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O N E

RAYFORD STEELE had endured enough brushes with death to know that the cliché was more than true: Not only did your life flash before your mind's eye, but your senses were also on high alert. As he knelt awkwardly on the unforgiving red rock of the city of Petra in ancient Edom, he was aware of everything, remembered everything, thought of everything and everybody.

Despite the screaming Global Community fighter-bombers—larger than any he had ever seen or even read about—he heard his own concussing heart and wheezing lungs. New to the robe and sandals of an Egyptian, he tottered on sore knees and toes. Rayford could not bow his head, could not tear his eyes from the sky and the pair of warheads that seemed to grow larger as they fell.

Beside him his dear compatriot, Abdullah Smith, prostrated himself, burying his head in his hands. To Rayford,

Smitty represented everyone he was responsible for—the entire Tribulation Force around the world. Some were in Chicago, some in Greece, some with him in Petra. One was in New Babylon. And as the Jordanian groaned and leaned into him, Rayford felt Abdullah shuddering.

Rayford was scared too. He wouldn't have denied it. Where was the faith that should have come from seeing God, so many times, deliver him from death? It wasn't that he doubted God. But something deep within—his survival instinct, he assumed—told him he was about to die.

For *most people*, doubt was long gone by now . . . there were *few* skeptics anymore. If someone were not a Christ follower by now, probably he had chosen to oppose God.

Rayford had no fear of death itself or of the afterlife. Providing heaven for his people was a small feat for the God who now manifested himself miraculously every day. It was the dying part Rayford dreaded. For while his God had protected him up to now and promised eternal life when death came, he had not spared Rayford injury and pain. What would it be like to fall victim to the warheads?

Quick, that was sure. Rayford knew enough about Nicolae Carpathia to know the man would not cut corners now. While one bomb could easily destroy the million people who—all but Rayford, it seemed—tucked their heads as close to between their legs as they were able, two bombs would vaporize them. Would the flashes blind him? Would he hear the explosions? feel the heat? be aware of his body disintegrating into bits?

Whatever happened, Carpathia would turn it into political capital. He might not televise the million unarmed souls, showing their backsides to the Global Community as the bombs hurtled in. But he would show the impact, the blasts, the fire, the smoke, the desolation. He would illustrate the futility of opposing the new world order.

Rayford's mind argued against his instincts. Dr. Ben-Judah believed they were safe, that this was a city of refuge, the place God had promised. And yet Rayford had lost a man here just days before. On the other hand, the ground attack by the GC had been miraculously thwarted at the last instant. Why couldn't Rayford rest in that, trust, believe, have confidence?

Because he knew warheads. And as these dropped, parachutes puffed from each, slowing them and allowing them to drop simultaneously straight down toward the assembled masses. Rayford's heart sank when he saw the black pole attached to the nose of each bomb. The GC had left nothing to chance. Just over four feet long, as soon as those standoff probes touched the ground they would trip the fuses, causing the bombs to explode above the surface.

Chloe Steele Williams was impressed with Hannah's driving. Unfamiliar vehicle, unfamiliar country—yet the Native American, who had been uncannily morphed into a New Delhi Indian, handled the appropriated GC Jeep as if it were her own. She was smoother and more

self-confident than Mac McCullum had been, but of course he had spent the entire drive across the Greek countryside talking.

“I know this is all new to you gals,” he had said, causing Chloe to catch Hannah’s eye and wink. If anybody could get away with unconscious chauvinism, it was the weathered pilot and former military man, who referred to all the women in the Trib Force as “little ladies” but did not seem consciously condescending.

“I got to get to the airport,” he told them, “which is thataway, and y’all have got to get into Ptolemais and find the Co-op.” He pulled over and hopped out. “Whicha you two is drivin’ again?”

Hannah climbed behind the wheel from the backseat, her starched white GC officer’s uniform still crisp.

Mac shook his head. “You two look like a coupla Wacs, but ’course they don’t call ’em that anymore.” He looked up and down the road, and Chloe felt compelled to do the same. It was noon, the sun high and hot and directly overhead, no clouds. She saw no other vehicles and heard none. “Don’t worry about me,” Mac added. “Somebody’ll be along and I’ll catch a ride.”

He lifted a canvas bag out of the back and slung it over his shoulder. Mac also carried a briefcase. Gustaf Zuckerman Jr., whom they all knew as Zeke or Z, had thought of everything. The lumbering young man in Chicago had made himself into the best forger and disguiser in the world, and Chloe decided that the three of them alone were the epitomes of his handiwork. It was so strange to see Mac with no freckles or red hair.

