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DR. DAVID JEREMIAH

WITH SAM O'NEAL

# SHATTERED

A  
VANISHED  
NOVEL

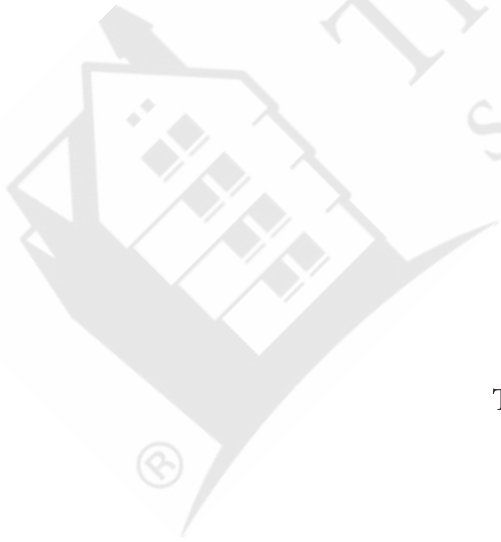


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A NOVEL

DR. DAVID JEREMIAH

WITH SAM O'NEAL



THOMAS NELSON  
Since 1798

*Shattered*

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## PROLOGUE

NEW ERA, DAY 2  
TEL AVIV, ISRAEL

**H**ear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one.”  
Saul Katz whispered the holy words to himself, seeking comfort. Or peace. Or even a moment of solace within the chaos detonating the regular rhythms of his life since the previous evening.

*Isaac was in the office with me. He was right in front of me. I was talking to him when he . . . When it . . .*

“No.” Saul squeezed his eyes closed, then tried again to find an anchor in the long-remembered prayer. “Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one.” His fingers twitched as if he were holding the tassels of the *tallit* his father had given him—as if it were wrapped around his shoulders even now rather than resting near the top of his messenger bag bouncing lightly against his leg.

He’d packed the bag the night before, moving feverishly around his small apartment in Jerusalem to collect the most sensitive documents and data packages. He’d thrown in a few changes of clothes almost as an afterthought, then gently folded the woolen tallit and placed it on top of everything else, making sure the tassels were tucked safely away from zippers and sharp corners.

Saul hadn't known why he was packing up his life's work. Not exactly. But given what had happened to Isaac, not to mention what had happened to the rest of the world—what was still happening, apparently—it seemed best to be prepared. In his experience, it was always preferable to meet what was coming face-to-face rather than be chased down from behind.

He'd been correct, of course. The knock came at 4:17 a.m. Saul was already dressed when he opened the door to find two middle-aged men wearing dark suits and grim expressions. They told him who wanted to see him and where they were going, and Saul picked up his bag and followed them down a flight of stairs and out into the darkness of the street.

That was less than ninety minutes ago. Now Saul followed the same men down a sparsely lit corridor somewhere inside the bowels of the Israeli Security Agency.

*I have done nothing wrong. I have worked hard. I have been faithful. But was the same true of Isaac? Did he know something? Did he plan something? Is that why he's gone?*

Neither Saul nor Isaac worked for the Israeli Security Agency. Not officially. But they required significant funding to maintain their lab and advance their work. Much of that funding came from government organizations with known connections to ISA. There were expectations and understandings, along with regular progress reports. Saul himself had visited this building many times, although he did not recognize this particular hallway.

The two men stopped abruptly in front of an unmarked door. One of them pointed at Saul's bag, while the other shifted positions to stand directly behind Saul. They both looked at him silently. Waiting.

Saul sighed, then slipped the bag off his shoulder and handed it to the first man. He opened it and rifled through the contents with practiced fingers. At the same time, the second man patted

his palms and fingers along Saul's shoulders, across his back, and down both legs.

Satisfied, the first man returned the bag as the second knocked three times, then opened the door so it swung inward on well-oiled hinges. Neither man spoke to Saul, but the implied instruction was obvious.

Still, he hesitated.

*I've done nothing wrong. I've worked—*

"Come in, Saul." The voice from within the room was low and raspy but packed with confidence. With command. "We have no time for delay."

Saul stepped into a lamplit office oozing with authority, from the massive acacia wood desk to the supple leather chairs to several large LCD screens mounted on the walls, each one bristling with data. Even now, Saul drank in that data as he moved forward, the back of his mind analyzing, identifying patterns, and making connections.

Yossef Cohen sat behind the desk. Chief of the Israeli Security Agency. He was an older man of medium height and build, his face craggy with wrinkles and deep-set creases. His hair was iron gray. It had been his unmistakable voice that summoned Saul into the room.

A second man half sat, half leaned on the corner of Cohen's desk—a casual and untroubled posture that suggested familiarity. A colleague. The man remained at eye level with Saul even while leaning, which meant he must be very tall. He was a bit younger than Yossef Cohen, perhaps in his early sixties, and physically more imposing.

Cohen spoke first as he gestured toward the other man. "Saul Katz, this is David Pardo. Please sit."

Saul's stomach dropped with a lurch. His knees threatened to buckle, and he gratefully took the offered seat in front of the desk.

David Pardo was director of Mossad, Israel's vaunted network of spies and assassins. Which meant Saul had been summoned to speak with two of the most terrifying men in the Middle East—commanded to bow before Shin Bet and Mossad together.

*Adonai, have mercy on Your servant!*

"We understand your research partner was caught up in yesterday's unpleasantness," Cohen rasped. "Is that correct?"

"Yes, Chief. Isaac . . ." How to say it? "We were speaking when he vanished. He was there one moment and gone the next, only his clothes left behind."

There it was. Two sentences to describe the most shocking and terrifying moment of Saul's life.

They had been in Saul's apartment, which for years had served as their de facto conference room and brainstorming space whenever they weren't needed in the lab with all of its humming servers and dehumanizing safety protocols. Isaac was talking about a new test he wanted to run—a new way to assess Dohv's ability to think on its feet, so to speak. He looked the same as ever while talking out his ideas. A round, boyish face always seemingly right on the edge of breaking into a beatific smile. Dark hair in tight ringlets. Bright eyes.

Saul had asked a question, and Isaac paused for a moment to ponder. He pushed his thick-framed glasses up on his forehead while he thought, then lifted his brow to let them slide back down again. A mannerism of concentration. He said, "I think . . ." And then he was gone. Physically gone. Disappeared. One moment Saul had been looking at his friend's familiar face; the next moment—the next instant—that face was completely absent. The man Saul had known for twenty years was reduced to blue jeans and a T-shirt and glasses all jumbled together on the floor.

For two minutes, Saul had sat and stared at that pile of clothes. At least two minutes. His first thought was that Isaac had been

assassinated. Disappeared by some new weapon because of the research they were doing—because of what they were creating.

What they had created.

Absurdly, Saul had wandered around his own apartment, calling Isaac's name. As if his friend had teleported over to the bathroom or to the small kitchen to grab some dates and orange juice.

Eventually Saul had picked up his phone to call one of his handlers at the ISA. In doing so, he'd seen the overwhelming collection of alerts on the screen. Text messages. Breaking news notifications. Social media pings. He clicked and scanned, reading headline after headline, message after message.

It wasn't just Isaac. It was happening all over the world. People vanishing into thin air. Millions of people, and perhaps more. Perhaps many more. Saul clicked and read. He watched with increasing alarm as videos appeared—several records of people disappearing, but more records of people in Saul's position. Witnesses. Mourners.

*Or are we survivors?*

The whole scenario was impossible. Scientifically, it made no sense. The back of Saul's brain kept protesting about matter being neither created nor destroyed. About the mathematics behind transferring matter into energy and everything that would be required to do so.

Yet the scenario was impossible to deny. Beyond Saul's own experience, the exponential collection of eyewitness accounts and even video evidence was unquestionable. Overwhelming.

Back in the lamplit office, the two older men shared a glance across the desk before turning back to Saul. "Isaac will be missed, I'm sure. But we press on." Cohen flicked his wrist and fingers in a gesture of dismissal, as if he were flinging Isaac Berenson out of his thoughts, out of the room, and out of existence entirely.

*No, someone already did that, Saul corrected himself. Someone*

*or something. Why won't they tell me what happened?*

"I must know!" Saul was surprised to hear the fervor of his own voice, but he pressed forward. He felt compelled to speak. "If the reports are true—if the same thing has happened to millions of people, or even hundreds of millions—surely you must know what caused it?" He looked back and forth between two stony faces. "Surely one of you must know?"

Director Pardo spoke for the first time, his tone flat and impatient. "We don't know, and we don't care. Not right now. We have bigger issues to deal with."

*Bigger issues than millions of people vanishing at the same moment?* Saul had to restrain his hand from unzipping the bag in his lap and pulling out the tallit to wrap around his shoulders.

Cohen spoke again. "Please explain to Director Pardo the details of your project with Isaac. And, Saul"—he raised a pair of bushy eyebrows—"Be brief."

Saul gulped and took a moment to collect his thoughts. Then he shifted his gaze to Director Pardo. "We have created a next-generation artificial intelligence software. Something we believe is very special."

