

OBLIVION'S REACH

THE
BATTLE FOR
HUMANKIND
IS ON

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Carpenter's Son Publishing



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*by Michael Stafford
and Don Gladden*

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*Before the Earth's last days,
before there would be
a population left behind . . .*





1



THE FALLEN
ANGELS
DESCENDED
INTO A
DARKNESS WITH
NO BOTTOM.
THERE WAS NO
GOING BACK.
GOD HAD BEEN
QUITE SPECIFIC
ABOUT THAT.



WONDER WHY THEY CALL THIS THE GOLD COAST? Sonta was perplexed. He had never been to this part of America, wasn't from here, and never could be called a history buff. The high-rise condos lining Lake Shore Drive along the Chicago skyline were undoubtedly impressive. Hailing a limousine at Grand Central Station, he headed to his destination with his entourage.

Sonta could have flown, but the train was more conducive for his activities while traveling. The accommodations of the two compartments on the City of New Orleans allowed him to continue the party with his companions. He was unwilling to give up the enjoyment and attention his entourage showered on him.

Sonta was a Fallen Angel and possessed powers far beyond those of earthlings. In his demonic state, he towered over the tallest mortals. His wings spanned nearly twenty feet tip to tip. Sonta answered only to a few.

When Lucifer and his followers went tumbling out of Heaven's confines, Sonta was among them. The castoffs had eventually gathered in a place called the Second Heaven, from whence they dispersed, bringing their wrath to all civilizations.

Like his brethren, Sonta was a changeling, capable of altering his appearance. The importance of this capability could not be overstated, since there were many races on Earth where Christianity flourished. Here, he presented as a tall European gentleman with somewhat aristocratic roots.

Arriving at the address given to him, Sonta and his attendants waited impatiently for the private elevator to whisk them up to the penthouse. Luxury fairly oozed from the marble floors, the window treatments, and the reception area. The lavish surroundings fit his persona. There was no reason why he should not be enjoying more of these moments, but it had not happened yet.

Boarding the elevator, Sonta daydreamed about being able to enjoy all the creature comforts available in this world he now temporarily called home. Being one of the Fallen Angels God cast out of Heaven eons ago had resulted in an always fluid algorithm of changing conditions. Assignments with no end and battles with no resolution had led him to this place in a land called Earth where all was available.

Sonta couldn't help think that his master, Koal, Jeremiah Koal to the locals, was collecting chits that carried his imprint. *I have been as successful in battle as he has, yet here he is, summoning me.*

Jeremiah Koal was just a name chosen because its prefix had biblical standing. A Christian name in the mortal community seemed necessary for an Overlord of the demonic Kingdom whose direct responsibility was the heartland of America.

Koal was a handsome man in his earthly presence, but an object of fear and loathing in his demonic form. There was no measuring the evil that resided within him. He had blood-red eyes sunken beneath a misty haze, foulness oozing from his pores. When thoroughly demonized, he was nearly twelve feet tall, with a twenty-five-foot wingspan and yellow-hued complexion.

He had fallen slightly behind Lucifer.

Koal engendered such fear that his adversaries, with good reason, always wanted to run, but couldn't, being frozen with fear's massive adrenaline shooting through their veins.

The elevator stopped one floor below the penthouse. Sonta cautioned his companions to behave as they stepped out into a reception area. People scurried everywhere. It was a busy place, a typical American corporate office setting. Computer screens received data and routed it away. Phones rang. Quiet conversations were taking place.

Two security personnel, handguns holstered at their waists, approached Sonta from a rear stairway area that was hidden by beautiful palm trees.

"Are you Alexander Sonta, sir?" one asked.

"Well, yes, I am Sonta," he replied. "I don't know where Alexander came from, but I am Sonta, and I am expected."

It was apparent to Sonta that Master Koal had given him a first name, an earthling name, entirely without his permission.

"Sir," said the other guard, "please walk up to the next floor where Gozan will meet you. We will keep your companions here in the lounge area," he added, with no hint of emotion.

Sonta didn't want to leave his "traveling party." Nevertheless, he had to comply.

Gozan was Koal's chief of staff, his right-hand man, who held down the position that should have been his, a position Sonta had rightfully earned on the battlefield.

Perhaps if I were more accommodating, thought Sonta, *things would change.* He brushed the thought aside. Whatever the role he had played, the lives he had taken certainly merited a promotion. One day soon, he would become a member of the high council presided over by the great master Satan himself.

"Sonta, so good to see you," said Gozan, forcing a smile. He had never liked Sonta, whom he considered too full of himself. Sonta wanted his job, and Gozan knew it. Fat chance of that happening.

"Sure, good to see you, too," Sonta mumbled as he scanned

the surroundings, barely hiding his contempt for a lackey who was most obviously not a warrior.

“What’s up with the names? I was just told I am Alexander.”

“First names only exist when humans are present. We can’t be bothered with them here. How was your trip?”

“Other than having to board the City of New Orleans at 3 a.m., it was just fine. It passed the smell test.”

“I don’t understand those words,” said Gozan.

Sonta looked at the man with a condescending stare. “None of my associates had any complaints, so all’s well that ends well.”

“Associates?” Gozan seemed taken aback.

“Yeah. We had a good party going on at departure time so I brought everyone with me,” replied Sonta, almost laughing out loud at what he perceived as embarrassment on Gozan’s face.

“Well, what you do is your business unless it’s mine,” replied Gozan, looking at him evenly with no hint of inferiority.

“Well said,” replied Sonta, thinking that he might need to reassess his situation. On display were Koal’s and Gozan’s new lives, not his.

“What is on the agenda?”

“That depends on Master Koal,” said Gozan. “He doesn’t clear his schedule with me.”

“That’s quite an admission, Gozan, coming from his chief of staff. I was summoned, had to leave in the middle of the night to get here, endure an hour and a half cab ride in rush hour, and still have to wait on his supremeness. To top it all off, you don’t know the agenda!”

“I don’t know why I’m giving you this heads-up, Sonta,” Gozan said, “but our master has read your recent report, and I observed some discomfort on his face when he was through.”

“How so?” asked Sonta, seeing a smirk on Gozan’s face.

