



LEFT BEHIND SERIES
LEFT BEHIND • TRIBULATION FORCE • NICOLAE
COLLECTORS EDITION I

RAPTURE'S WITNESS



TIM LAHAYE
JERRY B. JENKINS



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LEFT
BEHIND

* * *

*For Alice MacDonald and Bonita Jenkins,
who ensured we would not be left behind*

1

RAYFORD STEELE'S MIND was on a woman he had never touched. With his fully loaded 747 on autopilot above the Atlantic en route to a 6 a.m. landing at Heathrow, Rayford had pushed from his mind thoughts of his family.

Over spring break he would spend time with his wife and twelve-year-old son. Their daughter would be home from college, too. But for now, with his first officer fighting sleep, Rayford imagined Hattie Durham's smile and looked forward to their next meeting.

Hattie was Rayford's senior flight attendant. He hadn't seen her in more than an hour.

Rayford used to look forward to getting home to his wife. Irene was attractive and vivacious enough, even at forty. But lately he had found himself repelled by her obsession with religion. It was all she could talk about.

God was OK with Rayford Steele. Rayford even enjoyed church occasionally. But since Irene had hooked up with a smaller congregation and was into weekly Bible studies and church every Sunday, Rayford had become uncomfortable. Hers was not a church where people gave you the benefit of the doubt, assumed the best about you, and let you be. People there had actually asked him, to his face, what God was doing in his life.

"Blessing my socks off" had become the smiling response that seemed to satisfy them, but he found more and more excuses to be busy on Sundays.

Rayford tried to tell himself it was his wife's devotion to a divine suitor that caused his mind to wander. But he knew the real reason was his own libido.

Besides, Hattie Durham was drop-dead gorgeous. No one could argue that. What he enjoyed most was that she was a toucher. Nothing inappropriate, nothing showy. She simply touched his arm as she brushed past or rested her hand gently on his shoulder when she stood behind his seat in the cockpit.

It wasn't her touch alone that made Rayford enjoy her company. He could tell from her expressions, her demeanor, her eye contact that she at least admired and respected him. Whether she was interested in anything more, he could only guess. And so he did.

They had spent time together, chatting for hours over drinks or dinner, sometimes with coworkers, sometimes not. He had not returned so much as one brush of a finger, but his eyes had held her gaze, and he could only assume his smile had made its point.

Maybe today. Maybe this morning, if her coded tap on the door didn't rouse his first officer, he would reach and cover the hand on his shoulder—in a friendly way he hoped she would recognize as a step, a first from his side, toward a relationship.

And a first it would be. He was no prude, but Rayford had never been unfaithful to Irene. He'd had plenty of opportunities. He had long felt guilty about a private necking session he enjoyed at a company Christmas party more than twelve years before. Irene had stayed home, uncomfortably past her ninth month carrying their surprise tagalong son, Ray Jr.

Though under the influence, Rayford had known enough to leave the party early. It was clear Irene noticed he was slightly drunk, but she couldn't have suspected anything else, not from her straight-arrow captain. He was the pilot who had once consumed two martinis during a snowy shutdown at O'Hare and then voluntarily grounded himself when the weather cleared. He offered to pay for bringing in a relief pilot, but Pan-Continental was so impressed that instead they made an example of his self-discipline and wisdom.

In a couple of hours Rayford would be the first to see hints of the sun, a teasing palette of pastels that would signal the reluctant dawn over the continent. Until then, the blackness through the window seemed miles thick. His groggy or sleeping passengers had window shades down, pillows and blankets in place. For now the plane was a dark, humming sleep chamber for all but a few wanderers, the attendants, and one or two responders to nature's call.

The question of the darkest hour before dawn, then, was whether Rayford Steele should risk a new, exciting relationship with Hattie Durham. He suppressed a smile. Was he kidding himself? Would someone with his reputation ever do anything but dream about a beautiful woman fifteen years his junior? He wasn't so sure anymore. If only Irene hadn't gone off on this new kick.

Would it fade, her preoccupation with the end of the world, with the love of Jesus, with the salvation of souls? Lately she had been reading everything she could get her hands on about the rapture of the church. "Can you imagine, Rafe," she exulted, "Jesus coming back to get us before we die?"

"Yeah, boy," he said, peeking over the top of his newspaper, "that would kill me."

She was not amused. "If I didn't know what would happen to me," she said, "I wouldn't be glib about it."

“I *do* know what would happen to me,” he insisted. “I’d be dead, gone, *fnis*. But you, of course, would fly right up to heaven.”

He hadn’t meant to offend her. He was just having fun. When she turned away he rose and pursued her. He spun her around and tried to kiss her, but she was cold. “Come on, Irene,” he said. “Tell me thousands wouldn’t just keel over if they saw Jesus coming back for all the good people.”

She had pulled away in tears. “I’ve told you and told you. Saved people aren’t good people, they’re—”

“Just forgiven, yeah, I know,” he said, feeling rejected and vulnerable in his own living room. He returned to his chair and his paper. “If it makes you feel any better, I’m happy for you that you can be so cocksure.”

“I only believe what the Bible says,” Irene said.

Rayford shrugged. He wanted to say, “Good for you,” but he didn’t want to make a bad situation worse. In a way he had envied her confidence, but in truth he wrote it off to her being a more emotional, more feelings-oriented person. He didn’t want to articulate it, but the fact was, he was brighter—yes, more intelligent. He believed in rules, systems, laws, patterns, things you could see and feel and hear and touch.

If God was part of all that, OK. A higher power, a loving being, a force behind the laws of nature, fine. Let’s sing about it, pray about it, feel good about our ability to be kind to others, and go about our business. Rayford’s greatest fear was that this religious fixation would not fade like Irene’s Amway days, her Tupperware phase, and her aerobics spell. He could just see her ringing doorbells and asking if she could read people a verse or two. Surely she knew better than to dream of his tagging along.

Irene had become a full-fledged religious fanatic, and somehow that freed Rayford to daydream without guilt about Hattie Durham. Maybe he would say something, suggest something, hint at something as he and Hattie strode through Heathrow toward the cab line. Maybe earlier. Dare he assert himself even now, hours before touchdown?

* * *

Next to a window in first class, a writer sat hunched over his laptop. He shut down the machine, vowing to get back to his journal later. At thirty, Cameron Williams was the youngest ever senior writer for the prestigious *Global Weekly*. The envy of the rest of the veteran staff, he either scooped them on or was assigned to the best stories in the world. Both admirers and detractors at the magazine called him Buck, because they said he was always bucking tradition

and authority. Buck believed he lived a charmed life, having been eyewitness to some of the most pivotal events in history.

A year and two months earlier, his January 1 cover story had taken him to Israel to interview Chaim Rosenzweig and had resulted in the most bizarre event he had ever experienced.

The elderly Rosenzweig had been the only unanimous choice for Newsmaker of the Year in the history of *Global Weekly*. Its staff had customarily steered clear of anyone who would be an obvious pick as *Time's* Man of the Year. But Rosenzweig was an automatic. Cameron Williams had gone into the staff meeting prepared to argue for Rosenzweig and against whatever media star the others would typically champion.

He was pleasantly surprised when executive editor Steve Plank opened with, "Anybody want to nominate someone stupid, such as anyone other than the Nobel prizewinner in chemistry?"

The senior staff members looked at each other, shook their heads, and pretended to begin leaving. "Put the chairs on the wagon—the meetin' is over," Buck said. "Steve, I'm not angling for it, but you know I know the guy and he trusts me."

"Not so fast, Cowboy," a rival said, then appealed to Plank. "You letting Buck assign himself now?"

"I might," Steve said. "And what if I do?"

"I just think this is a technical piece, a science story," Buck's detractor muttered. "I'd put the science writer on it."

"And you'd put the reader to sleep," Plank said. "C'mon, you know the writer for showcase pieces comes from this group. And this is not a science piece any more than the first one Buck did on him. This has to be told so the reader gets to know the man and understands the significance of his achievement."

"Like that isn't obvious. It only changed the course of history."

"I'll make the assignment today," the executive editor said. "Thanks for your willingness, Buck. I assume everyone else is willing as well." Expressions of eagerness filled the room, but Buck also heard grumbled predictions that the fair-haired boy would get the nod. Which he did.

Such confidence from his boss and competition from his peers made him all the more determined to outdo himself with every assignment. In Israel, Buck stayed in a military compound and met with Rosenzweig in the same kibbutz on the outskirts of Haifa where he had interviewed him a year earlier.

Rosenzweig was fascinating, of course, but it was his discovery, or invention—no one knew quite how to categorize it—that was truly the "newsmaker

of the year.” The humble man called himself a botanist, but he was in truth a chemical engineer who had concocted a synthetic fertilizer that caused the desert sands of Israel to bloom like a greenhouse.

“Irrigation has not been a problem for decades,” the old man said. “But all that did was make the sand wet. My formula, added to the water, fertilizes the sand.”