His face was dark now, his hair brown, and he wore glasses he didn't need. She only hoped Z's work with her dad and the others at Petra proved as effective.

Mac set down his bags and rested his forearms atop the driver's side door, bringing his face to within inches of Hannah's. "You kids got everything memorized and all?" Hannah looked at Chloe, fighting a smile. How many times had he asked that on the flight from the States and during the drive? They both nodded. "Lemme see your name tags again."

Hannah's was right in front of him. "Indira Jinnah from New Delhi," Mac read. Chloe leaned forward to where he could see hers. "And Chloe Irene from Montreal." He covered his own name tag. "And you're on the staff of who?"

"Senior Commander Howie Johnson of Winston-Salem," Chloe said. They'd been over it so many times. "You're now the ranking GC officer in Greece, and if anybody doubts it, they can check with the palace."

"Awright then," Mac said. "Got your side arms? This Kronos character, at least a relative of his, has some more firepower."

Chloe knew they needed more firepower, especially not knowing what they would encounter. But learning the Luger and the Uzi—which they knew the Greek underground could supply—had been more than enough to tax her before they left Chicago.

"I still say the Co-op people are going to clam up when they see our uniforms," Hannah said.

"Show 'em your mark, sweetie," Mac said.

The radio under the dashboard crackled. “Attention GC Peacekeeping forces. Be advised, Security and Intelligence has launched an aerial attack on several million armed subversives of the Global Community in a mountain enclave discovered by ground forces about fifty miles southeast of Mizpe Ramon in the Negev Desert. The insurgents murdered countless GC ground troops and commandeered unknown numbers of tanks and armored carriers.

“Global Community Security and Intelligence Director Suhail Akbar has announced that two warheads have been dropped simultaneously, to be followed by a missile launched from Resurrection Airport in Amman, and that the expected result will be annihilation of the rebel headquarters and its entire personnel force. While there remain pockets of resistance around the world, Director Akbar believes this will effectively destroy 90 percent of the adherents of the traitorous Judah-ites, including Tsion Ben-Judah himself and his entire cabinet.”

Chloe’s hand flew to her mouth, and Hannah grabbed her other hand. “Just pray, girls,” Mac said. “We all but knew this was comin’. Either we have faith or we don’t.”

“That’s easy to say from here,” Chloe said. “We could lose four people, not to mention all the Israelis we promised to protect.”

“I’m not takin’ it lightly, Chloe. But we got a job to do here too, and this is no safer than a mountain under a bomb attack. You keep your wits about you, hear? Listen to me—we won’t know what happened at Petra

till we see it with our own eyes or hear it from our people. You heard the lies already, from the GC to their own forces! We know for sure there's only a million people in Petra and—”

“*Only?!*”

“Well, yeah, compared to several million like they said. And armed? No way! And did we kill GC forces—murder 'em, I mean? And what about commandeering those—”

“I know, Mac,” Chloe said. “It's just—”

“You'd better practice callin' me by my GC name, Ms. Irene. And remember everything we went over in Chicago. You may have to fight, defend yourselves, even kill somebody.”

“I'm ready,” Hannah said, making Mac cock his head. Chloe was surprised too. She knew Hannah had warmed to this assignment, but she couldn't imagine Hannah wanted to kill anyone any more than she did. “The gloves are off,” Hannah said, looking to Chloe and then back to Mac. “We've gone way past diplomacy. If it's kill or be killed, I'm killing somebody.”

Chloe could only shake her head.

“I'm just saying,” Hannah said, “this is war. You think they won't kill Sebastian? They very well already could have. And I'm not counting on finding this Stavros girl alive.”

“Then why are we here?” Chloe said.

“Just in case,” Hannah said, using the Indian lilt Abdullah had taught her in Chicago.

“Just in case is right,” Mac said, hefting his bags

again. “Our phones are secure. Keep the solar receptors exposed during the daytime—”

“C’mon, Mac,” Chloe said. “Give us a little credit.”

“Oh, I do,” Mac said. “I give you more than a lot of credit. I’m impressed, tell you the truth. Comin’ over here for somebody you’ve never met, well, at least you, Chloe. And Hannah, er, Indira, I don’t guess you got to know George well enough to give a—to, uh, care that much about him personally.”

Hannah shook her head.

“But here we are, aren’t we?” Mac said. “Somebody was here workin’ for us, and best we can figure out, he’s in trouble. I don’t know about you, but I’m not leavin’ here without him.”