"Artificial intelligence." The Mossad official leaned forward with interest. "A true AI?"

"No, Director. Nothing we call AI today is actually a functional intelligence. None of them are sentient or have the ability to think for themselves in the true meaning of that word. They are algorithms, or in some cases a series of algorithms."

Pardo sat back, disinterested once more. "And your project? Why do you say next generation?"

"To put it in simple terms, Isaac and I"—Saul hesitated for a moment as the emotions threatened to overwhelm him, but a look from Chief Cohen pushed him onward. "We call it a predator AI. What we designed does not chat with users or create videos for

social media. Instead, it is an advanced algorithmic chain that specifically targets, infiltrates, and repurposes other advanced algorithms.”

“Predator? It can destroy other software? Other AI programs?”

“No, Chief.” Saul paused. “Well, yes, it can destroy them. But that would be a waste. Our predator—we call it Dohv—is designed to infiltrate other software. It penetrates and subverts other programs without alerting those programs or the people using them.”

Cohen shifted in his chair. “Would it be accurate to say that your predator, as you call it, is something like a digital spy? An AI double agent?”

Saul nodded, feeling more comfortable to be answering technical questions related to his work. “You could say that, Chief Cohen. But double agents are still noticed by others; they have to generate cover stories and maintain fictional lives in their assigned territories. Dohv is more like a ghost in the machine. When it is fully functional, it will pass in and out of networks and servers without being noticed.”

“But how does it work?” Pardo’s voice was a little more animated now. His forehead rumped in thought. “How does one algorithm subvert another algorithm?”

“That is a very technical question, Director Pardo. The layman’s answer is that Dohv is trained to ‘solve’ the algorithms that form the core of other programs. Other artificial intelligences. Once those algorithms are solved, the base programming can be adapted to pursue new goals or achieve new outcomes based on our instructions.”

Pardo had several more questions, and Saul answered with growing confidence. The conversation was in Hebrew, but it drifted in and out of English whenever it touched on technical topics in the field of software engineering.

Eventually the two agency heads regarded each other in an-

other silent look, this one much longer and packed with meaning. Then Pardo spoke again.

“What is the current status of your project? Is it functional?”

“Yes, Director. We have run hundreds of audits in the last month alone. The performance is optimal. Isaac is—Isaac was compiling a final report for ISA review.”

Pardo eyed him. “You were trained at 8200 Unit, is that correct?”

“Yes.”

“Part of the Gvahim program?”

“No, sir. I was Magshimim.” Saul could not help raising his chin a few inches higher at the admission. Gvahim was a tech-recruiting program targeting wealthier neighborhoods in Israel, while Magshimim targeted lower-income recruits.

The Mossad director nodded thoughtfully, then abruptly stood from his perch on the edge of the desk. “Very good. Please deliver all essential files and instructions to me in the next two hours. You can work through Chief Cohen to make all necessary transfers.”

Saul blinked. He was stunned. “Transfer my files?” He stared in confusion at Cohen, still seated behind his massive desk. But the familiar face remained unreadable and unspeaking.

“Mossad has need of your work,” continued Pardo. “Israel has need of your work. Be quick in doing your duty.”

Now it was Saul who stood, his arms tightening protectively around the messenger bag. “I will *not* be quick. I will transfer nothing to Mossad nor anyone else.” Saul detested the quaver in his voice, but a heat was rising through his gut and into his chest. A resolve. This was his life’s work!

Pardo remained unimpressed. He gestured to the bag in Saul’s hands. “Your escorts outside can retrieve whatever you’ve brought with little difficulty. Don’t be a fool.”

Saul placed the bag on the opposite corner of Chief Cohen’s desk. “I am not a fool. I have taken precautions.” Again fear col-

ored his words, but he straightened his shoulders and did his best to glare across the desk at Pardo. “The project cannot be accessed without security protocols known only to me.”

“*Dohv*,” Pardo scoffed. The Hebrew word for “bear.” “Perhaps you meant to create a dove for Shin Bet, eh? Another of Noah’s pets to gather olive branches?” He stepped forward, looming over Saul. “I tell you again: Transfer all essential files *and passwords* to me. Immediately.”

In truth, the *Dohv* AI was connected directly to Saul through several layers of biometric security, which meant Saul would have to provide fingerprint, retinal, and vocal scans before Mossad or any other person could interact with *Dohv*’s core programming—but he didn’t plan to bring that up right now. It would be a mistake to give a man such as Pardo any excuse to begin carving up body parts.

Saul looked again at Cohen, eyes pleading. But the old soldier was silent. No help from that quarter. And no other options.

Moving slowly, Saul unzipped the messenger bag and slipped his hand inside, feeling the comforting wool of the tallit against his fingers. He pulled out a sleek gray phone, although not his personal phone. This one was reserved exclusively for *Dohv*. After typing in the access code, Saul swiped and tapped several more times, his eyebrows furrowed in concentration.

Eventually he grunted in satisfaction and held up the phone for Pardo to see. The screen displayed a numeric countdown with six digits and two colons—hours, minutes, and seconds. The bottom of the screen was dominated by a large red circle with a black border. A digital button.

“What is this?” Pardo looked at the phone with scorn. “Where is the information I require?”

“It’s all here.” Saul held up the phone. “But it will not be for you, Director. Never for you.”

“Is that right?” The taller man curled the corner of his lip into a sneer. “I doubt you can keep it from me.”

Saul sighed. He felt exhausted all of a sudden. Physically and emotionally drained by everything that had happened in the past twelve hours. He moved his thumb so it hovered over the red button displayed at the bottom of the phone.

“If I press this button, Dohv will be erased. Completely. The servers wiped. All the critical documents expunged. I have even rigged a small explosive inside the server room itself. I do not think there will be much left for any examiners to find.”

“You arrogant—” Pardo moved forward as if to snatch the device by force, but Saul held it up like a talisman.

“Also,” he continued, surprised by the new steadiness in his voice, “if I do not input the correct security protocols in”—he checked the screen—“Forty-seven minutes, the same will occur.” He looked again at Cohen. “As I told you before, I have taken precautions.”

*Best to meet what’s coming head-on. Adonai, give me strength.*

Pardo studied Saul once more. His face clouded. “Why all this nonsense? Why not simply serve your nation? Your people?”

“I created Dohv to protect my people! I fashioned a shield. I will not watch it be forged into a sword.”

The two men regarded each other in silence, and Saul again felt weariness tugging at his limbs even as sadness squeezed his heart. He missed his friend. Was he truly gone?

*What would you do in my place, Isaac? Probably have these old crocodiles laughing at your jokes and sending out for coffee.*

Chief Cohen broke the impasse by laboring to his feet. “Dohv will not be a sword,” he rasped. “It will be an offering.”

“Offering?” Saul stared at Cohen, unable to comprehend. “An offering? I thought you of all people understood the value of what Isaac and I have built. The value for Israel.”

"I do understand, but I am not the only one. More's the pity." Cohen's voice was heavy with sadness, which for Saul was another shock crowding into a day filled with astonishments. "A sacrifice is required because of our sudden weakness on the world stage."

"No," Pardo broke in once more, his hand chopping down in a violent gesture. "He does not have the clearance for that information, nor for our planned response. There is a line that must be—"

"Enough, David." By this time Cohen had made it around the desk, and he placed a heavy hand on the Mossad director's shoulder. "He will know in an hour. Everyone will know."

Without waiting for a response, the old ISA chief turned back to Saul. "America was attacked less than three hours ago. By our best estimations, close to three hundred bombs detonated at the same moment. All of them nuclear."

Saul rubbed his temples. Unable to process. "Who? How?"

Cohen and Pardo were both shaking their heads, but Pardo spoke. "We have very few answers. Only that none of the strikes were airborne. Satellite imagery suggests each blast was relatively small—possibly a tactical nuclear device. But the overall number of detonations is devastating."

"How can you not know?" Saul felt horrified. "You are the sword in the darkness. You are the unseen shield. How could this happen and both of you not know?"

They stared back at him in silence. For the first time, they both looked like old men attempting to confront a new and frightening world.

"What—" Saul cleared his throat. "What does this have to do with Dohv?"

"We don't yet know the full effect of this attack," Cohen answered. "But America will certainly be devastated. Possibly . . ." He closed his eyes for a silent moment. "Possibly it is already destroyed. Which means our strongest ally—we could say our only

ally, the only one that matters—is gone.”

*Disappeared. Like Isaac. Like so many others.*

“With America out of the picture, how long until the Ayatollah targets Jerusalem? How long until the coalition of the Six-Day War gathers against us once more? How long until Russia decides to take what it has long coveted within our borders? Will Europe rise up to stop them? Will anyone help us? What do you think?”

“No.” Saul croaked the word. Not Europe. They soured on Israel a long time ago.

“We have been given one chance, Saul.” Cohen was looking down at him with compassion. “One opportunity to buy ourselves some time—to strengthen ourselves so we can finally stand on our own feet. But we must pay a price.”

“My work.”

