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AT THE CONCLUSION OF WORLD WAR III

IN THE FALL OF 2009, it was determined by the new international government in Bern, Switzerland, that beginning January 1 of the following year, the designation A.D. (*anno Domini*, “in the year of our Lord” or after the birth of Christ) would be replaced by P.3. (post–World War III). Thus, January 1, A.D. 2010, would become January 1, 1 P.3.



PROLOGUE

11:05 P.M., EASTERN STANDARD TIME

MONDAY, DECEMBER 22, 36 P.3.

BRIGHTWOOD PARK, WASHINGTON, D.C.,
CAPITAL OF THE COLUMBIA REGION,
UNITED SEVEN STATES OF AMERICA

A COMMON CITIZEN would not have recognized the danger. But the lone occupant of the Chevy Electrolumina was retired Delta Force Command Sergeant Major Andrew Pass.

He touched the tip of his right thumb to the tip of his pinkie, activating cells implanted in his molars. He could have dialed with his other fingertips, but he opted for voice recognition and quickly recited the numbers that would connect him on a secure, private circuit to his brother in the underground compound.

"This is Jack, Andy," came the answer that resonated off his cheekbones and directly to his eardrum. "GPS shows you heading north on Sixteenth toward Silver Spring."

"Roger that. My ETA was eleven-fifteen—"

"Was?"

"Yeah, I—"

"Say no more. I see 'em. What kinda rig, Andy?"

"Looks like an extended Suburban Hydro. They're on to me."

"You sure?"

"And I'm unarmed, Jack."

"Can you lose 'em?"

"Snow's deep and packed, but I have to try."

"What do you need?"

"Just wanted you to get hold of Angela in case I can't."

"No fatalism now, Andy. Come on."

"If I don't see you in ten minutes, spread the word."

Andy pressed his pinkie and thumb tips together again and peeked in the rearview mirror. *Smooth*. The hydrogen-powered Suburban was hanging back almost three blocks. By now they had to know that he knew. Clearly they weren't going to blow this by being overeager.

He thought about calling his daughter himself, but he had to concentrate. Jack would know how to break it to her.

Andy took a right and then a left, dousing his lights. That wouldn't shake the Suburban, and with its colossal power pack, it could run him down in seconds, even in this weather. For the moment he was out of his pursuers' line of vision. Andy reached deep into his pocket and pulled out the flat, smooth, white stone that told those he wanted to know that he was one of them. He lowered his window a few inches and tossed it into the frigid night. He was going to have to ditch the Chevy too.

He wheeled into an alley, eyes peeled for a spot to hide the small car. Nothing. He leaped out and sprinted three blocks through icy flurries, darting in and out of shadows, keeping to alleyways. He was grateful his daily jog and workout afforded him such conditioning at fifty-six. But he chastised himself for leaving the compound without a weapon.

It had been months since Andy had had even a close call, but

that was no excuse for laxity. If only he could distance himself enough from the Suburban, he could get Jack to have someone pick him up in a fresh, unsuspected car.

Another black Suburban whooshed past ahead of him and slid to a stop. Andy heard doors slamming and boots crunching. He whirled to head back out the way he came, but the original tailing Hydro roared up, blocking his escape. Andy slipped but stayed upright as he quickly moved left to use a window ledge, hoping to hoist himself atop a one-story building. Too late. His pursuers had filled the alley, and he faced the barrels of high-powered weapons.

A rawboned, thin-lipped woman with a shock of silver hair stepped forward. "Andrew Pass?"

He would not respond.

Another uniform, a young man, patted him down. The vapor rushing from his mouth told Andy the kid was excited. "Unarmed." He cuffed Andy's hands behind his back, the steel cold on his wrists. "I'll wand him."

Oh no.

He ran a detector over Andy's limbs, stopping when a high tone signaled the ID biochip beneath the skin of his right forearm. The young man studied an LED readout. "It's Pass, all right."

Silver Hair waved the rest of the uniforms into position. They guided Andy to a windowless truck and boosted him into the back. When the door was shut, Andy lowered himself to the floor. With his hands behind him he couldn't keep from pitching and rolling, banging into the door as the truck took off.

