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LEFT BEHIND:  
APOCALYPSE

# APOCALYPSE UNLEASHED



BASED ON THE BEST-SELLING  
LEFT BEHIND® SERIES

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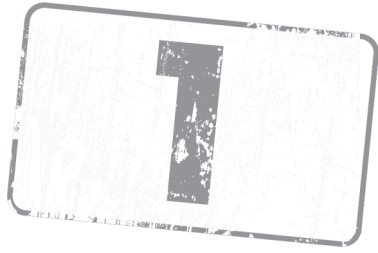
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**Village—Designation South 14, U.S. Army Rangers  
Seven Klicks North-Northeast of Harran  
Sanliurfa Province, Turkey  
Local Time 2104 Hours**

Goose drove his boot through the frail wooden door of the burning house. The door ripped free of its hinges with a loud screech that nearly drowned out the noise of the flames greedily consuming the structure. With an arm wrapped around his face to protect it from the questing, twisting flames, he dashed through the doorway.

Inside the small room, he looked for the people he was certain he'd seen through the window during his approach. Smoke blurred his vision and stung his eyes.

He pulled his assault rifle to his shoulder immediately and assumed a profile position that streamlined his body to make a smaller target. He'd been carrying the weapon for so many years the M-4A1 felt like a part of him.

"I'm First Sergeant Gander of the United States Army Rangers," he said in his command voice, stern and direct. "I'm here to get you out."

Two teenagers hunkered down beside a patchwork chair that was probably a castoff from a hotel in Sanliurfa. They stared at Goose. The older one, a girl of maybe sixteen, held a hand over her mouth and nose and the other hand over her younger sister's.

Goose lowered his weapon. "It's all right." Smoke burned his sinus passages and made his throat raw. "You need to get out of here. Do you speak English?"

The girls just looked at him with fear-filled eyes.

A pool of flame suddenly rushed across the ceiling like an incoming tide. The surface burned black in seconds and chunks fell. The fire breathed in cracks and whooshes as it claimed new territory.

Goose stepped toward the girls.

The older one wrapped the younger one protectively and pulled her back. They coughed and hacked as the smoke threatened to overcome them.

Holding a hand out, Goose said, "Please come with me." He wished he had the words to make them understand. Since he'd been stationed as part of a United Nations peacekeeping effort along the Turkish-Syrian border, he hadn't learned more than a few words of Turkish. Making matters more problematic, the area also contained several Arabic and Kurdish languages and dialects. The villages and towns were often melting pots for several cultures. He had no idea what language the girls spoke.

At the other end of the room, a timber sagged with a loud crack. A large section of the roof pulled free and dropped to the floor.

The girls screamed and held each other.

"Please," Goose said as he continued to hold out his hand. "Please." The heat boiled all around him and the air thickened with smoke. He coughed.

The younger girl looked at the older one and spoke rapidly. She pointed meaningfully at Goose.

Goose knew he wasn't at his best. He was dressed in sweat- and dirt-stained khaki BDUs, and he was armed with the assault rifle and a Beretta M9 pistol. A bandolier of extra rifle magazines crossed his Kevlar jacket. He hadn't shaved or rested well in days. He knew that, at the moment, he didn't look like the kind of guy anyone should trust.

"United States Army," Goose said. "United Nations. Good guy." Those words had served him in tours of duty in several foreign countries. A lot of people who didn't understand English at least understood those words.

"Good guy," the younger girl said hopefully and turned to the older one. "Good guy."

The older girl shook her head vehemently. She spoke rapidly, but the smoke choked her out. When the younger girl tried to get up, the older girl wrapped her arms around her and pulled her back.

"Please," Goose said again, "you've got to come with me."

The younger girl fought off the older one and struggled to get up. A coughing jag took her strength away and almost knocked her off her feet.

Goose put a hand on the girl's shoulder and steadied her. When he glanced back at the door, he saw that flames had spanned the opening. Embers spiraled up into the night sky. He could faintly see other soldiers from his squad running from house to house, getting people out.

Goose squatted down to her level so he wouldn't seem so threatening. "I'm going to get you out of here. Okay?" He nodded, wanting to establish some kind of communication bedrock.

The girl nodded back. Tears coursed down her cheeks.

Goose slung the M-4A1 across his back and reached for the older girl with his other hand. "C'mon. You've got to get out of here. Good guy. Good guy."

