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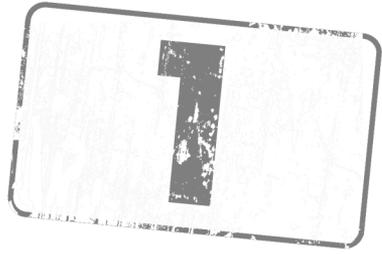
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**United States 75th Army Rangers Temporary Post
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"Help me! Please, God, send someone to help me! My wife! They took my wife!"

The agonized and fearful cry jerked First Sergeant Samuel Adams "Goose" Gander from the mental paralysis that had gripped him for the last several moments. The early afternoon sun blazed over Sanliurfa, beating down on the city with an unrelenting heat. Shimmering blasts of ovenlike air radiated from the shattered buildings surrounding him and the hard-baked asphalt beneath his boots. Sweat soaked Goose's BDUs and ran down his face from beneath his Kevlar helmet. The helmet shaded his eyes and would deflect most bullets and shrapnel, but right now it felt like a stewpot slowly parboiling his brain. Sand stuck to his chin and burned his eyes. The coppery taste of his own blood still lined his mouth, a souvenir from the fight he'd just had with Icarus.

Goose still stood in the alley where minutes ago he had first fought, then talked with the man he knew only as Icarus, the rogue CIA agent that Special Agent-in-Charge Alexander Cody and Ranger Captain Cal Remington had scoured Sanliurfa to find. Despite their desperate efforts, neither had been able to locate their target.

Goose, however, had encountered the fugitive on three different occasions. On two of those occasions, Icarus had sought Goose out. The rogue agent had staged the circumstances of those events so that Goose had had no choice but to let him walk away. The third time, at their meeting in this place, Goose had discovered by accident where

Icarus was hiding. He'd forcibly taken the rogue agent into custody. But he hadn't remanded Icarus over to Remington, Goose's commanding officer.

Though he and Remington disagreed on the matter of Icarus—as they had on many other things over the long years of their association in the military—Remington was Goose's good friend and a brother in arms.

But in the end Goose hadn't held Icarus. He'd allowed him to slip free. Now Icarus was gone, once more loose to pursue whatever mission drove him to remain within Sanliurfa's boundaries despite the dangers of the Syrian army, poised to attack the city, and the presence of his hunters Remington and Cody. If any of his pursuers caught up with him, Icarus's odds of survival, Goose knew, were essentially zero.

Goose also knew that he should be in hot pursuit of the rogue agent. But it appeared that chasing Icarus wasn't an option just now. Something else was going down, and Goose couldn't ignore the plea for help. He was a soldier, and soldiers defended those who couldn't defend themselves. In Sanliurfa, there were a number of defenseless.

"Help me! Someone help me! For the love of God!"

Goose stared toward the mouth of the alley, tracking the plea for help. He automatically slid his M-4A1 assault rifle from his shoulder and canted the weapon so the barrel pointed down and the butt rested on but not against his right shoulder under his chin. Four inches shorter than the M16s that infantrymen had carried in past wars, the M-4A1's design lent itself to close-quarter combat. Today's battlefields moved increasingly in the direction of urban warfare rather than open terrain. The weapons the Rangers carried reflected that.

A man in brown khaki shorts, hiking boots, and a gray shirt staggered in front of the alley mouth. He appeared thirty-something, balding and sunburned. Blood poured down the side of his face from a wound at the top of his head. Crimson lines ran down his chin and neck, disappearing into his shirt. His battered features were red and raw. Swollen bruises almost closed one eye.

"Sir." Goose kept his voice strong but neutral. The man jerked away and covered his head with one arm.

Peering fearfully under his forearm with his one good eye, the man looked at Goose. "You are American."

"Yes, sir," Goose replied. The wounded man stood partially behind Goose's Humvee, hiding as well as he could. Goose had driven

into the alley to have his confrontation privately with Icarus. But right now the man was using the Humvee as cover. Goose cleared his throat, searching for the right words to get through to this man. "I'm First Sergeant Gander. With the United States Army 75th Rangers from Fort Benning, Georgia." His words were tinged with a southern accent, acquired courtesy of Waycross, Georgia, where Goose had been born and raised.

"Thank God," the man said. "Thank God." He started down the alley but almost fell over a loose hunk of debris from the nearby bomb-blasted buildings. Syrian artillery hadn't hit this part of the city as extensively as it had in other sections, but fallen debris still blocked the alley behind Goose.

"Sir," Goose said in a sterner voice, "stay where you are."

The man gaped at Goose but halted where he was.

Over the past few days, the Sanliurfan citizens and visitors had quickly learned to obey commands given by the three armies that currently held positions within the city. In addition to the Syrian threat looming outside the city's borders, the strange anomaly that had ripped away what most experts agreed was at least a third of the world's population had left people everywhere confused, paranoid, and afraid. No one knew if the disappearances would start up again, or who might disappear next.

"What?" the man shouted.

"Stay where you are," Goose repeated. "I don't know you."

During the past few days, the Rangers as well as the United Nations Peacekeeping teams and the Turkish army had learned that Syria's blatant and unprovoked attack on Turkey and the subsequent invasion had inspired a number of local terrorists to start ratcheting up their own campaigns to make political and religious statements. Most of those campaigns concentrated on raising the body count. Several soldiers of all three armies, various Sanliurfan citizens, and some innocent tourists trapped in this mess had paid the price for the terrorists' convictions.

The man stopped. "*Mon Dieu!* This is insane! I need help! My wife needs help! Do you not understand? They have her! They *took* her!"

Goose listened, straining his ears for any sounds of a struggle or confrontation. Distant vehicle noises and the roars of earthmoving equipment used to clear the primary streets and reinforce fighting positions, none of them nearby, created a constant aural backdrop over the city. He blinked stinging sweat from his eyes. He was edgy from not sleeping for more than twenty-four hours, and even the last sleep

he'd managed hadn't been uninterrupted for more than an hour and a half at a time.

"You have *got* to help her." The man leaned heavily against the alley wall, as if the realization that he would have to win Goose over was almost too much to bear. Blood continued to thread down the side of his face and neck. His injured eye seemed to close a little more with each frantic heartbeat. "I do not know what they will do to her. Please."

"Your wife was taken?" Goose asked.

"*Oui.*" There was no mistaking the pain in the man's eyes.

"Who are you?"

"I am Jean Arnaud," the man replied. "I am a university professor in Paris." He named the school, but his French was so rapid Goose couldn't understand him. "I have papers." He reached for his shirt breast pocket with trembling hands that left bloodstains in their wake. "I was here in Sanliurfa on a sabbatical with my wife, Giselle. They took Giselle. You *must* help her." His fingers fumbled with the pocket and barely got the papers out.

Trusting his instincts that the man was telling the truth as well as the physical evidence of the beating Jean Arnaud had obviously undergone, Goose lowered his weapon but didn't put it away as he approached the man. If someone had kidnapped the woman, time was already working against a rescue effort. Sanliurfa, with its hodgepodge of architecture and hundreds of years of history, was a rabbit warren of hiding places.

Goose gestured to the Hummer. "Get in."

Arnaud hesitated just for a moment.

Grabbing the man by his arm, Goose pulled Arnaud into motion. He escorted the man to the passenger side of the Hummer and shoved him into the seat.

Goose jogged around to the driver's side, limping a little on his bad knee, and slid behind the wheel. Starting the Hummer's engine, he tagged the communications headset he wore to open a channel, then pulled the pencil mike to the corner of his mouth.

