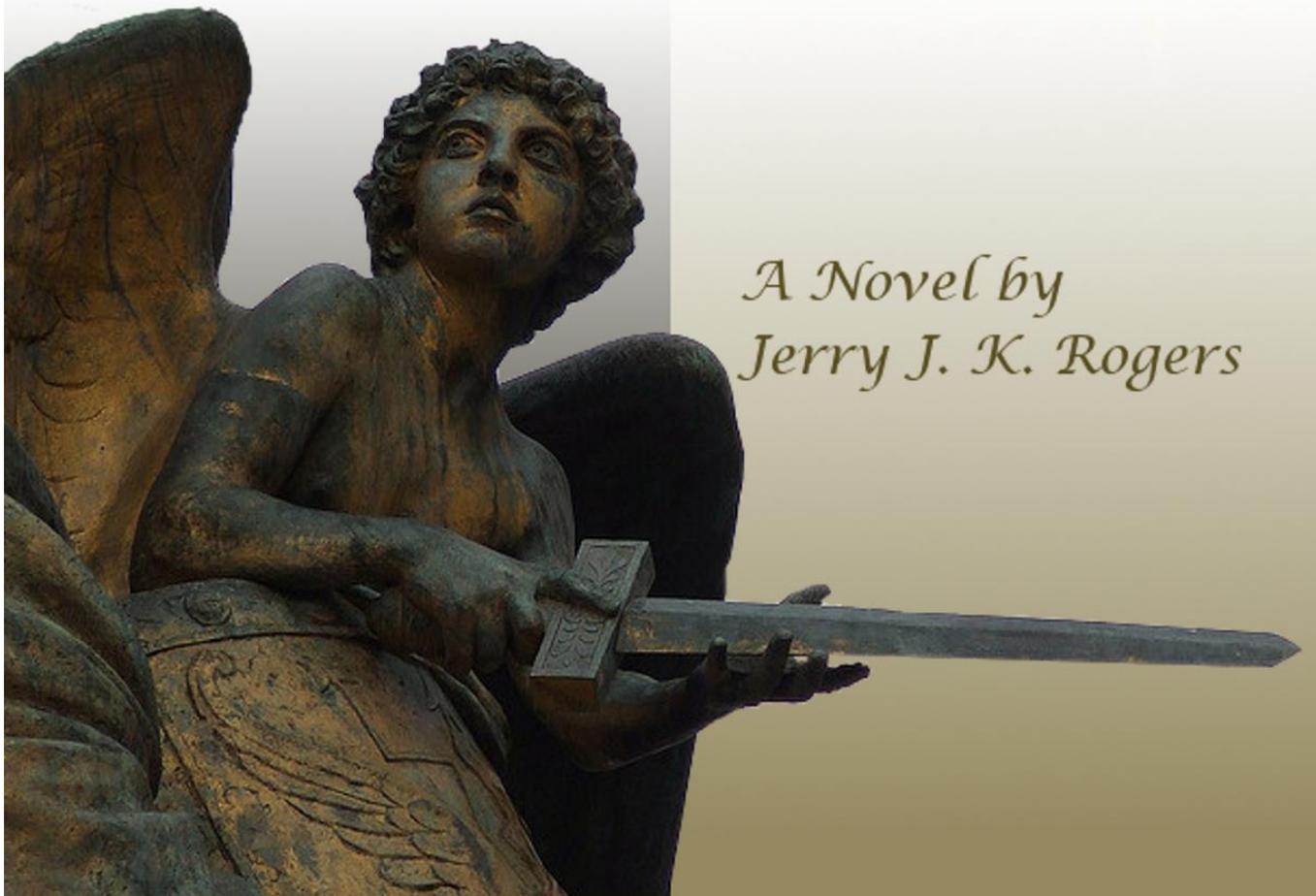


THE and THE  
FALLEN ELECT

*A Novel by  
Jerry J. K. Rogers*



# **The Fallen and the Elect**

By Jerry J. K. Rogers

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## **Dedication**

I wholeheartedly dedicate this book to Mark, Annie, Mark II, Cameron, Emilie, Alex and Luke. The encouragement all of you provided as well as a place to collect my thoughts and work on this project, mean more than all of you will ever realize.

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*I. The Eulogy of Angels: Abriel's Song*

## *Chapter 1*

Alder Dennison was pissed. His family should have been ready to go half an hour ago. His wife Maria said the kids were ready; she just needed to finish her makeup. Now she was changing their nine-month old son Matthew's diaper again.