Cohen nodded. “Dohv will be a shield for us, Saul. You will be the protector of your people.” Smoothly, the old man plucked the phone from Saul’s hand, then set it down on the desk.

Saul did not resist. Instead, he reached inside his bag for a second time and drew out the tallit—the prayer shawl given to him when he completed the Magshimim program and began his career. The wool was beige with thick streaks of sand and bronze. The colors of the mountains in the Negev. The tassels were ivory, still bright and clean.

“May God bless you and keep you,” his abba had told him that day, placing his hand on Saul’s head as he spoke the words. “May God’s light shine upon you, and may God be gracious to you. May you feel God’s presence within you always, and may you find peace.”

*I have failed you, Abba.*

Saul shook his head as he wrapped the shawl around his shoulders and took up one of the tassels in the fingers of his right hand.

He longed for the light of better days, but he felt as if he were drowning in darkness.

*I do not feel the presence of God. He finally admitted the truth long denied to himself. I don't feel Him, Abba, and I have no hope for peace.*

---

Many hours later, Saul was back in Jerusalem. He'd left the messenger bag in Tel Aviv, still atop Chief Cohen's desk in that unmarked office. He'd left the phone, too, after assigning Dohv's core programs to Director Pardo. And, it seemed, his career. His life's work.

*Did I leave my life also? Or do I carry it still?*

The roads remained chaotic after yesterday's disappearances, with hundreds of cars abandoned in the streets. Many others had been traveling at speed when their drivers' vanished, which had caused major accidents. There must have been a large number of fatalities and severe injuries. Saul assumed the rescue teams and other maintenance crews had been busy all evening and through the night. He hadn't noticed, having remained in his apartment to think through options and make plans.

All of which had come to nothing.

Given the traffic conditions, Saul asked to be dropped off on the east side of Sacher Park. He didn't want to go back to his apartment. Not yet. Instead, he wandered by foot into the Old City, passing by museums and tourist traps and synagogues without really seeing any of them.

He did notice a few piles of clothing on the ground. Most were on sidewalks or street corners. A few were puddled on steps outside apartment buildings or near the entrances of tourist attrac-

tions. Saul spied one dress hanging haphazardly over a small iron fence, as if its owner had been leaning on the fence when she—well, when whatever happened to her had happened. The dress was light blue, and it fluttered in the breeze as if trying to fan away the shock and grief rippling through the rest of the city. And the rest of Israel. And the rest of the world.

As he walked, Saul noticed the way people avoided those piles of clothes. They shied away, veering to the side so as not to step over them. Nobody seemed interested in picking up the clothes, either. Almost as if they suspected the previous owners might pop back into reality and require them once more.

With a start, Saul realized he'd done the same thing. Isaac's jeans and shirt and glasses were still piled together on the floor of Saul's apartment. Which was probably the reason he didn't want to go back there. One of the reasons.

What would Saul even do with Isaac's things? Donate them? Throw them in the garbage?

Like Saul, Isaac had no wife and no children. Both men had talked about the importance of family, but as a long-term goal. Something for tomorrow. Today had always been focused on Dohv and everything it could achieve. Which meant family had to wait—even as both men worked themselves into their mid-thirties. Which was why, for Saul, losing Isaac was like losing family.

Now that he'd stopped moving, Saul took a moment to take in his surroundings. As always, the city was lovely in the morning light—sand-colored bricks and stones shining golden in the sun and contrasting with bursts of green leaves from the olive trees and sycamore figs.

His feet had carried him through New Gate and out beyond the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. The Via Dolorosa was off to the left, typically packed with shops and shoppers, tours and tour guides. Would the regular crowds be there after what had happened yes-

terday? After what the media was calling the Great Disappearance? Saul didn't know, but he was little inclined to find out.

He walked instead toward the Western Wall, cutting through long-remembered alleys and shortcuts to avoid the busiest streets.

It wasn't until he got close that he remembered the Western Wall was gone. It had been destroyed six months ago as part of a coordinated terrorist attack—a strike that, at the time, had made Saul and Isaac double down on their work. Surely Dohv would be needed if the world truly was teetering on the brink of World War III. Surely they could make a difference for their nation and their people.

“We are the unseen shield. The defender that shall not be known.” He spoke the words with bitterness, then kept walking around the edge of what had been the Temple Mount and down through the Kidron Valley. Walking and thinking. Walking and remembering. Walking and wondering how everything had gone so wrong—and so quickly.

Soon Saul's lungs began to burn and a fresh sheen of sweat ran down his back. He was ascending Mount Olivet by one of the ancient paths. To his right was the cemetery. A vast panoply of bone-colored boxes marking out the gentle slope down the valley.

Saul's father had often talked about his desire to be buried in that cemetery. He wanted to be among the first to rise and run toward the temple when Messiah finally appeared in Jerusalem.

*Perhaps the prophets had it backwards, Abba. Instead of the chosen rising from their graves in Jerusalem, we have people vanishing into thin air all over the world. What judgment could this be?*

Saul's fingers found the tassel at the end of the tallit, his thumb rubbing back and forth across the familiar material. *What do I pray for, Abba? What does Torah teach us to do when we can't even trust the laws of physics?*

As if in answer, voices rang out from the top of the hill. Saul

looked up to see two men descending the path that wound downward through the olive groves. Several other people were scattered about the sloping terrain, but these men in particular stood out.

For one thing, they were yelling. Loudly. Saul couldn't hear the words yet, but he felt certain they were speaking Hebrew. Their voices were resonant and strong, even from a distance.

They were also dressed . . . unusually. Both men appeared to be wearing bulky black robes, which wasn't that odd in Jerusalem. But the cut and style of their garments were unlike anything Saul had ever seen. The closer the men came, the more it looked as if each "robe" was a single rectangle of coarse material. Like bags converted into costumes.

Once the men were about thirty feet away, Saul realized that was exactly the case. Each man wore a thick, ill-fitting sack with holes cut in the sides for arms and on the top for a head.

By now Saul could make out what they were saying. The first man cried out, "As the Lord God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, there shall not be dew nor rain these twelve hundred and sixty days, except at my word."

Then the second man declared, "Hear the word of the Lord, lest He fall upon you with pestilence or with sword."

Then the first man repeated his cry, then the second. They echoed themselves back and forth as they descended the hill. Once again Saul was struck by the timbre of their voices, which were deep and powerful. Even mesmerizing.

*They must be actors. Some kind of performance.*

Then he saw the top of each man's head was covered in a thick coating of gray dust. Both men were bald, with sweat running in little rivulets through the dust, making riverbeds and crevasses in miniature. The powder had spilled to the shoulders of their robes like grim dandruff.

*Sackcloth and ashes.* Saul felt a flare of anger and resentment. These men were making a mockery of the ancient ways, and for what? Some kind of political statement? Or were they selling something?

He glared as the first man passed by, still shouting his proclamation. “There shall not be dew nor rain these twelve hundred and sixty days, except at my word.”

This one was parroting Elijah, so who was the second fellow? Isaiah? Jonah? Even Abraham or Moses? Saul felt an irrational urge to strike at the men. To silence them and put an end to their blasphemy.

The second man met Saul’s angry gaze—and stopped. He turned aside to stand in front of Saul. He was a large man, although slightly shorter than his companion. He had broad shoulders with powerful arms and legs, all the more noticeable for the way they stuck out of his ridiculous costume.

“Saul Katz,” said the second man, “we have reached the second day of our appointed time, times, and half a time. Only two of the appointed servants have been sealed. Do you stand ready?”

Saul blinked at the man. Stunned. He suddenly felt afraid—not of a confrontation with this man in particular, but afraid of the way his words stirred something deep inside. Something that had long been buried or forgotten.

“I . . .” he stammered. “I don’t . . .”

“I see that you are still in darkness.” The second man’s face showed compassion and affection. His amber eyes were bright and kind. “Make yourself ready. The time is at hand.”

Then he was gone. Walking down the path to catch up with his companion. Crying out in that same loud, sonorous voice, “Hear the word of the Lord, lest He fall upon you with pestilence or with sword.”

Saul watched them go, still stunned. Still unable to process what he'd just experienced. Down beyond the Kidron Valley, the burned and blackened scar that used to be the Temple Mount stretched out like a shadow across the Old City. Like an omen of things to come.



THOMAS NELSON  
Since 1798

# PART 1



THOMAS NELSON  
Since 1798

## CHAPTER 1

NEW ERA, DAY 700  
GUANACASTE, COSTA RICA

**H**onestly, Frank, I'm not seeing anything scary.”  
John Haggerty shifted atop his cramped, too-small chair in the corner of his cramped, too-small office on the outskirts of a little town called Junquillal on the Pacific side of Costa Rica. He was hot. He was tired. He was hungry, and he wanted very much to eat the meager sandwich cooling in the half-broken mini fridge under the desk.

Most of all he wanted to be alone. Even if just for a little while.

“I don't know, Doc. I feel it in my leg, like, all the time.”