Mac spun and stared at the horizon, causing Chloe and Hannah to do the same. A black dot grew as it moved their way. “Y’all run along now,” Mac said. “And keep in touch.”

Rayford’s first inkling was that he was in hell. Had he been wrong? Had it all been for naught? Had he been killed and missed heaven in spite of it all?

He was unaware of separate explosions. The bombs had caused such a blinding flash that even with his eyes involuntarily pressed shut as tightly as his facial muscles would allow, the sheer brilliant whiteness seemed to fill Rayford’s entire skull. It was as if the glare filled him and then shone from him, and he grimaced against the sound

and heat that had to follow. Surely he would be blown into the others and finally obliterated.

The resounding *boom* sent a shock wave of its own, but Rayford did not topple, and he heard no rocks falling, no mountainous formations crashing. He instinctively thrust out his hands to steady himself, but that proved unnecessary. He heard ten thousand wails and moans and shrieks, but his own throat was constricted. Even with his eyes closed, he saw the whiteness replaced by orange and red and black, and now, oh, the stench of fire and metal and oil and rock! Rayford forced himself to open his eyes, and as the thunderous roar echoed throughout Petra he realized he was ablaze. He lifted his robed arms before his face, at least temporarily unaware of the searing heat. He knew his robe, then flesh, then bone would be consumed within seconds.

Rayford could not see far in the raging firestorm, but every huddled pilgrim around him was also ablaze. Abdullah rolled to one side and lay in a fetal position, his face and head still cocooned in his arms. White, yellow, orange, black roaring flames engulfed him as if he were a human wick for a demonic holocaust.

One by one the people around Rayford stood and raised their arms. Their hoods, their hair, their beards, faces, arms, hands, robes, clothes all roared with the conflagration as if the fire were fueled from beneath them. Rayford looked above their heads but could not see the cloudless sky. Even the sun was blotted out by the massive sea of raging flames and a pair of roiling mushroom clouds. The mountain, the city, the whole area was afire,

and the fumes and plumes and licking flames rose thousands of feet into the air.

What must this look like to the world, Rayford wondered, and it struck him that the mass of Israelis were as dumbfounded as he. They staggered, eyeing each other, arms aloft, now embracing, smiling! Was this some bizarre nightmare? How could they be engulfed by the slaughtering force of the latest in mass-destruction technology yet still stand, squinting, with puzzled looks, still able to hear?

Rayford opened and closed his right fist, inches from his face, wondering at the hissing flarelike tongues of fire that leaped from each digit. Abdullah struggled to his feet and turned in a circle as if drunk, mimicking the others by raising his arms and looking skyward.

He turned to Rayford and they embraced, the fire from their bodies melding and contributing to the whole. Abdullah pulled back to look Rayford in the face. "We are in the fiery furnace!" the Jordanian exulted.

"Amen!" Rayford shouted. "We are a million Shadrachs, Meshachs, and Abednegos!"

Chang Wong joined the other techies in his department as their boss, Aurelio Figueroa, led them to a huge television monitor. It showed the live feed from the cockpit of one of the fighter-bombers as it circled high above Petra, broadcast around the world via the Global Community News Network. Later Chang would check his

recording of the bug in Carpathia's office to monitor the reactions of Nicolae, his new secretary Krystall, Leon, Suhail, and Viv Ivins.

"Mission accomplished," the pilot reported, scanning the target and showing square miles raging in flames. "Suggest subsequent missile sequence abort. Unnecessary."

Chang clenched his teeth so tight his jaw ached. How could anyone survive that? The flames were thick, and the black smoke belched so high that the pilot had to avoid it to keep the picture clear.

"Negative," came the reply from GC Command. "Initiate launch sequence, Amman."

"That's overkill," the pilot muttered, "but it's your money. Returning to base."

"Repeat?" The voice sounded like Akbar himself.

"Roger that. Returning to base."

"That's another negative. Remain in position for visual feed."

"With a missile coming, sir?"

"Maintain sufficient clearance. Missile will find its target."

The second plane was cleared to return to New Babylon while the first, its camera continuing to show the world Petra burning in the noonday sun, circled southeast of the red rock city.

Chang wished he were in his room and able to communicate with Chicago. How could Dr. Ben-Judah have been so wrong about Petra? What would become of the Tribulation Force now? Who would rally what was left

of the believers around the world? And where would Chang flee to when the time came?

It was four in the morning in Chicago, and Buck sat before the television. Leah and Albie joined him, Zeke having gone to collect Enoch. “Where’s Ming?” Buck said.

“With the baby,” Leah said.

“What do you make of this?” Albie said, staring at the screen.