Buck was not a scientist, but he knew enough to shake his head at that simple statement. Rosenzweig’s formula was fast making Israel the richest nation on earth, far more profitable than its oil-laden neighbors. Every inch of ground blossomed with flowers and grains, including produce never before conceivable in Israel. The Holy Land became an export capital, the envy of the world, with virtually zero unemployment. Everyone prospered.

The prosperity brought about by the miracle formula changed the course of history for Israel. Flush with cash and resources, Israel made peace with her neighbors. Free trade and liberal passage allowed all who loved the nation to have access to it. What they did not have access to, however, was the formula.

Buck had not even asked the old man to reveal the formula or the complicated security process that protected it from any potential enemy. The very fact that Buck was housed by the military evidenced the importance of security. Maintaining that secret ensured the power and independence of the state of Israel. Never had Israel enjoyed such tranquility. The walled city of Jerusalem was only a symbol now, welcoming everyone who embraced peace. The old guard believed God had rewarded them and compensated them for centuries of persecution.

Chaim Rosenzweig was honored throughout the world and revered in his own country. Global leaders sought him out, and he was protected by security systems as complex as those that protected heads of state. As heady as Israel became with newfound glory, the nation’s leaders were not stupid. A kidnapped and tortured Rosenzweig could be forced to reveal a secret that would similarly revolutionize any nation in the world.

Imagine what the formula might do if modified to work on the vast tundra of Russia! Could regions bloom, though snow covered most of the year? Was this the key to resurrecting that massive nation following the shattering of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics?

Russia had become a great brooding giant with a devastated economy and regressed technology. All the nation had was military might, every spare mark going into weaponry. And the switch from rubles to marks had not been a smooth transition for the struggling nation. Streamlining world finance to three major currencies had taken years, but once the change was made, most were

happy with it. All of Europe and Russia dealt exclusively in marks. Asia, Africa, and the Middle East traded in yen. North and South America and Australia dealt in dollars. A move was afoot to go to one global currency, but those nations that had reluctantly switched once were loath to do it again.

Frustrated at their inability to profit from Israel's fortune and determined to dominate and occupy the Holy Land, the Russians had launched an attack against Israel in the middle of the night. The assault became known as the Russian Pearl Harbor, and because of his interview with Rosenzweig, Buck Williams was in Haifa when it happened. The Russians sent intercontinental ballistic missiles and nuclear-equipped MiG fighter-bombers into the region. The number of aircraft and warheads made it clear their mission was annihilation.

To say the Israelis were caught off guard, Cameron Williams had written, was like saying the Great Wall of China was long. When Israeli radar picked up the Russian planes, they were nearly overhead. Israel's frantic plea for support from her immediate neighbors and the United States was simultaneous with her demand to know the intentions of the invaders of her airspace. By the time Israel and her allies could have mounted anything close to a defense, it was obvious the Russians would have her outnumbered a hundred to one.

They had only moments before the destruction would begin. There would be no more negotiating, no more pleas for a sharing of the wealth with the hordes of the north. If the Russians meant only to intimidate and bully, they would not have filled the sky with missiles. Planes could turn back, but the missiles were armed and targeted.

So this was no grandstand play designed to bring Israel to her knees. There was no message for the victims. Receiving no explanation for war machines crossing her borders and descending upon her, Israel was forced to defend herself, knowing full well that the first volley would bring about her virtual disappearance from the face of the earth.

With warning sirens screaming and radio and television sending the doomed for what flimsy cover they might find, Israel defended herself for what would surely be the last time in history. The first battery of Israeli surface-to-air missiles hit their marks, and the sky was lit with orange and yellow balls of fire that would certainly do little to slow a Russian offensive for which there could be no defense.

Those who knew the odds and what the radar screens foretold interpreted the deafening explosions in the sky as the Russian onslaught. Every military leader who knew what was coming expected to be put out of his misery in seconds when the fusillade reached the ground and covered the nation.

From what he heard and saw in the military compound, Buck Williams

knew the end was near. There was no escape. But as the night shone like day and the horrific, deafening explosions continued, nothing on the ground suffered. The building shook and rattled and rumbled. And yet it was not hit.

Outside, warplanes slammed to the ground, digging craters and sending burning debris flying. Yet lines of communication stayed open. No other command posts had been hit. No reports of casualties. Nothing destroyed yet.

Was this some sort of a cruel joke? Sure, the first Israeli missiles had taken out Russian fighters and caused missiles to explode too high to cause more than fire damage on the ground. But what had happened to the rest of the Russian air corps? Radar showed they had clearly sent nearly every plane they had, leaving hardly anything in reserve for defense. Thousands of planes swooped down on the tiny country's most populated cities.

The roar and the cacophony continued, the explosions so horrifying that veteran military leaders buried their faces and screamed in terror. Buck had always wanted to be near the front lines, but his survival instinct was on full throttle. He knew beyond doubt that he would die, and he found himself thinking the strangest thoughts. Why had he never married? Would there be remnants of his body for his father and brother to identify? Was there a God? Would death be the end?

He crouched beneath a console, surprised by the urge to sob. This was not at all what he had expected war to sound like, to look like. He had imagined himself peeking at the action from a safe spot, recording in his mind the drama.

Several minutes into the holocaust, Buck realized he would be no more dead outside than in. He felt no bravado, only uniqueness. He would be the only person in this post who would see and know what killed him. He made his way to a door on rubbery legs. No one seemed to notice or care to warn him. It was as if they had all been sentenced to death.

He forced open the door against a furnace blast and had to shield his eyes from the whiteness of the blaze. The sky was afire. He still heard planes over the din and roar of the fire itself, and the occasional exploding missile sent new showers of flame into the air. He stood in stark terror and amazement as the great machines of war plummeted to the earth all over the city, crashing and burning. But they fell between buildings and in deserted streets and fields. Anything atomic and explosive erupted high in the atmosphere, and Buck stood there in the heat, his face blistering and his body pouring sweat. What in the world was happening?

Then came chunks of ice and hailstones big as golf balls, forcing Buck to cover his head with his jacket. The earth shook and resounded, throwing him to the ground. Facedown in the freezing shards, he felt rain wash over him.

Suddenly the only sound was the fire in the sky, and it began to fade as it drifted lower. After ten minutes of thunderous roaring, the fire dissipated, and scattered balls of flame flickered on the ground. The firelight disappeared as quickly as it had come. Stillness settled over the land.

As clouds of smoke wafted away on a gentle breeze, the night sky reappeared in its blue-blackness and stars shone peacefully as if nothing had gone awry.

Buck turned back to the building, his muddy leather jacket in his fist. The doorknob was still hot, and inside, military leaders wept and shuddered. The radio was alive with reports from Israeli pilots. They had not been able to get airborne in time to do anything but watch as the entire Russian air offensive seemed to destroy itself.

Miraculously, not one casualty was reported in all of Israel. Otherwise Buck might have believed some mysterious malfunction had caused missile and plane to destroy each other. But witnesses reported that it had been a firestorm, along with rain and hail and an earthquake, that consumed the entire offensive effort.

Had it been a divinely appointed meteor shower? Perhaps. But what accounted for hundreds and thousands of chunks of burning, twisted, molten steel smashing to the ground in Haifa, Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, Jericho, even Bethlehem—leveling ancient walls but not so much as scratching one living creature? Daylight revealed the carnage and exposed Russia's secret alliance with Middle Eastern nations, primarily Ethiopia and Libya.

Among the ruins, the Israelis found combustible material that would serve as fuel and preserve their natural resources for more than six years. Special task forces competed with buzzards and vultures for the flesh of the enemy dead, trying to bury them before their bones were picked clean and disease threatened the nation.

Buck remembered it vividly, as if it were yesterday. Had he not been there and seen it himself, he would not have believed it. And it took more than he had in him to get any reader of *Global Weekly* to buy it either.

Editors and readers had their own explanations for the phenomenon, but Buck admitted, if only to himself, that he became a believer in God that day. Jewish scholars pointed out passages from the Bible that talked about God destroying Israel's enemies with a firestorm, earthquake, hail, and rain. Buck was stunned when he read Ezekiel 38 and 39 about a great enemy from the north invading Israel with the help of Persia, Libya, and Ethiopia. More stark was that the Scriptures foretold of weapons of war used as fire fuel and enemy soldiers eaten by birds or buried in a common grave.

Christian friends wanted Buck to take the next step and believe in Christ,

now that he was so clearly spiritually attuned. He wasn't prepared to go that far, but he was certainly a different person and a different journalist from then on. To him, nothing was beyond belief.

* * *

Not sure whether he'd follow through with anything overt, Captain Rayford Steele felt an irresistible urge to see Hattie Durham right then. He unstrapped himself and squeezed his first officer's shoulder on the way out of the cockpit. "We're still on auto, Christopher," he said as the younger man roused and straightened his headphones. "I'm gonna make the sunup stroll."

Christopher squinted and licked his lips. "Doesn't look like sunup to me, Cap."