Franklin Henderson, formerly of Columbus, Ohio, was younger than Haggerty—forty-four, according to his chart—and should have been tall, dark, and handsome. But his long limbs were awkward and gangly. His skin was chalky and scabbed. He was missing several teeth, and his eyes kept darting around the room rather than focusing on anything stable. Including Haggerty.

“It's cancer, Doc. I know it's cancer.”

The man's file was on the desk between them. Haggerty flipped it open. “You had a PET scan four months ago, Frank. All clear. And all your blood markers are negative.”

“That’s good. That’s good. But . . .” Frank rubbed long fingers back and forth across the top of his thigh. “I feel it real deep. It itches down in the bone, Doc. It don’t stop, you know?”

Then Frank leaned back in his chair, his mouth open and eyes wide. He looked like the stereotypical picture of someone who just had an amazing idea. If he were a cartoon, a lightbulb would have appeared over his head.

*Something to distract you from the pain*, Haggerty thought. *Something to take the edge off.*

“Hey, Doc—maybe it would help if I could distract myself somehow, you know? Like, maybe if I could get my mind off this itching feeling for a little while, it might go away.”

Haggerty said nothing.

Frank shifted in his chair, eyes still pinballing back and forth and up and down. “I just feel like it would help if something could take the edge off. You know what I mean, Doc?”

*Yeah, I’m pretty sure I know what you mean, Frank.*

Haggerty sighed, then flipped through the pages of Frank’s file. A laminated green square was stapled to the top-right corner of the intake form, which meant Frank had shown low levels of radiation exposure when he was transferred from the United States to the encampment at Junquillal—officially labeled as Evacuated American Citizens Encampment #433 in the United Nations archive.

As one of three supervising physicians at EVAC 433, Haggerty had treated a large number of patients with yellow squares stapled to their forms. That meant moderate exposure to ionized radiation, which typically resulted in a wide range of symptoms that could reasonably persist for well over a year. Hair loss. Radiation burns and other lesions of the skin. Recurring nausea. Vomiting. Anxiety. Mood disorders. And cancer. Lots of cancer.

There had been red-tagged patients as well. Severe exposure. None of them had lasted more than two months, and all of them

had died badly. Especially at the end.

But Frank was green, like the majority of people remaining in the EVAC zones. Which meant Frank *should* have no lingering symptoms. Not this far out. That itself was no small blessing given he'd been caught up in an attack unlike any other in human history—almost three hundred tactical nuclear bombs spread out across the United States, including Alaska and Hawaii, all detonating at the exact same moment.

Anyone should feel fortunate after surviving something that horrific, Frank and Haggerty included. Even if that meant being relocated to an entirely different country because yours was no longer physically habitable. Even if that meant ration cards and grimy apartment buildings and skimpy sandwiches inside half-broken mini fridges. Even if it meant living as a second-class citizen when you were used to being a leader—when you were used to being respected and resourced and reliably informed.

Even if you had to lose everything you knew about your previous way of life, you should feel fortunate because you survived. You should be grateful for the opportunity to keep going. Right?

*Is that right, Haggs? Is that what you actually think?*

Haggerty shook himself internally and tried to refocus on his patient. He was 90 percent sure Frank was just another junkie looking to score some pain meds, but 90 percent wasn't 100 percent. It wasn't certainty. Haggerty *could* be certain if he had access to Frank's full medical records and prescription history, but those kinds of records no longer existed. Not in the United States. Not after 287 simultaneous electromagnetic pulses fried America's power grid like an overcooked egg.

"Listen, Frank. I can't say for cert—"

The door to Haggerty's office swung open with a loud creak, followed by a louder crack as the handle struck the wall. Frank jumped in his seat and swiveled around. Haggerty stayed silent as

a small man entered the room. He wore camo pants and a black tank top. He had a canvas bag slung over his shoulder by one strap.

“Sorry to barge in like this, Dr. Haggerty.” The man’s voice was as creaky as the door, his accent thick. “But I thought you should see.”

Without further explanation, he stepped forward, reached into his bag, and dropped a snake on the top of Haggerty’s desk. There was a muffled thump as the serpent struck the wood.

Frank jumped out of his chair, cursing loudly and shuffling away from the desk into the opposite corner.

Haggerty kept his eyes on the snake, which wasn’t moving. It was big—probably five feet long from tip to tail and thickly muscular. The scales were a riotous clash of sky blue and dirt brown and cream, with heavy black triangular patterns along the back that resembled butterfly silhouettes. A striking creature.

Looking closer, Haggerty realized the serpent’s head had been almost completely severed. He looked up at the mysterious stranger. “What’s this?”

“A fer-de-lance, Doctor. Poisonous. I found her in the garden outside. Just now.”

“You killed this snake?”

“Yes, Doctor. Very dangerous.”

A pause that stretched for several seconds followed—then several seconds too long. The man was obviously waiting for something. Probably waiting for Haggerty to express his gratitude.

A little flustered, the man produced a long, thin pole from the bag and used the tip to gently open the serpent’s mouth. He hooked one of its fangs and pulled it forward, highlighting a translucent curve as sharp and deadly as a syringe filled with toxins.

“Very dangerous,” he repeated. “Perhaps you do not know, but in this country, it is customary to reward those who remove deadly creatures from public places. Especially”—he looked around the small office—“A place of healing such as this.”

Haggerty looked back down at the snake, then farther down to the little mini fridge under his desk. He thought about his sandwich, and he decided he'd had enough for today. More than enough.

"Get out of my office."

The man took a half step back. "What?" His accent was suddenly much less pronounced.

"I said get out."

The man puffed himself up like a blowfish. "How dare you? I have risked my life to capture this deadly serpent. I put myself in harm's way to keep your patients safe. And you—"

"Don't." Anger stirred inside Haggerty for what felt like the first time in a long time. He pointed at the man. "Your English is much too good to be a second language, which means you're probably from Ohio, just like the rest of us." He pointed to the snake. "If you just killed this thing, there would be blood everywhere. But there's none. Nothing. Plus"—he picked up the tail, which was stiff—"I can see rigor mortis is already setting in, which takes a long time for cold-blooded animals. Which means you killed this snake yesterday or the day before. Which means you've been bouncing from business to business, telling the same story and looking for the same payout from all kinds of people. Well, not here."

"That's ridiculous! That is a crazy thing to say!"

Haggerty stood, allowing all of his six-three, broad-shouldered frame to fill the tiny office. "Get this carcass off my desk, and get your own carcass out of my office. Now."

The man made an attempt to glare at Haggerty, but his anger fizzled quickly. Muttering, he grabbed the snake by the tail and stuffed it back in his bag. Then he left.

"And you." Still standing, Haggerty pivoted over to his patient in the corner. "I'm not giving you any dope, Frank. Come back for your next regular checkup, but not before. Understand?"

Frank nodded. "Yeah, I got you, Doc. I'll catch you later." He left,

gently closing the door behind him.

Haggerty stayed on his feet a while longer, relishing the feeling of—well, just relishing *feeling* something for a change. Savoring the wash of emotions running through his system. Then the well ran dry, and the anger drained away. He slumped back into his chair, strings cut. He placed his forehead on the relative cool of the desktop, then jerked upward again at the faint-but-still-disturbing smell of dead snake. Eventually he put his head back down again, his hands hanging loosely in his lap.

He had about three minutes of silent solitude before the next knock sounded against the door, firm and confident. Then the creak of hinges.

“I don’t want to hear it, Frank.” Haggerty spoke directly against the desktop, which muffled his words.

“Hello, John.” Not Frank’s voice. Not by a long shot. “It’s been a long time.”

Haggerty looked up sharply, suddenly very awake and very aware of his surroundings. Like Frank, the man standing in the doorway was tall and lean with dark skin. Unlike Frank, this man was impeccably dressed in a tailored dark blue suit. His coal-black hair was stylish, his eyes were bright, and his long, thin fingers glittered with several bejeweled rings.

Very much unlike Frank, this man was powerful. And connected. And, Haggerty suspected, extremely dangerous.

“Hardeep Singh.” Haggerty had to work hard to keep the dislike and resentment out of his voice, but he managed. “What in the world are you doing in Junquillal?”

Singh smiled and gestured to the chair in front of Haggerty’s desk. “May I?”

“Of course.” Haggerty thought he could see a little smear of blood left over from the nearly headless snake, but he decided not to mention it. “You’re still with Trident, I assume?”

“That’s right,” said Singh. “Have you been keeping track of me, John?”

“I guess I have. Not you, specifically, but the whole gang.”

He was referring to a coalition of task forces that used to exist under the joint authority of the United States Army and the Pentagon. Haggerty had commanded the Potential Pandemic Task Force, which aimed to identify and isolate regional epidemics to stop them from becoming global plagues. Hardeep had commanded the Task Force Tackling Climate Change. Other groups had focused on refugees, food shortages, and seismic anomalies. Together they had viewed themselves as humanity’s last best chance at pulling civilization back from the brink of collapse.

All of that was before the Great Disappearance—hundreds of millions of people from all around the world disappearing in the blink of an eye. It was also before the coordinated attack that effectively destroyed not only the US Army but the USA itself.

