They would pray five times a day. The first prayer, the Salatu-l-Fajr, took place just before or just after dawn. It usually took Ibrahim 10 or 15 minutes to wake up and wash himself, so Jibril got up before dawn. He loved to see the sun rise as he prayed. It was like receiving God's approval.

He returned to his room and pulled out a 4" x 7" hard plastic frame from his bag. This too was part of his morning ritual. It had been for 15 years. But today, after all the work, he would achieve his goal. He would be face-to-face with the man who had, in a single day, caused him more joy and more pain than he had ever experienced in his life. But more importantly, the only man that could have the answers.

He still wasn't sure what the words said. Something about bitterness in the stomach. It didn't matter. There wasn't any useful information. But the burned edges around the words, that is what mattered. How the words were burned. The treachery of the infidel Hennessey. The chance he had to get the rest of the manuscript. The pleasure he felt in exacting revenge for the humiliation he had endured. That is what mattered. At least at the time. But now time had run out.

What if the next thing to be done was but a few months off? How would they prepare? They would have to hope that God had been guiding them and that what they had been working

on was really God's will. What would happen if the words did not come to pass? Would it be his fault?

He stepped outside to get some air and wait for Ibrahim. It was already warm out in Anaheim. So much ahead of them that day. They needed God's guidance. His strength. It reminded him of the last morning prayer he had with the brothers who were martyred at the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

* * *

The heat and humidity outside the casino hotel in Hollywood, Florida on September 9, 2001, struck Jibril as he exited the air-conditioned gaming area. Even before dawn – 5 a.m. -- there were elderly people already playing the slot machines. Some with oxygen tanks next to them. Such wasted lives. He thought about asking an older man – *is this how you want to spend your last days? Worship God before you die, not these idols that take your money and give you nothing in return.*

And what of a society that preyed on what little money the elderly had? Completely, morally bankrupt. Where were their adult children? Why weren't they taking care of their elders?

But how could he feel superior? He had been with a prostitute the night before. He had refused to use a condom.

"I don't know. That's dangerous. Have you ever heard of sexually transmitted diseases? HIV? AIDS?" she asked

"I can assure you I do not have a disease. I will not be humiliated by wearing that."

"Well, I don't want that here," she said pointing to her crotch. "I can do other things though."

“No. We will be together as a man and a woman. As God intended. Not some form of sodomy.”

She looked up at him with fear.

“O.k. \$100 extra then.”

“Fine.”

Part of him also hoped though that he might get her pregnant. His own wives hadn't been capable of conceiving. Maybe he needed a handmaiden like Father Abraham and Mother Hagar.

That was just rationalizing. He knew that now. It was wrong. But one had to have perspective on these things. Surely it was only a minor sin. Yet, he knew it was wrong when he did it. It wasn't a mistake. It was pre-meditated. And Ibrahim had returned to the room as the woman was leaving.

“Him too?” the woman asked as Ibrahim walked in, looking surprised.

“No, no. Go now!”

“I need to clean up.”

“Get out of here you devil!” Jibril screamed. “Never come back here!”

The woman grabbed her clothes and cut a wide path around Ibrahim. She looked over her shoulder as she walked out of the hotel room naked.

He and Ibrahim didn't speak about the incident for months. Jibril would casually mention things from time to time, seeing if Ibrahim would respond.

One day Ibrahim simply said, “Brother, all sins are forgiven, except for those we do openly and without remorse. We are not perfect, we are merely servants. You have taught me that I need to look to God, though, not man. I will admit that I was disappointed in you. But God has strengthened me.”

* * *

It had been nearly five years, and he and Ibrahim had never spoken of that night again. But he still sensed that Ibrahim was watching him. Watching to see if he would slip again. He resented it at times, being judged that way. He trusted Ibrahim more than anyone except for Osama. But Ibrahim might know a bit too much now. He would have to deal with that once he ascended to Osama's position.

ONLINE VERSION

Chapter 93

Darrin's cell phone woke him up. *Where was . . .? Oh, Stacy left last night. Must be her.*

"Hey, I'm sorry," Darrin said as he answered his cell without looking at it. "Do you still love me?"

He heard throat clearing on the other end.

"Ah, Darrin, is that you," a man's voice asked.

He sat up in bed. Not a good start to the day.

"Yes, yes. This is Darrin."

"Hi Darrin, Graham Bixby."

"Oh. Geez. Professor Bixby, I'm sorry, I thought you were someone else."

"Well, it was a little unusual for my prize student to ask me if I still loved him."

"Yeah, I'm sorry about that. It's early here."

"No, no. No apology necessary. Well, not for that. One might be in order though."

"I'm sorry, still trying to clear out the cobwebs Professor. What's going on?"

"Well, I've had a most troubling morning so far. Actually, it started yesterday. Some chaps from the FBI interviewed me for about an hour. That was a bit unsettling. A lot of questions about you. Questions about Arab men. About whether you spoke about being a Chaplain in Saudi Arabia."

"Well, I'm sorry about that."

"I don't even want to know about that. I don't want to know. I told them it was the first I'd heard of Arab men."

Darrin tried to remember if he'd ever told Bixby about how he got the manuscript.

“Nothing to it Professor. They're just doing it as part of a security check. You're not the first person I've heard from.”

“I don't want to know I said. What I'm upset about here is that someone broke into my office last night and took the hard drive to my computer and some of my notebooks.”

“And you think the FBI did it?”

“I don't know. It's just very curious.”

“I don't know if the FBI is supposed to do that. They need a search warrant or something.”

“Darrin, it's the selectivity of what they took. The hard drive I understand. But of all my notebooks, they only took ones that related to . . . to my research on the Revelation to St. John.”

“Doesn't sound like the FBI, professor.”

“No. No, I'm afraid it doesn't. Darrin, are you at home?”

“Yes.”

“Could you call me back. On a landline phone. Call me here at the office.”

“O.k. Sure.”

A moment later Graham Bixby saw the 310 area code come up. It was Darrin's apartment. The 471 prefix gave it away. He wanted to make sure Darrin was in L.A. He didn't know who else would have an interest in his notes. If Darrin weren't at home it might confirm his involvement.

“My apologies to you Darrin. I ah . . . I just feel more comfortable on landline phones.”

“No problem. Now you said these notes related to the Book of Revelations?”

“More specific than that I'm afraid. I have a confession to make to you. I can get obsessive about things. Especially ideas. Note taking. Frankly, since we began talking about

these . . . these hypotheticals of yours I've been giving them a lot of thought. I decided that they might make an interesting story if nothing else."

"What do you mean?"

"Darrin, the notes that were stolen all deal with what you and I have discussed over the years."

"Not good," he blurted out. "Not good Professor Bixby. I was talking to you in confidence."

"But about . . . ideas. About hypotheticals, right?"

How could he respond to that? The more he would make out of it the more Bixby would know he believed it.

"Yeah. Just ideas. Obviously not true."

"We academics are always looking for new ideas. New windmills to tilt at. I thought this was interesting. So I would write things down. I did a great deal of follow-up research. Especially on the idea that the church could continue without those closest to God."

"O.k., so what are you going to do? Should you call the police?"

"Huh. And tell them notebooks were stolen. Probably not a priority in a college town like Austin."

"Is there something I can do to help?"

"Well, there may be."

"O.k."

"I'd like to see your source material, Darrin."

"My source material?"

“Yes. It’s obvious that there was a source for this. All your questions to me were very direct. After about the third time we spoke I looked back at my earlier notes. You kept hitting the same themes. It wasn’t as though you were looking at the universe and deducing what could have been. You were taking something constant, something fixed, and testing it over and over again.”

So much for talking to geniuses, Darrin thought.

“I really don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Oh, I’m sure you do. And after that visit from the FBI yesterday, I think that you somehow got the source material in the Middle East. Probably when you were in the Gulf War. I want to see it.”

“Professor Bixby, I can tell you that if I had any source material, I would be happy to give it to you. I don’t.”

“Then where is it Darrin?”

“It’s gone.”

“Then it did exist.”

“Yes.”

“I knew it. Tell me about it. Tell me everything.”

“Even if I could – which I can’t – you wouldn’t want to hear it.”

“Is that what it said? That God left? Is that what it was about Darrin?”

“Would it make a difference?”

“To me? No.”

“You don’t know what you’re saying, Professor. Trust me.”

“Darrin, what do you think I’m going to do here? Stop believing? I don’t have a choice. I’m a 60-year old Englishman who teaches at a fundamentalist Baptist college in Texas. Not a lot of call for my skills elsewhere. I have no choice but to believe. This is my life.”

There was a long pause on the line.

“You know Professor Bixby, I’ve thought for the past 15 years that my life was pretty sad. That I didn’t have a lot of choices. But what you said has to be about the saddest thing I’ve ever heard.”

“No it’s not, old boy. Not by a longshot. I can choose to believe even though I know. I’ll take those opportunities in my life to do things. To experience things. And then, at the end of my days, I can die in peace. Knowing that, whatever happens when I take my last breath, I lived the best life I could. I think it’s far more sad to believe without knowing. Ignorance is not bliss. It’s simply ignorance.”

“But you’re believing in what? What’s the point?”

“The point is, Darrin, that we were made a certain way. We were made with a spiritual element. How people choose to fill that . . . well maybe it doesn’t matter any more as you say. But God or no God, it has to be filled with something. Don’t you see that? Look at the world around you. The vast majority of people believe something. It gives them comfort.”

“So you’re still going to tell the students there that Catholics, Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, Hindus, gays, and atheists are all going to hell? Don’t you see that is where our problems come from? That religion does nothing more than divide us?”

Bixby didn’t respond.

“Are you still going to tell them that they can pollute the world and use up all the resources because Jesus is coming back soon?”

“I’ve never told anyone to do anything but love their neighbors and be good stewards of the earth.”

“Well, the school sure cranks out a lot of ministers who say otherwise.”

“I can’t change the world Darrin.”

“We never could, Professor. That was the mistake. We were playing a game using an old rulebook.”

“I’ve got a million questions for you.”

“I’ll tell you what. I’m tied up the next couple weeks. I’ll give you a call when I have time to talk some more.”

“I’d appreciate that. Can I come out to Los Angeles? I really would like to talk in person.”

“I’d wait to book your airline tickets. Right now isn’t such a good time.”

He heard Darrin hang up the phone. He stared at his phone for a moment then tapped the earpiece on his desk a few times before hanging up.

“I knew it. I knew it,” Bixby said shaking his head and smiling. He sat back, cradling his chin in his left palm. A sudden numbness started going down his left arm. He tried to rub it away.

Chapter 94

Later that morning, Darrin rang the bell at Rod's front gate. It felt kind of weird needing permission to enter a place he had lived for years. There was no answer. Both Rod's Escalade and Tina's Lexus 300 were in the driveway. *Hmmm, might be interrupting something*, he thought.