"Probably another hour or two. I'll see if anybody's stirring anyway."

"Roger. If they are, tell 'em Chris says, 'Hey.'"

Rayford snorted and nodded. As he opened the cockpit door, Hattie Durham nearly bowled him over.

"No need to knock," he said. "I'm coming."

The senior flight attendant pulled him into the galleyway, but there was no passion in her touch. Her fingers felt like talons on his forearm, and her body shuddered in the darkness.

"Hattie—"

She pressed him back against the cooking compartments, her face close to his. Had she not been clearly terrified, he might have enjoyed this and returned her embrace. Her knees buckled as she tried to speak, and her voice came in a whiny squeal.

"People are missing," she managed in a whisper, burying her head in his chest.

He took her shoulders and tried to push her back, but she fought to stay close. "What do you m—?"

She was sobbing now, her body out of control. "A whole bunch of people, just gone!"

"Hattie, this is a big plane. They've wandered to the lavs or—"

She pulled his head down so she could speak directly into his ear. Despite her weeping, she was plainly fighting to make herself understood. "I've been everywhere. I'm telling you, dozens of people are missing."

"Hattie, it's still dark. We'll find—"

"I'm not crazy! See for yourself! All over the plane, people have disappeared."

"It's a joke. They're hiding, trying to—"

"Ray! Their shoes, their socks, their clothes, everything was left behind. These people are gone!"

Hattie slipped from his grasp and knelt whimpering in the corner. Rayford wanted to comfort her, to enlist her help, or to get Chris to go with him through the plane. More than anything he wanted to believe the woman was crazy. She knew better than to put him on. It was obvious she really believed people had disappeared.

He had been daydreaming in the cockpit. Was he asleep now? He bit his lip hard and winced at the pain. So he was wide awake. He stepped into first class, where an elderly woman sat stunned in the predawn haze, her husband's sweater and trousers in her hands. "What in the world?" she said. "Harold?"

Rayford scanned the rest of first class. Most passengers were still asleep, including a young man by the window, his laptop computer on the tray table. But indeed several seats were empty. As Rayford's eyes grew accustomed to the low light, he strode quickly to the stairway. He started down, but the woman called to him.

"Sir, my husband—"

Rayford put a finger to his lips and whispered, "I know. We'll find him. I'll be right back."

What nonsense! he thought as he descended, aware of Hattie right behind him. "*We'll find him?*"

Hattie grabbed his shoulder and he slowed. "Should I turn on the cabin lights?"

"No," he whispered. "The less people know right now, the better."

Rayford wanted to be strong, to have answers, to be an example to his crew, to Hattie. But when he reached the lower level he knew the rest of the flight would be chaotic. He was as scared as anyone on board. As he scanned the seats, he nearly panicked. He backed into a secluded spot behind the bulkhead and slapped himself hard on the cheek.

This was no joke, no trick, no dream. Something was terribly wrong, and there was no place to run. There would be enough confusion and terror without his losing control. Nothing had prepared him for this, and he would be the one everybody would look to. But for what? What was he supposed to do?

First one, then another cried out when they realized their seatmates were missing but that their clothes were still there. They cried, they screamed, they leaped from their seats. Hattie grabbed Rayford from behind and wrapped her hands so tight around his chest that he could hardly breathe. "Rayford, what is this?"

He pulled her hands apart and turned to face her. "Hattie, listen. I don't know any more than you do. But we've got to calm these people and get on the ground. I'll make some kind of an announcement, and you and your people keep everybody in their seats. OK?"

She nodded but she didn't look OK at all. As he edged past her to hurry back to the cockpit, he heard her scream. *So much for calming the passengers*, he thought as he whirled to see her on her knees in the aisle. She lifted a blazer, shirt and tie still intact. Trousers lay at her feet. Hattie frantically turned the blazer to the low light and read the name tag. "Tony!" she wailed. "Tony's gone!"

Rayford snatched the clothes from her and tossed them behind the bulkhead. He lifted Hattie by her elbows and pulled her out of sight. "Hattie, we're hours from touchdown. We can't have a planeload of hysterical people. I'm going to make an announcement, but you have to do your job. Can you?"

She nodded, her eyes vacant. He forced her to look at him. "Will you?" he said.

She nodded again. "Rayford, are we going to die?"

"No," he said. "That I'm sure of."

But he wasn't sure of anything. How could he know? He'd rather have faced an engine fire or even an uncontrolled dive. A crash into the ocean had to be better than this. How would he keep people calm in such a nightmare?

By now keeping the cabin lights off was doing more harm than good, and he was glad to be able to give Hattie a specific assignment. "I don't know what I'm going to say," he said, "but get the lights on so we can make an accurate record of who's here and who's gone, and then get more of those foreign visitor declaration forms."

"For what?"

"Just do it. Have them ready."

Rayford didn't know if he had done the right thing by leaving Hattie in charge of the passengers and crew. As he raced up the stairs, he caught sight of another attendant backing out of a galleyway, screaming. By now poor Christopher in the cockpit was the only one on the plane unaware of what was happening. Worse, Rayford had told Hattie he didn't know what was happening any more than she did.

The terrifying truth was that he knew all too well. Irene had been right. He, and most of his passengers, had been left behind.

TRIBULATION FORCE

* * *

*To those readers of Left Behind
who wrote to tell us of its impact*

1

IT WAS RAYFORD STEELE'S turn for a break. He pulled the headphones down onto his neck and dug into his flight bag for his wife's Bible, marveling at how quickly his life had changed. How many hours had he wasted during idle moments like this, poring over newspapers and magazines that had nothing to say? After all that had happened, only one book could hold his interest.

The Boeing 747 was on auto from Baltimore to a four o'clock Friday afternoon landing at Chicago O'Hare, but Rayford's new first officer, Nick, sat staring ahead anyway, as if piloting the plane. *Doesn't want to talk to me anymore*, Rayford thought. *Knew what was coming and shut me down before I opened my mouth.*

"Is it going to offend you if I sit reading this for a while?" Rayford asked.

The younger man turned and pulled the left phone away from his own ear. "Say again?"

Rayford repeated himself, pointing to the Bible. It had belonged to the wife he hadn't seen for more than two weeks and probably would not see for another seven years.

"As long as you don't expect me to listen."

"I got that loud and clear, Nick. You understand I don't care what you think of me, don't you?"

"Sir?"

Rayford leaned close and spoke louder. "What you think of me would have been hugely important a few weeks ago," he said. "But—"

"Yeah, I know, OK? I got it, Steele, all right? You and lots of other people think the whole thing was Jesus. Not buying. Delude yourself, but leave me out of it."

Rayford raised his brows and shrugged. "You wouldn't respect me if I hadn't tried."

"Don't be too sure."

But when Rayford turned back to his reading, it was the *Chicago Tribune* sticking out of his bag that grabbed his attention.

The *Tribune*, like every other paper in the world, carried the front-page story: During a private meeting at the United Nations, just before a Nicolae Carpathia press conference, a horrifying murder/suicide had occurred. New U.N. Secretary-General Nicolae Carpathia had just installed the ten new members of the expanded Security Council, seeming to err by inaugurating two men to the same position of U.N. ambassador from the Great States of Britain.

According to the witnesses, billionaire Jonathan Stonagal, Carpathia's friend and financial backer, suddenly overpowered a guard, stole his handgun, and shot himself in the head, the bullet passing through and killing one of the new ambassadors from Britain.

The United Nations had been closed for the day, and Carpathia was despondent over the tragic loss of his two dear friends and trusted advisers.

Bizarre as it might seem, Rayford Steele was one of only four people on the planet who knew the truth about Nicolae Carpathia—that he was a liar, a hypnotic brainwasher, the Antichrist himself. Others might suspect Carpathia of being other than he seemed, but only Rayford, his daughter, his pastor, and his new friend, journalist Buck Williams, knew for sure.

Buck had been one of the seventeen in that United Nations meeting room. And he had witnessed something entirely different—not a murder/suicide, but a double murder. Carpathia himself, according to Buck, had methodically borrowed the guard's gun, forced his old friend Jonathan Stonagal to kneel, then killed Stonagal and the British ambassador with one shot.

Carpathia had choreographed the murders, and then, while the witnesses sat in horror, Carpathia quietly told them what they had seen—the same story the newspapers now carried. Every witness in that room but one corroborated it. Most chilling, they believed it. Even Steve Plank, Buck's former boss, now Carpathia's press agent. Even Hattie Durham, Rayford's onetime flight attendant, who had become Carpathia's personal assistant. Everyone except Buck Williams.

Rayford had been dubious when Buck told his version in Bruce Barnes's office two nights ago. "You're the only person in the room who saw it your way?" he had challenged the writer.

"Captain Steele," Buck had said, "we all saw it the same way. But then Carpathia calmly described what he wanted us to think we had seen, and everybody but me immediately accepted it as truth. I want to know how he explains that he had the dead man's successor already there and sworn in when the murder took place. But now there's no evidence I was even there. It's as if Carpathia washed me from their memories. People I know now swear I wasn't there, and they aren't joking."