“Come on, let’s go,” Alder blasted from the doorway to the garage in his tenor voice, “I don't wanna be late.” He glanced at his watch, one thirty. Maria finally worked her way downstairs, Matthew in her arms. Michelle, his older sister by almost three and a half years, patiently took each step with the surety and confidence of a much older child. Once on the landing, she darted to the doorway, grabbed her favorite Winnie the Pooh doll from the floor, and was helped by her dad into her car seat of the Toyota Sienna minivan. Maria followed walking gingerly so as not to disturb Matthew, who was drifting to sleep.

“You know, if you helped out more with the kids I would’ve been ready. I had to change your son,” Maria said, gently resting Matthew in his baby carrier and securing it to the passenger-side rear seat. “You could have easily taken care of his diaper before coming down. I know you smelled something was wrong when you were playing with him.”

“Hell, all he seems to do is eat, crap and sleep,” Alder replied, securing the driver side-sliding door.

“Takes after daddy, doesn't he boo bear?” Maria whispered to Matthew in the “goo goo gaga” voice most adults use when talking to a baby, loud enough for Alder to hear. “You pack the kids’ diaper and travel bags?” Maria asked directing her question to Alder tinted with disdain. Still frustrated with him for not helping with getting the children ready earlier, she became more infuriated as she added the current incident to his recent string of not supporting her more with the kids. He only seemed concerned with playing with the children.

“They should be back there.” Alder made sure they were in the minivan. He didn't want to have any reason to return home and miss the ceremony. He and Maria were both very enthusiastic about attending finding out they won a spot on the primary guests’ list and not on the alternates list of raffled seats. Yet from her present bout of being frustrated at him, Alder would not have known of her supposed excitement.

Driving onto the freeway, traffic turned out to be lighter than expected for a Saturday afternoon. Alder knew that if he sped they could still arrive early enough to find a decent parking spot. Yet with the entire family in the vehicle, hovering around the posted speed limit was his only option; they might still arrive before the closing and locking of the funeral home doors.

\* \* \* \*

The seafood focused hors d'oeuvres table was a place of temporary reprieve for Stephen Williams. He wanted to avoid the crowd for as long as possible, most who were mulling around their seats in the main chapel of the funeral home waiting for the service to begin. The buffet table, one of seven, bore smoked salmon, mini-crab cakes topped with a dollop of roasted red pepper aioli, prosciutto-wrapped shrimp, a small tower of seasoned shrimp, miniature fruit cups, and multiple wafers and crackers. Traditionally, many would find an overindulgent buffet out of the ordinary for a funeral. These days, when a family could afford it, opulent displays were a status symbol as if to impress in case there were a heavenly visitation.

Grabbing a small gold-trimmed porcelain plate, Stephen added several pieces of the hors d'oeuvres fair with eager anticipation to savor the delicacies. Glancing back at the main congregation of attendees, the senior director for marketing William Sumner noticed him, smiled, and dashed in his direction extending his hand. "Stephen, how's it going?"

Stephen reciprocated the handshake after moving the plate to his other hand. "I'm doing fine. How 'bout you?"

"Better than that dead little shit laid out stiff in the box," William answered. Stephen knew William didn't like Jeffrey Bradfield. William felt Jeffrey's father had brooded over him incessantly to the detriment of the company. Even though he'd worked in a different division, Jeffrey's constant management fiascos caused problems that William felt would need correction for a catalog of accounting errors and misrepresentations.

"Where's your buddy Alder?" William continued.

"Don't know; he should've been here by now," Stephen answered, returning to stockpiling his plate.

"So, you think we'll have a visitor today?"

“Depends on Jeffrey's life I guess. No one knows why they show up, if they do,” Stephen noted.

“So how well did you know Jeffrey Bradfield?”

“Not too well. We dealt with him on a few accruals that didn't get posted to the proper month. Other than that, didn't have to deal with him too much,” Stephen lied. Stephen and Alder did work quite a bit with Jeffrey Bradfield. They continually corrected Bradfield's budget updates, redid the assignment of expense codes and reworked the other numerous accounting errors for his department, some seriously putting his department in the red. Stephen knew that if Jeffrey Bradfield hadn't been the son of the senior vice president for production, the company wouldn't have tolerated the incompetence and would've fired him. A car accident netted the same effect.