“Ah.” Singh’s lips curled in an unpleasant grin. “The gang. Yes. You heard about the unpleasantness with Burgess?”

Haggerty nodded.

“Poor woman. She was never the same after the attack. I think she blamed herself.”

*Might be good reasons for that.* Haggerty didn’t share the sentiment with Hardeep.

“But yes,” Hardeep continued, “we have employed several members of the ‘gang,’ as you call it, at Trident. We are very serious about continuing that important work, as I’m sure you are aware.”

Haggerty was aware that several commanders, executive officers, and staff members of the old task forces had been appropriated by the Trident Group—including General Burgess, before her untimely death. He was also aware that Trident had become an influential voice on the international stage and that its influence continued to grow across Europe, the Middle East, and Asia. Even

Russia paid attention when Trident published data or made policy recommendations.

More than that, Haggerty knew the name that kept showing up over and over in Trident press releases was Hardeep Singh, Director.

Leaning back in his chair, Hardeep crossed one long leg over the other, revealing expensive leather shoes. He seemed to be waiting for Haggerty to say something. Probably to ask again why he had come to Junquillal.

Instead, Haggerty bent down to his mini fridge and pulled out his sandwich. Unwrapping it, he offered half to his guest. “Hungry? It’s a PB&J.”

“No, thank you.” Singh wrinkled his nose as Haggerty began to eat.

“You asked why I’ve come, and the answer, of course, is you, John. I assumed you were part of the EVAC communities from Washington, D.C., or perhaps from Maryland or Virginia. When we couldn’t locate you, it took my staff almost a month to track you down here. Ohio?”

Haggerty shrugged. “It’s where I grew up.”

“So I’ve learned. Of course we wouldn’t have wasted so much time if the global registry was finished, but . . . that’s another matter.”

Haggerty raised his eyebrows but said nothing. He waited.

“In any case, I’ve come to offer you a position at the Trident Group. Something similar to your previous work.”

“You want me to work on pandemics?”

“Something to that effect. Your team would be smaller than the old task force, of course, and your resources more limited. To be honest, John, we can figure out the details of your day-to-day work once you’re on the bus, so to speak. The real urgency is with our upcoming Commemoration Celebration.”

“Commemoration Celebration,” repeated Haggerty. “Sounds important.”

“It is, John. It is. We’re going to have a ceremony broadcast across the globe. We want it to be a unifying moment—a real spectacle to help bring everybody together and get us all on the same page. We’re going to hold it on the two-year anniversary of the attack against the United States.”

“Which was the same day as the Great Disappearance,” Haggerty interjected. “I always thought the timing was a little odd.”

Hardeep’s face curdled for a moment, then relaxed. “Globally, there has been a great deal of confusion about what some call ‘disappearances’ or ‘vanishings.’ That’s one of the reasons we require your particular expertise.”

“Mine?” Haggerty felt a moment of genuine surprise. “Why mine?”

“Well, John, immediately after the events of two years ago, there were certainly rumors of strange, even supernatural events. But as you know, that was all superstition.” Hardeep spoke slowly and deliberately. He leaned forward, as if trying to use his tall frame to add additional emphasis to his words. “Our research suggests—and I’m sure your own investigations have led in the same direction—that these so-called disappearances were merely an effect of the SARS-CoV-12 pandemic.”

Haggerty was quiet for a long time. Thinking. Making connections. Hardeep watched him intently, a peculiar light in his eyes and the ghost of a smile tugging at the corner of one long, thin lip.

Haggerty broke the silence. “You’re saying there was no Great Disappearance. You’re saying it was the Dirty Dozen pandemic.”

“Of course it was the pandemic. What else could it have been?”

“*I’ll tell you what.*” Haggerty’s own voice echoed in his mind—echoed from a conversation with Caleb Johnson more than two years before. “*If I ever wake up one day and there are billions of*

*people missing without any explanation, I'll sprint over to the first church I can find. Deal?"*

Haggerty shook his head to clear his thoughts, but his guest seemed to take it as an answer to his question.

"Exactly, John. Nothing else makes sense."

"People remember what happened that day. There are videos, for crying out loud. You can't just invent some alternate reality."

Singh waved his hand in a gesture of dismissal. "Two years have passed. It was a confusing time. Besides"—another ghost of a smile emerged—"Trident has become quite effective at shaping public opinion."

*You've always been quite effective at telling people what to think. I've always known that about you, Hardeep.*

Out loud, Haggerty said, "I can't help you. You're asking me to make a medical declaration that's unsupportable." He shook his head wearily, allowing a tinge of regret to color his voice. "It would be a violation of my personal integrity."

"We have plenty of evidence to support our position. We can—"

"Nope." Haggerty's voice was firm, his face resolute. "I'm a doctor. I help people."

"Yes, I can see that." Singh glanced around the cramped confines of the office. Bare walls. Two bookshelves with a sparse collection of medical texts—several of which were written in Spanish and therefore unusable to Haggerty. A little desk cluttered on the edges with files and paperwork and Post-it notes and pen cases. "You'd rather stay here than get back in the game? Join the world once more?"

"I'd rather help people," Haggerty repeated.

"Yes, but I'm offering you that chance, John! Don't you see?" Singh stood and spun around, as if he wanted to pace back and forth while he spoke. There wasn't room for pacing, however, so he turned back toward Haggerty, his arms outstretched.

“This is something I have emphasized strongly within Gaia’s Children.” He paused. “Are you familiar with our growing community?”

Haggerty nodded. Gaia’s Children was a group of nature worshippers who seemed to have formed an official religion around climate change. They were often aggressive in explaining their beliefs and pursuing their specific agendas. He wasn’t surprised at all to learn that his guest was involved.

For his part, Hardeep became energized in a flash, his face alight with passion. “When people are forced to confront the concept of supernatural realities, it’s frightening. It suggests they are no longer in control of their own lives. It causes them pain. What Matt—” He stopped. Collected himself. “What the Trident directors want is to give the world a different way to process those events. A better way. You can help us do that. Which means you would be helping people.”

*Helping people by lying to them. It always comes back to that, somehow. There’s always someone who knows what’s best for everyone else.*

Haggerty took a final bite of his sandwich and chewed thoughtfully. Watching his guest and waiting.

“Of course,” said Singh, “we wouldn’t be asking you to volunteer your time. Nor your expertise.” He reached out to pluck one of the Post-it notes from Haggerty’s desk, then took up a pen. He sat back down and scribbled quickly, then reached out again to stick the note on Haggerty’s side of the desk.

Haggerty tried to stop any show of surprise from registering on his face, but he failed. In spite of everything else he believed about the man sitting in front of him, this number was truly astonishing.

“Your starting salary,” said Singh. “Trident knows the value of expertise.”

“And the value of integrity?” Haggerty’s voice was choked. Even

to his own ears, he sounded uncertain.

“Let’s quit with the games, John. You can rejoin the old gang, become *somebody* again, and be compensated.” He tapped the Post-it note with a well-manicured index finger. “Or you can stay here and keep dishing out painkillers to Midwestern hicks. You choose.”

Haggerty felt strangely uncertain. As if he lacked the capacity to comprehend the choice in front of him—lacked the clarity to gaze out into the future and manifest the consequences of that choice. He looked down again at the Post-it note, which offered a lot more than thirty pieces of silver. He looked over at Singh, who was grinning openly. An angler confident in his catch.

*Or maybe a shark eyeing his prey.*

“I need something up front.” Haggerty tapped the number Singh had scribbled out. “A signing bonus. This same amount.”

Now it was Hardeep’s face that registered surprise. “That would be a big bonus. I think something could be arranged, but—”

“You said we’re through playing games. You have a global event just a few weeks away. You’ve spent a month trying to find me. Which means you need *me*.” Haggerty did his best to work around the revulsion he felt inside. Did his best to push it away and keep his mind blank. He tapped the paper again. “That’s the price. Half up front and half after this . . . Commemoration Ceremony, or whatever you call it.”

Hardeep stood, still confident but no longer smiling. “Very well, John.” He held out his hand. “Welcome to the Trident Group.”

Haggerty shook, feeling a new wave of revulsion at the slender coolness and limpness of the other man’s fingers. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the blood still gleaming under the light of the overhead bulb.

“*Yes, Doctor.*” The mystery snake catcher’s voice echoed in Haggerty’s mind. “*Very dangerous.*”

## CHAPTER 2

NEW ERA, DAY 702  
GUANACASTE, COSTA RICA

**B**ienvenidos de nuevo a *Cross Talk* con Janelle Hernández, donde sabemos lo que vale la pena conversar!”

Abigail Hart tried to keep the corner of one eye on the large TV bolted to the warehouse wall, where a very blonde, very energetic woman named Janelle Hernández was speaking into the camera. Mostly, though, Abigail listened to the words, doing her best to translate at full speed.

“Welcome back to *Cross Talk* with Janelle Hernández, where we . . . something about ‘talk’ or ‘talking.’”