Chloe and Bruce Barnes had looked at each other and then back at Buck.

Buck had finally become a believer, just before entering the meeting at the U.N. “I’m absolutely convinced that if I had gone into that room without God,” Buck said, “I would have been reprogrammed too.”

“But now if you just tell the world the truth—”

“Sir, I’ve been reassigned to Chicago because my boss believes I missed that meeting. Steve Plank asked why I had not accepted his invitation. I haven’t talked to Hattie yet, but you know she won’t remember I was there.”

“The biggest question,” Bruce Barnes said, “is what Carpathia thinks is in your head. Does he think he’s erased the truth from *your* mind? If he knows you know, you’re in grave danger.”

Now, as Rayford read the bizarre story in the paper, he noticed Nick switching from autopilot to manual. “Initial descent,” Nick said. “You want to bring her in?”

“Of course,” Rayford said. Nick could have landed the plane, but Rayford felt responsible. He was the captain. He would answer for these people. And even though the plane could land itself, he had not lost the thrill of handling it. Few things reminded him of life as it had been just weeks before, but landing a 747 was one of them.

* * *

Buck Williams had spent the day buying a car—something he hadn’t needed in Manhattan—and hunting for an apartment. He found a beautiful condo, at a place that advertised already-installed phones, midway between the *Global Weekly* Chicago bureau office and New Hope Village Church in Mount Prospect. He tried to convince himself it was the church that would keep drawing him west of the city, not Rayford Steele’s daughter, Chloe. She was ten years his junior, and whatever attraction he might feel for her, he was certain she saw him as some sort of a wizened mentor.

Buck had put off going to the office. He wasn’t expected there until the following Monday anyway, and he didn’t relish facing Verna Zee. When it had been his assignment to find a replacement for veteran Lucinda Washington, the Chicago bureau chief who had disappeared, he had told the militant Verna she had jumped the gun by moving into her former boss’s office. Now Buck had been demoted and Verna elevated. Suddenly, she was *his* boss.

But he didn’t want to spend all weekend dreading the meeting, and neither did he want to appear too eager to see Chloe Steele again right away, so Buck drove to the office just before closing. Would Verna make him pay for his years of celebrity as an award-winning cover-story writer? Or would she make it even worse by killing him with kindness?

Buck felt the stares and smiles of the underlings as he moved through the outer office. By now, of course, everyone knew what had happened. They felt sorry for him, were stunned by his lapse of judgment. How could Buck Williams miss a meeting that would certainly be one of the most momentous in news history, even if it hadn't resulted in the double death? But they were also aware of Buck's credentials. Many, no doubt, would still consider it a privilege to work with him.

No surprise, Verna had already moved back into the big office. Buck winked at Alice, Verna's spike-haired young secretary, and peered in. It looked as if Verna had been there for years. She had already rearranged the furniture and hung her own pictures and plaques. Clearly, she was ensconced and loving every minute of it.

A pile of papers littered Verna's desk, and her computer screen was lit, but she seemed to be idly gazing out the window. Buck poked his head in and cleared his throat. He noticed a flash of recognition and then a quick recomposing. "Cameron," she said flatly, still seated. "I didn't expect you till Monday."

"Just checking in," he said. "You can call me Buck."

"I'll call you Cameron, if you don't mind, and—"

"I do mind. Please call—"

"Then I'll call you Cameron even if you *do* mind. Did you let anyone know you were coming?"

"I'm sorry?"

"Do you have an appointment?"

"An appointment?"

"With me. I have a schedule, you know."

"And there's no room for me on it?"

"You're asking for an appointment then?"

"If it's not inconvenient. I'd like to know where I'm going to land and what kind of assignments you have in mind for me, that kind of—"

"Those sound like things we can talk about when we meet," Verna said. "Alice! See if I have a slot in twenty minutes, please!"

"You do," Alice called out. "And I would be happy to show Mr. Williams his cubicle while he's waiting, if you—"

"I prefer to do that myself, Alice. Thank you. And could you shut my door?"

Alice looked apologetic as she rose and moved past Buck to shut the door. He thought she even rolled her eyes. "*You* can call me Buck," he whispered.

"Thanks," she said shyly, pointing to a chair beside her desk.

"I have to wait here, like seeing the principal?"

She nodded. "Someone called here for you earlier. Didn't leave her name. I told her you weren't expected till Monday."

"No message?"

"Sorry."

"So, where *is* my cubicle?"

Alice glanced at the closed door, as if fearing Verna could see her. She stood and pointed over the tops of several partitions toward a windowless corner in the back.

"That's where the coffeepot was last time I was here," Buck said.

"It still is," Alice said with a giggle. Her intercom buzzed. "Yes, ma'am?"

"Would you two mind whispering if you must talk while I'm working?"

"Sorry!" This time Alice did roll her eyes.

"I'm gonna go take a peek," Buck whispered, rising.

"Please don't," she said. "You'll get me in trouble with you-know-who."

Buck shook his head and sat back down. He thought of where he had been, whom he had met, the dangers he had faced in his career. And now he was whispering with a secretary he had to keep out of trouble from a wannabe boss who had never been able to write her way out of a paper bag.

Buck sighed. At least he was in Chicago with the only people he knew who really cared about him.

* * *

Despite his and Chloe's new faith, Rayford Steele found himself subject to deep mood swings. As he strode through O'Hare, passed brusquely and silently by Nick, he suddenly felt sad. How he missed Irene and Raymie! He knew beyond doubt they were in heaven, and that, if anything, they should be feeling sorry for him. But the world had changed so dramatically since the disappearances that hardly anyone he knew had recaptured any sense of equilibrium. He was grateful to have Bruce to teach him and Chloe and now Buck to stand with him in their mission, but sometimes the prospect of facing the future was overwhelming.

That's why it was such sweet relief to see Chloe's smiling face waiting at the end of the corridor. In two decades of flying, he had gotten used to passing passengers who were being greeted at the terminal. Most pilots were accustomed to simply disembarking and driving home alone.

Chloe and Rayford understood each other better than ever. They were fast becoming friends and confidants, and while they didn't agree on everything, they were knit in their grief and loss, tied in their new faith, and teammates on what they called the Tribulation Force.

Rayford embraced his daughter. "Anything wrong?"

“No, but Bruce has been trying to get you. He’s called an emergency meeting of the core group for early this evening. I don’t know what’s up, but he’d like us to try to get hold of Buck.”

“How’d you get here?”

“Cab. I knew your car was here.”

“Where would Buck be?”

“He was going to look for a car and an apartment today. He could be anywhere.”

“Did you call the *Weekly* office?”

“I talked to Alice, the secretary there, early this afternoon. He wasn’t expected until Monday, but we can try again from the car. I mean, you can. You should call him, don’t you think? Rather than me?”

Rayford suppressed a smile.

* * *

Alice sat at her desk leaning forward, her head cocked, gazing at Buck and trying not to laugh aloud as he regaled her with whispered wisecracks. All the while he wondered how much of the stuff from his palatial Manhattan office would fit into the cubicle he was to share with the communal coffeepot. The phone rang, and Buck could hear both ends of the conversation from the speakerphone. From just down the hall came the voice of the receptionist. “Alice, is Buck Williams still back there?”

“Right here.”

“Call for him.”

It was Rayford Steele, calling from his car. “At seven-thirty tonight?” Buck said. “Sure, I’ll be there. What’s up? Hm? Well, tell her I said hi, too, and I’ll see you both at the church tonight.”

He was hanging up as Verna came to the door and frowned at him. “A problem?” he said.

“You’ll have your own phone soon enough,” she said. “Come on in.”

As soon as he was seated Verna sweetly informed him that he would no longer be the world-traveling, cover-story-writing, star headliner of *Global Weekly*. “We here in Chicago have an important but limited role in the magazine,” she said. “We interpret national and international news from a local and regional perspective and submit our stories to New York.”

Buck sat stiffly. “So I’m going to be assigned to the Chicago livestock markets?”

“You don’t amuse me, Cameron. You never have. You will be assigned to whatever we need covered each week. Your work will pass through a senior editor

and through me, and I will decide whether it is of enough significance and quality to pass along to New York.”

Buck sighed. “I didn’t ask the big boss what I was supposed to do with my works in progress. I don’t suppose you know.”

“Your contact with Stanton Bailey will now funnel through me as well. Is that understood?”

“Are you asking whether I understand, or whether I agree?”

“Neither,” she said. “I’m asking whether you will comply.”

“It’s unlikely,” Buck said, feeling his neck redden and his pulse surge. He didn’t want to get into a shouting match with Verna. But neither was he going to sit for long under the thumb of someone who didn’t belong in journalism, let alone in Lucinda Washington’s old chair and supervising him.

“I will discuss this with Mr. Bailey,” she said. “As you might imagine, I have all sorts of recourse at my disposal for insubordinate employees.”