"Sky rockets in flight," he began to sing, "afternoon delight. Ooooooh, afternoon delight."

"Really funny," he heard Tina say on the intercom. "Come on up Darrin," she said, buzzing the gate open.

Tina was standing at the door holding her purse when he got to the top of the steps.

"Hey Darrin, what's up?"

"Nothin' much, just wanted to talk to Rod for a minute."

She offered her cheek and he gave her a kiss.

"He's out by the pool. Looking at his corks," she said rolling her eyes.

"Ah, yes. The cork collection. You guys didn't have a fight did you?"

"No, he got melancholy all by himself."

They both knew Rod well enough to understand. He pulled the cork collection out when he was depressed or otherwise in one of his "what does it all mean?" moods.

"He's been like this all day. God only knows. It can't be stress - he doesn't do anything. Its like, 'Hey, try going out and getting a job, then you'll have something to be sad about.' Oh well, he'll come out of it."

"Ok, I'll take it easy on him," Darrin replied.

"Have you talked to Stacy today?" Tina asked.

"No, not since yesterday."

"Hmmm. She's not answering her cell. Oh well, I'll try her later. I'm on my way to run some errands. You boys have fun," she said nodding toward the pool before she walked out the front door.

Rod was in his shorts and a Kawasaki t-shirt sitting barefoot at a table near the pool. Stacked in front of him were over a dozen shoeboxes. Each shoebox represented a different year. In each shoebox were scores of corks from the bottles of wine he'd had that year.

"Hey man," Darrin said.

"Hey Darrin."

"Whatcha doin'?"

"Oh, just thinking."

Darrin looked around at the yard and the pool, trying to give Rod a little time.

Rod started fumbling through his boxes until he got to one marked "2003." He opened it up and fished through several corks, carefully looking at each.

"Here it is," Rod said. "Here's the first bottle of wine you and I had together back in 2003."

He handed a cork to Darrin.

The name of the vineyard was stamped on the cork. Rod had written some notes on the cork with a felt tip pen. "00 Pinot, blackberries, weak finish."

Darrin rolled the cork around between his thumb and forefinger and saw his name on it. Then four stars. Then "5-4-03.". Rod had a system where, in addition to writing the date he drank the wine he recorded who he drank it with and rated the experience. Four stars was the best rating.

"I thought you didn't like this vineyard much?" Darrin said.

"I don't. But I didn't want to overwhelm you the first time you drank a California red."

"What you really mean is that you didn't want to waste good stuff on me when I wouldn't appreciate it?"

"Something like that."

"But you gave it four stars."

"The four star experience was sharing something new with my best friend, but probably only a one star bottle of wine."

"Yeah, that was fun. You set me on the road to being a wine snob."

"Nothing snobby about being able to tell good stuff from most of the backwash the public drinks."

"It's pretty impressive that you've saved all these corks."

"Hmmmph," Rod grunted. "This is my life. My collection of experiences."

"Well, you've had a lot more in your life than just wine."

"I know. But these are the times I really, you know, cherish. I can remember the moments with a lot of these corks. I guess some people have photographs. I've got my wine corks."

Rod picked up a cork he had set aside on the table and handed it to Darrin.

"Here's the bottle of wine Tina and I had the night I proposed to her," he said.

"97 SB Citrus Pear," Darrin read. "What's that mean?"

"A '97 Sauvignon Blanc. They always have that citrus smell. This was a good one. Citrus and pear. Tina's kind of a lightweight - it's the closest thing I could find to those God-awful fruity martinis she always drinks."

"Yeah, Stacy loves those too."

"It's the memories that keep you afloat. You know?" Rod observed.

Or that sink you, Darrin thought. "Yeah, I guess the good memories do," he said out loud.

"What's gonna happen here?" Rod asked, getting to the point.

Darrin pressed his lips tight together and shook his head.

"Not gonna tell me?"

"Nope."

"So that's it. Just wait and see? You think you might owe me a little more than that?"

Darrin looked down at the corks on the table.

"I read that wineries are moving away from using real cork. Going to rubber corks or screw tops."

"Yeah, the shitty wineries are," Rod replied. "Won't happen with the better ones. The cork is part of the experience. Hundreds of years of experience."

"But a lot of the wineries are those Australian ones."

"Whatever. Just because I lived there doesn't mean I think their wines are better. But they've got a lot of good ones in the \$15 to \$20 a bottle range. I got the money, so I drink \$40 bottles."

"Maybe there'll be fewer bottles of wine that go bad though. No bad corks, no vinegar tasting wine."

"Bad wine will still taste bad because it sits on the back of trucks in 95 degree heat. Or because the vintners don't know what the hell they're doing. It's not the corks. Why the hell do people have to screw with things that work?"

"Things change, buddy. Not enough cork bark on trees, so cork gets more expensive."

"It's a goddam renewable resource. Not like oil. You're an oilman, you know."

Darrin laughed uncomfortably. "I'm just sayin'," he said lifting his hands.

"So anymore tips for me, bro?" Rod asked.

"No. No tips."

"Nothing more with the oil futures? Which way are they going? You're the big expert," Rod said sarcastically.

"Don't know."

"Come on, look in your crystal ball. Where do you keep that anyway? Down in my storage locker?" Rod asked, getting increasingly hostile.

Darrin didn't respond.

"Am I gonna have to come pick you up someplace again? Where this time? Afghanistan? Iraq? Huh? I fucked myself up last time. Got about 40% usage of my heart left. I can walk about a 100 yards without getting winded. Maybe I can finish myself off this time."

Losing some weight might help, Darrin thought.

"I'm sorry," Darrin said softly.

"Me too," Rod said. Rod's eyes started watering. "You know I'd do it again, too, you prick."

"I know."

Rod started putting his corks away.

"Rod?"

Rod ignored him.

"I need you to promise me something."

"You're a piece of work, man," Rod chuckled resentfully.

"If anything happens to me, you and Tina still need to be on that flight to Hong Kong. Got it? That's what you need to do. I don't care who you piss off. I don't care what anybody tells you. You need to leave on that day, if not earlier."

"Why?"

"You just do."

"O.k., so we bail."

"That's the easier part."

"Easier?"

"Yeah. I need you to take Stacy with you."

"Stacy? How am I gonna do that?"

Tears came to Darrin's eyes. It was the first time Rod had seen him show real emotion in a long time.

Rod put his hand on Darrin's shoulder.

"What happened to you man?" Rod asked.

"I don't know," Darrin said looking down.

"You're the cleanest guy I know. Can't even get ya to smoke a joint. And now all this?"

"Just a bad turn of fate, I guess. Wrong place, wrong time. But you play the hand you're dealt. Right?"

"Yeah," Rod said nodding his head acceptance.

"I'm playing this hand out. One way or another, this is my last hand. I live and walk away, or I die playin' it."

"What can I do? You're my best friend. I can't let you . . ."

“No. Don't call, don't come over. Unless you hear from me.”

“Not going to be able to talk you outta this, am I?”

Darrin shook his head.

“Now, that promise I need you to make.”

“I don't make promises unless I know I can keep them. That's why that whole ‘Jesus as my savior’ thing never worked for me. I knew I couldn't live up to that.”

"You need to promise me Rod."

"I don't need to promise you shit."

"Yes, you do. Promise me."

Rod nodded his head. "All right. On one condition. You swear to me now that you're helping the FBI. That you're not part of some" Rod didn't want to say it. "You know what I mean."

"I'm going to be helping the FBI."

"Swear?"

"Yep."

"How do I know that?"

"Call Hogue if you don't believe me. But wait until tomorrow."

"Hogue," Rod chuckled. "What a hillbilly. Gollllly," he said, doing his best Gomer Pyle.

"He's a good guy, Rod."

"Yep, the dumb ones always are."

"You're going to take care of Stacy, right?"

"What do I do if she wants to stay?"

"I don't know. Tie her up and put her in a suitcase. I don't care. Just get her outta here."

ONLINE VERSION

Chapter 95

Stacy kept trying to lift her head, but she was too tired. Her chin rested on her chest. Her neck hurt. It was dark. The air was warm. She could feel her own breath. She felt fabric against her nose and face. Like she was under a blanket. No, not a blanket. She couldn't feel it on her arms. Only on her head.

She tried to move the blanket from her head. Her arms wouldn't move. Stuck in place. She tried her legs. Nothing.

She heard a voice. Then another. She couldn't make out what they were saying.

"Hello?" she wheezed. The voices stopped. "Hello?" she said again. "Who's there? Darrin?"

She heard the beeping of a cell phone being dialed. Then more talking. She still couldn't make it out. But throat talking. Like . . . Hebrew? Arabic?

Now she started to feel everything. Wrists hurt. Ankles hurt. Back hurt. She had to pee.

"Who's there, dammit?"

She heard two footsteps and then felt a smack to the back of her head.

"Shut up!" a voice said.

"Hey, knock it off!"

Another smack to the back of the head. Not enough to hurt, but more of a warning. She felt whatever was on her head slide a little bit.

O.k., Stace, she thought. Step outside your body and try to figure this out. You can't move. You can't see. Something is over your head. A couple of men speaking Arabic or something. And they're not afraid to hit you. Last thing you remember? Leaving Darrin's

apartment. He wouldn't do this to you. What were you talking about with him? The FBI. No, not them. The terrorists. Jibril. Jibril. Jibril. Fucker.

“Which one of you is Jibril?” she shouted.

Now, intense talking between the two men. More beeping of the cell phone. A faint voice on the cell phone responding to one of the men.

“You tell Jibril I want to talk to him! Now!”

A shout of “Shut up!” and then she felt herself being pushed on her chest and falling backwards. Her head hit something. Her bladder emptied. She felt warm and wet. Wet up to her stomach now.

She was in a chair. They had her tied up in a chair. Now she was on her back. Her feet up. Urine slowly soaking her clothes. Now up to her chest.

A man laughed. Another man laughed.

More talking between the men. It sounded like only two men.

O.k., so a little piss, she thought. This is how she kept herself warm when she went scuba diving off Catalina. They always taught you to piss yourself in your wetsuit when you got into the water. It would keep you warm for a few minutes as your body adjusted to the water temperature. Stay in the game here, Stace. If they wanted to kill you, they would have done that already. This has something to do with Darrin. They want him. Play it cool. Try to keep from getting hit again.

“O.k., really funny. I wet myself. Ha ha. Now help me up.”

A brief exchange occurred between the two men. She felt herself being lifted from the floor by hands in either of her biceps. Then she was in a seated position again. She was definitely in a chair. And this was a bag over her head, not a blanket.