Abigail shook her head. After living in Costa Rica more than eighteen months, she expected to be passable in conversational Spanish. Maybe on her way to fluency. But she couldn’t even keep up with a silly daytime talk show.

The problem, she reflected for the hundredth time, was that she wasn’t immersed in a Spanish-speaking culture. Not really. Most of the people she encountered each day were fellow transplants from Ohio, which meant they just kept speaking English to one another. Even the locals—those who had been around when the town was called Junquillal rather than EVAC 433—spoke English

as a second language.

*“Me revienta.”* Abigail sighed, taking a moment to look around at her workspace.

She was inside a large industrial warehouse that was part of Junquillal’s solid waste management facility. The prefab metal building boasted a high ceiling and several bays open to the outside air—which was good because the interior was filled with trash. Large dumpsters sat at the entrances to the bays, all of them filled to the brim with garbage. Abigail’s job was to empty each dumpster bag by bag, separating out any recyclable materials on a large sorting table in the middle of the room. Glass, paper, plastics, aluminum, cardboard—they were all sorted into their bins. Everything else went inside smaller rolling dumpsters that could be wheeled out the back and loaded onto trucks bound for the nearby landfill.

Not very glamorous but efficient.

Actually, there were several things Abigail liked about her job. The pay was good, especially compared to what most of the other transplants could scrape together. The hours weren’t bad. The company of her fellow coworkers was lacking, but that had become another positive. There were supposed to be two other “sorting specialists” working alongside Abigail, but the position had a high turnover rate and an even higher truancy rate. Which meant she often worked alone, as was the case today.

Given the often cramped conditions of the EVAC zone, a little quiet time was always welcome.

One thing Abigail didn’t like was the smell. Piles of garbage baking in the Costa Rican sun produced an overwhelming, saturating stench she couldn’t deny or explain away with positive platitudes. She’d originally tried to wear face coverings to work, but the cloth made her feel claustrophobic and did nothing about the odor. Now she relied on a small but powerful box fan she’d positioned to blow

across her nose and mouth as much as possible.

As she worked, Abigail continued listening to Janelle Hernández and the various guests on *Cross Talk*, doing her best to translate, process, and restate what she heard in real time.

*“Esa es mi canción favorita.”* That’s my favorite song.

*“Ya entiendo.”* I know what you mean.

*“Es un bombón.”* He’s really handsome.

She worked for an hour straight, sorting out the bottles and cans and papers with nimble fingers. All the while sorting out words and phrases and patterns of speech with straining, sluggish ears.

She had just opened the back door to a new dumpster when she froze, all her attention fixated on a brown paper bag on top of the garbage pile. It was a takeout bag from a local restaurant called Poblano’s. Reaching out slowly, she hefted the bag in both hands, measuring its weight. Not full, certainly, but not empty. Which was both intriguing and exciting.

Abigail’s stomach contracted painfully as she moved the bag to a relatively clean spot on her sorting table. She was wearing thick green rubber gloves over green coveralls—what she jokingly described as her “office ensemble.” Now she carefully removed the gloves and placed them behind her on the chair. Then she pushed her sleeves up above her elbows. Then she opened the bag.

*Jackpot!*

Her stomach gurgled again and saliva filled her mouth as she pulled out a double stack of paper plates holding what appeared to be half a burrito. Carefully moving aside the tortilla, she scanned the internal ingredients like a surgeon hovering over exposed nerves. Brown rice. Black beans. Pico de gallo. Guacamole. Lettuce. Several chunks of white, flaky fish. Some kind of salsa or sauce.

Abigail licked her lips. She hadn’t eaten all day, and this was the best-looking choice of “leftovers” (her own preferred term) she’d seen in weeks. But she’d made rules for herself that she intended

to follow. *No maggots. No meat. No milk.*

Working quickly, she pulled a cloth-wrapped kitchen knife from the back pocket of her coveralls, wiped the blade, and began flicking the little flecks of fish back into the paper bag. That done, she rerolled the tortilla and carefully cut across the “used” end. Then she ate. Not hurrying but not wasting time. Chewing methodically and trying her best to ignore the reek still hovering around her like a fog.

“Thank You, Father, for this daily bread.” She whispered the words between bites. “Thank You for providing for me. Please make a way for all who are hungry today to be satisfied.”

She’d just gotten her gloves back on when she heard a scuffling sound from one of the bays behind her. Turning around, she saw a young man standing next to the nearest dumpster. He was short and thin with dark skin and a white baseball cap pulled down tightly over his forehead.

“Jimmy! It’s good to see you.”

Even as she spoke the words, Abigail slipped around the side of the sorting table to keep it between herself and her visitor.

“Hey, Abigail.” Jimmy took a few steps forward. He seemed to be trying hard to look casual in front of the reeking dumpster, but she could see the temptation pulling at him to pinch his nose or wave a hand in front of his face. Instead, he held up a small paper bag. “Got a delivery for you.”

*Not a social call. That’s good.* She still felt the hair standing up on the back of her neck.

“Let’s go out front,” she said. “You can show me in the sunshine.” Without waiting for a response, Abigail half walked, half jogged around the opposite side of the table and out through a separate bay. She kept moving until she came into view of several short, heavysset men in green coveralls that matched her own. Another crew on the waste-management team.

It wasn't that she was afraid of Jimmy or believed he would do something to harm her. Not really. She'd known Jimmy for many years. She'd worked with him back at the electrical cooperative in Millersville, Ohio—back in her former life. They'd been friends, up to a certain point.

But the world was different now.

For one thing, Abigail, Jimmy, and most of her hometown of Millersville had been upended and evacuated to this entirely new place. This entirely new country. Most of the original residents of Junquillal had vanished during what people still called the Great Disappearance—an event Abigail knew to be the Rapture as described in the Bible—which meant the town had been largely abandoned. Which made it an ideal place to relocate several towns' worth of Americans who suddenly had no home.

Practically, though, taking a large group of people from one culture and place and then dumping them haphazardly in the middle of a different culture and place didn't happen effortlessly. Those who vanished from Junquillal were teachers, shop owners, civic employees, plumbers, carpenters, and more. And yes, many of the transplants from Millersville were also teachers and shop owners and civic employees and plumbers and carpenters, but they couldn't just pick up where somebody else had left off. A teacher from Millersville couldn't waltz into a local school and expect everything to go smoothly—especially when all the young children had disappeared. How could a Walmart manager in Middle America expect to find a role in a small coastal town where the biggest store had ten total shelves?

So there had been some growing pains for the American immigrants—not to mention the locals who'd seen most of their community vanish and were suddenly overwhelmed by a flood of people they didn't know. Violence had broken out often in those early months, and the overall climate remained stressful even after

almost two years. People were tense. On edge.

Dangerous.

All of which meant it made sense to be as careful as possible.

Abigail heard the crunch of Jimmy's footsteps on gravel as he walked up behind her. She turned to see him holding out the bag once more. Looking at him there, she couldn't help feeling a little sorry for him.

Jimmy had been part of the security detail for Miller County Electrical Co-Op. It wasn't the most important job in the world, but it was stable. A good foundation for a young man looking to build a family. Now Jimmy was a part-time courier, part-time handyman, part-time construction worker, and part-time Uber driver on his little motorized scooter.

*At least he's not dealing drugs.* Then she realized she really didn't know if that was true. *Oh, I really hope he's not caught up in all that. Please don't let that be true.*

"Thanks Jimmy." She accepted the bag. "Who sent it?"

"Don't you want to see what's inside? I bet you'll like it."

The way he grinned at her was familiar. In spite of her marriage to Xavier Hart, Jimmy had carried a crush on her for years. Now those feelings seemed to be buoyed by something more. Something hopeful or even expectant. Because he saw her as single these days. They all did. They knew Xavier had vanished, and they thought she'd be ready to move on sooner or later.

As always, thoughts of her family brought a deep pang of grief and pain. She missed them so much! She truly believed she would see them again—she knew she would. But the lack of time with them each day was palpable. Especially her son. Her Booker, whom she'd held only a single time before—

*No. I can't go there right now.*

Tears formed at the corners of her eyes, and Abigail blinked them back. Needing something else to focus on, she prodded the

bag Jimmy had given her. It held a solid little rectangle. Probably a candy bar. “Who sent the package, Jimmy?”

“One of the doctors. The big one. He said to tell you happy birthday, but it ain’t your birthday, Abby.”

She scowled automatically at being called “Abby” but didn’t respond. Her thoughts were swirling in an entirely new direction.

*Uncle John? What does he want?*

“Thanks, Jimmy. Goodbye.” She felt too distracted for any more pretending, so she simply walked past him, heading back in the direction of her sorting warehouse. If he followed her, she’d have to loop around one of the outbuildings and come back—but no. He was walking away.

Then she remembered. “Wait! Jimmy, wait!”

He turned around, the dopey grin still on his face. Still hopeful.

“The man who sent this.” She held up the bag. “Did he give you a tip?”

Now it was Jimmy’s turn to scowl. “Yeah. Seven colónes.”