“I can imagine. Why don’t you get him on the phone right now?”

“For what?”

“To find out what I’m supposed to do. I’ve accepted my demotion and my relocation. You know as well as I do that relegating me to regional stuff is a waste of my contacts and my experience.”

“And your talent, I assume you’re implying.”

“Infer what you want. But before you put me on the bowling beat, I have dozens of hours invested in my cover story on the theory of the disappearances—ah, why am I talking to you about it?”

“Because I’m your boss, and because it’s not likely a Chicago bureau staff writer will land a cover story.”

“Not even a writer who has already done several? I dare you to call Bailey. The last time he said anything about my piece, he said he was sure it would be a winner.”

“Yeah? The last time I talked to him, he told me about the last time he talked to you.”

“It was a misunderstanding.”

“It was a lie. You said you were someplace and everybody who was there says you weren’t. I’d have fired you.”

“If you’d had the power to fire me, I’d have quit.”

“You want to quit?”

“I’ll tell you what I want, Verna. I want—”

“I expect all my subordinates to call me Ms. Zee.”

“You have no subordinates in this office,” Buck said. “And aren’t you—”

“You’re dangerously close to the line, Cameron.”

"Aren't you afraid *Ms. Zee* sounds too much like *Missy*?"

She stood. "Follow me." She bristled past him, stomping out of her office and down the long hallway in her sensible shoes.

Buck stopped at Alice's desk. "Thanks for everything, Alice," he said quickly. "I've got a bunch of stuff that's being shipped here that I might need to have you forward to my new apartment."

Alice was nodding but her smile froze when Verna hollered down the hall. "*Now, Cameron!*"

Buck slowly turned. "I'll get back to you, Alice." Buck moved deliberately enough to drive Verna crazy, and he noticed people in their cubicles pretending not to notice but fighting smiles.

Verna marched to the corner that served as the coffee room and pointed to a small desk with a phone and a file cabinet. Buck snorted.

"You'll have a computer in a week or so," she said.

"Have it delivered to my apartment."

"I'm afraid that's out of the question."

"No, Verna, what's out of the question is you trying to vent all your frustration from who knows where in one breath. You know as well as I do that no one with an ounce of self-respect would put up with this. If I have to work out of the Chicago area, I'm going to work at home with a computer and modem and fax machine. And if you expect to see me in this office again for any reason, you'll get Stanton Bailey on the phone right now."

Verna looked prepared to stand her ground right there, so Buck headed back to her office with her trailing him. He passed Alice, who looked stricken, and waited at Verna's desk until she caught up. "Are you dialing, or am I?" he demanded.

* * *

Rayford and Chloe ate on the way home and arrived to an urgent phone message from Rayford's chief pilot. "Call me as soon as you get in."

With his cap under his arm and still wearing his uniform trench coat, Rayford punched the familiar numbers. "What's up, Earl?"

"Thanks for getting back to me right away, Ray. You and I go back a long way."

"Long enough that you should get to the point, Earl. What'd I do now?"

"This is not an official call, OK? Not a reprimand or a warning or anything. This is just friend to friend."

"So, friend to friend, Earl, should I sit down?"

"No, but let me tell you, buddy, you've got to knock off the proselytizing."

"The—?"

“Talking about God on the job, man.”

“Earl, I back off when anyone says anything, and you know I don’t let it get in the way of the job. Anyway, what do *you* think the disappearances were all about?”

“We’ve been through all that, Ray. I’m just telling you, Nicky Edwards is gonna write you up, and I want to be able to say you and I have already talked about it and you’ve agreed to back off.”

“Write me up? Did I break a rule, violate procedure, commit a crime?”

“I don’t know what he’s going to call it, but you’ve been warned, all right?”

“I thought you said this wasn’t official yet.”

“It’s not, Ray. Do you want it to be? Do I have to call you back tomorrow and drag you in here for a meeting and a memo for your file and all that, or can I just smooth everybody’s feathers, tell ’em it was a misunderstanding, you’re cool now, and it won’t happen again?”

Rayford didn’t respond at first.

“C’mon, Ray, this is a no-brainer. I don’t like you having to think about this one.”

“Well, I *will* have to think about it, Earl. I appreciate your tipping me off, but I’m not ready to concede anything just yet.”

“Don’t do this to me, Ray.”

“I’m not doing it to you, Earl. I’m doing it to myself.”

“Yeah, and I’m the one who has to find a replacement pilot certified for the ’forty-seven and the ’seventy-seven.”

“You mean it’s that serious! I could lose my job over this?”

“You bet you could.”

“I’ll still have to think about it.”

“You’ve got it bad, Ray. Listen, in case you come to your senses and we can make this go away, you need to recertify on the ’seventy-seven soon. They’re adding a half dozen more within a month or so, and they’re going to be running them out of here. You want to be on that list. More money, you know.”

“Not that big a deal to me anymore, Earl.”

“I know.”

“But the idea of flying the 777 *is* attractive. I’ll get back to you.”

“Don’t make me wait, Ray.”

* * *

“I will get Mr. Bailey on the phone if I can,” Verna said. “But you realize it’s late in New York.”

“He’s always there, you know that. Use his direct, after-hours number.”

“I don’t have that.”

“I’ll write it down for you. He’s probably interviewing a replacement for me.”

“I’ll call him, Cameron, and I will even let you have your say, but I am going to speak to him first, and I reserve the right to tell him how insubordinate and disrespectful you’ve been. Please wait outside.”

Alice was gathering up her stuff as if about ready to leave when Buck emerged with a mischievous look. Others were streaming from the office to the parking lot and the train. “Did you hear all that?” Buck whispered.

“I hear everything,” she mouthed. “And you know those new speakerphones, the ones that don’t make you wait till the other person is done talking?”

He nodded.

“Well, they don’t make it obvious you’re listening in, either. You just shut off the transmit button, like this, and then if something happens to hit the speakerphone button, oops, then you can hear a conversation without being heard. Is that cool, or what?”

From the speakerphone on her desk came the sound of the phone ringing in New York.

“Stanton. Who’s this?”

“Um, sir, sorry to bother you at this hour—”

“You got the number; you must have something important. Now who is this?”

“Verna Zee in Chicago.”

“Yeah, Verna, what’s happening?”

“I’ve got a situation here. Cameron Williams.”

“Yeah, I was going to tell you to just stay out of his hair. He’s working on a couple of big pieces for me. You got a nice spot there he can work in, or should we just let him work out of his apartment?”

“We have a place for him here, sir, but he was rude and insubordinate to me today and—”

“Listen, Verna, I don’t want you to have to worry about Williams. He’s been put out to pasture for something I can’t figure out, but let’s face it, he’s still our star here and he’s going to be doing pretty much the same thing he’s been doing. He gets less money and a less prestigious title, and he doesn’t get to work in New York, but he’s going to get his assignments from here. You just don’t worry yourself about him, all right? In fact, I think it would be better for you and for him if he *didn’t* work out of that office.”

“But, sir—”

“Something else, Verna?”

“Well, I wish you had let me know this in advance. I need you to back me on this. He was inappropriate with me, and—”

“What do you mean? He came on to you, made a pass at you, what?”

Buck and Alice pressed their hands over their mouths to keep from bursting with laughter. “No, sir, but he made it clear he is not going to be subordinate to me.”

“Well, I’m sorry about that, Verna, but he’s not, OK? I’m not going to waste Cameron Williams on regional stuff, not that we don’t appreciate every inch of copy that comes out of your shop, understand.”

“But, sir—”

“I’m sorry, Verna, is there more? Am I not being clear, or what’s the problem? Just tell him to order his equipment, charge it to the Chicago account, and work directly for us here. Got that?”

“But shouldn’t he apolog—”

“Verna, do you really need me to mediate some personality conflict from a thousand miles away? If you can’t handle that job there . . .”

“I can, sir, and I will. Thank you, sir. Sorry to trouble you.”

The intercom buzzed. “Alice, send him in.”

“Yes, ma’am, and then may I—”

“Yes, you may go.”

Buck sensed Alice taking her time gathering her belongings, however, staying within earshot. He strode into the office as if he expected to talk on the phone with Stanton Bailey.

“He doesn’t need to talk with you. He made it clear that I’m not expected to put up with your shenanigans. I’m assigning you to work from your apartment.”

Buck wanted to say that he was going to find it hard to pass up the digs she had prepared for him, but he was already feeling guilty about having eavesdropped on her conversation. This was something new. Guilt.

“I’ll try to stay out of your way,” he said.

“I’d appreciate that.”

When he reached the parking lot, Alice was waiting. “That was great,” she said.

“You ought to be ashamed of yourself.” He smiled broadly.

“You listened too.”

“That I did. See ya.”

“I’m going to miss the six-thirty train,” she said. “But it was worth it.”

“How about if I drop you off? Show me where it is.”

Alice waited while he unlocked the car door. “Nice car.”

“Brand-new,” he answered. And that was just how he felt.