“Not for me to say,” replied Gozan, walking toward a door

on the right and motioning for Sonta to follow.

Opening the door, they entered a large suite. The usual complement of office equipment was scattered neatly around. A large mahogany desk flanked by chairs and a small conference table occupied the center of the room. On the east wall, several large picture windows looked out over Lake Michigan.

Gozan pressed a button and the wall to the west began to fold on itself, exposing as it did an expanded version of the present room. The Chicago skyline was in full view.

"Settle in, Sonta," advised Gozan. "It's a little after one. I'll have lunch brought in. Hard to say how long you'll be here before Master Koal makes himself available."

"I doubt it will make any difference," said Sonta, "but I do have an eight o'clock train reservation."

"You're right again," replied Gozan, leaving the room. "It doesn't matter."

Arrogant jerk! thought Sonta, quickly dismissing the speculation, knowing full well the powers of Koal, one of which was advanced telepathy. It allowed him to monitor thoughts as a way of controlling the demons around him. He could have been listening to this entire preamble.

Lunch arrived, but Sonta ate fitfully, still not knowing why he had been summoned. Eventually, he settled into a comfortable chair and dozed off. Awaking, he checked his watch. It was three thirty.

Looking around the vacant room, his gaze meandered to the east windows that revealed several sailboats bouncing on the lake's small waves. The beachfront up and down Lake Shore Drive was also in view, which attracted sunbathers and windsurfers. It was a hot day, and through the binoculars lying on an adjacent table, he spotted a stunning blonde sunbather roll slowly to her back, attracting the attention of several men in her proximity.

Sonta breathed hard as he observed the dynamics of the scene, so caught up in the grand design that he completely missed Koal's entrance.

"If you are that interested in her," Koal said, snapping Sonta's head around at the sound of his voice, "I can have her brought up later."

"Master Koal, I didn't hear you enter," Sonta sputtered.

"I've reviewed your report on southern Illinois. As is, it appears in alignment with our master plan but looks a little skimpy. Did you leave anything out? Anything that affects our chances of success?"

Sonta felt as though he was caught totally off guard. The distraction of the blond down on the beach had carried his thought processes to a different time zone. But Koal was here now, and he needed to pay attention. The demon's mortal appearance had changed since Sonta's last visit. More aristocratic-looking, probably to help push his "Jeremiah" agenda.

"The report is factual, Master Koal," Sonta replied as he wiped sweat from the binoculars and dabbed his brow with the back of his hand. He hadn't realized how disturbed he had become with the beach activity.

"According to your two-year timetable," Koal continued, "our takeover will be complete. We will have determined who is faithful and who is not and turned the hearts and minds of the masses to our agenda. The population will be controlled or eliminated. Your confidence rides high, Sonta, does it not? But what about the opposition? In the past, you have not always been effective in that arena. There have been mistakes. What's your strategy?" Koal's Earth form began to melt at the utterance of these words.

Sonta read the shapeshift as a danger signal. Tensing, he said, "I remind you, Master, earthlings are a poorly evolved

species. They are simple people, and our plan has already yielded promising results. Land acquisitions have largely gone unnoticed. Those who became aware of even small portions of our plan have been neutralized. Possible adversaries have been identified. People who pose a potential problem, well, let's just say they are on the watch list. We have aligned with past partners and are bringing them into the area. Let me assure you. . . .”

The setting sun had suddenly dipped below a roof overhang, causing Koal and Sonta to shield their faces as the sun's rays momentarily blinded them. Koal turned and groped for a panel on his desk. At the press of a button, the blinds lowered, obscuring the panoramic view of the Chicago skyline. Too much sunlight was dangerous.

“Let me assure you,” Sonta continued, “that this plan will be the gold standard for similar takeovers elsewhere.”

“Much depends on it. Much,” Koal said, his eyes framed with fire boring a hole through Sonta. “Let me assure you that your existence depends on it as well.”

Sonta understood. Koal did not make veiled threats.

“As you know, our region is one of four. We are the test quadrant bringing the battle for humankind to the entire nation. Your plan will be a blueprint for the conquest of Earth. I have three counterparts, as do you. Our Grand Master Satan has chosen America because of its decadence. In my opinion, we could not have selected a better environment. Our Master has one worry that he voices regularly. He fears our takeover will not be completed before the Rapture sends all of us who follow him to the fiery pit, from which there is no escape. This event the Christians call the Rapture means we must be busy fulfilling our mission.”

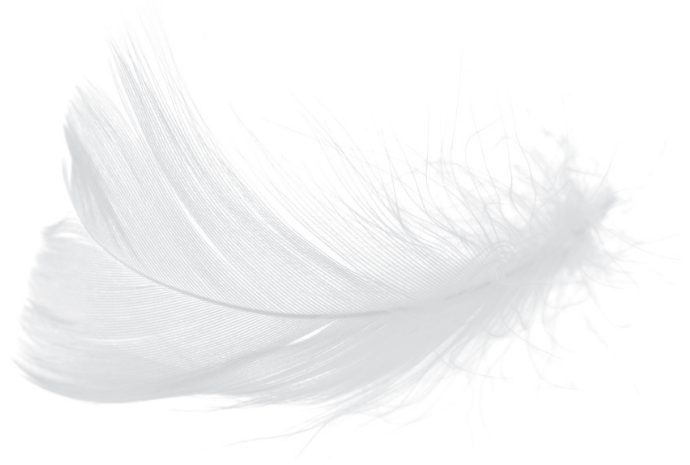
The message was understood.

“Master Koal, do you remember how early last century you maneuvered the Ottoman Empire to eliminate the Armenians?”

“At your direction during World War I, I was able to infiltrate the Turkish leadership and harden their hearts and minds against the Armenians. We convinced the government that the Armenians were a dangerous foreign element. Today history calls it the Armenian Genocide. You were bloody and ruthless in your elimination of this Christian element. As I recall, this campaign won you your seat on the high council.”