"Base," Goose said. "This is Phoenix Leader."

"Base reads you five by five, Phoenix Leader," the calm male voice responded.

"I need a com network for an immediate SAR op and access to soldiers at this twenty." Goose gave his location, then looked over his shoulder and backed the Hummer out into the street.

"A SAR, Phoenix Leader?"

"Affirmative," Goose replied. The call for a search-and-rescue team drew immediate attention, especially after the Syrian attack that had taken place the previous night. The city and the Rangers were still picking up the pieces from that. "The SAR target is a civilian, not one of our own."

"Understood, Phoenix Leader. Go to two-one for your network. I'll get a detail assembled for the SAR."

Goose flicked the headset to channel 21 and looked at Arnaud as the Hummer rolled to a stop in the middle of the street. "Which way?"

Arnaud looked around for a moment. His face was pale and anxious. Indecision weighed heavily on him. "There." He pointed to the right. "Giselle and I were in a little café. They ambushed us in the alley. They robbed us and took Giselle. I thought they were going to kill me."

Maybe they thought they had, Goose told himself, looking at the damage that Arnaud suffered. He put the Hummer into forward gear and let off the clutch, feeling another twinge of agony from his knee.

For the past few years he'd been careful with his left knee. He'd been wounded during a firefight in the first Iraq War, barely getting by on medical reports after extensive surgical repairs, because the doctors had known he was a dedicated soldier and wanted to muster out with a full pension, and because he'd always been able to handle the load. The crisis in Turkey was slowly eroding his physical ability to function. He needed rest but he wasn't getting it. The cortisone shots he'd used in the past to block the pain weren't working as effectively here, thanks to the continual stress and strain of constant use; even though the shots provided some relief, they didn't help the knee heal.

"Who took your wife?" Goose asked.

Arnaud shook his head miserably. "I do not know." He continued on in French.

"Sir, I don't understand what you're saying," Goose interrupted. He spoke just enough French to order a meal from a restaurant, and the man's rapid pace made comprehending him impossible. Goose's mind was still whirling from all the secrets that Icarus had revealed during the past few minutes.

"I was drawn to you, First Sergeant," Icarus had said. *"By something greater than myself. I know that now. There's a reason we've been put in each other's path."*

Goose gripped the Hummer's steering wheel harder. He knew how Arnaud felt, how the panic and helplessness slammed through the man. He forced himself to focus.

Shaking, Arnaud made a visible attempt to control himself. "The men, First Sergeant, they were not known to me. They are Bedouin, *oui?* Very probably traders. Scavengers." He glanced around, half out of his seat as he craned his neck to peer into buildings and down alleys. "You can see any number of them in the city. They come. They go. Some of them take what they can from the wreckage of the city. Others bring supplies into Sanliurfa. By any other name, most of them are still looters, taking profit from the hardships the rest of us have gone through. Now they have taken my wife."

Goose knew about the Bedouin. With the military satellite reconnaissance systems presently off-line in the Middle East, the nomadic people were a major conduit of information for the military forces currently hunkered down in Sanliurfa. The Bedouins existed as they always had, by trading and scavenging and taking whatever they could find. The Syrian assault on Turkey had proven a boon to the Bedouins, allowing them to capture prizes to own and to trade that they might never have gotten legally. According to news reports Goose had seen, several of the Bedouin tribes had started caches of war booty in the caves in the surrounding mountains.

"When was your wife taken?" Goose felt compassion run through him for this man. He hadn't seen his own wife in months, but if anyone ever tried to harm Megan, ever tried to take her away against her will—

God took Chris.

The thought rattled through Goose's mind, making him feel hollow and helpless, stripping away his confidence. The fact that God had taken Chris during the Rapture had been part of the message Icarus had delivered. "*Your son,*" Icarus had said in a quiet voice, "*is safe. God came and took your son up as He took all the other children.*"

Goose couldn't allow himself to believe everything Icarus had stated. If he did, he had to give up on ever seeing his five-year-old son again.

In this life.

That possibility ripped at Goose's mind. He didn't have a faith strong enough to allow him to accept that. He'd tried, but he couldn't believe God would do that. Not to the point that he could give everything—his hopes and his fears—over to Him. Goose didn't know how a person did that.

Bill Townsend, his good friend and a devout Christian who had always talked about the end times and the fact that the Rapture might happen any day, had disappeared during the anomaly. If Bill were

here, Goose was certain his friend would tell him that he'd see Chris again. At the end of the seven years of Tribulation. If he wasn't one of those who would die long before the end of that time.

But Goose couldn't help hanging on to the possibility that all those disappearances had been man-made—or even, though the concept strained his credulity, of extraterrestrial origins—and that he could somehow find a way to reverse those disappearances and bring those people—*bring Chris*—back. God wouldn't take his son away from him. The God Goose wanted to believe in couldn't be capable of that kind of cruelty.

"Over there." Arnaud pointed toward a small café and brought Goose's focus back to the present op. "I asked the people inside the café for help, but no one would help me."

That didn't surprise Goose. Most people who had remained in Sanliurfa after the mass exodus that came on the heels of the SCUD missile launch had stayed because they believed they would prosper, that Turkish reinforcements would arrive at any moment—which wasn't going to happen—and push the Syrians back. Or they simply didn't have anywhere else to go. The ragged crowds at any local café were probably a lot more interested in avoiding trouble than in looking for it.

"Were you dealing with the Bedouin?" Goose asked, peering along the street.

"No. I did not see them until they attacked us in the alley. They were waiting for us."

"Why did they attack you?"

Arnaud shook his head. "They robbed us. They took Giselle." He swallowed hard. "I have heard that some of the Bedouin have been stealing European and American women from the city." His voice broke. "I was told those Bedouin sell the women they kidnap."

Goose had known about the white slavery problems in the area before the Syrian attack. Women serving in the armed forces—in the United Nations Peacekeeping effort as well as in the Ranger support teams—had received warnings about the issue.

"Giselle and I were trying to find someone to help us get out of the city." He turned back to Goose and looked guilty. "For a time we believed that the combined militaries here would be able to hold off the Syrians. But after the attack last night, we could no longer hold out any such hope. I am sorry."

Goose met the man's gaze. "I understand." Last night's attacks had

only continued the assaults the Syrians launched against the city. And those attacks, Goose knew, would continue to come.

Sanliurfa was a keystone for the Syrian aggression. If the Syrian military could secure this city, they could stage attacks elsewhere. Their second logical target was Diyarbakir City to the east. If that city fell, the Iraqi rebels who still fought American intervention in their country might be inspired to rise up and join with the Syrians, creating threats on two fronts for Turkey.

Sanliurfa, after time enough for the U.S. and Turkish military to shore up defenses and build an offensive line, was considered an acceptable loss by the Allied forces. In fact, the American and Turkish commands considered every soldier in the city an acceptable loss if it came to it. The military commanders of both countries as well as the United Nations feared that the Turkish-Syrian conflict—it wasn't officially referred to as a war yet—could ignite a conflagration in the Middle East.

Throughout the history of humankind, and certainly since the creation of Israel in 1948, the Middle East had been a powder keg waiting to be touched off. With Chaim Rosenzweig's discovery of the chemical fertilizer that had turned the Israeli deserts into lush farmlands and pulled the nation into a time of bountiful wealth, the enmity felt by the Arab countries of the Middle East toward Israel had increased.