Would his family or his compatriots have a clue what became of him? Could he escape? He had to try. He had to do something.

Andy judged the ride at between ten and fifteen minutes, at a

speed that sent him bashing from wall to wall. When the truck finally skidded to a stop, he wrenched himself into a sitting position by planting one foot and pressing his shoulder against the side of the truck. The doors opened, and he was yanked to the ground.

The icy pavement was gritty, and the air smelled of moldering brick. They seemed to be in a run-down industrial park. A few buildings were operational, judging by their outside lights, but no doubt were deserted at this hour. The others looked abandoned, black hulks beyond the headlights of the cars ringing Andy—the Suburbans and a new one, a sleek dark limousine. Andy strained to see who was inside, but its tinted windows were impenetrable. *Some big shot.* He shuddered.

The silver-haired woman stood by the limo, talking to someone in the backseat. She came into the light, nodding to an underling who directed one of the Suburbans to the front door of the dark ruin to the left. Two men pulled a fifty-five-gallon drum from the back of the vehicle and awkwardly rolled it into the building. Two others grabbed Andy's arms and hustled him toward the door, a third propelling him from behind. They shoved him through the door and into a cavernous room where the two with the drum were prying off the perforated lid. It clanged to the floor.

Andy closed his eyes and drew in a long breath, acrid fumes attacking his nostrils. Fear flared in him. He had imagined such a moment. He prayed he would remain stoic.

The woman loomed over Andy, her eyes as silvery as her hair. *Psycho eyes.*

She moved close and bent toward Andy's ear, her breath hot and wet. "Recognize those fumes, Major?"

Andy glared, pulse raging, determined to stay silent. Surrender wasn't in his nature. A flying kick could topple this witch. A

lowered shoulder and a head butt might take out one or two more. But the odds were ludicrous. Even if he could make it to the door, there were at least four men outside, plus the driver and whoever else was in the limo—all were surely armed. Was he willing to die their way or with bullets in his back? Time was running out.

“Actions have consequences, *An-dy*,” the woman said. “Now others will get the message. The USSA does not tolerate subversives.”

Andy wanted to spit in her face. *Stay silent. Strong.* His mind reeled. *Torture? Death?* He’d risked death on the battlefield but had never faced such personal horror. Was his faith strong enough?

“Here’s your chance at bona fide martyrdom, Andy. Sainthood.”

So this was it then? Ignominious death without a fight? Andy had been taught that courage was not fearlessness but rather the management of fear. He wasn’t managing well. *I’m actually going to die.*

Two enforcers lifted him over the barrel, which was lined with napalm. As they lowered him Andy tried to kick, but his heels caught the rim of the drum as his hands and back slid into three inches of the surprisingly cool, jellied gasoline. One of the uniformed men jammed Andy’s feet into the drum. There he sat, pinned—feet above his head, chin pressed so tight to his chest that he could barely breathe.

“Ready, sir!” the woman called out.

Andy heard no reply but assumed her superior officer—the person in the limo?—was now in the building. *For what? To see me suffer?*

“Okay, hit it,” the woman barked.

Someone pressed the lid down over the barrel, sealing Andy

in. Dim light peeked through the holes. None of his training had cured his claustrophobia. His breath came in great rushes through clenched teeth.

“Stand back ten feet, gentlemen.”

The strike of a match. The tiny flame dropping into the barrel. The explosion of fumes. Andy willed himself to make no sound, but he failed. He had drawn in enough air to fill his lungs just before the conflagration enveloped him with a heat so hellish he could not fathom it. And he exhaled with a scream so piercing he could hear it above the roar of the fire.

He screamed as long as he could, knowing his next breath would draw in the flames and fuel for which his body had become a mere wick. Insane from the pain and unable to move, Andy finally sucked in the killing breath—the merciful, final invasion that roasted his lungs and heart and transported him from one world to the next.



1

WASHINGTON, D.C., STILL KNEW how to do holidays. Though the city was now merely one of seven capitals of the United Seven States of America, at times like this it harkened back to its glory days and reminded old-timers of the turn of the century—before the war changed everything, including the calendar.