“Yes, I remember the assignment, Sonta. Be careful in your analysis; these are entirely different operations. Here we are seeking to break the faith of those who would disappear should the Rapture occur. They are our priority. The nonbelievers are easily taken. There is no shortage of targets. Concern yourself with the righteous. Lord Satan himself has picked this land for us as a test case.” Koal had softened his voice somewhat, which Sonta took as a positive.

“I understand you have a train to catch. Gozan made sure your companions were accommodated while relaxing in the lounge. They should be fresh for your return trip. My limousine is waiting for you.”



2



"AND YOU WILL HEAR OF WARS AND RUMORS OF WARS. SEE THAT YOU ARE NOT TROUBLED; FOR ALL THESE THINGS MUST COME TO PASS, BUT THE END IS NOT YET."

MATTHEW 24:6

JONES O'BRIAN STOPPED READING HIS BIBLE AND looked across the kitchen table into his wife's big brown eyes. She still captured his attention after all these years.

"Ominous, isn't it?" she said, brushing back a wisp of auburn hair while straightening in her chair.

"What?" said Jones.

"All these wars, murders, drugs, evil acts without end. Everywhere you look. It can't be a coincidence. Besides, you don't believe in coincidences," she said tauntingly.

Her voice trended country, a product of growing up and working on Kazenski Acres, her parents' farm. Although her given name was Connie, somewhere along the line, Kaz took over.

"Don't start bringing blowing up the world again, Kaz. Not everything is falling apart," Jones replied. "And don't get started on Washington either," he added, knowing full well it was her favorite destination.

"Calm down, honey. I'm just saying the political world is wild out there and shows no signs of going away."

He had walked away after one of her interruptions a few nights ago, and right now, she was trying to atone.

“Well, thanks for the input,” he said with a scowl.

“Anytime,” she had replied.

“What do you have spinning inside that head of yours?” she asked.

“I’m thinking about the men who built the roadmap, especially John. The man was centuries ahead of his time.”

“Explain,” said Kaz.

“He was laying out the path that men would walk in the final days, before the Rapture. His vision was one of wars and rumors of wars, horrible events without end.”

Jones’ favorite biblical subject was prophecy. It was easy for him to go there.

“Everyone has an opinion,” he said, “but my feeling is there is too much upheaval for all this conflict to be random. These events are not mere happenstance. Your observations about our government seem right on, though it’s hard to make sense of the mess. It does hurt sometimes having to agree with you.”

“You’ll get over the hump,” said Kaz, flashing him a big smile.

“Anyway,” Jones continued, “the government’s confusion and lies represent not just us but our times. We are all God’s creatures, flawed and in need of salvation. Many of us long to see a great leader emerge, but that may not happen until humanity evolves and sheds its penchant for money, power, and territorial control. We have no real say in who we elect; they are chosen for us by the ruling tribes. If our thousands of churches in this land would only vet these candidates and do what Jesus would do, there would be no uncertainty. I am convinced Satan has infiltrated our churches with nonbelievers posing as Christians, whose tasks are to sow discord and doubt among the faithful. It is the hand of The Most Evil come to bear upon us all,

and I pray the righteous can and will overcome it through the intervention of our Lord and the power of prayer.

"Somedays I feel abandoned in the field," he added, thinking back to his horrific days of combat in Afghanistan. Death, blood, and destruction were all around, and some wanted more. "Who wants that world, Kaz?" he asked.

"Lucifer and his fallen angels. . ." she replied, "they help to install the hate, the corruption, the misery that men bring upon themselves. Over time, the demonic forces take ownership and further damage the people and society."

"That's what I think John envisioned and wrote about, Kaz," said Jones.

"I wouldn't presume to guess at that," she answered.

"Sure makes me think that the end-times are closer than we realize," said Jones.

"It makes me almost glad we can't have children," Kaz blurted out.

Reality bit hard as Jones witnessed her pained expression, one that had existed just below the surface for years. The topic had vanished from their conversations despite countless attempts at coming to peace with her barrenness.

Refocusing, Jones said, "It's all okay, Kaz. It's all okay."

Kaz looked expressionless, still a prisoner of her thoughts.

"Sure, honey, I know."

No one was convinced.

Jones had spent untold hours studying the Bible, a book he treasured over all others. The words there had convinced him to be vigilant and keep watch for signs of world conflict. He was doing just that.

"The good news, Kaz, is that the Bible is clear about angels in our midst, present and active in the affairs of men, just as they were with the Israelites in the olden days. How else could

we have survived without angels and prayer?”

“True,” said Kaz. “I believe that.”

Jones and Kaz had been down this road before. Both, in their own way, wanted to believe so very badly. Kaz had prayed her heart out for a baby and gotten no for an answer. Jones had not stopped questioning how you could write that off to “God’s Will.”

It was murky water at best; even Jones conceded that fact. The details of divine intervention had many interpreters and interpretations. How the Heavenly Host interacted with mortals was tough to figure out sometimes. Try as he might, he couldn’t dismiss Raphael, and the other Grand Masters’ images of mighty Joshua led into battle by a flock of precious, winged cherubs.

“So, Kaz,” he asked hesitantly, “you think the angels have kept the struggle between light and darkness at a stalemate all these years? There is a war going on between God and Satan. I’m just not clear on what part we play in the overall scheme.” He had to get off the baby thing.

“I’m just saying; there’s no reason to think there’s something so special about our time.” She began to cough.

“I’ve never felt caught up in a world invaded by monsters. Of course, Jesus did say the end would come when we least. . .” She succumbed to a fit of shivering and hacking.

Dear Lord, not again, Jones thought. Kaz was manifesting a deep-down kind of sickness that was growing within her. The coughing spells had been happening for several months. Jones continually prayed for healing, sending his prayers into the void. The silence was deafening.

“Are you okay, Kaz? Should we go to the ER?”

She just shook her head. “Get me some water. I’ll be fine.”

After Kaz took a few sips of water, they finished their study time without further discussion and closed with a prayer. Jones

noticed the coughing spell had taken some of the fight out of her. Moving around the table, Jones gently helped Kaz to her feet. Moments later, he tucked her into bed and lumbered back to the kitchen.