Even Russia had felt threatened by Israel's newfound wealth. The former Soviets had launched an attack against the country. But only minutes before the jet fighters reached their targets, the Russian aircraft fell to the ground or imploded in the sky. Like the disappearances only days ago, no one knew the cause of that event. That sudden defeat of the Russian air force had come about as mysteriously as the massive disappearances that had occurred around the globe.

Goose pulled his thoughts away from that event. Thinking about that led right back to the unsettling conversation he'd had with Icarus. *"God came and took your son up as He took all the other children."*

For a moment, Goose remembered the peace that had settled over him as he'd almost come to accept that thought. But he hadn't been able to swallow it, and in the end that peaceful feeling had retreated. Maybe Bill Townsend could have believed that God had taken those people, but Goose couldn't. He wouldn't believe it, either, not until he had proof.

Goose was a good man. He believed in God as best he could, and he acknowledged Christ as his personal Savior. But Goose was also a

fighter, a practical man used to meeting problems head-on, a man who resolved situations, problems, and the evils that men could do to one another. He believed more in himself and in finding a way to reverse the effects of the disappearances than he believed in divine intervention in the world.

"Phoenix Leader," a man's voice crackled over the headset. "This is Sergeant Clay of Echo Company. We're responding to your SAR request."

"Acknowledged, Sergeant," Goose responded. Sergeant Thomas Clay of E Company was a solid soldier and a good man. "Glad to have you. How many strong are you?"

"Seven. Myself and six. Base says others are on their way here. We're still spread out and dealing with the problems left over from last night. We're coming from the north, closing in on your twenty."

"Affirmative," Goose responded. "Base, are you there?"

"Base is here."

"Can I get a helo attached to the SAR?"

"I'll check, Phoenix Leader."

Goose stared along the streets. A number of alleys spread out through the area, all of them filled with hiding places. He hoped the Bedouin kidnappers hadn't taken their prey and ducked into hiding. He wasn't looking forward to playing cat and mouse with them in the debris-strewn streets and bombed-out buildings.

"Who are we looking for?" Clay asked.

Goose looked at Arnaud. "Have you got a picture of your wife?"

Arnaud pulled his wallet out and flipped it open. He showed Goose a picture of himself and a younger woman. "This is Giselle."

"Her name is Giselle Arnaud," Goose said, jerking his attention back to the alleys. "She's French. I'm with her husband. He says she was taken by a group of Bedouins after they were robbed." He glanced at Arnaud. "Does she speak English?"

"*Mais oui*," Arnaud answered. "She is very fluent in five languages. That is her specialty at university. She is also a teacher."

"Giselle speaks English," Goose said, glancing back at the picture of the couple standing in front of a flowered archway that existed only in some photographer's studio. "She's a little over five feet tall. Dark hair down to her shoulders. Dark eyes. Thirties. She's wearing—" He looked at Arnaud.

"A red sleeveless blouse," Arnaud said. "Tan pants. Walking shoes."

Arnaud, Goose realized, was a man who paid attention. The description made Goose feel guilty. He couldn't remember what his

wife had worn the last time he'd seen her. Megan had come to the airfield to see him off as she always had since they'd been married. He'd seen her, remembered her brave smile even though the separation hurt her, but he didn't remember what she was wearing. With a pang, he realized he couldn't remember what Chris had been wearing the last time he'd seen him either.

Mechanically swallowing the lump in his throat, Goose passed the information along. Just as he finished, Arnaud stood up in the seat and threw his arm out.

"There, Sergeant! She is back there! I saw them!" Arnaud shouted. "You must back up!"

Before Goose could say anything, Arnaud leaped from the Hummer. Goose made a frantic grab for the man but missed him. By the time Goose braked the Hummer, the worried husband was already rushing toward the last alley they had passed.

"Sergeant," Goose spoke over the headset as he pushed himself from the Hummer and dropped into the street. The impact cracked through his injured knee, but he ignored the pain and kept moving.

"Here, Phoenix," Clay responded.

"We've got a possible ID on the SAR target." Goose checked the street signs and relayed his location.

"Acknowledged, Phoenix," Clay said. "We're only a few blocks away."

Goose ran, favoring his left knee and feeling the pain lance all the way up his side to detonate in the left side of his brain. It was projected pain. He recognized the sensation from years of dealing with the injury. He held the M-4A1 in both hands, high across his chest to keep his lower body clear.

A car that had been following the Hummer honked impatiently. With all the debris in the street, there was little room to pass. The earthmovers had worked only to clear a vehicle-wide path, not two lanes. A few pedestrians, all of them civilians, stopped to stare at Goose as he ran.

At the mouth of the alley, Arnaud shouted, "Giselle! Giselle!" He started forward again. Before he'd taken his second step, he jerked and spun to his right. Pain etched his features, popping even his swollen eye slightly open with surprise.

The flat crack of the rifle report reached Goose's ears just before Arnaud hit the ground. The echoes of the shot rumbled in the narrow alley between the three-story buildings. Chunks of rock jumped up from the street as three more rounds landed near the fallen man but

miraculously did not touch him. Arnaud scabbled weakly to right himself. Blood darkened his shirt on his upper chest.

Moving quickly, Goose slammed into position with his back against the building to the right of the alley mouth. He pushed his weapon vertical, then curled around to peer down the alley.

A group of Bedouin men, all dressed in flowing robes and burnouses, hurried along the alley nearly eighty yards away. Goose saw that three of the eleven Bedouin carried a woman whose appearance matched the picture Arnaud had shown him. The Bedouin closest to their position racked the slide back on the heavy-caliber rifle he carried, then took deliberate aim at Arnaud.

"I've got targets at my twenty. Shots fired." Goose lifted the M-4A1 to his left shoulder, switching hands easily because he'd trained himself to be ambidextrous with the assault rifle, and got himself into a straight line with the weapon. He leaned his shoulder into the building, kept both eyes open to view the battle zone, looked through the scope with his left eye while his right took in everything, swapping fields of vision inside his head, and squeezed the trigger.

The 5.56mm round caught the Bedouin in the center of his chest just before he fired again. Driven back by the tumbling bullet, the Bedouin fired his weapon into the air, knocking stone chips from the second floor of the building.

Staying locked on his target, Goose drove a second and third round into the center of the Bedouin's upper body, wanting to make sure his opponent was down. Switching to his right eye, he picked up his second target: a man turning to bring up his rifle.

Goose knew the sound of his weapon firing had alerted the other Bedouins to his position—and not just to his position, but also to his nationality—but there had been no way around that. The M-4A1's sharp report was a lot different than the heavier detonation of the Russian SKS chambered in 7.62mm carried by the Syrians. Flicking his vision back to his left eye between heartbeats, Goose centered the crosshairs above the Bedouin's rifle, almost looking down his opponent's barrel, then squeezed the trigger.

The M-4A1 chugged against Goose's shoulder almost recoil-free, but a spray of stone splinters and dust blinded him almost immediately as the Bedouin's bullet struck the wall in front of him. Withdrawing, Goose kept himself from instinctively trying to wipe the stone grit from his eyes. Rubbing at them now might scratch one of his eyes, or even both of them. He looked down, letting the tears come naturally to wash the grit and dust from his eyes.

Footsteps pounded down the alley toward Goose.

Arnaud lifted his head, eyes big with fear. "They are coming," he whispered in a hoarse, panicked croak. "Giselle." He tried to crawl but couldn't move.