Dense snowfall didn't slow traffic or seem to dampen spirits this December 24—Wintermas Eve—of 36 P.3. Lights bedecked the monuments, those that had survived the war or been erected since. Only the war memorials remained dark. While military heroes were acknowledged with appropriate burials, war itself had not been commemorated for more than thirty-five years.

The main thoroughfares of the historic city sparkled with blinking white lights that washed the trees with cheer. The West Wing, all that was left of the White House, shone through the

splatty downfall. And behind it the Columbia Region's Wintermas tree illuminated the lawn. Santas dotted street corners, ringing bells and thanking passersby for donations, but not to the Salvation Army, for neither *salvation* nor *army* remained de rigueur. The money would go to international humanitarian relief.

On a tony, tree-lined street in old Georgetown sat a row of nearly identical three-story brownstones. In the driveway of one on a corner, snow slid off the steaming hood of a rented Ford Arc, and the car's electric power pack began to cool. Fresh footprints—of two adults and two children—led to the front door. While there were no outside decorations, the den window boasted a gleaming Wintermas tree.

Inside that den, Dr. Paul Stepola, Jae Stepola, and their young family from Chicago awkwardly settled in with her parents, the former army Lieutenant General Ranold B. Decenti and his wife, Margaret.

This was the first Wintermas Eve in their ten years of marriage that the Stepolas had celebrated with the Decentis. Traditionally they spent holidays in Chicago with Paul's mother, who was alone, while the Decentis—thanks to Ranold's post-war ascendancy in the National Peace Organization, for which Paul also worked—attended a ceaseless round of high-level year-end parties. But Ranold had eased out of the administrative fray, and that September, Paul's mother had passed away after a protracted and painful battle with brain cancer. Her death was expected and not unwelcome, so it wasn't sadness at the change of venue that made the holiday greetings so stiff. The four adults had greeted each other with handshakes. Daughter Brie, seven, and son Connor, five, were formally acknowledged.

Paul had never settled on how to address his father-in-law.

He had tried *Dad*, *General*, *Ranold*, and even the sixty-six-year-old's last title in the NPO, *Deputy Director*. This year Paul called the man *sir* and lied that it was wonderful to see him again.

Margaret Decenti might as well have been invisible. She smiled occasionally but rarely spoke. Her lot in life, it appeared to Paul, was to do her husband's bidding. This she did, largely with a blank expression. Occasionally she would ask Jae to tell the kids to stop doing one thing or another.

Complicating this year's festivities for Paul was that Jae was again on his case about the time he spent on the road—her code for not trusting him. He had been caught in an indiscretion, which she persisted in calling an "affair," more than six years before. At thirty-six, a muscular six-foot-three, and possessed of a quick wit, he had always been attractive to women. Often when traveling he would have dinner with a female colleague who, after a few drinks, would radiate the signals of invitation, sometimes even brazenly. If the woman was appealing—and not infrequently she was—Paul didn't say no.

These encounters were mostly onetime, no-strings flings that livened up the boredom of travel and, to Paul's mind, had nothing to do with his marriage. But Jae sifted through his luggage like Sherlock Holmes and quizzed him relentlessly. Her jealous obsessions and tight-lipped silences were wearing him down. Paul used to love merely gazing at Jae. Now he could hardly stand being in the same room.

They had met in graduate school at the University of the District of Columbia in 22 P.3., just after Paul had left the army's top secret, elite counterterrorist strike unit, Delta Force. He had joined the army to honor his father, who had been killed in World War III when Paul was an infant. Despite his obvious proclivity for it, the military wasn't much of a career since there was little armed conflict in the world anymore. So Paul had

chosen to pursue a doctorate in religious studies, with the encouragement of his mother.

She had taught him that every war stemmed from the fairy tales of religious extremists and that the most rewarding career he could choose would be one in which he helped maintain an intellectual, humanistic society that eschewed both religion and war. "Study the major religions," she'd say again and again, "and you'll see. You'll find out what makes people follow despots like sheep. Study history or be doomed to repeat it."