Pushing his hand through his short-cropped black hair, he grabbed a chair and a bag of chocolate chip cookies. He had been a pretty good athlete once, but those days were long since passed. Still yet, he tried to keep active and in some semblance of shape. Just a few more cookies, he reasoned.

Sitting at the table, he went back in time to figure when Kaz's coughing spells started. The sickness had been infrequent at first, presenting no real effect on her daily routine. But earlier this year, shortly after their thirteenth wedding anniversary, Kaz's symptoms worsened. Something wasn't right with her body. The coughing would double her over, grinding any activity to a halt. Some attacks came on so quickly there was no safety net. Everything went boom and shuddered to a stop. Everything.

The shivers came first, causing her body to shake almost uncontrollably. Her fever rose, and nothing stayed down. Sometimes an electric blanket would help, sometimes not. But going to the doctor—no it wasn't going to happen. He couldn't convince her, no matter how hard he tried. Kaz insisted her fate was in God's hands. *What kind of logic was that*, Jones wondered. *How could all this be God's will?* He was confused.

While washing down his fifth cookie, the solution came to him. Kaz needed a doctor. God helped those who helped themselves.

Abby Soloman, he reasoned, Kaz's best friend growing up, should be able to convince her to go to the doctor. At least it was worth a try. Knowing Abby was a deputy sheriff possibly on duty at this hour, he dug into Kaz's tote, found her phone, located the number, and gave her a call.

"It's getting a little late, isn't it, Kaz?" Abby sounded asleep.

"Abby, it's Jones. I've already put Kaz to bed."

"Well, I haven't heard your voice in a while, Jones, although I do hear about you regularly. What's up?"

"Has Kaz mentioned her health issues lately?"

"No, she hasn't. What's she been keeping from me?"

"She's been having coughing spells for some time, and they are getting worse. She coughs, shivers, gets fevers, and it's downhill from there. She has to use an electric blanket to get warm."

"Not good, Jones. What's the doctor say?"

"That's just it, Abby. She won't go. I don't think she realizes how bad this may be. Do you think you could get her to go see the doc?"

"Of course I'll get her to go, Jones. I won't give her any choice. She'll probably be upset that you've told me."

"Then don't tell her," Jones interjected, violating principles that didn't seem too important right now.

"Right. . ." said Abby. "If she does find out she'll just have to get over it. I'll get right on it, Jones. I'd do anything for you guys."

A more accurate statement had seldom been voiced. The O'Brians, Jones and Kaz, would not exist without Abby. She had realized way back in high school that love was in the air, their air, considerably before the two lovers did.

Early the next morning, Abby was on the move. She called and made an appointment for Kaz, and then she showed up at the front door with appointment slip in hand. The anger on Kaz's face was evident when she found out about the collaboration.

The visit didn't go well. Kaz had a coughing fit in the exam room. All the usual tests took place. Blood work, MRI, and myriad other investigations into Kaz's health began. However,

in the end, there was no resolution, no definitive conclusion that pointed to a starting point for treatment.

The small-town hospital was not equipped to diagnose her symptoms. Referrals were their only answer, so appointments were made, and eventually, several specialists in the city examined Kaz stem to stern. Videoconferences with other specialists across the U.S. cost thousands while Kaz continued to wither as the hand of man and science yielded no definitive diagnosis.

The life that Jones and Kaz had forged came apart. Their daily routines of times together disappeared. She was too weak for Bible study to be a cooperative venture. Her accommodations became the sole priority of the Jones household.

Kaz was the executive director of Hope House, a local home for unwed mothers. Unable to have a child of her own, she dedicated her life to helping others bring new life into the world. Despite her true passion for the services that Hope House provided, she began coming home early almost daily.

Jones' life changed in sync. He started taking time off from his position as operations manager for Southern Distributing to tend to Kaz, whose condition continued to worsen. Time seemed to be in slow motion as Kaz deteriorated. Several prayer groups in the community prayed daily for her recovery, but there was no change.

Early one Sunday at 2 a.m., when no good is afoot, Jones stepped out of the house. Some lady friends were tending to Kaz as he fired up his truck and headed to Lake Murphysboro, an old "out of the way" fishing hole with darn near as many cottonmouths as fish. It had been one of two favorite parking spots with Kaz in high-school days. It was quiet there, the right place to ponder the future.

Parking his truck in the empty lot, Jones walked toward

the rundown boat dock that occupied the east side of the lake. The water was deeper there, which meant more fish and fewer snakes. As was his habit, he stopped to scoop a handful of flat rocks for skipping across the water.

It was a cloudless, pleasant night; the warm, humid southern Illinois spring was in full bloom. The moon was in waning gibbous status. The air stood still. As he threw each rock across the water, rings rippled out and finally disappeared in the darkness.

“Kaz,” he whispered into the nothingness, “I’m so sorry.”

His confusion mounted.

Was God listening?

He wanted to believe that God heard his prayers, but why wasn’t He answering?

Jones felt helpless. He cried. There was nothing anyone had been able to do to spare her pain. *I would gladly take the illness on myself. Just spare Kaz*, he forwarded to the universe. As he stood in the faint moonlight examining the smooth rocks in his hand, the wind started to blow gently. The humidity shrank.

Not sure what was happening, Jones felt a great calm come over him. The breeze stopped. Thinking he heard someone calling his name, he turned toward the parking lot to acknowledge the call. No one was there. Instead, all the light in the sky seemed concentrated at the end of the dock.

As he looked, dozens of figures seemed to materialize: They were large.

“No. No way. Angels?” came from his lips.

There they were. No other explanation. Angels. No little, small cherubs. They were all over the end of the dock, and they covered the rough terrain that led to the walkway.

They appeared to have a leader, who, although not the biggest, had an aura of authority and responsibility that declared, “I am in charge here.”

He was not earthly, of that Jones was certain. What was it about him? His eyes radiated a look of peace. Jones could feel it.

Taking a step toward Jones, he spoke, "Jones, I knew we would meet someday. I do wish the circumstances could be better."

Jones was overwhelmed by his presence. The voice sounded familiar, but there was no basis for that assumption. They had never met. It was more of a "knowing" deep inside of him. Like something that was just around the corner, invisible but there nonetheless, keeping him protected, making way for him. His voice sounded familiar. *Who . . . ?*

The answer came before he could form the question.