It was clear these guys weren't going to talk to her. They were taking instructions from the voice on the phone. That must be Jibril. These guys weren't going to do anything. She'd keep her mouth shut and wait for him.

ONLINE VERSION

Chapter 96

Darrin left Rod's house and headed for the beach. He needed to think. He needed to work this out. He wound his way through Pacific Palisades until he could see the shimmering blue ocean. He headed down a steep boulevard that dead-ended at the beach. He normally would've looked for street parking, but he didn't have the time today. He handed the park attendant five bucks and took a parking spot facing the water.

The beach was crowded – pretty typical for a warm August afternoon. He opened his car door and set his feet on the pavement. He untied his sneakers and tossed them over his shoulder onto the passenger seat. His socks followed.

The asphalt was hot under his feet. He should've brought his flip flops. He hadn't thought ahead. Going to the beach was an impulse decision. With a few steps he was on the sand.

“Hot, hot, hot,” he muttered. He ran toward the water, hoping to get some relief. He dodged beach blankets and umbrellas, picnic baskets and coolers. Damn it was hot.

He passed a couple of co-eds face down on their towels with their bathing suit tops untied. Man he'd missed out on a lot getting married so young. He should've been chasing girls and doing what young men do – not preaching sermons.

He finally got to the cooler, wet sand near the surf. Relief. It felt good. He started walking south, toward the pier.

Kids were sliding on skinboards next to the water. Frisbee. Footballs. Little kids with those floaties on their arms. Occasionally a lifeguard would yell to someone “You're out too far, come back in.”

So this was the plan? Kill a bunch of people like this who are minding their own business? Just like the people in the World Trade Centers. People who had nothing do with anything? Just wipe them out? he thought.

Darrin started to get angry. But who was he angry at? Himself? Sure. He could always have handled things differently. It was easy to be upset with yourself when you'd obviously failed.

How about Jibril? The jury was out on that one. He'd seen the anger in Jibril's eyes when he was pinned against the supply hut at KKMC. Notwithstanding what happened in Dar es Salaam, Jibril was capable of killing. He was certainly capable. Maybe Hennessey was right. Maybe Jibril did take inappropriate satisfaction in hearing about the "Lions of the Sons of Ishmael" attacking the "Greater Sons of Tarshish." But how would he know where to attack? No – those attacks had to have been independent. How would Jibril know to attack New York instead of L.A.? Maybe that was proof. They got it wrong – twice. It was the city on the Western Sea and they misinterpreted it. But how about Dar es Salaam. How would he know where the son of Solomon and Sheba was laid to rest? He could have figured that out with enough time and money. Al Qaeda probably had smart people working for them.

But at most Jibril was an instrument. All the other things had happened before 1993 without Jibril. This was multi-act play scripted by a pretty cold-hearted director.

What good was it going to do rehashing this again? There was nobody there to listen.

He'd already wasted half his life believing in a God that had bailed out on mankind.

Why waste what little time he might have left?

Because things needed to be said. And in case God was still listening, he, she, it, whatever, needed to hear about this from somebody who knew the truth. Not even Jibril knew

the truth. He didn't know why it was that these dates were written down. He just knew there were dates.

But Darrin knew the truth. God – the God of love – bailed out on his creation. And, if that weren't enough, he predestined centuries and centuries of horrible troubles for his creation.

“Who the fuck does that?!?” he shouted toward the ocean. He bent over and picked up a couple of smooth stones. He tried skipping them on the water, but the waves and swells kept them from going too far. You really needed placid water for good skipping.

“Just so you know, I'm not standing by this time! So whatever you've got for me, you better start getting it ready! You missed me the first time, by the way! In case you hadn't noticed, I'm still here!” he screamed, slapping his hands on his chest.

People started moving away from him on the beach. That's what people do in L.A. when they run into somebody acting crazy. Just slowly move away. Don't attract the attention of the nut jobs.

“I'm not letting you get away with your shit this time! It'll be over my dead body!”

Now shouting would get people to move away from you. But talking about dead bodies, well, that got people on their cell phones to the 911 dispatcher. Fortunately for Darrin, that system was pretty overworked in L.A. A guy yelling wasn't going to be a lot of attention. Not unless you saw a gun, and the only thing to really seal it was being able to say “shots fired.”

But the L.A. County lifeguards are pretty efficient at what they do. He must have gotten the attention of one of the lifeguards who sit up in the tall, white chairs watching the surf. Soon a yellow pick-up truck pulled up and a couple of guys in orange shorts jumped out. Like something out of Baywatch. People started pointing toward Darrin.

“You picked the wrong guy if you think I'm going to stand by this time”

“Sir, is there something we can help you with,” the taller and tanner of the two lifeguards said as he approached Darrin.

“Oh, no. No. Nothing.”

“Have you been drinking or taking drugs?”

“No. It’s pretty early in the day.”

“We’ve had some complaints, sir.”

“Oh. I was just . . . just praying.”

“Well, you certainly have the right to do that. But somebody thought they heard you shouting and threatening somebody.”

“That is true. I happen to have a God who doesn’t hear very well. I have to speak loudly.”

“Were you saying threatening things, sir?”

“Well, God needs a little challenge sometimes.”

The two men looked at each other and smiled.

“You know, I find that asking God nicely helps,” the shorter lifeguard said.

“Yeah, unfortunately God and I aren’t on speaking terms right now.”

“All right, can we just ask you to maybe take this somewhere else then?”

“Fair enough. Sorry for the trouble. Would you mind driving me up to my car? It’s up there in the lot.”

“No, can’t do that. Liability reasons and all. But we’ll stand here while you walk up to your car. How would that be?”

“Not what I’d hoped for, but I guess that’s the way it’ll be.”

He didn't want to look like a coward running from the lifeguards, so he walked slowly across the sand, trying not to think about the pain in the soles of his feet. He noticed people staring and whispering to each other as he walked by.

He heard somebody yell "Freak" behind him, followed by laughter.

So these are the people I'm saving? Or maybe they're the ones I'm sentencing to death by interfering.

ONLINE VERSION

Chapter 97

Stacy heard somebody come into the room. Men speaking in Arabic. One spoke with authority. That must be Jibril. She heard footsteps coming toward her.

“What is your name, woman?” asked the man.

When she didn’t respond she felt a hand swat the back of her head.

“Your name?” the voice demanded.

“Stacy. Stacy Lawson.”

“Ah. So you are Darrin Allis’s whore?”

“Fuck you.”

Another smack across the back of the head. Men speaking to each other.

“Leave us,” Jibril said to the two men in Arabic. The men looked confused. “Ibrahim and I will handle this. Now go. We’ll call you when we need you.”

After the two men left, Jibril leaned in close to Stacy.

“I’m not sure you understand how serious this is.”

“Well, I’ve been kidnapped. I’m tied up. There’s something over my head. And I smell like piss. I think I understand.”

She felt something hard against her temple.

“Do you know what this is against your head?”

“No.”

“It’s a pistol. I want you to think of something peaceful. Can you do that?”

Her heart began to race. She was going to die.

“Do you believe in God, Stacy Lawson?” Jibril asked.

“Yes.”

“Good. Think about God.”

She started to cry. *This isn't right. How can this be happening to me?*

She heard Jibril say something in Arabic. Then he pressed the gun tighter to her temple.

The she heard a click and jumped.

It took her moment to realize the gun hadn't gone off. At least she didn't think it had.

She was still in darkness.

“Stacy Lawson, do you know who I am?”

“Yes.”

“Who am I?”

“Jibril.”

“And how do you know that?”

“Darrin. Darrin told me about you.”

“Who else did he tell?”

“Nobody. Just me.”

“Tell me the truth.”

“I am.”

“I will shoot you if you lie to me. Do you understand? The gun was not loaded. But I will load it and shoot you. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

“I am the only one keeping you alive. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

“If I leave here and tell these men to kill you, they will.”

“O.k.”

“So you need to tell me the truth. If I think you are lying, I will have them cut your throat. Very slowly. Do you understand me?”

“Yes.”

“Now, who did Darrin Allis talk to about me?”

“Nobody. Just me.”

“How do you know?”

“Because, he told me. He thinks . . . ,” she stopped. *Should she say this?*

“What? What does he think?”

“He thinks you saved his life.”

That caught Jibril by surprise.

“You are lying!” he shouted.

“No. No. It’s true. He almost died in Dar es Salaam. You took him to the hospital. He lived. You saved his life.”

It sounded so absurd to him. He tried to kill Darrin Allis, but Darrin Allis thought he saved his life. Would someone make that up? No.

“That is right. I saved his life. And I will save your life if you cooperate with me.”

“Yes.”

“Yes? Yes, what?”

“I’ll cooperate.”

“Very well. Did he say he was going to meet me?”

“No. He didn’t tell me that.”

“Did he tell you how we met?”

“Yes. In Saudi Arabia. During the Gulf War.”

“And what else did he tell you?”

“He said one of his men burned something that belonged to you.”

“Yes. That is true.”

“And there was something in there about Los Angeles.”

“Yes. And what else?”

“New York. London. Madrid.”

“Yes. And then what. What did he tell you happens after Los Angeles?”

“He didn’t say anything about that.”

“He didn’t say anything about the future? Nothing after Los Angeles?”

“No.”

He heard Jibril say something in Arabic again. She felt whatever was on her head being lifted off. The light hurt her eyes for a moment.

The man in front of her was thin, with olive skin, black hair and a black goatee. To her right was a larger man. Balding. He had a deep voice.

“Stacy Lawson, I need you to think very carefully about what Darrin Allis told you.”

Jibril took a step back. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a clip. He held his pistol in his left hand and jammed the clip up into the handle. He took a step forward to Stacy.

“Now we have a problem. I told you that if you cooperated you wouldn’t be hurt. But you are not taking me seriously, are you?”

She looked at the gun. *Not more of this.* “That’s not true,” she objected.

He put the barrel of the pistol against her forehead. Then he lowered the pistol.

“My brother,” he said in English to the larger man. “I do not want to make a bigger mess here than I have to. Is there something here, maybe a blanket. Something I can use. The spray of her skull and blood is going to get all over me.”

Her heart began to race again. This man was cold blooded. This is how Tina described Darrin when he would kill animals.

The larger man shrugged.

“Very well,” Jibril responded, putting the pistol back up to Stacy’s forehead. “I am going to count to three. You will tell me what Darrin Allis told you. What happens after Los Angeles. If you don’t, I am going to put a very large, very messy hole in your head.”

“I don’t know anything.”

“One.”

“He didn’t tell me anything.” She began to cry.

“Two.”

She closed her eyes.

“Speak!” he screamed.

“I don’t know.”

“Three!” He pulled the trigger. Again a click. And also a flash of light. She emptied what was left in her bladder. Nothing hurt though. She was still alive.