It seemed everything Paul read of religion bore out his mother's belief. His religious studies program was a virtual military history course, especially when it came to World War III. It had been sparked by the Muslim holy war against Jews and the West, which began with the American World Trade Center attacks in 2001. The U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 led to an escalation of the Israel-versus-Palestine conflict, prompting devastating terrorist attacks in the nations that tried to quell it—in both North America and Europe—in 2008. Meanwhile, Catholics and Protestants continued to war in Northern Ireland, culminating in the destruction of major landmarks in London; the Balkans exploded with the mutual persecutions of the Catholics, Muslims, and Orthodox Serbs; Hindus and Muslims battled over Kashmir; and various Asian religious factions skirmished. Soon the globe was ablaze with attacks, counterattacks, reprisals, and finally, an all-out nuclear war that most thought signaled the end of the world.

Jae had been a local girl studying economics, and Paul's immediate attraction to her was returned. She was tall and lithe, a celebration for the eyes. He—she said—would easily pass muster with her father, an ex-army general and one of the founding fathers of the NPO. They married in 26 P.3., right after grad school.

Paul dreamed of a corporate job, but when his Ph.D. in reli-

gious studies didn't open those doors, Jae urged him to pursue the NPO. The National Peace Organization had risen from the ashes of the FBI and the CIA after World War III. Like the CIA, it was a foreign intelligence force—though a skeletal one, since in the postwar world the United Nations oversaw global peacekeeping. And like the FBI, it handled interstate crimes—which, these days, were as likely to be international—such as fraud, racketeering, terrorism, and drug trafficking.

Paul trained at Langley, Virginia, then spent his first few years in Chicago on the racketeering squad, where, surprisingly, his graduate work found purchase. Studying the world's major religions had introduced him to a broad range of cultures, background that proved invaluable when investigations drew him or his colleagues overseas. Now he did much of his work abroad, on one of the consulting teams the NPO hired out to help other governments train their own peacekeeping and intelligence forces.

Ranold Decenti seemed to view Paul's work as a cushy desk job. Paul never felt put down in so many words, but his father-in-law's tone and demeanor were condescending. Ranold clearly considered the early years of the NPO, when he was helping build and run it from its original headquarters in Washington, as its golden age. "Back then guys joined the agency for the action, not to teach and consult. And no one wanted to get stuck in some regional capital. The best and the brightest came to Washington."

"Well," Paul said, "maybe that made sense when it was the capital of the country. Nobody listens to Washington anymore."

"Tell me about it. Now, instead of visionary leadership, a national director baby-sits a bunch of bureau chiefs who all set their own agendas."

"Task forces work across regional lines."

"Yeah, but—"

The kids burst in, trailed by Jae, now in their pajamas and begging to know whether Wintermas presents might be opened that night instead of the next day. Margaret expelled an audible sigh.

Ranold gave her a look that could have stopped the snow. "No!"

He growled with such menace that Brie backed away, but Connor kept staring at the Wintermas tree. "Why do you have a flag on top of your tree, Grandpa? My friend Jimmy's mom says when she was little people put stars or angels on top of their trees. She's still got some."

Ranold waved dismissively. "Not in this house. And not in yours either, I hope."

"Of course not," Paul said.

Connor climbed into Paul's lap and wrapped his arms around his neck. Paul sensed the boy's fatigue. "Why not, Dad?"

"We'll talk about it in the morning," Paul said. "Now why don't you and your sister—"

"But why not? They sound pretty, like they'd look better on a Wintermas tree than an old flag."

Ranold stood and moved to the window with his back to them. "That flag stands for everything I believe in, Connor."

"He wasn't saying anything about the flag," Paul said. "He doesn't understand. He's just a—"

"He's old enough to be taught, Paul."

"It's never come up before, Ranold. I plan to tell him—"

"See that you do! And you ought to check into that mother who's harboring contraband icons."

Paul shook his head.

"What's wrong with angels and stars, Daddy?"

"I promise I'll tell you tomorrow."

"Tell him now, Paul!"

"Ranold, give it a rest. I'll decide when and how to educate my son. . . ."

Jae stood and nodded at Brie, taking Connor's hand. "Right now he's going to bed," she said.

"Tell him in bed then," her father said.

• • •

Jae avoided Paul's gaze as she led the children to the stairs. "Say good night to Grandpa and Grandma."