* * *

Rayford and Chloe arrived at New Hope early. Bruce was there, finishing a sandwich he had ordered. He looked older than his early thirties. After greeting them, he pushed his wire rims up into his curly locks and tilted back in his squeaky chair. "You get hold of Buck?" he asked.

"Said he'd be here," Rayford said. "What's the emergency?"

"You hear the news today?"

"Thought I did. Something significant?"

"I think so. Let's wait for Buck."

"Then let me tell you in the meantime how I got in trouble today," Rayford said.

When he finished, Bruce was smiling. "Bet that's never been in your personnel file before."

Rayford shook his head and changed the subject. "It seems so strange to have Buck as part of the inner core, especially when he's so new to this."

"We're all new to it, aren't we?" Chloe said.

"True enough."

Bruce looked up and smiled. Rayford and Chloe turned to see Buck in the doorway.

NICOLAE

* * *

To Beverly and to Dianna

1

IT WAS THE WORST OF TIMES; it was the worst of times.

Rayford Steele's knees ached as he sat behind the wheel of the rented Lincoln. He had dropped to the pavement at the crushing realization of his pastor's death. The physical pain, though it would stay with him for days, would prove minor compared to the mental anguish of having yet again lost one of the dearest people in his life.

Rayford felt Amanda's eyes on him. She laid one comforting hand on his thigh. In the backseat his daughter, Chloe, and her husband, Buck, each had a hand on his shoulder.

What now? Rayford wondered. *What do we do without Bruce? Where do we go?*

The Emergency Broadcast System station droned on with the news of chaos, devastation, terror, and destruction throughout the world. Unable to speak over the lump in his throat, Rayford busied himself maneuvering his way through the incongruous traffic jams. Why were people out? What did they expect to see? Weren't they afraid of more bombs, or fallout?

"I need to get to the Chicago bureau office," Buck said.

"You can use the car after we get to the church," Rayford managed. "I need to get the word out about Bruce."

Global Community peacekeeping forces supervised local police and emergency relief personnel directing traffic and trying to get people to return to their homes. Rayford relied on his many years in the Chicago area to use back roads and side streets to get around the major thoroughfares, which were hopelessly clogged.

Rayford wondered if he should have taken Buck up on his offer to drive. But Rayford had not wanted to appear weak. He shook his head. *There's no limit to the pilot's ego!* He felt as if he could curl into a ball and cry himself to sleep.

Nearly two years since the vanishing of his wife and son, along with millions of others, Rayford no longer harbored illusions about his life in the twilight of history. He had been devastated. He lived with deep pain and regret. This was so hard. . . .

Rayford knew his life could be even worse. Suppose he had not become a believer in Christ and was still lost forever. Suppose he had not found a new love and was alone. Suppose Chloe had also vanished. Or he had never met Buck. There was much to be grateful for. Were it not for the physical touch of the other three in that car, Rayford wondered if he would have had the will to go on.

He could hardly imagine not having come to know and love Bruce Barnes. He had learned more and been enlightened and inspired more by Bruce than anyone else he'd ever met. And it wasn't just Bruce's knowledge and teaching that made the difference. It was his passion. Here was a man who immediately and clearly saw that he had missed the greatest truth ever communicated to mankind, and he was not about to repeat the mistake.

"Daddy, those two guards by the overpass seem to be waving at you," Chloe said.

"I'm trying to ignore them," Rayford said. "All these nobodies-trying-to-be-somebodies think they have a better idea about where the traffic should go. If we listen to them, we'll be here for hours. I just want to get to the church."

"He's hollering at you with a bullhorn," Amanda said, and she lowered her window a few inches.

"You in the white Lincoln!" came the booming voice. Rayford quickly turned off the radio. "Are you Rayford Steele?"

"How would they know that?" Buck said.

"Is there any limit to the Global Community intelligence network?" Rayford said, disgusted.

"If you're Rayford Steele," came the voice again, "please pull your vehicle to the shoulder!"

Rayford considered ignoring even that but thought better of it. There would be no outrunning these people if they knew who he was. But how did they know?

He pulled over.

* * *

Buck Williams pulled his hand from Rayford's shoulder and craned his neck to see two uniformed soldiers scampering down the embankment. He had no idea how Global Community forces had tracked down Rayford, but one thing was certain: it would not be good for Buck to be discovered with Carpathia's pilot.

"Ray," he said quickly, "I've got one set of phony IDs in the name of Herb Katz. Tell 'em I'm a pilot friend of yours or something."

"OK," Rayford said, "but my guess is they'll be deferential to me. Obviously, Nicolae is merely trying to reconnect with me."

Buck hoped Rayford was right. It made sense that Carpathia would want to make sure his pilot was all right and could somehow get him back to New Babylon. The two uniforms now stood behind the Lincoln, one speaking into a walkie-talkie, the other on a cell phone. Buck decided to go on the offensive and opened his door.

“Please remain in the vehicle,” Walkie-Talkie said.

Buck slumped back into his seat and switched his phony papers with his real ones. Chloe looked terrified. Buck put his arm around her and drew her close. “Carpathia must have put out an all points bulletin. He knew your dad had to rent a car, so it didn’t take long to track him down.”

Buck had no idea what the two GC men were doing behind the car. All he knew was that his entire perspective on the next five years had changed in an instant. When global war broke out an hour before, he wondered if he and Chloe would survive the rest of the Tribulation. Now with the news of Bruce’s death, Buck wondered if they *wanted* to survive. The prospect of heaven and being with Christ sure seemed better than living in whatever remained of this world, even if Buck had to die to get there.

Walkie-Talkie approached the driver’s-side window. Rayford lowered it. “You *are* Rayford Steele, are you not?”

“Depends on who’s asking,” Rayford said.

“This car, with this license number, was rented at O’Hare by someone claiming to be Rayford Steele. If that’s not you, you’re in deep trouble.”

“Wouldn’t you agree,” Rayford said, “that regardless who I am, we’re all in deep trouble?”

Buck was amused at Rayford’s feistiness, in light of the situation.

“Sir, I need to know if you are Rayford Steele.”

“I am.”

“Can you prove that, sir?”

Rayford appeared as agitated as Buck had ever seen him. “You flag me down and holler at me through a bullhorn and tell me I’m driving Rayford Steele’s rental car, and now you want me to prove to you that I’m who you think I am?”

“Sir, you must understand the position I’m in. I have Global Community potentate Carpathia himself patched through to a secure cell phone here. I don’t even know where he’s calling from. If I put someone on the phone and tell the potentate it’s Rayford Steele, it had blamed better be Rayford Steele.”

Buck was grateful that Rayford’s cat-and-mouse game had taken the spotlight off the others in the car, but that didn’t last. Rayford slipped from his

breast pocket his ID wallet, and as the GC man studied it, he asked idly, “And the others?”

“Family and friends,” Rayford said. “Let’s not keep the potentate waiting.”

“I’m going to have to ask you to take this call outside the car, sir. You understand the security risks.”

Rayford sighed and left the car. Buck wished Walkie-Talkie would disappear too, but he merely stepped out of Rayford’s way and pointed him toward his partner, the one with the phone. Then he leaned in and spoke to Buck. “Sir, in the event that we transport Captain Steele to a rendezvous point, would you be able to handle the disposition of this vehicle?”

Do all uniformed people talk this way? Buck wondered. “Sure.”

Amanda leaned over. “I’m Mrs. Steele,” she said. “Wherever Mr. Steele is going, I’m going.”

“That will be up to the potentate,” the guard said, “and providing there’s room in the chopper.”

“Yes, sir,” Rayford said into the phone, “I’ll see you soon then.”

Rayford handed the cell phone to the second guard. “How will we get to wherever we’re supposed to go?”

“A copter should be here momentarily.”

Rayford motioned for Amanda to pop the trunk but to stay in the car. As he shouldered both their bags, he leaned in her window and whispered. “Amanda and I have to rendezvous with Carpathia, but he couldn’t even tell me where he was or where we would meet. That phone is only so secure. I get the feeling it’s not far away, unless they’re coptering us to an airfield from which we’ll fly somewhere else. Buck, you’d better get this car back to the rental company soon. It’ll be too easy to connect you with me otherwise.”

Five minutes later Rayford and Amanda were airborne. “Any idea where we’re going?” Rayford shouted to one of the Global Community guards.

The guard clapped the chopper pilot on the shoulder and shouted, “Are we at liberty to say where we’re going?”

“Glenview!” the pilot hollered.

“Glenview Naval Air Station has been closed for years,” Rayford said.

The chopper pilot turned to look at him. “The big runway’s still open! The man’s there now!”

Amanda leaned close to Rayford. “Carpathia’s in Illinois already?”

“He must have been out of Washington before the attack. I thought they might have taken him to one of the bomb shelters at the Pentagon or the National Security Administration, but his intelligence people must have figured those would be the first places the militia would attack.”

* * *

"This reminds me of when we were first married," Buck said as Chloe snuggled close to him.