William pressed on with the questions, “So have you seen one before?”

“Nope.” Stephen finished loading his plate.

“Well I'm hoping something will happen this time. I keep dragging my kids to these hoping something would happen. We even got a new digital camera with enough megapixels to grab the tiniest detail, with one of the fastest shutter speeds around.”

“Will it work? I heard everyone who's tried to take a picture, it comes out either completely black or just a splotch in a blurred background.”

“Hey, this was special ordered. I paid a few g's for this one,” William boasted as he pulled a Nikon digital SLR camera from a camera bag hanging on his shoulder and placing the strap around his neck.

Stephen hadn't noticed the camera bag. He found himself focused on the plates of food in his hand and wanted to raze the succulent appetizers until another thought hit him. “Can you have that in here?”

“Don't forget my position in the company. I managed to allow for any personal camera devices in case of a visitor,” William bragged.

Stephen felt disappointed because he didn't get the word about the waiver for camera related devices. He left his cell phone in his car.

“Hey, do you smell that?” William queried looking around the foyer attempting to find the source of the aroma. “It smells like a damn flower shop in here.”

You suspect a heavenly visit will take place when you begin to smell the scent of fresh flowers like a bouquet of roses, hibiscus, or tulips. Some even said there's a hint of a fragrant scent similar to sweet cinnamon or clove and that a simple waft would calm an agitated soul. That was the closest anyone came to accurately describing the aroma in earlier news reports and newspaper articles. Not everyone could smell the arrival, however. Stephen was one who couldn't. His sense of smell had been deteriorating over the last couple of years, and if there were to be a visitation, he would miss this part of the experience.

Several attendees made a final grab for food from the buffets tables in the foyer area before the homily and pastoral memorial would begin. William was already making his way back into the main sanctuary of the chapel to join his family. As the other attendees rushed to claim open seats, Stephen made one final glance past the foyer waiting area to see if Alder and his family had arrived. No sign of him. The ushers urged him back to the chapel area while letting in a husband, wife, and their toddler son from the standby line. *There's three lucky bastards*, Stephen thought.

\* \* \* \*

"Ah shit," Alder broadcasted, looking down range on the highway to see four lanes of brake lights.

"What's wrong?" Maria asked while entertaining Matthew not having to worry about Michelle, who had fallen asleep as soon as the minivan began to move.

"Traffic. And damn it, we just missed the exit to get off and try to detour this crap."

"Are we going to be late?"

Alder glanced at the clock on the dash of the minivan. "We may now."

Finally managing to exit the highway in hopes of bypassing the congested swarm of cars, Alder found himself driving in an unfamiliar area of Los Angeles. His attempt to navigate in a parallel course to the highway became unsuccessful when two-lane streets became one way and took tangent angles mimicking the nearby river. Alder became upset with himself that he hadn't replaced the faulty GPS device sooner. "Damn, we're lost," he thought.

"Great, now we'll definitely be late," Maria jabbed.

Alder wasn't too happy with the disparaging tone of her comment. "Is something wrong?"

"If you don't know, I don't have to tell you."

“What type of sense does that make?”

Maria decided not to answer and remained quiet the remainder of the trip.

To forget about how annoyed he was with his wife, Alder thought about trying to contact his co-worker and friend Stephen to let him know they would be late. Then he remembered that Stephen probably wouldn't be able to answer his cell phone since there were restrictions on bringing personal devices capable of taking pictures. Alder wasn't aware the restrictions were lifted.

\* \* \* \*

Large crowds consistently attended funerals for the famous, prestigious, wealthy, or well known. These days so many individuals wanted to go, raffles or other events were held to see who could attend. Everyone assumed there would be more of a chance for a visitation during such a funeral when the events first began more than ten years before. Soon, aggregated information determined there were hundreds of visitations each year all over the world regardless of the socioeconomic status of those who passed away. Irrespective of the religion or belief, reports abounded of strange angelic visitors. Even the funerals of avowed atheists or nonreligious individuals would present manifestations, which led some to believe in the universality of God and his angels. Over the years, there were fewer nonbelievers. Many however, who, despite what they saw, remained nonbelievers, assuming some sort of special effects trick or mass hallucination. Even though special effects couldn't explain how the angelic visitors knew so much about the deceased only the nonbeliever themselves could know, they still chose not to believe. Religious leaders, churches and spiritual organizations all tried to explain the phenomena. No one could produce any direct physical evidence other than the subliminal echoes of aromas, abstract footprints in places where the carpet held them, and the euphoria of those observing something so magnanimous.