Both singsonged a good night. Margaret formally wished them the same. Ranold said, "Yeah, yeah."

Great, Jae thought. Paul and Dad are already sparring.

When they were first married, Paul seemed to look up to her father, but there was always an undercurrent of competition. Paul had declined a good offer from the Washington NPO bureau, asking instead to be assigned to Chicago, his hometown, to escape his father-in-law's shadow. For Jae it was an adventure to settle in a new city, and she was thrilled to land a position with the Chicago Board of Trade. Then the kids came along and she became a stay-at-home mom. Now that they were in school, she missed the camaraderie of the office but didn't feel she could go back to work with Paul on the road so much. Even when he was home, he wasn't much of a companion. In fact, he was so distant and distracted that her old suspicions came flooding back. She had been looking forward to Wintermas in Washington as a break from those worries.

At the top of the stairs, Paul caught up with her. "What?" she said.

"You know what. I don't like your father criticizing the kids."

"I don't like it either," she said, "but you know how he is. And you know what he lost because of a bunch of religious fanatics."

"Jae, come on. He overreacted. Connor brought it up and—"

"He has a reason to be hypersensitive about it."

"We all have painful areas, Jae."

"Of course we do." Jae steered the children toward their beds and tucked them in. "But, Paul, he did lose his entire army and the population of a whole state. Hawaii was a state then, you know."

Paul bent to embrace Connor, who turned away, appearing upset by the tone of the conversation. "There were a lot of states then, Jae."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

They closed the kids' door and stepped into the hall. "Just that it's not like losing a whole region would be now. And it doesn't give him the right to tell me how to raise my kids."

"Oh, Paul, he doesn't mean it that way. He was a general. He's used to speaking his mind."

"So am I."

Tears welled in Jae's eyes. "Paul, please—I want this to be a nice holiday. Mom thinks Dad's testy because he's having trouble adjusting to his consultancy—being out of the limelight."

"That was his choice, to hear him tell it. He was tired of management and could be more 'creative' in special projects, whatever that means. And it's been more than a year."

"Yes, but for someone like him, it's tough giving up the big staff and the authority and the perks, even if he's doing what he wants. So go easy on him. Can't you go back down there and try to make nice?"

"How'm I supposed to do that? I'm not going to apologize because I didn't—"

"I'm not asking you to apologize. Just smooth things over. Have a drink with Dad. There's a lot you two could talk about. Let's not start the holiday off on the wrong foot."

“I guess I could do that. Whatever you think, I don’t enjoy butting heads with the old blowhard.”

• • •

Trudging down to the den felt like going to the principal’s office. Paul was well aware that nothing upset his father-in-law more than religion. Ranold had been commander of the U.S. Pacific Army during the war. He was on his way back from Washington to his headquarters at Fort Shafter, north of Honolulu, when disaster struck. Conflict between Asian religious factions in the South China Sea resulted in the launching of two nuclear warheads. A colossal chunk of southern China, including Kowloon, was literally separated from the rest of the continent. Besides the devastation from the bombs themselves, which snuffed out tens of millions of lives, the violence to the topography caused a tsunami of such magnitude that it engulfed all of Hong Kong Island, swamped Taiwan with hundreds of feet of water, raced to the Philippine Sea and the East China Sea, obliterated Japan and Indonesia, swept into the Northwest Pacific Basin and the Japan Trench, finally reaching the North Pacific Current.

It was upon the whole of the Hawaiian Islands, swallowing the entire state before any evacuation could take place. Not one person in all of Hawaii survived. The great tidal wave eventually reached Southern California and Baja California, reaching farther inland than expected and killing thousands more who believed they had fled far enough. It changed the landscape and the history of millions of acres from the Pacific Rim to what was then known as North America. The global map would never look the same, and decades later the grief at the human toll still lingered.

A million times more destructive than the atomic bombs that had brought an end to the previous war, the killer tsunami

seemed to sober every extremist on the globe. It was as if, overnight, every nation lost its appetite for conflict.