"What do you mean 'when we were first married'? We're still newlyweds!"

"Shh!" Buck said quickly. "What're they saying about New York City?"

Chloe turned up the radio. ". . . devastating carnage everywhere here in the heart of Manhattan. Bombed-out buildings, emergency vehicles picking their way through debris, Civil Defense workers pleading with people over loudspeakers to stay underground."

Buck heard the panic in the reporter's voice as he continued. "I'm seeking shelter myself now, probably too late to avoid the effects of radiation. No one knows for certain if the warheads were nuclear, but everyone is being urged to take no risks. Damage estimates will be in the billions of dollars. Life as we know it here may never be the same. There's devastation as far as the eye can see.

"All major transportation centers have been closed if not destroyed. Huge traffic jams have snarled the Lincoln Tunnel, the Triborough Bridge, and every major artery out of New York City. What has been known as the capital of the world looks like the set of a disaster movie. Now back to the Cable News/Global Community News Network in Atlanta."

"Buck," Chloe said, "our home. Where will we live?"

Buck didn't answer. He stared at the traffic and wondered at the billowing clouds of black smoke and intermittent balls of orange flame that seemed to hover directly over Mt. Prospect. It was like Chloe to worry about her home. Buck was less concerned about that. He could live anywhere and seemed to *have* lived everywhere. As long as he had Chloe and shelter, he was all right. But she had made their ridiculously expensive Fifth Avenue penthouse flat her own.

Finally, Buck spoke. "They won't let anybody back into New York for days, maybe longer. Even our vehicles, if they survived, won't be available to us."

"What are we going to do, Buck?"

Buck wished he knew what to say. He usually had an answer. Resourcefulness had been the trademark of his career. Regardless of the obstacle, he had somehow made do in every imaginable situation or venue in the world at one time or another. Now, with his new, young wife beside him, not knowing where she would live or how they would manage, he was at a loss. All he wanted to do was to make sure his father-in-law and Amanda were safe, in spite of the danger of Rayford's work, and to somehow get to Mt. Prospect to assess what was happening to the people of New Hope Village Church and to inform them of the tragedy that had befallen their beloved pastor.

Buck had never had patience for traffic jams, but this was ridiculous. His

jaw tightened and his neck stiffened as his palms squeezed the wheel. The late-model car was a smooth ride, but inching along in near gridlock made the huge automotive power plant feel like a stallion that wanted to run free.

Suddenly an explosion rocked their car and nearly lifted it off its tires. Buck wouldn't have been surprised had the windows blown in around them. Chloe shrieked and buried her head in Buck's chest. Buck scanned the horizon for what might have caused the concussion. Several cars around them quickly pulled off the road. In the rearview mirror Buck saw a mushroom cloud slowly rise and assumed it was in the neighborhood of O'Hare International Airport, several miles away.

CNN/GCN radio almost immediately reported the blast. "This from Chicago: Our news base there has been taken out by a huge blast. No word yet on whether this was an attack by militia forces or a Global Community retaliatory strike. We have so many reports of warfare, bloodshed, devastation, and death in so many major cities around the globe that it will be impossible for us to keep up with all of it. . . ."

Buck looked quickly behind him and out both side windows. As soon as the car ahead gave him room, he whipped the wheel left and punched the accelerator. Chloe gasped as the car jumped the curb and went down through a culvert and up the other side. Buck drove on a parkway and passed long lines of creeping vehicles.

"What are you doing, Buck?" Chloe said, bracing herself on the dashboard.

"I don't know what I'm doing, babe, but I know one thing I'm not doing: I'm not poking along in a traffic jam while the world goes to hell."

* * *

The guard who had flagged down Rayford from the overpass now lugged his and Amanda's baggage out of the helicopter. He led the Steeles, ducking under the whirring blades, across a short tarmac and into a single-story brick building at the edge of a long airstrip. Weeds grew between the cracks in the runway. A small Learjet sat at the end of the strip close to the chopper, but Rayford noticed no one in the cockpit and no exhaust from the engine. "I hope they don't expect me to fly that thing!" he hollered at Amanda as they hurried inside.

"Don't worry about that," their escort said. "The guy who flew it here will get you as far as Dallas and the big plane you'll be flying."

Rayford and Amanda were ushered to garishly colored plastic chairs in a small, shabbily appointed military office, decorated in early Air Force. Rayford sat, gingerly massaging his knees. Amanda paced, stopping only when their

escort motioned that she should sit down. “I am free to stand, am I not?” she said.

“Suit yourself. Please wait here a few moments for the potentate.”

* * *

Buck was waved at, pointed at, and hollered at by traffic cops, and he was honked at and obscenely gestured at by other motorists. He was not deterred. “Where are you going?” Chloe insisted.

“I need a new car,” he said. “Something tells me it’s going to be our only chance to survive.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Don’t you see, Chlo’?” he said. “This war has just broken out. It’s not going to end soon. It’s going to be impossible to drive a normal vehicle anywhere.”

“So what’re you gonna do, buy a tank?”

“If it wasn’t so conspicuous, I just might.”

Buck cut across a huge grassy field, through a parking lot, and beside a sprawling suburban high school. He drove between tennis courts and across soccer and football fields, throwing mud and sod in the air as the big car fish-tailed. Radio reports continued from around the world with news of casualties and mayhem while Buck Williams and his bride careened on, speeding through yield signs and sliding around curves. Buck hoped he was somehow pointed in the right direction. He wanted to wind up on Northwest Highway, where a series of car dealerships comprised a ghetto of commercialism.

A last sweeping turn led Buck out of the subdivision, and he saw what his favorite traffic reporter always said was “heavy, slow, stop-and-go” traffic all along Northwest Highway. He was in a mood and in a groove, so he just kept going. Pulling around angry drivers, he rode along a soft shoulder for more than a mile until he came upon those car dealerships. “Bingo!” he said.

* * *

Rayford was stunned, and he could tell Amanda was too, at the demeanor of Nicolae Carpathia. The dashing young man, now in his mid-thirties, had seemingly been thrust to world leadership against his own will overnight. He had gone from being nearly an unknown in the lower house of Romanian government to president of that country, then almost immediately had displaced the secretary-general of the United Nations. After nearly two years of peace and a largely successful campaign to charm the masses following the terror-filled chaos of the global vanishings, Carpathia now faced significant opposition for the first time.

Rayford had not known what to expect from his boss. Would Carpathia be hurt, offended, enraged? He seemed none of the above. Ushered by Leon Fortunato, a sycophant from the New Babylon office, into the long-unused administrative office at the former Glenview Naval Air Station, Carpathia seemed excited, high.

“Captain Steele!” Carpathia exclaimed. “Al—, uh, An—, uh, Mrs. Steele, how good to see you both and to know that you are well!”

“It’s Amanda,” Amanda said.

“Forgive me, Amanda,” Carpathia said, reaching for her hand with both of his. Rayford noticed how slow she was to respond. “In all the excitement, you understand . . .”

The excitement, Rayford thought. Somehow World War III seems more than excitement.

Carpathia’s eyes were ablaze, and he rubbed his hands together, as if thrilled with what was going on. “Well, people,” he said, “we need to get headed home.”

Rayford knew Carpathia meant home to New Babylon, home to Hattie Durham, home to Suite 216, the potentate’s entire floor of luxuriously appointed offices in the extravagant and sparkling Global Community headquarters. Despite Rayford and Amanda’s sprawling, two-story condo within the same four-block complex, neither had ever remotely considered New Babylon home.

Still rubbing his hands as if he could barely contain himself, Carpathia turned to the guard with the walkie-talkie. “What is the latest?”

The uniformed GC officer had a wire plugged in his ear and appeared startled that he had been addressed directly by Carpathia himself. He yanked out the earplug and stammered, “What? I mean, pardon me, Mr. Potentate, sir.”

Carpathia leveled his eyes at the man. “What is the news? What is happening?”

“Uh, nothing much different, sir. Lots of activity and destruction in many major cities.”

It seemed to Rayford that Carpathia was having trouble manufacturing a look of pain. “Is this activity largely centered in the Midwest and East Coast?” the potentate asked.

The guard nodded. “And some in the South,” he added.

“Virtually nothing on the West Coast then,” Carpathia said, more a statement than a question. The guard nodded. Rayford wondered if anyone other than those who believed Carpathia was Antichrist himself would have interpreted Carpathia’s look as one of satisfaction, almost glee. “How about Dallas/Ft. Worth?” Carpathia asked.

“DFW suffered a hit,” the guard said. “Only one major runway is still open. Nothing’s coming in, but lots of planes are heading out of there.”

Carpathia glanced at Rayford. “And the military strip nearby, where my pilot was certified on the 777?”

“I believe that’s still operational, sir,” the guard said.

“All right then, very good,” Carpathia said. He turned to Fortunato. “I am certain no one knows our whereabouts, but just in case, what do you have for me?”