His vision still partially blurred and his tears cool on his face, Goose swung around the corner again. He slid the fire selector to three-round-burst mode, then centered the rifle at the lead Bedouin's waist and squeezed the trigger. He rode the slight recoil up and to the right, stitching the man from hip to shoulder in two three-round bursts and knocking him back.

The assault rifle rode naturally, carrying over to the second man in the alley. Goose squeezed the trigger again, holding the weapon steady and putting a three-round burst into the center of his chest.

As this target went down, Goose saw that his initial round at the second man in the alley had sprawled another man out. Four men were down. Seven were up and moving. Giselle Arnaud remained among them.

Moving quickly, Goose hooked the fingers of his left hand in the back of Arnaud's shirt and dragged the man clear of the alley's mouth. From Goose's quick look at the man, he noted that the wound in his shoulder wasn't life threatening.

Goose took a compress from his field medkit and covered the wound. "Hold this on your chest," he ordered. "Tight. Slow the bleeding."

"My wife," Arnaud whispered. "Giselle—"

"We're going to get her," Goose said and hoped that he told the man the truth. "But you need to take care of yourself." He pushed himself up, feeling the weakness in his bad knee, then positioned himself at the corner of the alley again. He swapped magazines in his weapon, shuffling the partially spent one to the back of his LCE.

The Bedouins ran for the other end of the alley.

"Sergeant Clay," Goose called over the headset.

"Here," Clay responded immediately. "We heard gunshots over your headset."

"There was an exchange," Goose said. "Four Bedouin are down. Seven remain viable. They do have the woman. She's alive. Let's keep her that way."

"Affirmative," Clay replied. "We're on top of your twenty now."

"Base," Goose said, pushing himself forward into the alley.

"Base is here, Phoenix Leader."

"I need a medical team here."

"Already en route."

"What about air support?" Goose passed the first two men in the alley's mouth.

"Negative. The captain doesn't see the need to risk a helo at this time."

Not for a civilian, Goose thought, feeling angry with Remington. At the same time, though, he recognized that Remington's reluctance was good military strategy. Helicopters were hard to come by in these tough times. They were a limited resource not meant for squandering. Plenty of civilians had taken refuge throughout the city, too afraid to brave the open expanse back to Ankara, Turkey's capital to the north and west. As far as Remington was concerned, they weren't his problem. Only holding this line against a superior force of invading Syrians mattered.

"Affirmative, Base." Goose kept going, watching as the Bedouin juked into another alley to the east. "Clay, our targets broke east. Along an alley."

"Acknowledged," Clay replied.

"I see them," another Ranger said.

Gunfire broke out in a steady staccato roar.

"Keep the woman clear." Goose broke into a run, passing the final two Bedouin bodies, then positioned himself beside the alley the group had disappeared into.

Gunfire continued, filling the air with harsh cracks and accompanying echoes.

"They're turning back," Clay said. "Coming back your way, Leader. Two more are down. Five remain."

"Understood." Goose glanced around the corner. The other end of the alley was too far to reach, and he didn't want to expose Arnaud to enemy fire again. "What about the woman?"

"She's alive. We picked targets we could take without endangering her."

Goose flattened himself against the building. "Come up quick, Sergeant. I'm about to be in the middle of them. They've caught me exposed."

"Understood," Clay said. "Look over your shoulder when it goes down. That'll be us."

Footsteps pounded the asphalt, drawing closer. Hoarse shouts in a language Goose couldn't understand punctuated the sporadic weapon blasts. Despite the Kevlar armor he wore, he knew he might die in the coming encounter.

Will I see Chris if I do, God? I believe in You, but I don't believe You took my child away from me. I don't believe those disappearances were by Your hand. I don't believe that was the Rapture. I refuse to believe that. But if I die right here and right now, please let me see my boy again and know that he is all right.

Then the first Bedouin broke from the alley, coming into view and passing Goose all in the same instant.

Goose let the man go and prayed that the man would not notice him. Another followed. The three Bedouin carrying the kidnapped woman brought up the rear.

Settling into the moment, knowing surprise was his greatest weapon, Goose shot the first of the three men through the head, aiming for the base of his skull as he passed. The bullets severed the spinal cord and the vagus nerve, destroying all motor control immediately. He dropped like a rock, causing the two men following him to stumble and fall and drop Giselle.

Goose spun, switching the fire selector to full-auto, and opened up on the two Bedouin farther down the alley. He emptied the magazine in less than two seconds, not even enough time for the two survivors to recover from their fall.

Dropping the assault rifle, Goose swept his M9 pistol from his hip, thumbed the safety off, and aimed at the nearest fallen Bedouin, who pulled a pistol from beneath his robe and pushed himself up.

Giselle Arnaud lay on the asphalt. Ropes bound her wrists and ankles. Blood trickled down her hands, evidence of her struggles to free herself. A gag tied around her head prevented her from crying out, but tears spilled down her cheeks, leaving tracks on her dusty face. Her bruised and dirty features were twisted with fright.

Goose looked away from the woman, locating his targets. He put a bullet through the nearest Bedouin's face. He followed up with two more through the man's chest as he fell. Near the woman's head, the other Bedouin rose with a pistol in his hand, firing as he stood.

Bullets slammed into Goose's chest armor. One of them caught his helmet, bouncing his head to one side. He remained on task. He wasn't dead and he had a job to finish. He fired the M9 at the Bedouin, hitting the man's chest and working up in case the man wore body armor beneath the robe.

As the Bedouin fell away, Goose spotted Sergeant Clay and his Ranger squad coming down the alley, throwing themselves forward and taking up positions as the men behind raced up to move into new positions.

Gunfire opened up behind Goose, letting him know the two men farther down the alley weren't dead. He dropped and covered the kidnapped woman with his own body, lending her the protection of the body armor he wore as Clay and his men reached the alley mouth.

The M-4A1s blazed on full-auto for a few seconds. When they stopped, Goose doubted any of the Bedouin remained alive. Clay ordered his men into new positions, securing the alley in a standard two-by-two deployment.

Looking down at the woman, Goose knew immediately that something was wrong. Her face was slack and still. Fear still showed there, but nothing moved. He saw his own reflection in her glassy eyes.

"No," Goose said hoarsely. Over the past few days, he'd seen too many dead not to know what he was probably looking at. He pushed himself up.

The woman didn't move.

"Goose," Clay said, striding toward him.

"*Giselle!*" Arnaud called from the alley's end. "Where is my wife?" He continued in French.

Stunned, Goose gazed at the dark spot in the center of Giselle Arnaud's red blouse. The spot was not spreading. She wasn't bleeding. That meant her heart no longer pumped.

Laying his pistol down, Goose tore the woman's blouse open. The wound was a jagged mess of torn flesh, but—

"There's no penetration here," Clay said as he hunkered down beside Goose. "She caught a ricochet. The bullet was too spent to break through her sternum. Deflected from bone."

"She's not breathing," a young Ranger said.

"The bullet stopped her heart," Goose said, stripping his helmet off. "Impact caught her between heartbeats, stopped her heart. She's got a chance." *God, please let there be a chance.* "Help me start CPR."

"*Giselle!*" Arnaud called, sounding closer. "*Mon Dieu!* What has happened to my poor wife? What are you doing? Sergeant? Sergeant, answer me!"

Glancing over his shoulder, Goose spotted Arnaud only a few feet away now. "Corporal," Goose ordered, "keep that man back."