The larger man laughed.

“Oh, don’t be afraid now. We were just taking a picture of you with our camera.”

The larger man held up a Polaroid shot of her with a gun to her forehead.

“Why are you doing this to me?” she cried.

“Because I want the truth!”

“I don’t know anything else.”

“Then what use are you to me?”

She just sobbed.

He turned to Ibrahim. “Leave us,” he said in Arabic.

“But my brother, you shouldn’t be alone with this whore. They,” he said nodding toward the door, “will think”

“My brother, I need information. She is reluctant to speak with you here. Come back in 10 minutes.”

Ibrahim looked at Stacy. Then back at Jibril. It wasn’t a good idea. He knew Jibril regretted what had happened in Florida. He stood there for a moment longer.

“It will be o.k.,” Jibril said. “Now go.”

Ibrahim nodded.

Jibril watched Ibrahim leave. He turned back to Stacy.

“I don’t want to do this to you.”

“Then don’t,” she said looking up to him.

“I have to. It’s my job. I would much rather be back with my wives.”

“Do you treat them like this?”

“No. No. Of course not.”

“Why are you doing this?”

“I just need information. That’s all I want. But it is very important. The most important thing in the world to me. To all of us.”

“I don’t know anything else.”

“How long have you been his whore?” Jibril said, changing subjects.

“I’m not a whore.”

“Oh. I’m sorry. You are married then? You are his wife? I see no ring on your finger.”

“No. Darrin is my boyfriend.”

“But you have sex with him?”

“That’s not your business.”

“Oh, I see. You are ashamed of this.”

“No. I didn’t say that.”

“We have women like you where I come from.”

“Things are different here.”

“I’m aware of that. But it doesn’t change the fact that you have sex with a man you are not married to. Only whores do that.”

“I’m not going to argue with you. You have the gun.”

“I just want to understand Darrin Allis. I believe he is married, is he not?”

“No. He was married. But he’s divorced.”

“Did you make him get divorced.”

“No.”

“In my country, I have two wives. Darrin Allis should not have to divorce his wife to marry you.”

“That’s against the law here. Having two wives, I mean.”

“So why did he divorce his wife?”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know? Aren’t you worried he will put you away as well?”

“No.”

“I don’t understand how a man – a Christian – can sleep with a woman he isn’t married to.”

Stacy shrugged.

“Do his religious leaders approve of this?”

“I don’t know. He isn’t very religious.”

“Nonsense. He is a Christian minister.”

“Not anymore.”

“Why is that?”

“I don’t know. He doesn’t talk about it.”

Jibril reached out and put his hand against Stacy’s cheek. “Well, you are a beautiful woman.” She pulled back from his hand.

“It has been some time since I have been with my wives.”

She didn’t like the sound of where this was headed. She turned away.

“So what is it you do for Darrin Allis that he shares his bed with you?”

“I don’t want to talk about that.”

“Oh, come now. Don’t be modest,” he said, stroking her hair. “I’m sure you are very good at what you do.”

She shook her head. She needed to change the dynamic here.

“Darrin said you are a very devout man. Someone who is an example for others.”

Jibril frowned.

“We shouldn’t be alone here. You know that. It’s not right. You don’t want to set a bad example. Plus, look at me. I’m soaked with my own urine. I can’t even sit here myself without getting sick from the odor. I’m sure I must smell awful.”

She did smell bad, he thought to himself. His wives always bathed. And even the whore in Florida smelled of perfume. No, this wasn't the time.

He yelled something in Arabic. Ibrahim came back in. They spoke for a moment. Then Ibrahim left and came back with the other two men.

It looked to her like the interrogation was over. Would they just put the bag back over her head. She needed an out here. Something. Then it came to her. Would it work?

"I have medicine that I need," she said to Jibril.

"Medicine? For what?"

"I'm . . . I've got epilepsy. I need to take my medicine or I could have a seizure."

Jibril turned and said something to the other men in Arabic. One of the men responded.

"We won't keep you much longer. We just need you in case Darrin Allis refuses to cooperate. You will be fine."

"But I don't want to have a seizure. Do you know what a seizure is? I won't be able to control myself." *God, forgive me*, she thought. She never even joked about that stuff. It was bad karma. But she needed something.

More talking among the men. Then somebody put tape over her mouth. Then darkness as they put the bag over head.

Chapter 98

Ron Choi was wrapping up a small argument with his wife on his cell phone. His desk phone rang. Then his cell beeped like someone was on the other line. Then his desk phone again.

“Look, I gotta go. I’ll talk to you later,” he said, hanging up with his wife. You had to be able to hang up on them. That was the key to keeping the upper hand. Otherwise you were just going to get pecked to death until you gave in.

He picked up his desk phone.

“This is Choi.”

“Agent Choi, this is Darrin Allis.”

“Yes, Darrin. How are you?” Agent Choi said, turning in his chair and looking over to Agents Luis Robles and Cecil Hogue. He pointed to the phone and mouthed, “Darrin Allis. Get Randi and Jimmy.”

Cecil Hogue sprinted out of the room.

“I’m calling you about your investigation,” Darrin continued.

“Yes, yes. Of course. That’s great Darrin, just great. You’re making a wise decision,” Choi said, half-heartedly as he looked to see if Director Moran and Special Agent-in-Charge Socia were coming. He didn’t see them.

“Um. Darrin, I need to release a call I have on another line. Can you hold for a second?”

Choi hit the hold button.

“What’s he want?” Robles asked.

“Not sure.”

Choi saw Director Moran and Agent Socia walking quickly ahead of Agent Hogue. He shouted to them as they entered the room. “Darrin Allis on Line 3. Luis, let’s pick up together. One, two, three.”

Choi and Robles picked up at the same time.

“Sorry about that Darrin,” Agent Choi said. “Thanks for calling. I really appreciate it. How are you doing?”

“I’m fine. Thanks for asking. I’m calling because I want to cooperate.” Moran, Socia and Hogue heard that part. Agent Socia gave the thumbs up.

Choi sensed there was a catch, but he decided to lock in this amount of progress at least. “Darrin, I’m so glad to hear that. Like I said, I think you’re making the right decision here. Why don’t you come in now and we can sit down and”

“No, I’m not coming in. Here’s how this is going to work. I’m going to cooperate, but Barrett needs to be there.”

Damn, Choi thought.

Agent Socia shook her head in disagreement.

“Ah, well, Darrin, Agent Barrett is taking some time off. I don’t think”

“Get Agent Barrett to call me or this isn’t going to happen. I will get you Jibril al-Attas. But I need to hear from Barrett in the next hour if this is going to work.”

“Darrin, I really don’t think that’s a good idea. I’m sorry about what happened, but putting you two together again, that just doesn’t seem likely.”

“Well, it doesn’t seem like you have much of a choice, Agent Choi. You’ve got my cell phone number here.”

Director Moran nodded and motioned for Agent Choi to go along.

“O.k., Darrin. I’m going to try to set that up. But I can’t promise you anything.”

“That’s the deal. Got it? The next call I get is from Barrett. Goodbye.”

The line went dead in Choi’s hand.

“What in the hell is he doing?” Agent Socia asked.

“Sounds like maybe he wants to get a little piece of Carl for what happened,” Agent Robles responded.

“Look, he said he’ll get us Jibril. Let’s just get Carl to help,” Agent Hogue pleaded.

They all looked at Director Moran.

“I don’t like suspects, or ‘persons of interest,’ Moran quickly said correcting himself, “making demands. Randi, what do you think?”

“I don’t like it. But we need his help. What’s it going to hurt I guess?”

Moran scowled.

“O.k., well we have to deal with Carl,” she said, “but other than that . . .”

“Ron, you think Carl is even going to be able to answer a phone at this point, let alone be able to talk to Darrin Allis?” Moran asked Choi.

“Hard to tell, Jimmy.”

Moran rubbed this chin and neck with the back of his left hand. He always did that when he was thinking.

“All right, I’ll give him a call from my office. Let’s see what he says.”

~ ~ ~

Carl Barrett was sitting on his living room sofa. It had been years since Trish and Cassie had been killed. But everything in the living room was pretty much untouched. Like a time capsule from the morning they left him. There was the 8 x 10 framed picture of the three of

them together on the coffee table. It had a redwood frame. They had picked it up on one of their car trips to Northern California. It had come from a 500-year old tree. He like the rough feel of the frame. It was like his marriage to Trish. Rough sometimes, but sturdy. Beautiful. Like the redwood, he had thought it would last forever. And there she was in the picture, those beautiful eyes. He thought if he concentrated hard enough, he could see her again. Like he had yesterday with Darrin Allis. He touched the part of the picture where her hair was. He kissed his finger and put it on her lips. Just one more chance to see her. To tell her how much he loved her.

The phone rang. He thought about ignoring it. No, he sensed this was a call he should take. He reached over to the side table.

“Yeah,” he said.

“Carl? It’s Jimmy,” said the caller.

“Yeah Jimmy,” Barrett sighed.

“Carl, we’ve got a break in the Darrin Allis thing.”

“Good for you, Jimmy.”

“Look Carl, I’m sorry about what happened yesterday. I’m sorry about a lot of things. You got dealt a shitty hand in life. I should’ve done a better job making sure you came out of it o.k. We can talk about that some other time. Right now I’ve got a problem that only you can help with.”

Barrett closed his eyes. Maybe if he concentrated on Darrin Allis it would happen again. Maybe he would see Trish one last time.

“Carl, are you there? I’m calling because we need your help with Darrin Allis.”

To Barrett, the words “Darrin Allis” and “help” sounded like a bell ringing.

That was why he'd seen the Viet Cong teenager. It had been over thirty years since he watched the South Vietnamese colonel shoot that kid in the back. He wanted to stop it from happening. The V.C. was only a kid. His leg was wounded, but he would have lived. Barrett remembered reaching for his sidearm. But the lieutenant who was with him said "Don't interfere, Barrett." He regretted that moment. He regretted doing nothing. But an order was an order. He hadn't done the right thing. He stood by because that was what he was supposed to do.

That was Darrin Allis. That was what had happened to him. Something was keeping him from helping. Something more than a fresh-from-West Point lieutenant though. But he had his reasons. He needed help. He needed help to do the right thing.

Trish. It was what she wanted. This was the chance.

"I'm listening Jimmy," Barrett replied.

A half hour later, Barrett placed a call to Darrin Allis.

Chapter 99

“Where’s he at?” Special-Agent-in-Charge Socia asked into the Walkie.

“Going up Barrington now,” Agent Hogue replied. “We’re watching him.”

“Well his friends just got out of a white van across the street from the apartment.”

“They’re early.”