Initial reports classified witnesses as having the same category of delusion as those who allegedly observed aliens and UFOs. Then when some of the skeptics--priests, pastors, rabbis, imams, and memorial officiators during successive funerals--began to perceive the same visions as their peers, their veracity solidified the arrival of heavenly visitors. All of this occurring shortly after the disappearance of millions, the world being unnerved feared the funeral appearances. Over time as the populace acclimated to the visitation, the angelic presences

demonstrated benevolence; the visitations became the cement for the religious systems across the world, helping to meld a common belief in a single god for all mankind. The faiths of the world incrementally built a new cooperative relationship by looking for common threads between their beliefs.

Stephen noticed the crowd was moderate sized while again scanning the sanctuary and foyer for his friend and his family. He wasn't sure if all the attendees knew Jeffrey or were only there hoping to witness a potential paranormal event. Stephen saw attendees' heads craning and taking deep sniffs of the air, hoping that reports similar to other visits, a deluge of aromas would embrace their noses. And even though Jeffrey's family had requested for a device-free service, occasionally someone would attempt to snap a clandestine picture or record a video with a phone or digital camera.

The traditional melancholy music whispering from the PA system in the background in the chapel seemed opposite the effervescent sense of anticipation and wonderment. Stephen noticed Jeffrey's few family members didn't display an overt sense of mourning or loss. Everyone was confident something was going to happen.

The reverend began the eulogium according to the family's arranged program, though he seemed distracted by the fragrant air. Stephen thought it odd the clergyman didn't use a bible or any other religious guidance for the ceremony.

"Jeffrey Bradfield was a beloved father and son," the reverend started, "He was considered by all who knew him to be magnanimous and helping. Jeffrey was dedicated to his family and his job. He served the community and, like his family, was very much a philanthropist. Why Jeffrey was taken away from us? We will never know." The reverend continued for the next fifteen minutes, and with nothing more to say, many in the assembly of supposed mourners seemed disappointed. It was during the reverend's benediction before the removal of the casket for the departure for the cemetery, something above caught his attention. Stephen followed his gaze and saw that the ceiling of the chapel glowed with an eerie translucence.

Instantly, in the twinkling of an eye, a personage, clothed in flowing robes appearing to be made of the purest and finest white linen, its visible skin without blemish, mark, or discoloration, stood in the front of the audience within the chapel. There was no slow dramatic descent, no spectacular entrance riding on a rainbow, just an instantaneous arrival of radiant light emanating

from the entire presence of the heavenly figure. Stephen thought witnesses from reports in the newspaper must have embellished preceding arrivals.

The aura of silver-white light shimmered and made it impossible to tell whether he, or she, possessed wings. The visitor's brilliance didn't overpower the audience's ability to see. The spectators whispered among themselves about their view of the angel. William remembered his Nikon and reached to snap a picture. He would swear the camera shocked him. Others attempting to use their cameras, or camera on their phones or tablets experienced the same sensation, some even dropping their devices on the floor.

The form stood motionless for several minutes. The pronounced humanity of the muscular structured body became more majestic. Immersed in an ethereal aura, the distinguishable outline of grandiose wings took greater form. Piercing eyes with pupils black as coal scanned the onlookers. Stephen felt as if the angel were looking directly into each attendee's souls. Time seemed to stop. The outside ambient light coming through the windows of the chapel dimmed. Muffled silence enclosed the chapel. An uneasy quiet settled among the spectators. Stephen couldn't hear his own heavy breathing as if someone had turned on a noise-cancellation system. The air now still and no longer filled with the scent of flowers, began to the smell as if the stirring of dust and dew were preceding a rainstorm.

It was now that Stephen saw the semblance of a scroll as the angel pulled it from what appeared to be a large pouch attached to a golden rope fashioned as a belt. The spool was unrolled. Expecting to see some form of paper or vellum was a very thin, brass-like foil material. The heavenly creature turned a bit to its left; Stephen could see letters slowly emblazon on the surface of the metallic parchment. According to reports, this had never happened before. The angel would arrive, present the eulogy, and then depart. *I don't like the looks of this*, Stephen thought to himself. A queasy uncomfortable feeling began to settle in; he decided to leave. Working his way to the center aisle, people in his row glared at him for the distraction.