“Seven,” she repeated. “Right. Here.” After digging in her pocket, she pulled out five colónes and handed them over. “Thanks again.”

Then she walked back the way she’d come.

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Later that evening, Abigail stood just inside the line of jungle canopy running alongside one of Junquillal’s central roads. She’d slipped quietly into the trees after seeing the play of headlights along the tree trunks as she walked. Now she watched as a small, gas-powered truck drove past her and continued on down the road, heading out of town.

There were plenty of vehicles in Junquillal, and plenty of her fellow immigrants had claimed one for themselves in accordance with GUARD Protocol #3 from the United Nations. But the cost of

gasoline made it rare to see anyone actually driving. Most people just walked or rode bicycles around town, only willing to shell out exorbitant prices for fuel when they needed a run to Liberia or Tamarindo for supplies.

With the truck gone, Abigail allowed herself a moment to bask in the wonder of the jungle. Twilight was deepening into full night, and the trees were alive with humming and buzzing and chirping and rustling—a nocturnal symphony played over and over in endless variation. She inhaled deeply, filling herself with the smells of green leaves and black loam and multicolored blossoms. The scent of growth. Of life.

Then she stepped back onto the road and moved on.

At exactly seven o'clock, Abigail walked onto the patio of Soda Caliente, one of the few restaurants that had stayed open through the Great Disappearance and the influx of immigrants from America. Most of the tables were outside under a pea-green tarp that was good for shade but bad for ambience. The floodlights filtering through the plastic created a sickly shade in the dining area.

Haggerty was already seated at a table in the corner. He looked huge as ever, even when hunched over a plate of rice and beans and fried plantains. To Abigail, it still felt strange seeing him in jeans and a T-shirt rather than his crisp, highly decorated service uniform. It was also odd seeing him with a full, shaggy, salt-and-pepper beard.

He didn't turn around as she parked herself at a table catty-corner from his. She made sure not to look in his direction, nor to say anything. Not yet. Instead, she glanced at the laminated menu, her stomach rumbling painfully.

*Not a meal. Just enough to avoid looking strange. Maybe a salad, or—*

"Oh." Abigail started when a waitress came out of the interior and set two plates in front of her. One had white rice, red beans,

black-bean paste, fried plantains, and even a few bits of chicken. The other had freshly fried corn tortillas, lettuce, and sliced tomatoes. The sight and smell of both plates together were almost overwhelming.

The waitress was gone before Abigail could finish spluttering out, “Where did this . . . ?”

“I ordered for you.” Haggerty spoke from the table beside her. “I didn’t want you to stick yourself with a salad and lemon wedges or something equally silly.”

Abigail didn’t respond, although a whole arsenal of potential comebacks loaded and unloaded themselves on the tip of her tongue. She picked up the menu and tried to find the meal she’d been given, looking at the prices.

“It’s already paid for,” said Haggerty. “Tip too. You’re good.”

“I . . . You . . .” She paused to collect herself. “Thank you.” She kept her voice low and her eyes down. “But we’re not supposed to be seen together. We’re not supposed to be connected in any way. So you ordering food for me kind of defeats the purpose, wouldn’t you say?”

She saw movement out of the corner of her eye and glanced over just in time to see Haggerty scooping up his plate and stepping over to her table. He sat across from her, then wiped his mouth on a napkin.

“I would say I never understood the need for all this cloak-and-dagger stuff. Still don’t.”

Abigail sighed, feeling a familiar frustration. How many times had they had this conversation? “The need is—”

But he was already speaking again. “I know you’ve got reasons, and I know you’ll tell me.” He held up both hands, palms out, in front of his chest. Either an appeal or a gesture of protection. “But why not eat first? While it’s hot?”

She looked back down at the plates in front of her. So much

food. All of it fresh. The words of her earlier prayer slipped back into her mind. *Please make a way for all who are hungry today to be satisfied.*

She closed her eyes and lowered her head. “Thank You, Father.” Then she reached out and placed her hand on top of Haggerty’s. “Thank you, Uncle John.”

He smiled. She smiled. Then she ate.

It was a completely ordinary meal with completely average food. And it was incredible. She ate for five minutes without stopping or saying a word. Just chewing and savoring. Tasting and relishing. When Haggerty signaled for the waitress to bring out an iced tea, Abigail almost wept with gratitude.

He watched her eat, his face switching back and forth between appreciation and apprehension. Finally he said, “I want to ask what you’ve been eating recently, but I’m really nervous to know the answer.”

She took a sip of tea, then dabbed a napkin at the corners of her mouth. “I eat whatever God provides. I’m doing well.”

“You eat garbage, you mean.”

It wasn’t a question. She didn’t answer.

“Why, Abigail? I want to understand, but . . .” He shook his head. “You’re putting yourself in real danger, you know? What’s the point?”

“The point is that we’re *already* in real danger. More danger than you could possibly imagine.” She felt it all flooding up again, catching in her throat—all the old arguments. But she stopped herself and took another breath.

Two years ago, when John had stumbled into her father’s living room after the Rapture, Abigail felt so relieved to have someone close to her in this strange new world. Someone who cared about her. And she cared about him. Fresh off her own rediscovery of God, she’d asked him to join her in that belief. To consider the

truth of everything that had happened—and everything that was going to happen.

She still remembered his response. *“Tell me the truth. I’m listening.”*

Well, she’d told him. Many times and in many ways. And yes, he’d listened each time. Or at least, he’d heard what she was saying. Processed the words and chewed on the information. But in her estimation, he’d never really wrestled with the reality of the Rapture and everything it entailed. He’d never allowed himself to fully consider the truth.

The few times she’d pressed him on his beliefs, he’d fallen back on what seemed to be a long-repeated slogan: “I just want to do what’s right today. I’ll figure out the spiritual stuff tomorrow.”

*The problem is, neither of us are guaranteed tomorrow. Especially now.*

The thought saddened her, and the sadness drained her earlier anger—along with much of her energy. She looked at her friend across the table. “Do you really want to hear this again, or are you just trying to goad me?”

He sighed and rubbed his palm against his forehead, both elbows on the table. She realized in that moment that he felt as frustrated as she did.

“Not goading you,” he said, his hand still covering his eyes. “I promised myself I’d take care of you after—well, after.”

*After I lost Daddy and Xavier and Booker, my baby. After you lost Marianna and Sonya.*

Part of her bucked against the implication that she needed to be taken care of, as if she were a child. As if she were lost without this aged knight to ride in on a white horse and rescue her. But that was silly. They needed each other. And he needed her to keep telling him the truth.

“The Rapture was the start of the Tribulation, John. Seven years

of suffering and chaos. We're almost two years in, but the real horrors will get started around halfway. Plagues. Famine. Drought. Rivers and seas turned to blood. Constant war. All of that's happening already, I know, but it's going to get worse. A lot worse."

She paused to see if he'd respond, but he just watched her. Listening.

"Right now I'm earning money, but that won't be the case for long. Pretty soon, people like me will be completely cut off from society. No salaries. No shopping. Nothing."

"People like you, meaning . . ."

"Christians. And Jews. Anyone who believes in God. We're going to be hounded and harassed. Persecuted and killed. Right now I'm saving every nickel I possibly can so I can be helpful to my community when things get bad. If that means I eat leftovers for most of my meals, then so be it."

"Leftovers." He scoffed at the word, ready to jump on his white horse. But she kept talking.

"And the reason for all the cloak-and-dagger stuff—the reason I don't want it to be known that you and I are close—is because the people who hate me won't be satisfied by killing just me. They're going to come after everyone I love. And I don't want anything to happen to you."

He'd been tracking with her, his eyes locked on hers. But now they shifted away, darting around the little dining room to glance at the two other patrons eating quietly in the opposite corner.

He cleared his throat. "If things really do get as bad as you keep telling me, will your savings be enough? To survive, I mean? To keep going?"

She shrugged. "I have to let God take care of tomorrow. I'm doing the best I can today."

The practical answer to his question was no. She'd saved a significant amount by the standards of the EVAC zones, doing her

best to diversify between three online bank accounts and a hidden stash of cash. But it wouldn't be enough for herself to live on if things got as bad as she feared, let alone to have any left over for helping others. Not enough by a long shot.

"What about your network?" he asked. "The World's Way, do you call—What?"

Abigail had tucked an index finger tightly to her lips, and she was attempting to blaze a warning across the table with wide-open eyes and uplifted eyebrows. He was talking about a sensitive subject she very much wanted to keep secret.

She had founded the World Wide Way as a seemingly innocent website and moderated network. Anyone who randomly stumbled onto [www.theworldwideway.com](http://www.theworldwideway.com) would find generic images and marketing copy for major American cities, plus an option to pay five euros to access travel itineraries in those cities. But since whatever was left of American cities was currently locked down against any kind of travel, Abigail didn't expect much in terms of spontaneous web traffic.