Buck shook his head. “I just wish I were there.”

“Me too,” Albie said. “I feel like a coward, a traitor.”

“We missed something,” Buck said. “We all missed something.” He kept trying to call Chloe, only imagining what she was going through. No answer.

“Do you believe this guy?” Leah said. “It’s not enough to massacre a million people and destroy one of the most beautiful cities in the world. He’s chasing it with a missile.”

Buck thought Leah’s voice sounded tight. And why not? She had to be thinking what he was thinking—that they had not only lost their leadership and seen a million people incinerated, but that everything they thought they knew was out the window.

“Get Ming, would you?” he said. “Tell her to let Kenny sleep.”

Leah hurried out as Zeke and Enoch walked in. Zeke plopped onto the floor, but Enoch stood fidgeting.

“I can’t stay long, Buck,” he said. “My people are pretty shaken.”

Buck nodded. “Let’s all get together at daybreak.”

“And—?” Enoch said.

“And I don’t know what. Pray, I guess.”

“We’ve been praying,” Albie said. “It’s time to reload.”

Rayford could not keep from laughing. Tears poured from him and huge guffaws rose from deep in his belly as the people in Petra began shouting and singing and dancing. They spontaneously formed huge, revolving circles, arms around each other’s shoulders, hopping and kicking. Abdullah was glued to Rayford’s side, giggling and shouting, “Praise the Lord!”

They remained in the midst of fire so thick and deep and high that they could see only each other and the flames. No sky, no sun, nothing in the distance. All they knew was that they were kindling for the largest fire in history, and yet they were unharmed.

“Will we wake up, Captain?” Abdullah shouted, cackling. “This is my weirdest dream ever!”

“We are awake, my friend,” Rayford yelled back, though Abdullah’s ear was inches from him. “I pinched myself!”

That made Abdullah laugh all the more, and as their circle spun and widened, Rayford wondered when the flame would die down and the world would find out that God had once again triumphed over the evil one.

An older couple directly across from him gazed at each other as the circle turned, their smiles huge and wonder-filled. "I'm on fire!" the woman shouted.

"I am too!" the man said, and hopped awkwardly, nearly pulling her and others down as he kept one foot in the air, showing her the fire engulfing his entire leg.

Rayford glanced past them, aware of something strange and wondering what could be stranger than this. Here and there within his range of vision, which extended only about thirty feet, was the occasional huddled bundle of clothes or a robe that evidenced a person still curled on the ground.

Rayford pulled away from Abdullah and a young man on his other side and made his way to one of those on the ground. He knelt and put a hand on the man's shoulder, trying to get him to rise or at least look up. The man wrenched away, wailing, quivering, crying out, "God, save me!"

"You're safe!" Rayford said. "Look! See! We are ablaze and yet we are unharmed! God is with us!"

The man shook his head and folded himself further within his arms and legs.

"Are you hurt?" Rayford said. "Do the flames burn you?"

"I am without God!" the man wailed.

"That can't be! You're safe! You're alive! Look around you!"

But the man would not be consoled, and Rayford found others, men and women, some teenagers, in the same wretched condition.

“People! People! People!” It was clearly the voice of Tsion Ben-Judah, and Rayford had the feeling it came from nearby, but he could not see the rabbi. “There will be time to rejoice and to celebrate and to praise and thank the God of Israel! For now, listen to me!”

The dancing and shouting and singing stopped, but much laughter continued. People still smiled and embraced and looked for the source of the voice. It was enough, they seemed to conclude, that they could hear him. The cries of the despairing continued as well.

“I do not know,” Dr. Ben-Judah began, “when God will lift the curtain of fire and we will be able to see the clear sky again. I do not know when or if the world will know that we have been protected. For now it is enough that we know!”

The people cheered, but before they could begin singing and dancing again, Tsion continued.

“When the evil one and his counselors gather, they will see us on whose bodies the fire had no power; the hair of our heads was not singed, nor were our garments affected, and the smell of fire was not on us. They will interpret this in their own way, my brothers and sisters. Perchance they will not allow the rest of the world to even know it. But God will reveal himself in his own way and in his own time, as he always does.

“And he has a word for you today, friends. He says, ‘Behold, I have refined you, but not as silver; I have tested you in the furnace of affliction. For my own sake, for my own sake, I will do it, for how should my name be profaned? I will not give my glory to another.

“‘Listen to me, O Israel,’ says the Lord God of hosts, ‘you are my called ones, you are my beloved, you I have chosen. I am he, I am the First, I am also the Last. Indeed, my hand has laid the foundation of the earth, and my right hand has stretched out the heavens. When I call to them, they stand up together.