“So the mice arrive before the cheese,” Director Moran said. He and Randi Socia were in the back of a California Department of Transportation “construction van” on the 405 Freeway overlooking Darrin’s apartment. The rest of the FBI team was dispersed through several other vehicles which simply appeared to be part of the never-ending CalTrans road improvements to the 405 near the Sunset Boulevard Exit. The Exit had been made famous from OJ Simpson’s “low speed” chase the decade before.

They watched on high resolution night vision cameras as Ibrahim made quick work of the lock on Darrin’s door. He and Jibril walked in.

“Should I stop Darrin and tell him?” Hogue asked.

“No. No. Let’s keep him moving. They’re might be others watching him. We don’t want to tip off Jibril.”

“Carl and Ron, get into place. Pull up a half block or so behind the van.”

“Got it Randi.”

“I see somebody in the driver’s seat to the van,” said Agent Claussen. “Be careful, Carl.”

“I’ve got voices in the apartment,” said Agent al-Jafari. “Speaking in Arabic. They’re looking for him. One of them is asking the other if they should leave. No, the other one says. Be patient. He must be the leader. He must be Jibril.”

“Darrin Allis is a block away now,” Agent Hogue reported.

Darrin knew the FBI was all around him as he was walking back to his apartment. But he couldn't see them. He then saw the white van he'd seen before. *Is Jibril here? Or is that the FBI?* he thought.

* * *

"You realize how dangerous this is, right?" Barrett had asked Darrin as they stood in the kitchen of Darrin's apartment earlier that day.

"I don't think he'll hurt me."

Barrett shook his head.

"This guy had his minions fly airplanes full of passengers into office buildings filled with people. No regard for life. Not even for his own people. How can you say he won't hurt you?"

"Look, he saved my life, o.k.? And he didn't have to. For some reason he wants me alive."

"Things change."

"Maybe."

"But you're sure you want to do this?"

"You know I have to."

"Yeah," Barrett replied.

Barrett took a good look at Darrin. Nothing there in his eyes this time.

"I just need to know one thing, Darrin."

"O.k., shoot."

"I gotta know about the money. The other stuff – the standing by – I think I get that. But the money? How could you make money off this?"

“It was the only thing I knew to do that might bring some good out of this. So I borrowed money from my friend. Bought a bunch of futures that would go up in value as the market crashed right after 9/11.”

“Just looks bad.”

“I put it in a trust. At the end of this year, no matter what, half of it goes to a 9/11 victims’ fund. It will go to help the thousands of people who’ve had their health destroyed by the dust from that day. It’s like they were inhaling Drano for the days and weeks that followed. The other half goes to the Pico Avenue Assistance Center.”

“But you’ve been taking money out too?”

“Only enough to pay my rent and expenses so I could be here to . . . to help.”

“What about the money going to Sanchez?”

“That’s Johnny Duran’s father-in-law. It goes to pay the expenses for Johnny’s wife.”

Barrett looked down.

“I’m sorry about that. About what I said about your friend Duran. I was just trying to get you to talk. I understand what he did. I understand he did what you’re doing now. He tried to stop it. That took a lot a guts. I wish I had been that brave.”

The memory of Viet Cong teenager being shot was now Darrin’s memory too.

“You know you would have been just like Johnny Duran. That boy would have been shot by the South Vietnamese anyway. After you’d have shot that South Vietnamese colonel, his soldiers would have killed you and the rest of your squad.”

“But I wouldn’t have had to live with myself.”

“That’s what life’s about”

“You can call me Carl.”

“Carl. Yeah, I guess we know each other well enough for that now. Life’s about learning how to live with regrets. It’s what you do with them. Do you learn? Do you make something good out of them?”

Special-Agent-In-Charge Randi Socia walked into the kitchen with Agent Yousef al-Jafari.

“I think we’re going to need to wire him up,” she said. “Yousef says the mics in the living room aren’t picking up as well as we want.”

“No way, Randi,” Barrett replied. “The first thing Jibril will do is check him for a wire and then he’ll kill him. Not happening.”

“But that’s a risk that . . .,” Yousef began.

“That we’re not going to take,” Barrett finished.

Yousef looked to Randi Socia, who sighed. Part of her didn’t care if Darrin Allis got his throat slit. It would simplify things a bit. She had sympathized with Carl’s earlier reaction to Darrin – lock him up. This guy was no good. But now Carl had had this change of heart. She figured she’d trust her old mentor one more time.

“You’re right, Carl. Darrin, we need you to keep him talking. The more he talks, the more likely it is he’ll let something slip. We need to know the what, the how, and the who. And we also need to know if the timing has changed at all. We have a real ramp up in the chatter.”

“O.k.”

“Our resident shrink says you need to doubt him. Question his power to do anything. Bait him into telling you stuff.”

“I understand.”

“Now around 8 p.m. you’re going to want to go get a bite to eat. Leave the apartment. Then come back just before 9. If Jibril comes early, we want him to think everything is natural.”

ONLINE VERSION

Chapter 100

Darrin paused at his doorstep and took a deep breath. He put the key in the lock and opened the apartment door. He could tell some lights were on. He never left the lights on. That was ingrained in him by a father who always asked "You got stock in the electric company? Turn off the damn lights then."

He walked in and closed the door behind him. A strong set of arms grabbed him from behind, and he was face down on the floor. He blacked out for a moment. The next thing he knew, his neck was in the crook of a large arm.

~ ~ ~
"Sounds like they jumped him," Agent al-Jafari said. "A thud and then it sounds like somebody is choking. Wait. Wait. They're talking. Saying hello."

"Not a hello you'd expect for a ringleader of a terror plot," Director Moran commented. "Maybe Cecil was right."

~ ~ ~
From his spot on the floor, Darrin saw a pair of shoes, dark socks, and dark pants.

"Hello my friend."

"Not too friendly," he gasped.

"I am sorry. Ibrahim will let you up once he is sure you will cooperate. Do you remember me?"

"Of course, I remember you Jibril. I saw you last in Dar es Salaam. You got me to a hospital and saved my life."

"Yes . . . I saved your life," Jibril responded slowly. "Ibrahim let my friend up."

It was hard getting from a face down position quickly after that. He took his time.

“Ouch. You almost broke my windpipe.”

“Ibrahim is not a subtle man. Please, sit down. Relax.”

He sat on his sofa. His favorite spot for TV watching. The cushion was worn.

Unfortunately, this time it wasn't a rerun of the A-Team.

“Let me start over. Hello my friend,” Jibril offered.

“Hello Jibril.”

“It has been a long time since we have actually spoken.”

“Since that day after the Gulf War. In my office.”

“Yes, yes. After the infidel took what had been in my family for generations and burned it. What turned out to be the words of God.”

“I remember.”

“But the infidel Hennessey is dead now,” Jibril smiled.

Darrin found the statement odd. He guessed that Jibril had done his homework and tried to find Hennessey too. He could also see Jibril was starting to get agitated. Might be better to steer clear from what happened to the manuscript he thought.

Darrin nodded.

“But I still have your words. What you wrote down from that scroll. And the dates. And sometimes even where the glorious events would happen. But, usually, we had to figure them out ourselves. But the dates, you were always right. And my friend, believe me it has not always been easy to keep up with those dates. Sometimes we questioned. But even if we were not fully prepared, we went ahead. And God rewarded us.”

Stacy was right. He had been played. He had handed al Qaeda thousands of innocent lives.

“And now, we have one more date. And you had written down New York. But we know now it is Los Angeles. We know the city of the Greater Son of Tarshish on the Eastern Sea is Los Angeles - that the Eastern Sea is the Pacific Ocean. And that the Western Sea is the Atlantic Ocean - and the great city on the Western Sea is New York.”

“Very smart, Jibril. I didn’t figure that out until after the World Trade Center bombing in 1993.”

“That’s the problem with you Americans - you see the world from where you sit here in your rich country. You think the Eastern Sea is the Atlantic, ignoring that, for most of the world's people, that is not the case.”

“Yes, that’s why I was expecting L.A. in 1993. And they had just finished building the tallest skyscraper west of Chicago a few years before. I thought that was it.”

“You heard, you read, but you did not understand. We did. Further proof that those words were intended for true believers.”

“Well, I see that you are still a believer, Jibril. Has your faith ever wavered since we last spoke?” Darrin wondered – hoped – that Jibril was experiencing the same thing he was. That he was a soulmate.

“My belief in God has only been strengthened, Darris Allis. Everything has happened just as God had planned it.”

Darrin laughed nervously.

“Why is that funny?”

“I never told you what the purpose of the manuscript was.”

“It was a prophecy, that is clear.”

“That wasn’t really the main point of it. Do you know why those things had to be written down?”

“They were written for God’s glory.”

“Hardly.”

“What do you mean?”

“Jibril, they were written because God was leaving Planet Earth. The universe we live in. Abandoning mankind. That was just a roadmap of what would happen in a world without God.”

“Nonsense. What you are saying is blasphemy.”

“It’s true.”

“And when did this happen?”

“Around 100 A.D.”

“Blasphemy. The Prophet appeared hundreds of years later. Are you saying he didn’t hear the voice of God?”

“I’m saying that we’re all alone. Whatever we do to each other is because of us. Not because of God.”

“I don’t want to hear this babbling. God is great. He lives and reigns in the world. And one day every knee shall bow to him.”

“Really. And how will that happen? By putting a sword to the world’s neck?”

“If that is what is necessary.”

Darrin shook his head.

“If you’ve lost your belief, Darrin Allis, then maybe you need to submit to the true God. Not the God of your tired and dead religion. Christianity won’t survive much longer. Your people don’t have the stomach for sacrifice.”

“Is that what you call murdering innocent people? Sacrifice?”

Ibrahim slapped Darrin across the face. “Don’t speak to him that way,” he lectured Darrin.

Darrin spit some blood on the couch. He looked at Ibrahim and then Jibril.

“Let’s move on to why I am here.”

“Okay.”

“I need to know what happens next. I need to know what the rest of the manuscript says.”

“You mean after Los Angeles?”

“Yes.”

“I’m afraid I can’t help you with that.”

“Oh, I think you can help us.”

“No. I’m not going to do that.”

Jibril looked over to Ibrahim. Ibrahim slapped Darrin across the face again.

“It will only get worse for you, my friend.”

“I don’t think you even have Los Angeles down right.”

“That’s not true.”

“I didn’t give you the right information.”

“Of course you did. It was right for all the others. The dates were always right. And the descriptions. Always consistent with what we did.”

Darrin shrugged and smiled.

“Destruction will come from the waters,” Jibril recited. “And it will my friend.”

“So you’re going to create a big tidal wave or something?”

“No. That is nonsense,” Jibril responded. Then he paused and took a step back. He sensed something was wrong.