The corporal stepped forward to block Arnaud. The man tried to fight his way past him, but the corporal wrapped his arms around the man and prevented him from walking closer.

Clay tilted the woman's head back and opened her airway. "No obstruction."

Ignoring the biting pain in his knee, Goose straddled the woman and put his hands, one on top of the other, over the bloody wound. He leaned forward and heaved, applying pressure in short impacts, rolling his shoulders to use his weight.

"All right," Goose said, "breathe for her."

Clay did, putting his mouth over the woman's, ignoring the standard operating procedure of using safety gear to prevent spreading possible disease. The woman's life hung by a thread and they knew it. They had no time to drag out the gear.

Arnaud wept in the background, calling out his wife's name.

"Break," Goose said.

When Clay pulled back, Goose curled his right hand into a fist and struck the woman's sternum, hoping to create enough shock to start her stilled heart. Then he settled into the rhythm again, putting his shoulders and his weight into the effort.

"C'mon," Goose said, keeping count in his head. "C'mon. You can do this. You aren't gone yet. You've got a lot of living to do." But he wondered how much time had passed since her heart had stalled. After four minutes without a heartbeat, brain damage usually occurred.

He leaned back and let Clay breathe for her again, barely managing the panic that filled him. Everything swirled in his mind, running together in a blur that threatened to overwhelm him. Chris was gone. He was stranded in a war-torn country with no true hope of survival. He would probably never see Megan or Joey again. And this woman whom he'd risked so much to save wasn't breathing.

It was more than Goose could bear.

This woman was going to die on him, caught by a ricochet that should never have happened.

Clay broke away. Goose straddled the woman again, locking his hands together over her heart and pushing, hoping to revive that fist-sized clump of muscle that was the engine for the human body.

If God had raptured the world, if He had taken the children, then why had He left so many other people behind? Why would He take all the children? Why would He take Chris?

God wouldn't, Goose told himself. God hadn't done those things. The God he believed in wouldn't do something like that. Someone else caused the disappearances. Someone else took Chris. If God had done those things, there would be some kind of sign, some—

Miraculously, Goose felt the woman's heart suddenly flutter under his hands. In disbelief, he drew his hands back and pressed his ear to her chest.

Her heartbeat was erratic at first but quickly settled into a strong rhythm.

"Hey," Clay said excitedly, "she's breathing! She's breathing on her own. You got her back, First Sergeant. You got her back."

Tiredly, giving in to the pain in his knee, Goose moved away from the woman and stood. He stared down at her.

A moment passed before she opened her eyes and tried to sit up.

"Easy," Clay said, restraining her with a hand to her shoulder.

"Let me go!" Arnaud demanded, struggling more fiercely now. "Let me go!"

Goose nodded to the corporal, who released Arnaud.

The man dropped to the ground beside his wife. "Ah, Giselle! I thought you were lost to me!"

The woman looked at her husband, then at Goose. "I thought I was. I'm sure for a time I was dead. I was outside my body, standing here in this alley looking down at myself and you and these men. I was so scared. I was screaming for you, but you could not hear me. I thought I would never see you again. I felt like I was drifting away. Like fog giving way to the morning sun." She shook her head and smiled. "Then I saw the angel."

"Angel?" Arnaud seemed startled. "There was no angel."

"There was," the woman insisted. "There is. I saw it. The angel was at the sergeant's shoulder as he worked to start my heart. The angel told me everything was going to be all right, that it wasn't my time yet, that the sergeant was going to save me. Then the angel leaned down and touched my heart, and it started."

Goose didn't believe a word of it. The woman had gone through considerable trauma. It wasn't surprising that she'd imagined the angel.

But she looked at Goose with wide, awestruck eyes. "It's true, Sergeant. Believe it or not, but you have an angel at your shoulder. I saw it. I see it still."

"Yes, ma'am," Goose said politely, but he knew the woman must have been hallucinating. There could be no other explanation. Accepting that an angel had stood at his side meant accepting the supernatural. And that meant accepting that the Rapture had taken place, that everyone left on the planet was doomed to seven years of war and death, that a newly elected Romanian president named Nicolae Carpathia was the Antichrist even now rising to power to bury the world in deceit and treachery.

And that Goose would never see Chris again.

Goose couldn't believe any of that. He wouldn't allow himself to believe that.

Because if he believed it, it meant that his son was lost to him.



Hazel's Café
Marbury, Alabama
Local Time 0915 Hours

Eating breakfast in Hazel's Café was like stepping back in time.

Chaplain Delroy Harte got a definite feeling of déjà vu as he sat across the table from Deputy Walter Purcell in one of the back booths. The rustic decor, cobbled together from farming and ranching equipment; from NASCAR's licensed hats, mugs, and posters; and from local high school sports equipment, looked exactly as it had when he'd eaten there with his father when Delroy had been first a boy and later a young man.

At a few minutes past nine in the morning, the café held mostly late starters and farmers and ranchers who'd already put in a half day's work and wanted to take a break in each other's company for an hour or two before getting back to the full day's work waiting for them. The smell of fried sausage, ham, and beefsteak mixed with the scents of fresh-baked rolls, plain and sweet, eggs done a half-dozen different ways, and grilled onions.

But many of the people gathered here had come so they wouldn't be alone. Their need for company resonated within these walls. Fear etched their faces and kept their conversations to a bare handful of words thrown among them as they watched the two televisions, one on each side of the café. Both sets were tuned to news stations.

Delroy's heart went out to the frightened people, but he knew he had no words of comfort for them. He made himself look past them. They would be all right. Either they would help themselves or someone would help them. He had no business feeling like he could.

Not after the way he'd spent last night.

Delroy had arrived in the graveyard outside Marbury where his son was buried. Lance Corporal Terrence David Harte had died in action five years ago and had returned home to be buried here. After following Captain Mark Falkirk's orders to leave USS *Wasp*, Delroy's ship, and making the trek to speak to the Joint Chiefs in the Pentagon regarding his belief that God had raptured the world, the chaplain

had requested leave to attend to personal business. With the confusion going on regarding military action and the need to defend the United States, Delroy's request had received authorization.

In the cemetery last night, Delroy had started digging up his son's casket, wanting to discover if Terrence's body had been taken to heaven, if he had truly known God in his short life. Or if—like his father—he'd been left behind. Before he'd reached the casket, Delroy had realized that if he dug his son up and discovered the truth, his faith would be in jeopardy. If Terrence's body was still in that hole in the ground, Delroy didn't know if he would ever be able to believe again. And if Terrence's body was gone, true faith would be impossible because Delroy would know that God existed.

And people were supposed to go to God in faith. That was one thing Delroy's daddy, Josiah Harte, had taught him.

Overcome by doubt and fear and frustration, Delroy had turned from digging and been confronted by the demon he had first seen in Washington, D.C., days ago. They had fought, Delroy and the demon, and it had shown him the unforgettable image of Terrence—his body torn and broken by the conflict he'd died in—trying in vain to break out of the coffin.

When at last the demon had disappeared, Delroy had passed out, unable to leave the cemetery where his son and his daddy lay in their eternal slumber. Deputy Walter Purcell had found Delroy lying in the rain and mud. The big deputy had taken Delroy to the hospital in Marbury and little more than an hour ago got him released. Now he was taking Delroy to breakfast.

"Lotta memories in this place?" Walter stirred grape jelly into his scrambled eggs, then spooned the mixture onto a biscuit.