“‘Assemble yourselves, and hear! Who among them has declared these things? The Lord loves him; he shall do his pleasure on Babylon. I, even I, have spoken.’

“Thus says the Lord, your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel: I am the Lord your God, who leads you by the way you should go. Oh, that you had heeded my commandments! Then your peace would have been like a river, and your righteousness like the waves of the sea. Declare, proclaim this, utter to the end of the earth that the Lord has redeemed his servants and they did not thirst when He led them through the deserts. He caused the waters to flow from the rock for them; he also split the rock, and the waters gushed out.”

As the Tribulation Force in Chicago watched, the fighter-bomber pilot acknowledged to GC Command that he had a visual on the missile originating from Amman. And from the right side of the screen came the thick, white plume trailing the winding projectile as it approached the flame and smoke rising from Petra.

The missile dived out of sight into the blackness, and seconds later yet another explosion erupted, blowing even wider the fire that seemed to own the mountainous region. But immediately following came a colossal geyser, shooting water a mile into the sky.

“I’m—,” the pilot began, “I’m seeing—I don’t know what I’m seeing. Water. Yes, water. Spraying. It’s, uh, it’s having some effect on the fire and smoke. Now clearing, the water still rising and drenching the area. It’s as if the missile struck some spring that, uh—this is crazy, Command. I see—I can see . . . the flames dying now, smoke clearing. There are people *alive* down th—”

Buck leaped from his chair and knelt before the TV. His friends whooped and hollered. The TV feed died and GCNN was already into its apology for the technical difficulties. “Did you see that?” Buck shouted. “They survived! They survived!”

Chang’s brows rose and his chin dropped. His co-workers swore and pointed and stared, groaning when the feed was interrupted. “That can’t be! That looked like—no, there’s not a chance! How long was that place burning? Two bombs and a missile? No!”

Chang hurried back to his computer to make sure he was still recording from Carpathia’s office. He couldn’t wait to hear the back-and-forth between Akbar and the pilot.

Rayford had reunited with Abdullah and was standing, listening to Tsion, when the earth opened with a resounding crash and a gush of water at least ten feet in diameter burst from the ground, rocketing so high that it was a full minute before it began to rain down upon them.

The flames and smoke cleared so quickly, and the refreshing water felt so good, that Rayford noticed others doing what he was. They spread their palms toward heaven and turned their faces to the sky, letting it wash them. Soon Rayford realized he was about a hundred yards from Tsion and Chaim, who stood at the edge of the gigantic abyss from where the water had burst forth.

It appeared Tsion was again trying to gain the attention of the masses, but it was futile. They ran, they leaped, they embraced, singing, dancing, shaking hands, laughing, and soon hundreds of thousands were shouting their thanks to God.

Still, here and there, Rayford saw people grieving, crying out. Were these unbelievers? How could they have survived? Had God protected them in spite of themselves, just because they were here? Rayford couldn't make it make sense. Was it important to know who was protected and who was not and why? And would Tsion speak to that issue?

After several minutes, Chaim and Tsion were able to call the people to order. Somehow the miracle of Tsion making himself heard by a million people without amplification was multiplied in that they could hear him above the rushing sounds of the volcanic spewing water.

“I have agreed to stay at least a few days,” Tsion announced. “To worship with you. To thank God together. To teach. To preach. Ah, look as the water subsides.”

The noise began to diminish, and the top of the column of rushing water slowly came into view, now three hundred yards above them. Slowly but steadily the spring shrank, in height though not apparently in width. Soon it was just a hundred feet high, then fifty, then ten. Finally it settled into the small lake caused by the initial eruption and crater, and in the middle of the pool the spring bubbled as if it were boiling, a ten-foot-wide, one-foot-high gurgling that looked cool and soothing and seemed capable of adding to the already miraculous water supply.

“Some of you weep and are ashamed,” Tsion said. “And rightly so. Over the next few days I will minister to you as well. For while you have not taken the mark of the evil one, neither have you taken your stand with the one true God. He has foreseen in his mercy to protect you, to give you yet one more chance to choose him.

“Many of you will do that, even this day, even before I begin my teaching on the unsearchable riches of Messiah and his love and forgiveness. Yet many of you will remain in your sin, risking the hardening of your heart so that you may never change your mind. But you will never be able to forget this day, this hour, this miracle, this unmistakable and irrefutable evidence that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob remains in control. You may choose your own way, but you will never be able to disagree that faith is the victory that overcomes the world.”