“Darrin, I need you to remove your shirt.”

“Why?”

“Take your shirt off.”

Darrin complied.

“O.k., you want to know? You want to know how you’ve helped us plan the greatest attack ever on the United States?”

~ ~ ~

“Yousef, are you getting this?” Agent Socia asked.

“Yes, yes,” Agent al-Jafari replied.

~ ~ ~

Jibril leaned in close to Darrin’s face, putting his right hand on Darrin’s bare left shoulder.

“It’s the water you drink,” he whispered.

“Drinking water,” Darrin said out loud. “I don’t think you’d be able to do that. That stuff gets tested.”

~ ~ ~

“He’s doing a heck of a job,” Moran said. “Gene, I need you to coordinate with the Task Force on the supply of drinking water. Let’s double the security on every reservoir in Southern California,” Moran said to Agent Gene Claussen.

~ ~ ~

“You would be surprised,” Jibril responded proudly.

“How?”

“No more on this my friend. This is already history, is it not? It was written down. It will come to pass.”

“But I don’t think you got it right”

“Enough! Enough!” Jibril shouted. “My time is precious. We need to move on.”

Darrin wasn’t sure if it was going to be enough to stop it. He hoped, prayed, he hadn’t just made it worse by providing the FBI with partial information.

ONLINE VERSION

Chapter 101

Stacy figured it was Jibril and the larger, deep-voiced man that gotten out after the vehicle stopped. They had been gone for a while now. She had no idea where she was. She was pretty sure they had slid her into the back of some sort of van or panel truck with back doors. Two men. One stayed with her and the other got out. But he must have gotten into the front seat to drive. Two more men had gotten in the front. Then, judging by where the sound came from, the two men went out the passenger side front seat door once the van was parked. Another man stayed in front and was talking to the man in the back with her.

She still had the bag on her head. She needed that bag off her head in order to have a chance. The two guys that were left sounded like the guys at the place where she woke up. *Lightweights*, she thought. *How to do this though?* It wasn't clear when Jibril and the other man would come back. It was probably now or never. She needed to get out of that van.

But why else would they take the bag off her head? She had to do it. *God, forgive me*, she thought. *But this is the only way I can think of.* They had done a half-hearted job of tying her feet when they moved her from the chair out to the van or truck or whatever. She could get those loose pretty easily. But with the bag on her head, she couldn't see where she was going. Without that, she'd be easy to catch. Her hands were tied tight. But they weren't as important. She needed to be able to see to assess the situation.

Chapter 102

“Have you ever seen the movie ‘Lawrence of Arabia’ my friend?” asked Jibril.

“Sure,” Darrin replied.

“Do you notice the similarities to us?”

“Not really.”

“I am like Omar Sharif’s character, Sherif Ali. He had found a foreigner. He killed the foreigner’s helper for drinking from his well. He would have killed the foreigner, but didn’t. Then later, they came back together. Sherif was a great leader. It turned out that the foreigner was invaluable to the cause. But for me, not Lawrence of Arabia – but Darrin Allis of Indiana. Now, we need your help. We need to know God’s will. We need to know what happens next.”

He’s insane, Darrin decided. “I don’t get it, Jibril.”

“Ibrahim, am I the only one who sees these similarities?”

“I see them, brother. Of course.”

“Let me go slowly for you, Darrin Allis. You, a foreigner, were in my land. Your helper – that infidel Hennessey – took what was mine. Yes, it is a little different. I didn’t kill him then. But I killed him later.”

“That doesn’t make sense, Jibril. Sean Hennessey has been dead for 13 years. He committed suicide. He had a drug problem.”

Jibril smiled.

“I get satisfaction every time I think of it. Hennessey thought he would get money from me. After taking what was mine. He wanted money from me.”

Darrin looked over at Ibrahim, who was also smiling.

“So I gave him some drugs - cocaine. And he used them. I could have made it much more painful. But I showed mercy. I showed mercy to my enemy. And once he had taken the cocaine drugs, we spoke. We spoke of you. He sounded so . . . so sad. He had disappointed you.”

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying that your helper, Hennessey, contacted my family through his lawyer. He said he had something that would be of interest to me. He just wanted some money. I might have paid him. But it turned out he was lying. He had nothing. Neither did his lawyer.”

“You killed them?” Darrin asked.

“Yes. Well, Ibrahim killed them. I don’t like to touch dogs.”

“You?” he asked Ibrahim, starting to rise from the sofa. Ibrahim drew his 9-milimeter.

“Sit back down, my friend. This is history. It is past. I will admit Hennessey looked a little frightened when Ibrahim threw him from the balcony. But he didn’t scream or cry. He accepted it.”

Darrin put his face in his hands.

~ ~ ~

“God,” said Choi. “They drugged Hennessey and then killed him.” He looked over at his partner, who was looking pale. “You o.k., Carl.”

Barrett shook his head. “Son of a bitch. It’s hot in here, Ron. I gotta take this off.”

Barrett pulled on the Velcro seam of his assault vest.

“Carl, put that back on.”

“It’s 90 degrees in here at least with the engine off and no air conditioning. I’m feeling a little light-headed. I’ll be fine.”

~ ~ ~

“You son of a bitch,” Darrin said softly shaking his head.

Another slap from Ibrahim.

“Darrin Allis, please. There is no need to insult my mother. You know death anyway. It is not something to be feared if you are a believer. I have been there with many of my brothers as they breathed their last. As they entered paradise. They were at peace. Virgins awaited them. You cannot be a believer and really fear death.”

“He was a kid.”

“Yes, so like Talas the guide in Lawrence of Arabia, Hennessey died. He was a dog. He drank from my well.”

“This isn’t a movie, Jibril. You killed him.”

“What do they say, ‘life imitates fiction?’ But let me finish. Like Sherif Ali, I am a leader. Do you know my mother must have known this when I was born. I am named after the Angel Gabriel. I bring God’s message. I announce it. And how did that happen? Because of you. My Lawrence of Arabia. You brought it to me. And I gave it to my brother, Osama.”

Darrin shook his head. *It was the scroll. It had done this to Jibril. Another life ruined.*

“It doesn’t have to be this way, Jibril. You have a choice. Most of your brothers in Islam have rejected violence.”

“You are going to lecture me about violence? Please. Violence is a tool. It is not a first resort, it is a last resort. You – the Americans – made it this way. You support the wicked House of Saud that oppresses my people. Israel, that oppresses my brothers. You go to war to

give Iraq to the Shia infidels in Iran. You leave us no choice. But the Lions of the Sons of Ishmael – we won't stay under the foot of anyone.”

“Then why save my life? Why didn't you just leave me to die in Tanzania.”

Again, Jibril smiled knowingly.

“Ibrahim, I need to have a moment alone with Darrin Allis.”

Ibrahim thought about it for a moment. Then he knelt down and pulled a pistol from a holster around his ankle. “Keep this brother,” he said handing the gun to Jibril. “Be careful. I will be outside.” Ibrahim walked out the front door of the apartment, closing it behind him.

~ ~ ~

“I've got one exiting the apartment. I have a clean shot,” whispered an FBI sniper a couple of “construction vehicles” over.

“Hold your fire! Hold your fire!” yelled Moran.

~ ~ ~

Jibril turned back to Darrin.

“I don't want Ibrahim to hear this. It is embarrassing for me,” Jibril said softly.

Darrin could feel the anger welling up inside him.

“My friend, while I am tempted to lie to get your trust, I cannot. I would like to tell you that I saved your life that day, but the opposite is true,” he said even more softly, leaning toward Darrin.

~ ~ ~

“Yousef, I'm only hearing mumbling. What's going on?” Randi Socia asked.

“It's the microphones. I told you they weren't picking up very well.”

~ ~ ~

“I was very angry that you had kept me from doing God’s will at the embassy,” Jibril continued. “I ended up killing only innocents there because you kept the Americans away. When I saw you there on the sidewalk, I knew what had happened. Of course, I had no idea how successful we had been in Nairobi. But that was the backup. We always have a backup. And, as with that day and on September 11th, sometimes the backups have been more successful than the primary goal.”

“No, that day I shoved a pill in your mouth and tried to make you chew it and swallow it. Poison that I had saved for myself in case I was captured. I could not afford to have you interfere with God’s plan. But you vomited - I could not tell if you swallowed it or not. People came over and I had to leave. I could not risk capture. For years after that I wondered if you were alive. Then I had to know. I had to look for you, because time was running out.”

“You almost killed me!” Darrin shouted.

Jibril stepped back. “I know. I am sorry for that. God has forgiven me. Sherif Ali would have killed Lawrence of Arabia though. But it didn’t happen. They both had a greater purpose. Doesn’t that inspire you?”

~ ~ ~

“O.k., I’m hearing them again,” said Yousef.

“Yes, I’ve got them,” said Director Moran.

~ ~ ~

“Jibril, you took away my life when you handed me that scroll. You killed Hennessey. You killed Johnny Duran by having those psychos fly planes into the World Trade Center. You’ve killed thousands of innocent people. And now you want to kill more. Am I inspired? You’re insane to even ask that.”

“You will come to see, my friend. This is all part of God’s plan.”

“Not any God that I want to know.”

“You are just wrestling with your faith. Your eyes will be opened. Now, I need to know what happens next.”

ONLINE VERSION

Chapter 103

Stacy began the shaking slowly. First her legs, then her torso, then her head. She started making a choking noise. She had seen a man in the mall have an epileptic seizure and this is how she remembered it. Soon she was pretended to convulse violently.

The two men spoke quickly back and forth in Arabic. Then she felt the bag come off her head. She was in the back of a van. She stared at the ceiling and kept shaking and then started making a vomiting noise. More talking between the men. The one in the back with her pulled the tape from her mouth.

“Help me,” she gurgled. “Help me.”

She had loosened the ropes around her feet. She knew she could kick them off when she had to. She moved her blank stare to the back doors of the van as she kept writhing around. It was a simple handle that had to be flipped up.

“Need to sit up,” she gurgled.

The men were shouting at each other. The one closest to her sat her up.

“Look in my eyes,” she said. “Are they dilated?”

“What is ‘dilated’ meaning?” the man said.

The man in the front seat spoke to him in Arabic, interpreting, and the man with Stacy put his face next to hers.

It was her chance. She thrust her forehead into his nose as hard as she could. He howled in pain. The man in the front seat looked around to see if anyone was on the sidewalk who had heard the scream and might come over to the van. As he then turned and began to climb into the back, Stacy kicked off her ropes, then put a knee into the face of the man she had just

headbutted, knocking him off balance. She rolled over twice to the backdoors and opened the handle with her mouth. She then kicked the loose door open.

~ ~ ~

“The van door is opening!” Choi shouted. “There’s somebody coming out.”