Antireligion, antiwar factions toppled nearly every head of state, and an international government rose from the ashes and mud. The United States was redrawn to consist of seven regions:

Atlantica in the Northeast encompassed ten former states, with New York City as its capital. Columbia encompassed nine southeastern states, with Washington, D.C., as its capital. The president of the United States was deposed and the vice president installed as regional governor, reporting to the international government in Switzerland. Gulfland took in Texas and five nearby states, with Houston as its capital. Sunterra was comprised of Southern California, Arizona, and New Mexico, with Los Angeles becoming its capital. Rockland was made up of seven states, and Las Vegas became its capital. Pacifica, with its capital in San Francisco, encompassed Northern California and four northwestern states, as well as Alaska. And Chicago became the capital of Heartland, which took in ten Midwestern states.

Paul's own father had died earlier in the war, when the Coalition of Muslim Nations attacked Washington, D.C. *Ranold's loss isn't the only one that matters. His whole generation still focuses on the horrors they saw. We're never allowed to forget how they suffered so we could enjoy a lifetime of peace.*

Paul felt an immediate pang of guilt. Early in the twenty-first century the world had been uglier than he could conceive, and the devastating war had left scars—personal and global, physical and psychological—that would never be healed. He shouldn't have let his father-in-law provoke him. He hated the old man's self-righteousness, but maybe he could cut Ranold some slack.

When he reached the den, however, neither host nor hostess was still there. Paul glanced at his watch. Eleven straight up. He turned on the big-screen TV and settled in a chair.

"Local police report tonight the grisly discovery of the charred remains of a decorated military man, apparently the result of a tragic accident. The body of retired Delta Force Command Sergeant Major Andrew Edward Pass was found among the ruins of an abandoned warehouse just north of the Columbia Zoological Park."

Paul stood, mouth agape, holding his breath. *Andy? Andy Pass?*

"Police spokespersons say they have not determined any reason Major Pass would have been in the building, but they have ruled out arson. The fire has been traced to an electrical short, and police speculate that Pass may have seen the fire and attempted to put it out. Pass reportedly has been involved in community service since his retirement from the military five years ago. Full honor guard funeral services are set for Arlington Regional Cemetery at 10 A.M., Saturday, December 27."

Paul crossed the room to his father-in-law's bar. He poured two fingers of Scotch, raised the glass, then added two more. Ranold entered in robe and slippers. "No ice, Paul?"

"No thanks."

"That's a pretty good slug of booze."

"I just found out my Delta Force commanding officer is dead. He was like a father to me, and—"

"Pass?"

"You know?"

"Pour me one too. Make it bourbon."

"The news said he was caught in a burning warehouse."

"Paul, don't believe everything you hear."

"What are you saying?"

"Just that it's debatable which came first: his being caught or the warehouse burning."

"Caught by whom?"

"When was the last time you heard from Pass?"

"I don't know—seven, eight years ago."

"So you don't have a clue what he's been up to since you were his protégé at Fort Monroe."

"No, but Andy was the finest—"

"Sit down." Ranold took his glass from Paul, gesturing toward a chair.

Paul sank into the padded leather.

Ranold leaned in close. "Pass headed up an underground religious cell right here in D.C., in Brightwood Park."

"Religious? What faction?"

"Christian."

"Andy Pass? That's hard to believe. He was a veteran, a patriot . . ."

"Those are the ones who turn, you know. The true believers. Only a man who's capable of faith can be converted."

"So they say."

"It's true. Paul, we've got cells popping up like snakes in the woodpile. You gotta catch 'em while they're small. Lop off their heads and their tails soon die."

"Their heads? What's your involvement here, Ranold?"

His father-in-law smiled. "I hate snakes." He clinked his glass against Paul's and took a sip. "Let Andrew Pass serve as an example to other subversives."

• • •

Paul headed to bed gnawed by doubt. How could Andy Pass become a subversive, religious or otherwise? People changed, of course, but Andy had always seemed rock solid. And Ranold was so smug. Was that whole story prompted by his trouble adjusting to his new job, an effort to keep himself in the limelight? Could he have cobbled it together from the gossip of his old

agency cronies? Ranold was rabidly antireligious, and he loved being in the know. Maybe all those years in the cloak-and-dagger game had made the man conspiracy buggy.

Paul wanted to believe Ranold's story, but he knew better—and it filled him with rage.