"I am Arrow, and yes, I've been just around the corner many times for you, and will continue to be."

Jones processed the greeting. Knowing that angels were often used to bring messages in stories he read in his Bible, he stammered, "Kaz isn't going to make it, is she?"

"The Master is pleased with your Kaz," Arrow replied. "She has saved many lives at her home for unwed mothers. Multitudes more will be spared in the years to come because of her stand for righteousness and life. The Darkness that has attacked her body has not gone unnoticed. More defenders are coming, even at this moment. Now, go be with Kaz. She needs you," the angel said.

There was a stirring in the air, and Jones was alone.

The moon seemed to shine more brightly. Frogs and crickets continued their music.

Got to go, he thought, simultaneously running for his truck. *I've got to get to Kaz now.*

As he drove, Arrow's words kept ringing in his head, "The Master is pleased with your Kaz."

3



AND WE KNOW
THAT IN ALL
THINGS GOD
WORKS FOR THE
GOOD OF THOSE
THAT LOVE HIM,
WHO HAVE
BEEN CALLED
ACCORDING TO
HIS PURPOSE.

ROMANS 8:28



ENTERING THE FRONT DOOR, JONES SAW THE Night Owls, church women whose husbands were third-shift miners, kneeling on the floor in the living room with their Bibles open, arms lifted toward the Heavens. Tears were streaming down their faces.

Closing the door, Jones headed toward the bedroom, thanking them for being there as he went. Pausing for a deep breath, Jones relived the scene at the dock. The conversation with Arrow played through his mind. Kaz had always been adamant about angels and their active role in the affairs of men.

Could she have been prophesying, forthtelling, about his conversation at the lake?

He spoke softly in her direction as he entered the bedroom, "Kaz, I'm here."

Her eyes opened, and in her old southern drawl, the one he fell in love with from days gone by, said, "How did your boat dock visit go, big boy?"

Jones shuddered but said, "Good Kaz, and oh yeah, the Master is pleased with you."

She smiled, just as she had when he asked her out for their first date.

Their eyes met.

Together since birth when they shared a crib as babies at

their old church, they had walked this world for thirty-five years, the last fifteen as man and wife.

Kaz closed her eyes and was gone, but the smile lingered on her face.

An inexplicable illness had consumed her life. It was all too complex for reasoning. What a price to pay.

“A future and a hope,” a verse from the book of Jeremiah came to mind.

What is a future without Kaz, and how could there be any hope?

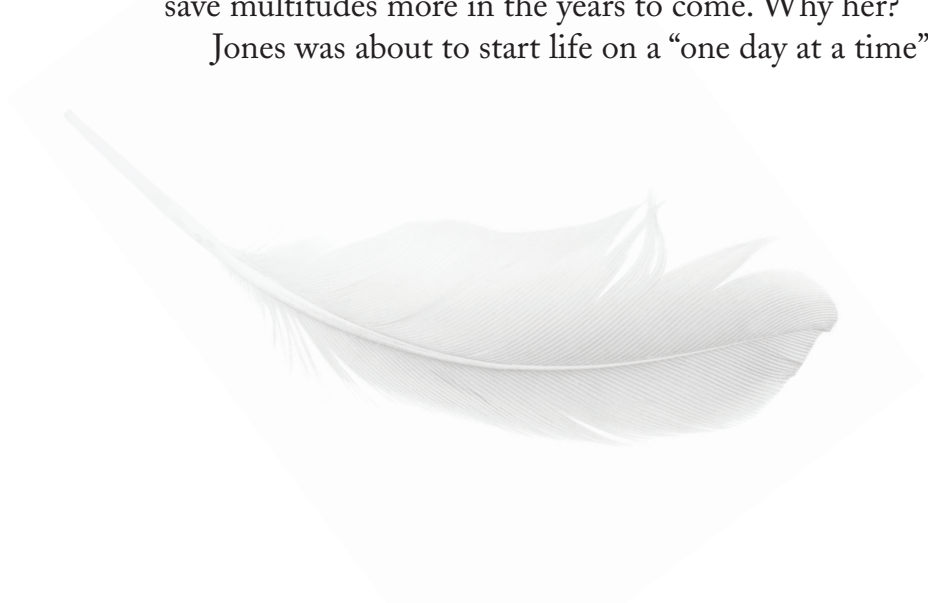
How could a benevolent God allow such loss? Their lives were ahead of them. Not over. Not done.

Stop being so selfish, Jones thought. *Kaz is with Jesus. She wouldn't want to return.*

Maybe she was his test. That would be too cruel, but then there was the biblical story of Abraham and Isaac, a boy whose father was asked to sacrifice him.

To say Jones' belief was shaken would be an understatement. Where should he draw the line between faith and fact? Prayers had not saved his beloved, and Jones believed in prayer. His wife had died way before her time in spite of all the prayers. Kaz was a life helper whose founding of Hope House would save multitudes more in the years to come. Why her?

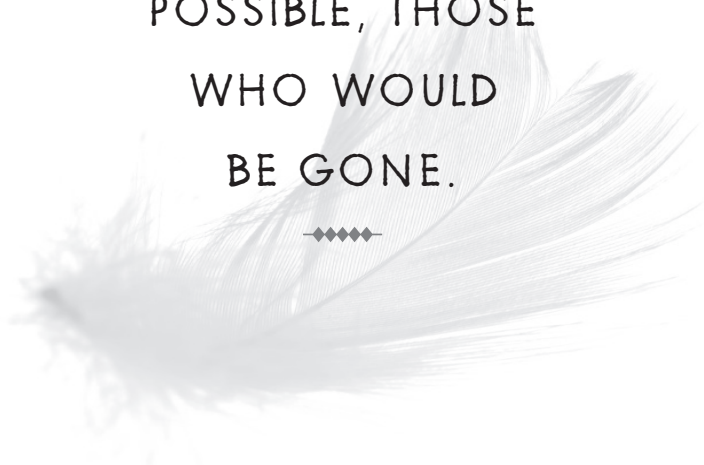
Jones was about to start life on a “one day at a time” basis.