“Line up a shot on the van,” Moran ordered.

“Can’t do it, shot is obstructed,” said another FBI sniper.

Barrett opened the driver side door as soon as he saw the woman running from the van. He grabbed his service revolver and started running toward her.

ONLINE VERSION

Chapter 104

“So you want to know what happens after Los Angeles? Why don’t you just get out of this Jibril? Just stop. Go live your life. This is a cursed life you’re living.”

“It’s the path I’ve chosen. Now tell me.”

“I gave you everything I had that day in Saudi.”

“I don’t believe that.”

“I’m afraid I can’t help you.”

“Oh, I think you can help us.”

“Even if could, I wouldn’t.”

Jibril raised his gun toward Darrin’s face.

“You can go ahead and kill me if you want. But I’m not talking.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t kill you,” he said, bending his arm at the elbow and pointing his gun to the ceiling. “But I would kill your whore. Is this her?”

Jibril pulled a Polaroid out of his pocket and showed it to Darrin. It was Stacy, tied up in a chair with a gun to her forehead.

“You’re a dead man, Jibril,” Darrin said matter-of-factly.

“Now, now. We haven’t hurt her. We just needed some leverage. You two will be back together soon enough.”

“Where is she?”

“Safe.”

“If anything happens to her”

“My, my. Such strong feelings. What happens to her is completely in your hands, my friend. If you don’t do the right thing, I will pull out my phone, say the word, and she will die.”

~ ~ ~

Barrett saw a man with blood on his face jump from the back of the van and stumble. As he got up, he raised a gun toward the woman. Barrett looked at the woman. He could see her face now. It was the beautiful woman he had seen in Darrin's eyes right before he saw Trish. He took two more steps toward her, grabbed her arm with his left hand, and spun her around, away from the man with the gun.

Agent Choi saw the man raise his gun and exited the passenger side. "I've got a shooter over here. Carl's in trouble. Take down the guy by the van."

"I don't have a shot," the sniper repeated.

Carl Barrett looked down into Stacy's eyes. "Trish," he said. They were on the dance floor in a nightclub in Hollywood. It was 1989. He gave her a twirl as he held her close. It was the night that she told him she was pregnant with Cassie. They danced the night away. The happiest evening of his life.

~ ~ ~

Ibrahim thought about shooting the older man who was holding Stacy Lawson, but he needed to protect Jibril. He ran back along the balcony to the apartment door.

~ ~ ~

Hasan's first shot hit Barrett in the back of the leg. Barrett slumped for a moment, then stood back up.

~ ~ ~

Jibril heard the gunshot and turned toward the door.

Darrin slipped his hand down the side of the sofa. Fortunately, the FBI hadn't swept the apartment again that day.

Jibril turned back to Darrin, who was pointing an old, Army-issue .45 caliber pistol at Jibril's chest.

"I don't know what comes next, Jibril. But I know how it ends."

Jibril smiled and closed his eyes. "God is great," he said.

~ ~ ~

The next shot from Hasan hit its target just above Barrett's left kidney. Then another into his back and through his left aorta before hitting a rib. Stacy began to scream as Barrett loosened his grip and began to fall.

Choi managed to get his assault rifle out and opened up on Hasan, the man with the bloody face. He went down immediately. Choi saw someone else in the van.

"Carl's down!" Choi shouted. "Officer down! I've got another one in the van."

~ ~ ~

Ibrahim heard two more shots as he opened the apartment door with gun drawn. He saw Darrin Allis, still seated on the sofa, but with a gun to Jibril's chest. Ibrahim yelled and raised his gun.

~ ~ ~

"I've got a clean shot at the one on the balcony."

"Take it! Take it!" Moran yelled.

~ ~ ~

The pug in the window of Eric Wise's apartment barked at the stranger passing by. Startled, Ibrahim turned his head to look as he fired off a shot at Darrin.

Two more shots rang out in the apartment before Ibrahim's head exploded like a pumpkin hit by a baseball bat.

~ ~ ~

“Got him.” said the sniper. “Got the one on the balcony.”

~ ~ ~

“I’ve got shots fired in the apartment!” Yousef yelled.

“Get in there Luis, get in there,” Socia ordered Agent Robles.

~ ~ ~

Bashir knew he didn’t have much time. He climbed from the back into the driver’s seat of the van. He thought about trying a getaway, but knew it was pointless. He had been in L.A. for almost a year and had watched police chases on the T.V. with amusement. No sense in that. The police always caught you. He pulled out the pill that Jibril had given him, chewed it, and swallowed it. His head started to feel light. It was a good feeling. All he needed to do now was wait.

~ ~ ~

Barrett fell to the ground at Stacy’s feet. She knelt down. He smiled up at her.

“Thank you,” she said.

“What’s your name?” he asked.

“Stacy.”

“That’s pretty.” He smiled and closed eyes.

Choi ran up and knelt next to her.

“Are you okay?” he asked her.

“Yes. Is he . . . ?”

He didn’t respond to her. “Get a damn ambulance here!” he screamed in the Walkie-Talkie. “I’ve got an officer down.”

“He saved my life,” she said, beginning to sob.

“Let me help you with the ropes,” Choi said. “Turn around and I’ll untie you.”

She could hear the sirens in the distance. She looked around her as Choi got the ropes off her wrists. It was Darrin’s street. She looked up at his apartment. There were men with guns going into it.

She got up and ran across the street and up the stairs.

“Hey!” Choi yelled. He let her go so he could stay with his partner. “I told you to leave the vest on, Carl,” he said to Barrett’s lifeless body.

~ ~ ~

“Luis, what have you got in there?” Socia asked Robles into the Walkie.

“I’ve got a dead guy in the doorway. It looks like . . ., like I’ve got Jibril al-Attas on the floor. Kick that gun away. Check him. Nothing? He’s dead Randi.”

“What about Darrin Allis?”

~ ~ ~

Stacy heard Darrin’s name over the Walkie Talkie as she got to the apartment door.

“Darrin!” she cried.

She saw the larger man lying in the door way. His head blown away. She wanted to scream. *Hold it together*, she thought. *Hold it.*

She looked in the apartment and saw Jibril on the floor and Darrin slumped back on the sofa. Blood was all over his face and the back of his head. She opened her mouth to scream. Nothing came out. Three men with guns and helmets and body armor were standing there.

“Looks like three dead up here, Randi,” one of the men said. “Darrin Allis took one in the forehead. Holy Mother, look at all the blood.”

“No! No! No!” Stacy screamed, running toward him. One of the men grabbed her.

“There’s nothing you can do now,” he said.

“Get away from me,” she said pushing him. “Darrin!”

He was there on the sofa, a pistol next to him.

“He must have shot Jibril,” one of the men said behind her.

She held his face with her hands. Blood – a lot of blood had trickled down from the wound in his forehead. There was another wound on the scalp on the top back part of his head. It had soaked the sofa behind him.

She saw something yellowish-white on the sofa cushion next to him. A tooth.

This isn’t happening, she thought. “You wake up, Darrin! Now!” she cried.

Darrin took a gasping breath. Stacy jumped back.

“My God, he’s alive,” Agent Robles yelled in the Walkie. “I need an EMT up here. Come on, come on.”

She straddled him and put her nose to his nose. “Darrin! Darrin! Are you with me?”

No response.

“Come on, stay with me now!”

“Jibril,” he mumbled.

“Don’t worry about Jibril,” she said.

“Jibril,” he mumbled again.

“He’s gone Sweetie. Don’t talk.”

“But Jibril,” he said, looking up at her.

“Darrin, shut up. You’re hurt.”

“But Jibril said”

“Said what?”

“He said there would be virgins for him.” Darrin smirked. “But I get you?”

It took a moment for her to process.

“If you weren’t bleeding, I’d kill you,” she said, holding his head to her breast.

It would take ten stitches to close the gash in his scalp where Ibrahim’s errant shot grazed him. Scalp wounds were always bloody. The “wound” in Darrin’s forehead would take another five stitches to close. Unfortunately for Darrin, and more so for Ibrahim, one of Ibrahim’s molars – propelled by a sniper’s bullet -- found its way to Darrin’s forehead, knocking him unconscious and opening the bullet sized cut.

Chapter 105

“That doesn’t look too bad,” Agent Hogue said as looked at the stitches in Darrin’s forehead. “You won’t have much of a scar.”

“How’s Ron Choi doing?” Darrin asked.

“He’s o.k. He and Barrett were a lot closer than either of them would admit. He’ll take some time off. That’s the policy when your partner dies.”

An LAX airport policemen yelled over, “Hey, let’s keep it moving. You can’t park there.”

Agent al-Jafari flashed his badge. “We’ll be finished in a moment.” The officer moved on.

“That was quite a funeral,” Stacy said. “I wish I would have known him.”

“Yeah. He was quite a guy. Darrin here saw the best and worst of him,” Hogue said.

“He’s found peace,” said al-Jafari.

“So, you guys will check in with me by phone when you get to Indianapolis, right?”

“Yes.”

“And then once a day while you’re in Muncie.”

“Yes.”

“I could go with you, you know,” Hogue offered.

“No. We’ll be o.k.”

“We’re going to need you to give grand jury testimony about what Jibril said to you.”

“I understand,” Darrin replied.

“For some reason, the U.S. Attorney feels it’s safe to let you go back to Indiana before then,” Hogue said. “Somebody convinced him you weren’t a flight risk.”

Thanks Althea, Darrin thought.

“How many of them have you caught?” Stacy asked.

“Eleven as of yesterday. We think that’s the whole group,” Agent al-Jafari said. “With the four dead, that was fifteen people they had involved.”

“So it was the reservoirs?”

“Yeah. Biological agents in the reservoirs. Stuff we don’t test for. Not yet at least. But we will. They had a warehouse with barrels and barrels of it. It would have been a catastrophe. Hundreds of thousands dead at least,” Hogue said.

“When will the public be told?” Stacy asked.

“Maybe after the grand jury indictments,” al-Jafari replied. “Maybe.”

“But we need to get our star witness out of town for now,” Hogue said. “Darrin, we owe you. Thanks.”

“Thanks Agent Hogue.”

“Cecil. You can call me Cecil. Funny how life works out, you know. The first time I see you you’re almost dead. Then, you’re almost dead again in the apartment. You got nine lives man.”

“Just lucky.”

“So how’s Rod Warner doing?” Hogue asked.

“He and his wife leave for Hong Kong in a couple days.”

“Well maybe I’ll have to check in on him before he goes. See if he still has that Australian accent.”

“Yeah. I think it comes and goes,” Darrin said. “Well, we’ll see you in two weeks.”

“I’ll be here,” Hogue said.

As Darrin and Stacy walked away into the terminal, Agents Hogue and al-Jafari waited to see they got to the security line and then got into their car.