The angel spoke, its voice melodic and harmonic as if it were singing upon one first hearing. Its voice quickly became stern and jarring once comprehended. "The speaker has given a wonderful extolment on the life of Jeffrey Bradfield. I tell you there is a true life story of Jeffrey Anders Bradfield, a deceitful, narcissistic and abusive life of one not worthy to be written in the boo-"

Members of the audience gasped loudly as the angel continued. Stephen didn't want to hear any more. The unsettling atmosphere magnified further unnerving him. He finally navigated himself out of his pew and darted down the aisle to depart the chapel. The ushers gave no opposition to his desire to leave. They stood motionless by the entryway with their eyes widened and transfixed on the supernatural event. Nearing the exit, the light behind him brightened enveloping the sanctuary and into the expanse of the foyer. It became hard to see. Stephen felt he couldn't escape fast enough and whatever was happening to his rear would overtake him. It was as if he were in a bad dream running down a long hallway, never reaching the end.

As Stephen approached the doorway leading outside, he caught a final burst of words from the angel, "...so as those whose names are written here upon this page are to be judg.." The last human related sounds inside Stephen thought he heard were moans and shrieks before all went silent just as he rushed out through the funeral home entrance. A voice echoed in his head, "Remember my name, Abriel."

Guests on the standby list waiting outside in line realized that something extraordinary was taking place; many waited with excitement for those inside to come out and present a firsthand report. Some urgently attempted to enter the chapel but found the doors locked. Others more astute after seeing Stephen's panicked face, and confident that they heard disturbing and haunting sounds from inside, retreated to their vehicles in the parking lot. Stephen stumbled across the concrete sidewalk to a small patch of grass and sat down on the ground. His vision faded. The crowd gathering around, the funeral home, cars in the parking lot, trees, and lampposts all went black. Stephen realized he was now blind.

Those who didn't scurry away in fear attempted to ask him a barrage of questions, "What happened? Was there an angel? Did he talk? What was it like?"

Through the barrage of questions, Stephen recognized the voice of one of the interrogators. "Stephen what happened."

"Alder, is that you? Where are you?"

"What do you mean where am I? I'm right here in front of you," Alder answered, kneeling down in front of his friend.

"Alder, I can't see."

Those remaining hearing this and the disturbing sounds from the chapel, gathered their friends and family and scattered to their cars. A couple of men who tried earlier to enter the chapel now found the doors unlocked and rushed into the building.

“What do you mean you can't see?” Alder responded. Maria caught up to her husband, who had run ahead to his friend when he saw him rush out of the building as they were driving up in the parking lot.

Stephen's eyes watered. “I can't see. Where were you?”

“Dude, we were running late. What happened?”

A man in his late forties who had gone in through the unlocked doors came running back out. “They're all dead, everyone inside is dead.”

## *Chapter 2*

Detectives Green and Matthews flashed their badges as they worked their way through the crowd of news reporters, photojournalists, and spectators outside of the funeral home. A frenzy of camera flashes enhanced the light from the street lamps of the parking lot each time the medical examiners' technicians couriered gurneys with covered bodies outside to waiting county vehicles. Working their way inside, the detectives passed through the foyer area where samples of food were being collected by crime scene investigators. Several bodies lay sprawled near the back exits of the chapel area leading into the foyer. Entering the chapel, they saw more bodies scattered throughout the sanctuary tended to by the coroners, medical examiners, and technicians both detectives knew were from the main Los Angeles offices as well as the Santa Clarita and High Desert facilities. Policemen and crime scene investigators scurried about to gather physical evidence, take photos of body positions, the buffet table and anything relevant to the investigation. Others were placing bodies on gurneys, searching and tagging personal effects, spilled food, plates, purses, and camera bags. Looking for the lead city medical examiner, Dr. McKay, the two detectives found him near the front pews.

"Doc, how's it goin? What can you tell me?"

Dr. McKay finished examining the body of a young man considered to be 18 or 19 years of age, dressed sharply in a custom-made suit with silk maroon tie, sprawled on the floor in front of a bench pew. After scrounging through the suit jacket and pants pockets, determined that the deceased man carried no identification, only a Starbucks card and a set of car keys, the auto key emblazed with an Audi logo. The examiner glanced up at Detectives Matthews and Green and smirked, "I'd say they're all dead."

"Very funny," Detective Green responded.

"What are you two doing here? I didn't know you were assigned to this crime scene."