"Aye," Delroy answered. They'd only gotten their food a few minutes ago. Getting out of the hospital had taken longer than expected. With a third of the patients and more than that from the staff disappearing, the hospital struggled to get everything done. Even with the disappearances, the hospital still needed to bill the insurance companies.

"You grew up here." Walter blew on his coffee, then took a sip.

"Aye. That I did." Delroy waited for the other shoe to drop. From his observation of Walter, he knew the man wasn't one to beat around the bush for long.

The egg-and-jelly biscuit had disappeared, but Walter was just getting started. Like a craftsman, he cut his ham into sections. The metal knife and fork rasped with quick strokes. His plate was piled high

with sausage gravy and biscuits, fried onions and hash browns, bacon, and pancakes.

"Are you going to drop the other shoe?" Delroy asked. "Or are you going to just let it hang there?"

Walter chewed his ham, swallowed, and washed it down with coffee. He eyed Delroy directly. "You been around Yankees maybe a little too long. Too direct. Maybe you've forgotten how to maintain a conversation before you get to the ugly parts of it. Around here, we kind of take things a bit slower. Use conversation and a meal to get to know each other a bit before we get down to it. That way you can still seal a deal with a handshake."

"I was just wondering what you had in mind, Deputy."

Walter wiped his mouth with his napkin. "My ulterior motive, you mean."

"That'll do," Delroy said.

Narrowing his eyes in irritation, Walter asked, "You always been this suspicious?"

"No."

"Well then, you should get away from it. It ain't becomin'."

Embarrassment stung Delroy and turned his face hot.

Walter returned his attention to his plate. "I say anything to you that makes you think I got some ulterior motive?"

"Not yet."

The deputy shook his head. "I ain't got but a couple things I want to make sure of." He counted them off on his thick, blunt fingers while maintaining his hold on the knife and fork. "One: that you ain't gonna hurt nobody in my county."

"That's not going to happen."

"Well, now since I only just met you—and not under the best of circumstance, I might add—I don't know that, do I?" Walter's gaze was fierce.

"I'm not going to hurt anyone here."

"I found you at your son's grave site," Walter went on. "You wasn't exactly plumb on the bob when I found you. You looked like you'd been beat near to death, and that's the flat-out gospel." He mopped his plate with a biscuit, picking up bacon grease, jelly, eggs, and gravy. "Then I did some checking around. Found out you were from here. Found out your daddy was a preachin' man. Found out he was killed—"

"He was murdered," Delroy said, and was surprised at how hollow his voice sounded in his ears.

Walter nodded. "They never caught the man who did it, did they?"

"No."

"But they figured they knew who it was."

Delroy remained quiet and still. His chest suddenly felt so tight he couldn't breathe.

"Man named Clarence Floyd was the man Sheriff Dobbs thought killed your daddy," Walter said.

"Where are you going with this, Deputy?"

"Walter. Call me Walter. I told you that."

Delroy waited.

Walter sighed and shifted his equipment belt. "Ain't no way but the hard way with you is there? Shoulda known that from all them knots on your face."

"Now who's being unbecoming?"

Frowning, Walter said, "I blame you. Yes, sir, I do. It's like you bring out the worst in me."

Delroy let the accusation hang between them. Anger stirred restlessly within him. He forced himself to breathe out. *Give me patience, Lord. This here's a good man, and I've got no cause to make his life any more complicated than it already is.* Slowly, the anger fizzled out. He broke the eye contact with the deputy and reached for his fork.

"I'm sorry," Walter said. "I shouldn't have said that."

"It's all right. I'm pretty sure I had it coming." Delroy broke open a biscuit, added butter and grape jelly, and ate.

"Biscuits still as good as you remember?" Walter asked.

"Melt in your mouth," Delroy answered. For a time, they ate in silence.

Delroy watched the news and saw fitful bursts of information regarding the military effort in Sanliurfa. More interviews with Nicolae Carpathia, the Romanian president scheduled to speak at the General Assembly of the United Nations in New York City, spun across both televisions.

"Reason I asked you about Clarence Floyd," Walter said.

Delroy looked at him.

"Three years ago," Walter said, eyes level and steady, "Floyd moved back to Marbury. He lives here now."

The news slammed into Delroy.

"You didn't know that, did you?" Walter asked.

Delroy didn't try to lie. He knew his angry disbelief had been too strong. "No."

"I didn't think you did. But if you're gonna stay here a couple

days, chances are you'd probably find out once folks in town figure out who you are."

Delroy sat quiet and still. His father's murder had happened over thirty years ago, but the grief and anger over the act had never truly dimmed. If he hadn't been so worn out emotionally from last night, he didn't know what he might have done.

"Why did he come back?" Delroy asked when he could talk again.

Walter studied him, then scooped up more jelly and scrambled eggs to spread on a biscuit. "He just come home. Like you, I suppose. Wasn't nowhere else to go, maybe. His life, it ain't been like yours. He doesn't have no navy career, no calling to keep him busy. He's just a mean seventy-three-year-old man who's afraid of dying."

"You've seen him?"

"Not today," Walter said. "But I have. I take a look through Sheriff Dobbs' cold-case files from time to time. When Floyd moved back into his folks' home, I looked him up." He ate the biscuit. "Wasn't nothing ever brought up against him regarding your daddy's murder."

"His father paid off the judge."

Walter shrugged. "That wasn't ever proved either."

"That's what happened."

"That may be. I can't say. But one thing I gotta tell you, Chaplain Harte. As long as you're around here, I don't want you seeing Clarence Floyd. Now normally, the city, why that's the police chief's concern. But what with everything going on that's been going on, the sheriff's department and the police department are working on a share-and-share-alike basis. We help each other out because we know most of the same folks around here. I brought you into town, and I decided to release you on your own recognizance. That makes me somewhat responsible for you."

Delroy sat back for a moment. "This breakfast isn't turning out the way I thought it was going to."

"No, sir." Walter nodded. "I expect not. Usually these eggs settle on my stomach better'n they are right now. From what I see of you, you're a good man. Just a little lost right now. In my experience, that's when men make bad decisions that can haunt them the rest of their lives. I ain't here to save Floyd's neck so much as I am to save yours."

Delroy didn't speak, didn't really know what he would have said if he had been so inclined.

"You can believe that or not," Walter said. "But something you

can take to the bank is this: If you go out of your way to cause problems for Floyd, I'll lock you up so fast it will make your head spin."

"All right," Delroy said.

"Another thing," Walter went on. "I made some phone calls while I was out and about waiting to get the doc's report on you. As it turns out, your wife Glenda is still in town."

Surprise pushed Delroy's outrage and pain aside. "Glenda is here? She didn't . . . leave with the others?"

"No, sir. She didn't leave. She's here."

The world grew silent and still and as cold as a January morning. Delroy couldn't breathe for a moment. Then he heard the blood roar in his ears as his heart chugged through another beat.

"Does she . . ." Delroy's voice failed him.

"Know that you're here?" Walter shook his head. "Not that I know of. I ain't one to go around jacking my jaws about everything. The doctors and nurses at the hospital ain't connected you with Glenda. As a matter of fact, I doubt they even know her."

"You said the floor nurse knew my name."

"Yes, sir. She did. But she don't know Glenda. She knew stories about your daddy. I also asked her to keep things quiet. She will."

"Thank you for that. I don't know how Glenda would react to knowing I was in town."

"You wasn't planning on stopping in and seeing her?"

"No," Delroy admitted, and he felt guilty at once. "All my plans ended at the graveyard."