After enduring the long security line, Darrin and Stacy headed to their gate.

Stacy slowed down as they came up to a Starbucks. "I sure could use a Chai."

"O.k. You want to go see if they're boarding our flight yet?"

"Yeah. I need to find a restroom too," she replied. "I'll meet you at the gate."

As he waited for his order, he saw someone familiar sitting at a nearby table. An older gentleman. Thin, distinguished looking. Gray hair on his mostly bald head. Dressed in a suit. Not unlike the older Orthodox Jewish men he would see walking on the Sabbath in West Los Angeles near Beverlywood.

Had he seen him at the Assistance Center? No. No. He remembered the face from New York. 9/11. It was the cabby who had driven up next to him, and helped him put Johnny's body in the back seat, not saying a word. Stoic, but very kind at the same time.

Darrin walked over, and gave the man a "don't I know you?" sideways glance.

The man smiled, just a little, and said, "Please, sit down child." It was then he recognized the voice from Dar es Salaam. A warm feeling came from inside him, moved up his body and then over him like a blanket. This was the man who had saved Darrin's life. But he had a feeling it was not just Darrin's life that this man had saved.

"You're John, aren't you?"

"Yes, my child. The one whom the Master loved."

He sat for a moment and looked into John's eyes. Eyes filled with love, but also sadness.

"I've watched you for a long time, little one. You picked up a burden that was not yours to carry."

“I know,” Darrin replied.

“I tried to take it back from you in Dar es Salaam. I thought I had. I still don’t completely understand what happened. But even after nearly 2,000 years, there are a lot of things about this world I still don’t understand.”

“Why did he leave us?” Darrin asked.

John sighed. “He didn’t leave you little one. You weren’t born. He left me.”

“But why?”

“He left because I told him to. Because I wanted ones like you to have a chance to live.”

* * *

"Master, wait. What of these? They cannot be judged."

"They must be my brother. The Father will make a new heaven and new earth."

"But Master, look at these. Their stories are not yet written."

"My brother, it is time for all to be fulfilled."

"But Master, how can a man be judged based on half a life? Some of these are not yet 20 years of age."

He had watched the Master for three years. He could see in his eyes that he was thinking about what John was saying. It was like the time a Samaritan woman spoke wisely to him and changed his mind.

“Master. It was not until I was 30-years old that you found me, repairing a fishing net. If I had been judged based on my life to that point, I wouldn’t have been ready.”

John shook his head and began to weep. He felt Jesus’ hand on his shoulder. Not like when they walked together in those days in Palestine. It was different. It truly was God's hand.

“My brother, what would you have me do?”

"Master, you have judged the dead. You have taken the faithful, your followers and those who still follow Moses' ways. Leave these Master. Let them live their lives. Let them know the joys and pains of your world."

"My brother, these are sheep. Who would lead them if I am not here, if the Spirit were not here. All has been fulfilled, we cannot stay."

"I will stay Master."

"You will stay? You are a man. You know the heart of man."

"I know that man's heart is created in your image. I know a man's heart can be darkened. But I also know the love that can be in a man's heart. The love for his friends. The love he feels for his wife. The love he feels when he looks at his child."

"You would stay here my brother, and give up sitting at my right hand?"

"Master, for these I would do that."

"And what of those who come after these, my brother? This won't be the last generation of men. There will be more and more on this earth. What of them? What if all of their hearts turn dark?"

"They will not Master. I know the human heart. I know it longs for love and peace and justice. That is how the Father made it."

"My brother, you know I was always the most fond of you." Jesus sighed. "Very well, let me show you what will happen to man. Then you must decide. Nothing I show you can be changed. It has already happened. Do you understand me brother?"

"I understand Master"

"I don't think you do understand my brother. If you try to change these things, only pain and heartache will come from it. If you take this path, then this is man's story, already written. Woe to anyone who tries to change that story. The tragedies I show will only be worsened."

"I understand Master."

"I tell you this to protect you my brother. I know your heart and I know what you will think. You will not be able to look at injustice and cruelty and tolerate it. You will think, 'just a little here then, just a little there. Just a little change.' But it's already written. Woe to anyone who tries to change it."

"I understand Master."

"Then here is man's story my brother," he said. "You will live to see all these things my brother, unless you willingly give yourself over to death. Like me when I walked with you, you will not die unless you willingly give yourself over."

* * *

"And you, little one, have seen the story. And you tried to change it," John said, shaking his head. "I don't blame you. You weren't meant to see it."

"Then why was it written down?" Darrin asked.

"It was written for me."

"And now it's destroyed."

"You only saw a copy. My scribe, Leucius Charinus, wrote down the words. But he also made a copy. Then he left. I never saw him again. That was the scroll you saw."

"What became of him?"

“He went off and tried to live his life knowing that God had left. He started his own religion. They called themselves the Gnostics. The ones with knowledge,” John said, shaking his head.

“Like in the Da Vinci Code, huh?”

“Da Vinci?” John chuckled. “Now there was a man who gave me hope. Brilliant. Far ahead of his time. But he was afraid of love. Uncomfortable with it. We would talk. We would have long discussions. I trusted he wouldn’t talk to others about me. He painted me as an effeminate figure. They claim now it was Mary Magdalene in the painting, but it was me.”

He knew John was referring to Da Vinci’s “The Last Supper.”

“Where did God go?” Darrin asked.

“In the years to come man will learn that there are other universes. Other dimensions. Man understands so very little.”

“How could you go through this for 2,000 years? I wanted to take my own life after just a few years.”

“Because I know how it ends,” John replied. “Not that I haven’t wanted to give up.”

John reached out his hand to touch Darrin. “The evil that man has perpetrated for the last 2,000 years has been the evil that man has designed. Not the devil. Man. But man can also do good. It is in the heart of a man to be able to choose good over evil.”

Darrin looked down at John's hands outstretched. The cuff of his sleeve was pulled high enough that Darrin could see a tattoo on the inside of his forearm. A tattoo with green numbers. Darrin had seen that type of tattoo before in photographs from the Holocaust.

John noticed Darrin was looking at the tattoo.

“Treblinka. Man's greatest inhumanity to man. I will tell you there have been many anti-Christ's since the Master left, but those monsters,” John trailed off.

Darrin could see anger in John's eyes.

“I almost walked into the gas chamber there to die with my brothers. It was at that time I was ready to give up on mankind and give myself over to die. But I heard the cry of a child. And I was reminded that there would be other generations. My task wasn't finished. I had to go on.”

The two men sat in silence for a moment.

“And now, little one, it is time for you to go on. It is time for you to lay down this burden.”

“But what will happen here in Los Angeles? Have I . . . ?”

“It's not for you to know.”

“But I already know how it ends,” Darrin objected. “I know there's hope. I read the last page. It's something my sister taught me. Always read the last page after you read the first page.”

“And what did it tell you, my child?”

Darrin had memorized the words.

“And, in that day, the world will see the Sons of Ishmael and the Sons of Israel and all the Sons of Men make peace and forever beat their swords into plowshares. There will be no more war and no more tears. And they will serve each other, as the Master taught. And they will live as one.”

“Very good,” John replied.

“How do we get there?”

“Knowing that. That is not your path. You must now know peace, my child,” John said, squeezing Darrin’s hands.

~ ~ ~

CNN Airport Television was playing in the terminal. "It's 11 a.m. on the East Coast, and 8 am on the West Coast," the announcer said, starting off the news with her normal tag line, "And here's what's happening. Another bloody day in Iraq, as thirty people are killed. . ."

“Darrin, they've called our row. What are you doing?”

“What?” he asked, looking up at Stacy.

“You were supposed to meet me at the gate. But you're sitting here by yourself -- with my grande soy chai latte, I might add.”

She picked it up. "And now it's cold."

“Sorry, I don’t know what happened. I guess I sat down.”

“I guess you did. You're not having second thoughts about introducing me to your family are you?”

“No. No, of course not. I guess it's everything that's happened lately. Zoned out. Really sorry.”

“Well, pick up your carry-on and let’s go.”

He looked around. *Weird*. It was like he blacked out but without falling down.

“You love me, right?” she asked.

“With all my heart,” he said smiling.

“Wait, what’s this?” she asked, looking at an envelope on the table in front of Darrin.

He smiled at her and shrugged.

She gave him one of those “o.k., what’s going on” looks and opened it.

“Oh my God! My God! You are crazy! Is this a joke?”

He looked down and looked back up at her.

“I . . . nope.” He paused for a long moment. “Let’s be crazy! We gotta hurry!” he said, getting up and starting to run. “Come on slow poke!”

“Wait up, I’m gonna spill my chai!” she giggled as she chased after him.

ONLINE VERSION

Epilogue

Ahmad was nervous. The container should have cleared the Port of Long Beach four days earlier. He now would have barely a day to get it on the truck and then to the location. Although nothing would happen for another week after that, the streets surrounding the delivery point would be shut down to traffic and there would be no way for him to make his delivery.

Unknown to Ahmad, this was al Qaeda's last, best opportunity to "please God" with such a high death-toll. In the coming months, all cargo containers would be actively scanned for radioactivity. That was the only way to catch a nuclear device housed in an 18-inch thick lead box. The passive radioactivity "sniffers" currently used by Port security would register a higher read for a container of televisions than for this Soviet-era, short-range warhead.

Al Qaeda had invested a lot in the operation. Yuri Pelekov had driven a hard bargain in selling them the warhead. The former Soviet officer had fought the mujahedin in Afghanistan. He was captured after being shot in the leg with an American rifle. The CIA officer that interrogated him could have gotten him treatment, but didn't. Yuri ended up losing his leg to gangrene. He blamed the Americans for that, not the Afghans. The Afghans had been fighting for their country. But the Americans were providing arms only as a way to inflict casualties on the Soviet army. With all their big speeches on human rights, it seemed the Americans were happiest when they were inflicting misery on others. Now Yuri would have his justice – along with a million dollar payday.

Ahmad didn't ask his handlers a lot of questions. He knew the container would come from an Indonesian freighter. He knew it had explosives in it – "drive very carefully, brother" -- but he wasn't told the type. He only knew where he had to take it. He had his suspicions, though, that it was something very deadly. Probably Oklahoma City deadly at least. He

certainly planned on steering clear of that part of Los Angeles for a while after making his delivery.

The “cell” structure that al Qaeda relied on could leave one feeling very isolated and lonely. There was only one person to talk to about things, and Ahmad knew there wouldn’t be any further contact until after the operation was complete. Had it not been that way, Ahmad may have learned that he was truly alone. His handler and others had been rounded up by the FBI in connection with a plot that had been foiled. Now, the “backup” plan was being initiated.

ONLINE VERSION