The man opened a canvas bag that seemed incongruous to Rayford. Apparently he had gathered Air Force leftovers for a disguise for Carpathia. He produced a cap that didn’t match a huge, dress overcoat. Carpathia quickly donned the getup and motioned that the four others in the room should gather around him. “The jet pilot is where?” he asked.

“Waiting just outside the door, per your instructions, sir,” Fortunato said.

Carpathia pointed to the armed guard. “Thank you for your service. You may return to your post via the helicopter. Mr. Fortunato and the Steeles and I will be flown to a new plane, on which Captain Steele will transport me back to New Babylon.”

Rayford spoke up. “And that is in—?”

Carpathia raised a hand to silence him. “Let us not give our young friend here any information he would have to be responsible for,” he said, smiling at the uniformed guard. “You may go.” As the man hurried away, Carpathia spoke quietly to Rayford. “The Condor 216 awaits us near Dallas. We will then fly west to go east, if you know what I mean.”

“I’ve never heard of a Condor 216,” Rayford said. “It’s unlikely I’m qualified to—”

“I have been assured,” Carpathia interrupted, “that you are more than qualified.”

“But what *is* a Condor 2—”

“A hybrid I designed and named myself,” Carpathia said. “Surely you do not think what has happened here today was a surprise to me.”

“I’m learning,” Rayford said, sneaking a glance at Amanda, who appeared to be seething.

“You are learning,” Carpathia repeated, smiling broadly. “I like that. Come, let me tell you about my spectacular new aircraft as we travel.”

Fortunato raised a forefinger. “Sir, my recommendation is that you and I run together to the end of the airstrip and board the jet. The Steeles should follow when they see us get on board.”

Carpathia held the oversized hat down onto his styled hair and slipped in behind Fortunato as the aide opened the door and nodded to the waiting jet

pilot. The pilot immediately took off running toward the Learjet as Fortunato and Carpathia jogged several yards behind. Rayford slipped an arm around Amanda's waist and drew her close.

"Rayford," Amanda said, "have you ever once in your life heard Nicolae Carpathia misspeak?"

"Misspeak?"

"Stutter, stammer, have to repeat a word, forget a name?"

Rayford suppressed a smile, amazed he could find anything humorous on what could easily be the last day of his life on earth. "Besides your name, in other words?"

"He does that on purpose, and you know it," she said.

Rayford shrugged. "You're probably right. But with what motive?"

"I have no idea," she said.

"Hon, do you see no irony in your being offended by the man we're convinced is the Antichrist?" Amanda stared at him. "I mean," he continued, "listen to yourself. You expect common courtesy and decency from the most evil man in the history of the universe?"

Amanda shook her head and looked away. "When you put it that way," she muttered, "I suppose I am being oversensitive."

* * *

Buck sat in the sales manager's office of a Land Rover dealership. "You never cease to amaze me," Chloe whispered.

"I've never been conventional, have I?"

"Hardly, and now I suppose any hope of normalcy is out the window."

"I don't need any excuse for being unique," he said, "but everyone everywhere will be acting impulsively soon enough."

The sales manager, who had busied himself with paperwork and figuring a price, turned the documents and slid them across the desk toward Buck. "You're not trading the Lincoln, then?"

"No, that's a rental," Buck said. "But I am going to ask you to return that to O'Hare for me." Buck looked up at the man without regard to the documents.

"That's highly unusual," the sales manager said. "I'd have to send two of my people and an extra vehicle so they could get back."

Buck stood. "I suppose I am asking too much. Another dealer will be willing to go the extra mile to sell me a vehicle, I'm sure, especially when no one knows what tomorrow may bring."

"Sit back down, Mr. Williams. I won't have any trouble getting my district manager to sign off on throwing in that little errand for you. As you can see,

you're going to be able to drive your fully loaded Range Rover out of here within an hour for under six figures."

"Make it half an hour," Buck said, "and we've got a deal."

The sales manager rose and thrust out his hand. "Deal."

DEAR READER,

With the advent of the movie *2012* and an Internet full of ominous warnings (from the ancient Mayans to the ancient Egyptians), doomsday prophecies are gaining purchase. The movie trailers show *2012* to be a picture with high production value and sophisticated special effects. And the History Channel Web site carries fascinating commentary from astronomers, archaeologists, and others who agree that we are heading toward something cataclysmic. This is something Dr. Tim LaHaye has been saying for years, and he believes we have more reason now than ever before to expect that the rapture of the church (the spiriting away of true believers in an instant)—as prophesied in the Bible—could occur in our lifetime.

While it may be that God, in His mercy, will wait one more day (a thousand years in our economy of time), the Bible urges people to watch and wait . . . and be ready.

As for the predicting of a specific day or time, however, Scripture also makes it clear that this is folly. Jesus Himself told His disciples that even He did not know the day or the hour, but only His Father knew.

In our opinion, it is not ours to predict a specific date for the end of the world as we know it. And we acknowledge that our view of biblical prophecy sounds as absurd to the modern mind as do the astrological and even scientific warnings currently bandied about.

We will watch the movie. We will listen to the experts. But we respectfully ask that our interpretation of the biblical record also be carefully considered. We don't expect everyone to agree, and we expect many to scoff, but we urge all to at least be aware of what it is you are disagreeing with or scoffing at. We sincerely don't want to see anyone left behind.

Dr. Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins

About the Authors

Jerry B. Jenkins, former vice president for publishing at Moody Bible Institute of Chicago and currently chairman of the board of trustees, is the author of more than 175 books, including the best-selling Left Behind series. Twenty of his books have reached the *New York Times* Best Sellers List (seven in the number-one spot) and have also appeared on the *USA Today*, *Publishers Weekly*, and *Wall Street Journal* best-seller lists. *Desecration*, book nine in the Left Behind series, was the best-selling book in the world in 2001. His books have sold nearly 70 million copies.

Also the former editor of *Moody* magazine, his writing has appeared in *Time*, *Reader's Digest*, *Parade*, *Guideposts*, and dozens of Christian periodicals. He was featured on the cover of *Newsweek* magazine in 2004.

His nonfiction books include as-told-to biographies with Hank Aaron, Bill Gaither, Orel Hershiser, Luis Palau, Joe Gibbs, Walter Payton, and Nolan Ryan among many others. The Hershiser and Ryan books reached the *New York Times* Best Sellers List.

Jerry Jenkins assisted Dr. Billy Graham with his autobiography, *Just As I Am*, also a *New York Times* best seller. Jerry spent 13 months working with Dr. Graham, which he considers the privilege of a lifetime.

Jerry owns Jenkins Entertainment, a filmmaking company in Los Angeles, which produced the critically acclaimed movie *Midnight Clear*, based on his book of the same name. See www.Jenkins-Entertainment.com.

Jerry Jenkins also owns the Christian Writers Guild, which aims to train tomorrow's professional Christian writers. Under Jerry's leadership, the guild has expanded to include college-credit courses, a critique service, literary registration services, and writing contests, as well as an annual conference. See www.ChristianWritersGuild.com.

As a marriage-and-family author, Jerry has been a frequent guest on Dr. James Dobson's *Focus on the Family* radio program and is a sought-after speaker and humorist. See www.AmbassadorSpeakers.com.

Jerry has been awarded four honorary doctorates. He and his wife, Dianna, have three grown sons and four grandchildren.

Check out Jerry's blog at <http://jerryjenkins.blogspot.com>.

Dr. Tim LaHaye (www.timlahaye.com), who conceived and created the idea of fictionalizing an account of the Rapture and the Tribulation, is a noted author, minister, and nationally recognized speaker on Bible prophecy. He is the founder of both Tim LaHaye Ministries and The PreTrib Research Center. Presently Dr. LaHaye speaks at many Bible prophecy conferences in the U.S. and Canada, where his current prophecy books are very popular.

Dr. LaHaye holds a doctor of ministry degree from Western Theological Seminary and a doctor of literature degree from Liberty University. For 25 years he pastored one of the nation's outstanding churches in San Diego, which grew to three locations. It was during that time that he founded two accredited Christian high schools, a Christian school system of ten schools, and San Diego Christian College (formerly known as Christian Heritage College).

Dr. LaHaye has written over 50 nonfiction and coauthored 25 fiction books, many of which have been translated into 34 languages. He has written books on a wide variety of subjects, such as family life, temperaments, and Bible prophecy. His most popular fiction works, the Left Behind series, written with Jerry B. Jenkins, have appeared on the best-seller lists of the Christian Booksellers Association, *Publishers Weekly*, the *Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today*, and the *New York Times*.

Another popular series by LaHaye and Jenkins is The Jesus Chronicles. This four-book novel series gives readers rich first-century experiences as John, Mark, Luke, and Matthew recount thrilling accounts of the life of Jesus. Dr. LaHaye is coauthor of another fiction series, Babylon Rising. Each of the four titles in this series have debuted in the top 10 on the *New York Times* Best Sellers List. These are suspense thrillers with thought-provoking messages.