4



IN THE LAST
DAYS, BEFORE
THE RAPTURE,
ALL HELL
DESCENDED,
TRYING TO
TURN AS MANY
BELIEVERS AS
POSSIBLE, THOSE
WHO WOULD
BE GONE.



"SO, YOU'RE CONFIDENT THE FIRES ARE WORKING?"
Sonta quizzed his chief underling, Zorah.

Mustering the most assuring voice he could, while concealing his irritation at being asked this question yet again, Zorah replied, "Yes! The fires are causing uncertainty, sowing discontent with the authorities."

Zorah's connection in the Jackson County Sheriff's Department was adamant about the distraction the fires were causing. They had popped up out of nowhere with no seeming origin and were causing a sense of unease throughout the community of humans. The sheriff and his deputies had not been able to solve the unsolvable and were facing a barrage of criticism for their lack of progress. It was, in fact, a regional strategy that, if successful, would have national implications. Their counterparts in the other three quadrants were watching, evaluating.

Zorah's eyes followed Sonta as he moved across the spacious room, transforming as he went from his demonic persona into a mortal. As with all demonic morphs, there was a smell associated with the changing that had not yet been eliminated or duplicated. It was the stench of death that clung tenaciously to the demon and disappeared as he gained mortal status.

Sonta's particular signature was intertwined with his extermination of over a million Armenian Christians back in the early twentieth century. It had been a bloody slaughter, including untold numbers of dismemberments. Men, women, and children were all murdered and left to rot in town after town as the Ottomans tried to rid themselves of what they had been led to believe was a threat. Master Koal had manipulated the carnage, but Sonta was the front man who carried out the attacks. His demonic personality would always remember with a smile the smell of rotting flesh. It was an exquisite perfume that never failed to recall and celebrate the victory he had led.

"Master, we are bringing in supplies to finish construction of our Wondren headquarters and ready it for the battles to come," said Zorah.

"Recruiting the nonbelievers has been less demanding than I ever thought possible. Their counterparts are more tenacious but are showing signs of vulnerability. Your methods have proved legendary."

Sonta nodded in acceptance of the praise. This coming battle carried his signature; no one else need apply. It was also true that his tactics predated these events by centuries. The hordes had proven that populations drowning in drugs, sex, and violence were ripe fodder for influence. The launch point centered around creating a sense of unease in the community regarding their leaders and their ability to govern. *People are Lemmings*, thought Sonta, recalling the mass suicides of the little creatures known in children's fiction for following one another to their deaths. *Doubt leads the way in the minds of the mortals; they are famous for it*, he thought.

His human form now complete, Sonta said, "We create problems that only we can solve, promises none but us can keep. As confusion creeps in, doubt creates a fog in the human

thought process. At some point, darkness captures the minds and hearts of the faithful as they become disoriented and unsure of their god. Their small, weak, throbbing little pink hearts are seared and ripe for manipulation. Without knowing, they begin to live lives contrary to the moral upbringing of their culture. How good is that?" Sonta said, lifting his arms in celebration.

"Your genius elevates this recruiting methodology," Zorah finished, hoping his flattery would score some points and divert Sonta's attention elsewhere.

Sonta sat down in a regal, high-backed chair. It was his throne for the moment. He raised an eyebrow on hearing the tribute, but only momentarily; realizing he invented the speech for Koal. He would be more attuned in the future.

"I just want to be sure you understand the importance of your assignment in this scheme," Sonta said, his voice taking a hard edge, his eyes boring into Zorah's. "When I am successful in taking over control of this quadrant, my next promotion will be assured. Our Supreme Leader will notice the template we are creating for others to follow as we continue to conquer this nation called America. My success will elevate my position. I will have status in the command hierarchy. Others, less capable, will bow.

"Stay on schedule, Zorah. Koal has been alerted about our plans and may present himself unexpectedly, as he is known to do. Be ready for anything."

Zorah understood the stakes were high, for everyone.

"Yes, Master," he replied, "your wish is my command. Rest assured my contact is embedded and close to the sheriff. He's aware of every nuance. Thanks to his intervention, our shipments of supplies and recruits are moving through the region without interference. We are on schedule."

Zorah turned to leave Sonta, pleased with his performance.

Nothing he could say would stop this delusion. Disguising his contempt, he closed the door behind him, confident that although he could outperform Sonta, there was life to consider, his life. It would be prudent to follow orders regardless of his perceived outcomes.



5



AFTER KAZ'S DEATH, JONES WAS FULL OF DOUBT ABOUT GOD'S ABILITY TO INTERVENE WHEN PRAYERS WERE OFFERED. IT WEIGHED ON HIM MIGHTILY. PERHAPS HIS PRAYERS LACKED SUBSTANCE. THEY SURELY LACKED SOMETHING.

HIS APPRECIATION OF THE ROUTINE AND THE application of that discipline were the distraction he needed. No good would come of rehashing how it all went down. Besides, there was work to do, and the food distribution business waited for no one.

Jones was working up his daily schedule when Ma Hale's restaurant in Grand Tower called in a late request for more kitchen supplies. It was late afternoon, and being down a deliveryman, Jones decided to fill the order personally.

Ma Hale's sat less than two hundred yards from the Mississippi River levee and had been there since the '40s. They were thrilled to see him.

As Jones drove back towards Murphysboro on Town Creek Road, he began to make out a glow, visible from one curve to another. The road straightened as it hit bottomland, revealing a large cornfield sandwiched between a creek bed and the right of way.

Jones was aware of the mysterious fires that were being reported around the county with no explanation for their causes. Maybe this was one of them. Probably some farmers are burning stumps.

Jones pulled up across the field from the fire and parked his truck on the side of the dusty gravel road. He ran toward the blaze, pushing his way through corn stalks that were brown from ripening, taking constant hits from ears that were dry and ready to harvest.

As he closed on the burn, he called out, hoping to get a response from someone, anyone, tending the fire. There was none. All he heard was the crackling of the flames. *If the wind picks up, we'll have an event*, he thought, reaching for his phone. *This brush fire will light up those corn stalks and go right into the woods close to the field's west end.* Jones called 911.