Another section of ceiling, closer this time, crashed to the floor. The older girl became a believer then. Whether she believed in the soldier in front of her or the fact that she was going to die if she stayed in the house, Goose didn't know. In the end, it didn't matter. He took her hand in his and pulled her to her feet.

He glanced around and found a blanket on a small pallet in the corner of the room. He let go of the girls long enough to retrieve the blanket, then shook it out and wrapped it around them.

Flames spat and cracked like live things. The smoke was now so thick that simply looking from one side of the room to the other was almost impossible.

"Hold on to the blanket." Goose held the cloth over their faces and tried to get them to understand. "Hold on."

Neither of the girls moved.

Feeling panicked by the increasing heat in the room and his own vision starting to go in and out of focus, Goose took one of the younger girl's hands and put it on the edge of the blanket.

"Hold on," he repeated.

She grasped his meaning and wrapped her fingers in the blanket's edge.

"Good," Goose said and started coughing. Tears blurred his vision. He started the girls back toward the wall of flame that filled the door.

They froze at once. Goose knew they'd figured out what they were going to have to do and weren't happy with it. He pulled the blanket down over their faces.

"Hold on," he said. "Just hold on." *God, if You're listening today, please help me get these girls out of here.* He prayed, but it seemed like his faith hadn't been as strong as it should have been lately. He pulled the girls toward the door.



At that moment, the ceiling gave way and the roof of the house collapsed. Everything rushed down to fill the room, and a heavy weight crashed against Goose's shoulders.



### **Local Time 2106 Hours**

"Which house did Goose go into?" Danielle Vinchenzo swung from the passenger seat of the Land Rover before it came to a full stop. The tires crushed the baked earth of the dirt roadway that cut through the heart of the village.

"That one." The driver pointed. "The one on fire."

Danielle raked the houses and tried to figure out which one was "that one." It was hard. The houses were all on fire. She turned to her cameraman, a young man in a concert T-shirt and shorts who was scrambling from the Land Rover's rear deck with a camera over one shoulder.

"Are you ready?" Danielle smoothed her blouse and combed fingers through her short dark hair.

"Shouldn't we be helping evacuate the people?" the cameraman asked.

"Believe me, Gary," she said, "we'd only be in the way. Goose and his men know what they're doing, and they're much better at it than we would be. We're going to do the guys here more good by letting the world know what they're facing and that they need help. Now get that camera on me."

"Get out from in front of the fire." The cameraman settled the camera on his shoulder. "You're going to be nothing but a shadow with that directly in the background."

Danielle shifted to the side, took a deep breath, and exhaled the fear and anxiety of the last few minutes.

"Ready?" Gary asked.

"Ready." She held up a hand and counted down. "Three, two, one." Her hand fell to her side. "This is Danielle Vinchenzo of OneWorld NewsNet. As you can see behind me, we're at ground zero of a recent attack in Sanliurfa Province in Turkey. The United States Army's 75th Regiment out of Fort Benning, Georgia, is presently engaged in trying to keep back the encroaching Syrian military forces threatening to invade Turkey."

Something in one of the houses blew up. Flaming debris lit the



sky like a Fourth of July fireworks display. Men yelled, and someone screamed in terror.

"First Sergeant Samuel Gander, whom you've gotten to know through my previous broadcasts, is commanding a resupply convoy to Harran. The United States Army entrenched here has established observation points throughout southern Turkey for field spotters. Since U.S. forces have been in Sanliurfa, they've been under constant attack from Syria."

One of the army Hummers rocketed by and closed on the exploded house. Rock and loose dirt sprayed from under the locked tires.

"I got wounded!" someone cried. "I got wounded! I need a medic for these people!"

*Focus on your job, Danielle told herself. A reporter helps most by revealing where help is needed.*

"Only moments ago," Danielle went on, "Sergeant Gander's scouts spotted this village blazing." She turned dramatically to gesture at the houses. "Although the origin at this point remains unconfirmed, this appears to be an attack made by one of the local warlords. The warlords have torn through towns and villages in an effort to provision themselves. Water and food are in short supply."

A Ranger corporal Danielle had gotten to know over the last few days barked orders at soldiers. They quickly formed a line and kept the villagers back from the worst of the burning houses.