"You thinking about stopping in and seeing her now?"

"No." Delroy's answer was immediate.

"You two divorced? 'Cause that's not the way I heard it was."

"Not divorced. At least, not that I know of."

"She's still carrying your name."

Delroy knew that was how Glenda was. She'd married him all those years ago, and she'd told him she'd wear his name for the rest of her life.

"You mind me asking what it is that's come between you two?" Walter asked.

"I do mind."

"Too bad. I'm asking anyway. Things I've heard about Glenda Harte are all good. I wouldn't stand for hearing that any harm's come to that woman because I made a mistake about somebody else."

Delroy thought about getting up and walking out of the café. His eyes darted to the door.

"Leaving wouldn't do you any good," Walter continued in a level voice. "I brought you to breakfast because I thought we might talk things out like men."

"What's gone on or is going on between my . . . wife and me is none of your business."

Walter sighed and rubbed his face. "Chaplain Harte, you're carrying around more grief and anger and confusion than any man I've ever met in my life. Or at the very least, any man I've met in a good many years. And in my line of business I've met no few men like that. So I consider myself a pretty good judge of another man's disposition. Maybe that's conceit on my part, but I've paid my dues for that one. Now, we're gonna get straight with each other this morning, or I'm gonna bust you and take you in to get some psychiatric help. I ain't gonna have no loose cannon roaming around this county I swore to protect and defend."

"I'm not here to hurt anyone."

Walter held up a hand. "Ain't nothing wrong with my hearing. I look like a man gone hard of hearing?"

Delroy said, "No."

"My wife's the only one accuses me of that, and that's 'cause I don't jump up ever' time she wants me to do something on her honey-do list. But I'm good at law enforcement. I get so I ain't, I'll lay it down immediately." Walter blew on his coffee and sipped it. "Now if I lock you up, it ain't but one short phone call to the navy. Bet if I told whoever was at the other end of that line that one of their officers was down here acting squirrely, you'd be back wherever it is you belong in a New York minute." He brushed biscuit crumbs and gravy from his mustache with his napkin. "Are you reading me now, Chaplain?"

"Aye," Delroy responded. "Loud and clear."

"Good. That's real good. 'Cause that's the last thing I want to do. I don't think that's what will get things done for you here." Walter leaned back a little.

"My son's death separated my wife and me," Delroy said.

"I heard your son passed during military action."

Delroy nodded, having to force himself to move.

"Your wife couldn't get over it?" Walter asked. "I've seen people like that. People that couldn't make peace with a loss. Took me a long time to meet eye to eye with God over the loss of my own boy. I still don't think it was right, and maybe I stepped away from Him some. I faulted Him a lot for a long time. Maybe that's part of why I'm still here."

Shame burned Delroy's features. It was hard to admit everything, but at least he felt that he and Deputy Walter Purcell shared something in common.

"It wasn't my wife that couldn't get past it," Delroy said in a low, soft voice. He thought of Terrence lying in that muddy grave, the ground above him all torn up where Delroy had tried to dig down to him. "It was me. I couldn't get past the death of my son."

Walter stared at Delroy for a long time. Then the big man leaned forward and put a hand on Delroy's shoulder. "It's a powerful hard thing to get past. And it's mighty confusing because you just don't feel right about moving on through it."

"I know. I've given a lot of people that speech over the years." Delroy felt cold and empty inside. "Glenda faltered. I saw her. And I tried to comfort her. That gave me something to do, gave me the chance to turn away from my own pain and anger." He stopped, lost in the memory and unable to go on.

"Then she started to come around," Walter said quietly. "She started healing."

"Aye."

"And you resented her for it."

Delroy tried to speak but couldn't.

"It's an easy thing to do, Chaplain," Walter said.

"Not for me," Delroy said fiercely. "Never once did I ever think I would resent Glenda for anything. I took a vow before God to cherish her always. I didn't." His voice broke, betraying the strong emotion that vibrated inside him. "I was supposed to be stronger than that. My father raised me up to be stronger than that."

"Your daddy," Walter stated gently, "wasn't there. And it wasn't him asked to give up a son, Delroy. It was you. You were entitled to your grief. Still are. I ain't finding no fault with that."

Delroy brushed tears from his eyes before they could fall; then he willed them to stop. "Not five years of grief." He kept his voice flat and neutral. "I'm being selfish. I just—I just don't know how to stop. It wasn't supposed to be like this."

"You're human. Ain't nothing wrong with being human. Just hard wearin' from time to time." Walter shifted. "I seen men what didn't care about nothin'. Seen 'em on battlefields and I seen 'em in law enforcement. Some of them men even wore badges now and again, and that was real hard to witness and not do nothing."

"I'm a navy chaplain," Delroy said. "A preacher's son. My father taught me my faith."

Walter was quiet for a time. "One thing I learned through losing my own son: God's grace is never known to you till after the fact. Sometimes, I suppose, it ain't gonna be known till you're in the hereafter. I still struggle with my own belief, but I believe God is there. Just haven't figured out my own relationship with Him. I guess that's why I'm still here. I look around this town, Reverend, and I see a lot of good folks stuck in much the same boat."

"Pretty good Christians." Captain Mark Falkirk's final words aboard *Wasp's* flight deck echoed in Delroy's mind: "*The most dangerous man on this planet is the person who believes he is a pretty good Christian.*"

"That's as good a term for it as any other," Walter said. "Good people that, for whatever reason, just didn't make the final cut. Now, I believe the world was raptured. I'm sure you do too. So that means we got a limited time to make a difference. Not just in our lives, but in the lives of others. Me, I'm a man what's always stood on the right of things. Straight and narrow. That's how I've lived 'er. When I could. And I could most of the time."

Delroy met the other man's gaze with difficulty.

"Now, I usually ain't one to go around taking chances," Walter continued. "Before all this happened, before I started opening up my Bible and reading Revelation, why if I'd come across you in that graveyard, found out the man who murdered your daddy and your ex-wife was living in this town, I'd have had you locked up for observation in two shakes of a lamb's tail. Just to keep the peace."

"I would never hurt Glenda," Delroy said. "I give you my word on that."

"And now I believe you about that. But you see, I know she's got her own grief she's dealing with. She didn't just lose her son; she lost her husband, and weren't none of that her fault. Might be her that started something, and I'd end up with the same problem."

The deputy's words cut through Delroy. He couldn't imagine Glenda doing something like that. But after what he'd done, after what they'd both suffered—*No. She still wouldn't do anything like that. The deputy just doesn't know her.*

"I know how she probably feels," Walter said. "Because that's how my own wife felt. I know that 'cause she cared enough about me to get riled up and tell me about it over and over. Till I owned up to it and pulled my head back on straight." He sipped his coffee. "Now, it ain't been easy, but I worked at it. Still do." He held his left forefinger and

thumb about an inch apart. "Little bit ever' day. Reckon I always will. And as long as I have to, I'll see that it gets done."

Delroy glanced out the big window overlooking the street in front of the café. Sluggish morning traffic passed by only occasionally.

"I can't go see my wife," Delroy said.

"Wasn't suggesting that you do. In fact, I'm thinking it might be better for the both of you to wait until you get your head together."

"I can't guarantee that will happen either."

"Didn't expect you to. The kind of changes you're gonna have to make are gonna take years."

Years. The word sounded like a prison sentence to Delroy.