"Our lucky butts got assigned to investigate the witness to this mess here. We ended up with some free time and wanted to head over to see if we could find out some background on what happened, for when we talk to him again. Any ideas? What about the time of death?"

“Well, according to all the other technicians’ examinations so far for the bodies we checked, the time of death seems to be between 2:00 and 3:00, best estimation closer to 2:30 based on liver temps.”

“That’s about the time the witnesses outside said Stephen Williams came out,” Detective Matthews commented.

“Who’s Stephen Williams?” the doctor inquired.

“The witness to what happened in here,” Detective Green answered. “You’re already taking out the bodies? Don’t you usually wait until a full forensics is worked up on the scene? Something like this should take at least a day or two.”

“Our boss told us this is special, and not to spend a lot of time working it in the field. They don’t want to panic the public if it was something supernatural. Rumor has it some higher-up religious leaders pulled some serious strings, even up at the federal level.”

“No shit?”

“Well, we still need to run tox screens, body exams, and crap. With nearly a hundred bodies, we should do that back in the morgue. Plus it’ll be awhile before we get anything definitive.”

“What do you have un-definitive?” Detective Green asked.

“What do you think happened?” Detective Matthews asked, interjecting himself into the conversation and expelling a cough less raspy and congestive than the previous ones.

“Look around, could have been the food. Yet you notice that none of the bodies show any signs of distress from food poisoning? Not one of them regurgitated or expelled anything. Besides, with this many fatalities, they all wouldn’t have necessarily consumed the same thing. And some of them probably didn’t eat anything for that matter. So I’d rule out food poisoning at least right now. Maybe it was a gas leak. Who knows? It could have even been some sort of terrorist chemical attack. Your buddies in blue and the fire department didn’t let us in until the building was cleared by hazmat.”

Detective Matthews studied the scene to see if anything of importance stood out while the doctor carried on with his explanation. Noticing the remaining bodies, he realized that all of their eyes were open and had a distinct fogging of the pupils and irises.

“Doc?” Detective Matthews asked. “Is it normal for all of their eyes to be open like that?”

“Hmmm,” Dr. McKay looked carefully into the eyes of the corpse of the young man. Not only were they fixed open, the natural color of the iris and pupils appeared cloudy, a distinct

shade of gray he'd never seen before. Afterward he scuttled over to a couple of the remaining bodies, a middle-aged woman extravagantly dressed next to an older man in a nicely tailored suit with hair graying and a Nikon SLR camera, tagged with a "police evidence," around his neck. The eyes of both bodies were rigidly open, the natural color of the iris and pupils foggy. The doctor looked about for other bodies to examine finding many already removed. Index card markers next to the doctor's location identified the two offspring of the deceased he was currently examining. Other index marker cards were scattered about the pews. Hurrying over to the other side of the chapel to view another body as it was placed on a gurney, the same result; the eyes were open and cloudy. Dr. McKay knew he would need to review the photos and video to determine if the corpses already removed were the same. He returned to work on his original body still pondering the discovery the detectives had made.

"Ok Doc, I just got to ask, what's going on here?" Detective Matthews asked, disturbed.

"Well first off," the doctor replied, "I don't believe that crap about an angel doing this. Why, if they do exist and were here to give eulogies, would this one get a wild hair up its ass and decide to become a mass murderer?"

"You don't believe in angels?" Detective Matthews asked.

"No one to date has been able to produce a photo, video, or anything else to say otherwise. It's just been someone spouting off, 'Ohh, I saw an angel.' Come on, get real."

"Then back to our earlier question, what happened here?" Detective Green asked again.

"Get back to me in the morning. Then I'll tell you what didn't happen."

### Chapter 3

*Who could be knocking at this time of the night?* Father Hernandez angrily thought. One of his parishioners could be in emotional or spiritual distress. It might be Jerome Bellows. The priest had counseled him during the last several months for his recently deceased wife. Then Agatha Pannetti came to mind. Recently diagnosed with advanced lung cancer, she had requested special prayers and rosaries for healing health, asking the Father to research a patron saint for intercessions.

The Father's anger subsided. He was upset at himself for having entertained indignant thoughts. Still, he questioned whether it couldn't have waited until daylight. Glancing at the wall clock, he noted 3:10 a.m. Tying off the belt of his robe, he approached the front door, turned on the porch light, and moved the curtain on the door window to view his visitor. It was Bishop Andrew Grielle, his mentor and the Diocese superintendent.