"Since the mysterious event that caused nearly a third of the earth's population to disappear weeks ago," Danielle said, "the world has been in turmoil. I know that you—wherever you are—have gone through the same kind of turmoil these men now face. But I doubt many of you have the enemy beating on your front door."

Below the camera's view frame, Danielle pointed toward the line of burning houses. The cameraman swung instantly in that direction. She continued with the voice-over.

"In addition to the peacekeeping efforts they've been providing here," Danielle said, "the 75th Rangers have also set up triages and camps to take care of the wounded and survivors of the Syrian SCUD attacks. But the army troops are hard-pressed and spread thin. Eighteen- and twenty-hour days are taking their toll."

"Please," a man called in heavily accented English as he staggered into the street. "My daughter. You must help me find my daughter."

The cameraman picked up the man as he stumbled out of the shadows. He was covered in ashes and disheveled. Blood leaked from a cut over his eye.

Two of the Rangers approached the man. One of them held his assault rifle centered on the man's chest. Frightened, the man raised his hands high above his head. The other Ranger quickly threw the man to the ground on his stomach and locked his arms behind his back.

"Please," the man begged. "My daughter was in the house when we were bombed."

Danielle spoke quickly. At home, the scene could easily be misinterpreted. "Due to the constant threat of Syrian militia, terrorists that have targeted the Turkish government for their pro-America stance, and the warlords, the Rangers aren't able to let their guards down. Everyone outside their tightly knit unit is suspect."

"How old's your daughter?" The Ranger frisked the man quickly, then looked up at his teammate and shook his head. The other Ranger lowered his weapon.

"Seventeen," the man wailed. "She's only seventeen."

"All right. Stay calm. We're gonna help you find her." The Ranger helped the man to his feet. "Which house?"

The man pointed to a house that had flames shooting twenty feet and more above it. More flames gushed from the windows and chewed into the house's exterior.

"There," the man said. "That one."

"Ain't nothing alive in that house," one of the Rangers said.

Danielle silently agreed, but she knew she was racking up dead air on the newscast. "Even responding as quickly as the Rangers did, there isn't much they've been able to do here."

Suddenly a young woman sprinted across the open space, screaming. Both Rangers brought up their weapons. A cold knot of fear formed in Danielle's stomach as she grew afraid she was about to witness the young girl's death. She couldn't fault the soldiers; they were in a land of hostiles.

"It's all right," the man shouted. "It's my daughter!" He rushed forward and threw his arms around the girl, lifting her from her feet in his joy.

"What happened here?" one of the Rangers asked.

The man put his daughter down and turned to the soldiers. "It was the bandits. They came and they bombed the town."

"They didn't take anything?" the Ranger asked.

"No. Nothing. They just started attacking the village. Most people were already in bed. We had no chance to fight back."

Danielle's mind churned that new information into a working hypothesis. She didn't like where her instincts were leading her.

Evidently the Ranger's thoughts were following the same track as Danielle's. He turned from the father-daughter reunion and put a hand to the ear-throat communications device he wore.

"Where's Sergeant Gander?" he asked. He waited a moment; then his head swiveled in the direction of one of the hardest-hit homes. "Are you sure he went inside?"

Danielle stared at the whirling inferno that the house had become. No one could have walked through that fire, and if they had, she feared they weren't coming back.

The corporal and his friend ran toward the building. Two young girls covered in a flaming blanket burst through the doorway. As one, the nearby soldiers grabbed the two girls and stripped the flaming blanket from them. Other soldiers beat embers and flames from their clothing.

"Where's the soldier that went in after you?" one of the Rangers asked.

The girl shook her head.

"She don't speak English," another Ranger said.

The corporal grabbed his Kevlar vest, yanked on it, then pointed back to the burning house. The younger girl nodded, obviously getting the context.

"Good guy," the girl said.

The corporal smiled. "That's right. That's our designation. Good guy."

The young woman kept pointing toward the house.

Looking at the flames, Danielle knew there was no way anyone could live through that. If First Sergeant "Goose" Gander was inside that house, she felt certain that he wasn't coming back out.

At that moment, the house's roof collapsed. Flames and smoke belched out of the windows and the open door. Rangers started to run toward the house.

"Sergeant Gander's inside the house," one of them said hoarsely, and that brought them all. "We gotta get him out."

"Back up," a grizzled veteran squalled.

"But First Sergeant Gander is in there!" someone shouted.

"And it's already too late. Stay back. We don't want to lose anyone else."