"But I will remind you of one thing," Walter said. "These changes you gotta make? You're running out of time. Way I read my Bible, there's only—"

"Seven years," Delroy said.

Walter nodded. "Less than that already. Figured you'd know. Don't help with the clock ticking, but I guess that's how it's gotta be."

"It's hard to care."

"Yes, sir. I expect it is. But you listen to me, Chaplain. Whatever chance you got of seeing your boy again—whole, hale, and hearty—why it's through the sacrifice Jesus made to take our sins on and the grace of God Almighty that you're gonna get it done. The way I figure it, you still got His work ahead of you."

"There's a reason I didn't go back to my ship," Delroy said. "I don't belong there. Those men are involved in a war zone. There are chaplains aboard *Wasp* that can do what they need done. I'm not the rock they need."

He felt guilty when he said that. He'd signed on to take care of those responsibilities. For the last five years, though, he'd hidden aboard *Wasp* more than he had attended to God's work. The Lord had been given lip service and short shrift. *And if that won't send a chaplain straight to hell, I don't know what will.*

"Wasn't talking about you taking care of nobody else," Walter said, breaking into Delroy's thoughts. "I was talking about you taking care of your own self. Man's drowning, why he's gotta make sure he's safe enough to save ever'body else. It's always been that way."

Delroy waited for a moment, then asked the question he didn't want to ask but he couldn't leave it alone. "What am I going to do if I'm not strong enough to save myself?"

"You'll cross that bridge when you get to it. Just take one step at a time for right now. That's plenty fast enough."

"That's not an answer."

Walter shrugged. "Onliest answer I got. And the way you get started on that is to finish that breakfast. They go to a lot of trouble to fix a good plate here, and ain't fitting for them to throw it out because you're denying your appetite. You gotta eat and keep your strength up. You're a military man, Chaplain. You eat what's put before you to keep yourself fit because that's part of a soldier's standing orders. Right now, God and the navy own you, and you'd best see that they get their investment back."

Delroy worked to turn off his feelings, his doubts, and his fears and concentrated on his plate. He got both jobs partially done. When he pushed the plate back, food remained but Walter Purcell seemed satisfied.

"Settle up the check," Walter said, grabbing his hat from the table. "I'll give you a ride."

Delroy paid the bill, left a generous tip, and joined the deputy outside the café. The wind blew cold and clean from the north, but it carried a taint of woodsmoke and burned rubber.

"Hotel's not gonna have you," Walter said as they climbed into his cruiser.

"Why?" Delroy asked.

"Because I ain't taking you there. I got a room in back of the house I can let you use for a few days." Walter cranked the engine over. "Till you figure out what you're gonna do."

"So I'm under house arrest."

"I wouldn't call it that."

"What if I want a hotel room?"

Walter looked at him. "You gonna insult my hospitality?"

Delroy didn't know what to say. Walter Purcell surprised him at every turn.

"You wasn't listening back in the café when I told you I had a couple of things I wanted to make sure of." Walter put the transmission in gear and pulled out of the parking lot into the street.

"You didn't want me to see Clarence Floyd and Glenda. I got that."

Walter nodded. "Yep. You heard that right enough. I don't aim to see you hurt nobody in my town." He paused and shifted gears. "But I also want to make sure you don't hurt yourself either."

"I wouldn't do that."

"Says the man who looks like he shoved his face into a wood chipper."

Delroy remained silent as he looked over the town. So many things seemed different, but so much of the area looked the same. Memories of his father played inside his head. He remembered the rough feel of his father's hand holding his when he was small, and the smell of his father's cologne when he was older.

Lord, I was wrong to come here. I was wrong to test You. I don't know what I'm supposed to do, but this is the wrong place to do it. My daddy's all over this town. I'm going to see him everywhere I go.

He knew he'd be trapped into remembering Terrence as well. Delroy had brought his family to Marbury often to visit his mother. Terrence had played in the same park he had, had spent time in his father's church after the new preacher had taken over, had eaten breakfasts in Hazel's Café.

"You okay?" Walter asked.

"Aye," Delroy answered.

"You ask me, that sounded a tad weak."

"Regretting coming here."

Walter nodded and pulled to a stop at the red light. "I can see how you'd feel that way right now."

"I do appreciate your hospitality, Walter. There aren't many men who'd do what you've done."

"No, sir. I expect not. A few days ago, before all them people disappeared, I wouldn't have done it." Walter glanced at Delroy and grinned. "I called my wife, told her I was bringing you home. She thinks I've lost my mind."

"Then why are you doing it?"

"Because it feels right." Walter shrugged and looked a little embarrassed. "Kinda following my heart on this one. And way I feel, I don't think I could walk away if I wanted to." He looked at Delroy. "Why'd you take me up on it?"

"I had a choice?"

"You coulda made me make that call. Coulda spent the night in jail and probably got you a navy escort out of here first thing in the morning."

"I could still slip out the window tonight."

Walter laughed. "Maybe we're both fools then, Chaplain."

"Call me Delroy. Chaplain . . . just doesn't feel right at the moment."

"Fair enough, Delroy."

"I'll probably trouble you for the bed today and tonight," Delroy

said. "More than likely, I'll make a phone call to the navy tonight and be gone first light if I can get a rental car."

"What about your missus?"

Delroy shook his head. "I've made enough mistakes coming here. I don't need to make one more. And that one would be a big one." He laid his head back on the headrest and closed his eyes, shutting out the familiar streets and all the painful memories.

Just get me free of this town, Lord, Delroy prayed. He hoped God was listening, but he didn't know if He was. *No, it's not that you don't know; it's that you don't believe, Delroy. You call this one fair and square.* He wanted to cry but he lacked the strength and he knew it would do no good. He kept his eyes closed good and tight.

Then he grew aware of how long the car was sitting at the red light. No red light lasted that long. Delroy lifted his head and peered forward. The light was still red. To his left, Walter Purcell sat patiently with both hands on the steering wheel. If he noticed the passage of time, the deputy gave no indication.

The growling pop of a loud exhaust suddenly thundered into Delroy's ears. The side mirror showed the approach of a yellow-and-red Harley-Davidson motorcycle. The lone rider, dressed in scarred black leather, kicked his feet out as the motorcycle drew even with the cruiser.

Drawn by the noise and the closeness of the motorcycle, Delroy looked at the rider.

He was young and blond, his bare arms and neck covered with tattoos. He wore wraparound mirror sunglasses. As Delroy watched, the rider's skin switched from tan and tattoos to a hint of reptilian scales.

The rider grinned. Somehow his voice carried over the thunder of the cycle's exhaust. "Glad to see you're hanging around here, Preacher." The thing glanced over his shoulder and made a show of taking in the town. "Lotta people here to hurt. And as long as you're around, I get to hurt them." He smiled, bright and cruel and cold. "I have to admit, playing with you has become more exciting than I thought it would be. You're being stubborn, but that just makes the chase better." He twisted the accelerator and revved the engine, cracking ominous thunder all around them. "But in the end, I'm going to bring you down. Your faith is weak."

Delroy fumbled for the door lock and pushed the button down.

The thing on the motorcycle laughed uproariously. He made a pistol of his thumb and forefinger and shot Delroy with it.

"Are you all right?"

Surprised by the deputy's voice, Delroy turned to look at Walter.

"I said, are you all right?" Walter asked again. He nodded at the lock. "You afraid of falling out?"

Delroy glanced back at the side of the cruiser, only then realizing the sound of the throbbing engine had disappeared. The street beside him was empty.