Instead, the site was a shell for what had developed into an extensive underground church. Or, more accurately, a network of leaders from the underground church—tens of thousands of believers from all over the world who used the World Wide Way to share news, seek help, and offer support. Finding her first subscribers had been fairly time intensive—scouting local gatherings, working a few networks, and doing some very targeted advertising. But word of mouth had begun to spread, and the majority of the site's new users now signed up without her knowledge.

"My project is coming along fine," Abigail whispered, glancing over at the other diners. "The biggest problem is funding. Just like with everything else these days. Which is another reason I don't waste money on food."

"Well, I might be able to help with that." Haggerty pulled a

square sticky note from his pocket and set it on the table in front of her. It displayed a large number written in an unfamiliar hand. “I’ve taken a new job. It’s in Istanbul. I start next week, and I want you to come with me.”

Abigail felt stunned. Each of those three statements struck her with a force that went well beyond surprise. Taken altogether, the news was massive. The implications were staggering. After almost two years of a totally new way of life in Costa Rica, things were finally starting to feel—well, not normal. But routine? Familiar? Something like that. And even though she rarely saw Haggerty, it was comforting to know he was close. That he was accessible, especially in an emergency. Now he was leaving? Just like that?

Waves of emotions crashed over her head, one after the other—shock, alarm, astonishment, curiosity.

*Me?* The last of his statements was most surprising of all. *I’m to come with him?*

“Abigail.” He took both of her hands in his own, then moved his head to make sure she was focusing on his face. “It’s the Trident Group. That’s the job.”

“Trident?” She had to consciously keep her mouth from gaping. “You found a way to reach out? You made contact?”

He shook his head. “No, they came looking for me. I had a visit from Hardeep Singh two days ago.”

“The Trident Group,” she echoed. “I can’t believe it. Do you think they suspect anything about you? About your motives?”

He shook his head again. “I played pretty hard to get. In fact”—he tapped the paper in front of her—“That’s my new annual salary. *And* I negotiated the same amount as a signing bonus. The transfer hit my account this morning.”

Abigail looked back down at the paper, really seeing the number for the first time. “They paid you this? Already?”

He nodded. Grinning. “Half up front. The rest will come after

I—well, in a few weeks.”

“That’s amazing!” Once again, Abigail felt well and truly stunned. “We could buy real servers for the network and keep them isolated from the rest of the web! We could afford actual data encryption, not to mention—Oh!” She was thinking fast, ideas zipping through her mind one after the other. “We could create an app for private chats with end-to-end encryption! That way . . . I mean . . .”

A flush of heat crept up her neck and cheeks. Embarrassment. *Get a grip! You’re shopping like it’s your money! Sheesh! Who do you think you are?*

Haggerty seemed to sense what she was thinking, and he waved it away with a flick of his fingers. “I don’t care about the money. I just want to get close to Vilks.”

*Vilks.* The name brought a new wave of emotion swirling and crashing against all the others: fear. Even terror.

“John, we’ve talked about this. I know Matthias Vilks is the leader of Trident, but so many other people are involved. There’s no way to—”

But he was already shaking his head vigorously back and forth. “No. I’ve never stopped researching. Matthias Vilks is responsible for the destruction of America. And I think he had something to do with the Great Disappearance.” Reacting to her expression, he added, “Or the Rapture. Whatever. Vilks was involved.”

“You can’t know that.”

“I can’t?” He held up his index finger. “First, you and I figured out a long time ago that Vilks’s empire had an ownership stake in COMM NRG, and it was COMM NRG that somehow smuggled all those tactical nukes throughout America. We know that.” He held up another finger. “Second, the Vilks empire took control of three private armies over the past five years, and all three had no electronic equipment *before* the EMP attack against America. Which means they knew what was coming.”

Abigail nodded along as Haggerty spoke. She knew these points well. The electromagnetic pulses from the nuclear explosions had decimated America's power grid and digital infrastructure—and in the process completely crippled America's military. After that, other nations around the world had become deeply paranoid about similar vulnerabilities in their own military equipment, which led them to hire Vilks's private armies for additional security.

Haggerty held up another finger. “Third, Matthias Vilks crafted the language for each of the GUARD protocols. Did you know that?”

Abigail shook her head. That was a surprise.

“Yeah. I found the minutes from the UN sessions. Vilks submitted the proposals himself.”

*That is significant.* Only a week after the Rapture, the United Nations issued a series of edicts called Global Unification for Assistance, Recovery, and Development—or GUARD. The language had been grandiose and filled with legalese: “The Security Council, reaffirming the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations insofar as it is established to maintain international peace and security, and recalling especially all its previous resolutions for the benefit of . . .”

But when you cut through all the jargon, the resolution had established five specific GUARD protocols:

1. Member states recognize the recent large-scale loss of life as an act of God for the purposes of insurance claims; no state, government, corporation, or other entity shall be identified as the responsible party.
2. This Council will establish a Global Record to identify all individuals deemed deceased because of the recent large-scale loss of life. An additional global registry shall be established to identify and catalogue all global citizens in good standing.
3. All property, deeds, titles, and possessions of those identified

as deceased in the previously named Global Record shall be transferred to global citizens in good standing. Such transfers must be registered with this Council in an orderly manner.

4. In the interest of maintaining international security, this Council shall hire and direct peacekeeping forces as needed.
5. The United States of America is hereby declared a major disaster area. All current residents of that State shall be relocated by this Council. International corporations and organizations formerly domiciled in the United States of America may be legally domiciled by this Council.

Most people had become laser focused on Guard Protocol 3, which basically declared that anything owned by someone who had vanished was now up for grabs. The days and weeks following that declaration became a mad mass scramble for everything imaginable—homes, property, corporate offices, cars, boats, jewelry, furniture, storage containers, safe-deposit boxes. Everything. Some even found ways to claim active businesses.

There were attempts to create systems for registering everything in an “orderly manner,” but on a practical level, everything boiled down to possession being nine-tenths of the law.

Globally and politically, though, the last two declarations were the main event. Through Protocol 4, the United Nations gave itself the right to maintain an active military. And Protocol 5 provided the funding. The biggest American corporations—those still active globally—were able to “domicile” themselves inside the United Nations for tax purposes at a corporate rate of 15 percent, which was a massive savings. So the companies were happy, and the UN gained a reliable source of income.

In a single efficient move, the UN went from a feckless organization with no practical authority to one of the most powerful players on the global stage.

Abigail’s mind was buzzing as she tried to connect Matthias

Vilks with those developments.

“Why would Vilks empower the UN like that? How does that help him?”

Haggerty barked a bitter laugh. “Whose armies do you think the UN Security Council hired to ‘maintain peace’?”

Abigail’s eyes widened. It was obvious. “Vilks’s private militias were already shielded against EMP attacks, which made them the only reliable armies available.”

He nodded. “Yep. Vilks launched the attack that made his own security forces indispensable. And according to my sources, each of his three armies has tripled in size since the GUARD protocols were put in place.”

“But those armies are under the jurisdiction of the UN now, right? He’s given away most of his power.”

Haggerty raised an eyebrow at her, and his lips twisted in disgust. “The major officers in those armies were personally selected by Vilks years ago. All the generals and most of the subcommanders. When push comes to shove, who do you think they’re going to obey?”

*Vilks. He’s become one of the most powerful leaders in the world.*

“How does the Trident Group fit in with all this?”

Haggerty sighed. “Trident is the philanthropic arm of Vilks’s empire. They sponsor studies and write policy suggestions—most of which are now funded by the UN. Which means Vilks is both the carrot and the stick.”

“Okay. I agree that all sounds pretty fishy. So—what’s next? What are you hoping will happen in Istanbul?”

He grinned, though his face looked pained. “Does that mean you’ll come with me?”

She didn’t have to think about it. The prospect of remaining in Junquillal by herself was both distasteful and downright frightening. And if he really would make the kind of money he claimed,

then she wouldn't have to sift garbage all day. Or eat garbage. She could focus most of her time and attention on the World Wide Way. She could build something significant.

"Yes." She knew that single word meant that everything in her life was about to change. "I'll come. And I'd like to help. If you're right about Trident and Vilks, how do we expose what's happening? What can we do?"

"Nothing." His voice was grim. Determined. "*We* don't do anything. *I* go to work for Trident. I bide my time until I get close to Vilks somehow. And then I do what needs doing."

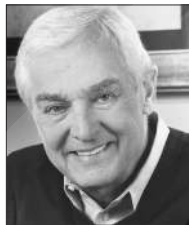
"Do what?" A cold thread of fear wormed its way through her insides. "What are you talking about?"

He stared at her with haunted eyes, his face filled with regret. "He took everything from me, Abigail. My work. My country. My family. So I'm gonna get close to him. I'm gonna kill him. And then I'll have vengeance for everything I've lost."



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Photo by Alan Weissman



**DR. DAVID JEREMIAH** is the founder of Turning Point Ministries, an international ministry committed to providing Christians with sound Bible teaching through radio and television, the internet, live events, and resource materials and books. He is the author of more than fifty books, including *The Book of Signs*, *The Great Disappearance*, *Where Do We Go from Here?* and *The Coming Golden Age*.

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