"What's your emergency," came the response from Judy Gage at the Jackson County Sheriff's office.

"Judy, this is Jones O'Brian. I've come on one of those strange fires we've been having lately. This time it's next to a cornfield."

"What's your location, Jones?"

"I'm on Town Creek Road, about four miles west of 20th Street Bridge. There's a cornfield here bounded by a woods. I'm afraid the whole thing is going to catch fire."

"Wait one."

"Okay, I've got City on the way. The Township Department is already out on a call. What's that noise I hear in the background?"

"It's just a cedar tree burning," Jones confirmed.

"Good to hear your voice, Jones. Take care." She signed off.

While waiting for the firemen, Jones inspected the area around the fire. Darkness was settling in, and the flames were creating eerie shadows across the landscape. Jones did a quick

survey of the surroundings. There was no substitute for good intel. He had learned that lesson in Afghanistan doing night recon with his pathfinder squad. His instincts said to pay attention. The present would soon become the past.

In the military, most field exercises, mock or real, were refined processes culminating from years of trial and error, most of which had a sufficient bounty of lost lives. The brush fire was no different, he told himself, slipping seamlessly into the routine.

There were no tire tracks in the weeds, no footprints, but when he saw a slight movement at the edge of his line of sight, he edged forward. There was nothing. Must have been a shadow from the flames. The whole scene felt off. He could sense a presence but saw only burning brush.

The fire was still manageable when a siren sounded in the distance, and Jones started back across the field to his truck when he ran headlong into Lozen and her bloodhound Hunter. Lozen was an Apache woman who ran with the Mountain Men. Rumor had it that she was prescient.

“What are you doing here?” he asked.

“I sensed evil in this area and moved toward it. The fire was fueled by dark spirits who have entered our dimension. As I approached and was recognized, they disappeared.”

Jones was distracted by a loud popping sound. When he turned to Lozen, she and the dog were gone.

The fire truck that arrived was specially equipped to attack a field fire. Two men jumped out, grabbed some equipment, and headed into the cornfield.

Jones recognized the lead fireman.

“Jack, I didn’t know you worked the night shift.”

The two men had grown up in the same neighborhood, and Jack Wilson, lucky sucker that he was, had married the homecoming queen from Jones’ class.

“Well, I’ve started hanging out at the station at night since all these fires started happening,” he said. “Marsha’s not too happy, but she’ll have to get over it. Have you seen anyone?” he asked.

“I covered the entire area down to the tree line,” said Jones, waving his arm around to encompass the perimeter. “Nothing. I thought I saw something, but it was probably just a shadow blowing in the wind. No indication of any human activity,” he said.

“Hold on a sec.”

Jack spoke into his pack radio, “Dispatch, this is the Chief. Let County know there’s no need to send a deputy out to 20th Street. Out.”

A response crackled back, “Copy, Chief. Out.”

Jack pulled out his smartphone and made some notes.

“Just another clueless report to turn in. We’ve had a lot of them lately. Interesting though, no one has ever been injured, at least physically, by any of these events. Folks are getting unsettled and will be seeing alien invaders before long.”

“I ran into Lozen, an Apache friend of the Mountain Men before you arrived. She was here,” said Jones.

“Doing what, exactly?” said Jack.

“I don’t think you want to know,” replied Jones, not sure how to interpret what Lozen had said.

He watched as the two men quickly snuffed out the fire and loaded their equipment and rumbled off. Firing up his truck, Jones followed close behind, mulling over the Chief’s statement and coming to the same conclusion. Every day people were getting edgy about the strange fires. Fires that hurt no one and burnt nothing important made it challenging to connect the dots. Something was going on, but what? Why would anyone want to mess with a place this unimportant?

Thinking back, he tried to remember when these fire events had crossed his radar. Hard to say. Southern Illinois was changing. So was his town. A steady influx of new families was growing the tax base.

Some undoubtedly were coming to work at the University, since the school was by far the county's biggest employer. Other than that, there was little here to attract them—nothing overt, anyway. A few more lawyers for the courthouse or maybe a new factory could be a reason, but not a solution. He was aware that some hiring was going on in Jonesboro, another county seat south of Murphysboro. Still, it just didn't make sense. Maybe they were having fires there too. He'd find out.

Jones latched on to the thought and decided to ask Sheriff Cable when he had a chance. Yeah, Sheriff Cable. They'd been friends from high school days when he was one of Jones' coaches. He might be able to provide some answers.



6



BOB CABLE WAS A SHORT MAN WITH A BROAD SMILE. A HOMETOWN GUY, HE HAD PLAYED HALFBACK FOR THE UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS FIGHTING ILLINI.

THE TEAM ROSTER LISTED HIM AT 5'9", BUT THEY MUST have put him on a stretcher to get that figure. He joined the army after college graduation, as many young men at the time were doing, and was a certified combat vet with a purple heart for his efforts when he reentered civilian life. Sergeant Cable put his degree to work coaching football and dabbling in school administration. Retiring early he entered the political arena and got himself elected County Sheriff.

Cable, as most everyone called him, sat behind a large oak desk, chin in hand, deep in thought. If he'd known his second term as sheriff would be this puzzling, he might not have considered reelection.

Fires. More fires. No explanations. A mountain of resources was being spent investigating, with no results worth mentioning to show for the effort. County Board Members had become so frustrated over the cost of chasing this madness they had demanded an accounting of expended funds.

The only thing Cable could come up with was possibly rounding up the Mountain Men and turning them loose out there in the great beyond.

The Mountain Men were known to hang out at The Kitchen, a local restaurant, almost every morning. They were all combat vets of varying ages who lived in the deep countryside yet seemed always to be together. Putting the Mountain Men in the field would be like inserting a force recon unit throughout the fire zone. Whatever was there they would see. No telling what the Board members would say if they knew the Mountain Men were involved. There would be no hourly wages coming into play, which was a plus, and the board wanted answers to these mysterious events that bordered on the unexplainable.

The Mountain Men's name was somewhat deceiving. One of their members was a woman who answered to the name Lozen. Jones had run headlong into her at the field fire. She was a full-blooded Apache who lived alone with her big red bloodhound Hunter. The two were inseparable. Lozen was prescient, and the dog could smell a fart in the Sahara.

The sum of the parts was a group that could hunt, trap, and track a man better than any of the sheriff's staff. The Crew, as they liked to call themselves, including the dog, wore CIB badges, which pretty well said it all. They made one for the dog.

The Mountain Men didn't live in the mountains. Southern Illinois doesn't have any. That didn't stop them from looking and dressing like Jeremiah Johnson. Lozen, tall for an Indian squaw, as she referred to herself, was unmarried and proud of it. Hunter was her man. Mostly she wore a fine wolfskin jacket with beaded turquoise trim and a Bald Eagle talon necklace. Rumor had it the eagle wintered at The Garden of The Gods, high up in the hill country near the tiny town of Herod. Occasionally, her friend Dani, an old Cherokee woman who lived in the Garden, was known to summon the giant bird, whose Cherokee name was Myoconda, which meant "he who flies high." Lozen told the Mountain Men of her ancestors'

move to this part of Illinois from the west many years ago. The Apache called her spirit woman. All in all, this formidable crew would be a tremendous asset if they chose to come onboard.

Cable reasoned there were ways to get a yes vote. His blind eye to their off-season hunting habits had undoubtedly earned some chits. The Crew wasn't known for shying away from trouble. The fires were an inconvenience, some of them burning valuable food and cover. A little extracurricular activity might be in order.

Sheriff Cable stood up from his desk, picked up his hat, and headed toward The Kitchen, one short block away. Founded by a former sheriff to keep him and his family busy during his retirement, the restaurant's primary source of business was feeding juries when the circuit court was in session. The midmorning regulars were filing out as he walked in, and he spotted the Crew sitting in their favorite northeast corner, talking among themselves.

Eight men clustered around a trio of square tables shoved together into a makeshift ten-seater. Cable noticed an empty chair and looked for the woman who was nowhere to be seen. That did not mean, however, that she was not there.

As Cable approached, chair legs screeched against the floor and gazes rose.

Dick Arnold, the group's unofficial leader at the moment, spoke for them all. "Bob, is this a social visit or sumthin' else?"

One of the Mikes chimed in, "Whatever it is, I didn't do it."

Cable ignored the claim of innocence.

"I'm sure you all are aware of the unexplained fires that have been going on all over the region for the last several weeks."

The men nodded their heads.

"Anybody got ideas on what's going on?"

John tipped his chair back. "Why're you coming to us?"

Hasn't anyone from your stable of crack investigators figured this out yet?"

Cable locked eyes with John.

"Look, I want to know what you think. These fires have nothing to do with you not passing the deputy's exam, John. You can retake it. Right now, I need your help."

Dale spoke up, "Lozen says it is evil and comes from the spirit world. The force is otherworldly and not human. She and Hunter went to one of the fire locations close to my house at the bottom of Cemetery Hill. I had scouted the area for a couple of hours with nothing to show for it. Right away, her eyes quickened, jumped, twitched, you know what I mean?"

Cable nodded, but really didn't grasp what was said.

"The dog, Hunter, walked around the fire circle and howled. Lozen caught him up, and they left."

"Whatever this is, it's bad medicine. Count on it," said John.

"Been to any of the other sites?" Cable asked the group.

"Went out to the McLaughlin place on the Ava blacktop a few nights ago," said one of the Mikes.

"It turned out one of the kids had been messing around in the fire zone. The only evidence was a bunch of trampled, burnt cornstalks. It had rained, but there were no footprints or tire tracks. After a couple of hours, we gave up and headed out."

There was an open spot at the table so Cable pulled up a chair.

As the server brought his coffee, Cable turned in his chair to say thanks. At that very moment, a strange feeling came over him. He looked around the room. No one was arguing or shouting. The room wasn't burning. What then?

Over in the opposite corner a man sat alone, apparently finishing a meal. No alarm there, still his antennae were up and he wasn't sure why.

In a quiet voice, he asked the guys if any of them knew who

the man was. The Crew shrugged almost in unison and shook their heads. *Strange. These boys know everyone in town.*

Cable glanced over at the outsider again, and as he did the hairs on the nape of his neck rose as, at that very moment, Lozen and the big bloodhound entered straight through the door. A cooling sensation laced the air.

Facing the stranger as he stood, her dog not moving so much as a muscle, Lozen asked in clear English, "Who are you? What is your name? What is your purpose?"

The big dog had lain down, his jowls and head completely one with the floor. Cable knew from watching his old friend Cyrus Kohler's Plott hound, Scout, take down a red weasel that this was clear intent. He had watched him settle down the same way Hunter did before exploding into the weasel's throat.

The stranger's face seemed to cloud in a fine mist, covering his facial features. He moved. Hunter jumped to his feet, a low growl emanating from a deep recess. Lozen moved like the wind; so fast that in the next moment, she was standing inches from the stranger.

The stranger pivoted around her and just like that was between her and the exit. He dropped money on the counter as he disappeared out the front door.

"I'll be back in a second," Cable said as he got up and sprinted toward the door. Stepping out on the sidewalk, he scanned the surroundings. There was nothing. The stranger had vanished into thin air.

Cable walked back inside and asked the cashier if she'd seen the customer before. She hadn't.

Cable sat down and spooned his coffee. Lozen motioned her dog to the front door and walked over. In a very subdued voice, she said, "Sheriff, you have just seen a dark messenger. They are among us." She walked to the door, summoned her

dog, and left. *Incredible*, thought Cable, along with everyone else at the table. *Has our Indian just seen the devil?*

Dan exhaled and said, "If Lozen says we have trouble, you can bet we do. We've been aware of this crap taking place for several weeks but never thought it could be anything, shall we say, extraordinary.

"Lozen has picked a fight, and we need to protect our sister. Let's develop a plan we can execute. No one is as agile as they used to be, but we're very well armed and ready to put our old Pathfinder skills to good use. Since you're asking for help, we're ready. We were already talking about how we could help track down whatever is causing this trouble. We'll let the rest of the Crew know you need help. We'll get to the bottom of this."