"Your Excellency?" Father Hernandez exclaimed while opening the door. "What can I do for you?"

"Sorry to disturb you so early in the morning Father Hernandez," Bishop Grielle responded as he worked his way into the parsonage and sat on the ample rust-colored leather armchair in the living room before he was invited into the house. "We have a situation. I'm not sure if you heard about what transpired at the funeral home yesterday afternoon?"

"Yes, evidently there was a visitation with tragic consequences. We're still sorting out the details with nothing yet officially released. You know your Excellency, if this is true, it could have some very serious ramifications for the Church."

"I'm well aware of the ramifications. The same as I was when the millions disappeared, including much of the clergy and church leadership."

"What's the Church's stance on what's happened?"

"That is why I'm here. There's no official position at this time until we investigate this more."

"I don't understand?"

Bishop Grielle gave a faint outbreath while looking around the living room, unsure of his next statement. He focused his attention back to Father Hernandez. "I'll get straight to the point. How much do you know about angels?" He asked.

"I wrote several dissertations while in seminary and a few essays several years ago when the eulogy supposedly began."

"Yes, his Eminence noted he read some of your work and found them quite intriguing. A couple quite controversial if I remember right."

"Many did find them controversial. I attempted to bring up alternative points of view to my own and those of traditional church teachings, everything from when they were created to their purported roles and functions. I even began an initial examination as to the importance and possible meaning of their names. By questioning our beliefs, I truly believe we solidify and ratify them."

"Hmmm, and from my understanding, you never partook of a visitation during any funeral services you presided over since this whole angel affair started?"

"No."

"Good, because of that, I believe that'll work well in keeping you objective. I need you to investigate what may have happened on behalf of the Church."

"Shouldn't this be done formally with the . . ."

Bishop Grielle interrupted, crossing his leg and taking the unyielding position of sitting back in the chair. "We need to keep this as informal as possible. We don't need to bring attention to what you'll be doing."

"I'm sorry. I still don't understand your Excellency."

"You must attempt to find out if there was a visitation, and why this evil has befallen those poor souls."

"I'm not sure if I have that level of expertise. I've been here for years at Our Lady of the Light serving as a modest pastor. Wouldn't this be better suited for someone in the Diocese hierarchy instead of me?"

"While communicating with his Eminence, we decided we didn't want to involve those with preconceived religious political viewpoints on what is happening," Bishop Grielle answered. "Besides, we'll be assigning someone to work with you who's a bit more experienced. She'll be meeting you later today."

“She?” Father Hernandez asked, unconsciously raising an eyebrow.

“Sister Justine Dawson. You'll find her background to be extremely beneficial to your investigation. I'm going to ask you to humble yourself and follow her lead if need be.”

Father Hernandez was a little agitated by the bishop's comments. “You presume I'm going to undertake this investigation.”

“Understand I would like for you to take this on voluntarily. If need be, take this as you being strongly induced and persuaded by his Eminence and myself.”

“Not to be obstinate, I still believe I'm not,” Father Hernandez said, emphasizing the word *not*, “the best person for this. “There's just too much that I don't know.”

“That's why you're well suited for this. Your objectivity will help guide you to discover a true clarification of what did happen. Realize this; there are things you may learn that I cannot pass on to you at this time. During your investigation, Cardinal Millhouse noted you'd find out things that you'll need to keep to yourself. You must not question what you do find but report back to us immediately.”

“I don't know if I can agree to that your Excellency.”

“There is one thing I will tell you. It appears several members of the congregation from your sister parish passed away in the incident. One was a prominent long-term deacon.”

Father Hernandez's eyes widened from the shock. “Holy Mother of God. How many from St. Augustine's perished?”

“From initial news reports, 98 souls in all were lost. We estimate 20 to 25 from St. Augustine. However, the deacon and his family are of most concern.”

“What were their names?” Father Hernandez asked.

“Morgan Bradfield and William Sumner; they were very active in the parish. More important, they and the company they worked for were instrumental in working on significant endeavors for the Church.”

“What company?”

“Everest International Bio-Medical Group.” Bishop Grielle saw Father Hernandez didn't understand the significance. “They were working on ways to produce inexpensive vaccines for underdeveloped countries and lower income families here in the United States. And they sponsored and funded several free clinics here in the city.”

“And what of Father Gates? Was he officiating the funeral?”

Bishop Grielle scratched his balding head and sunk deep in the chair. “Jeffrey Bradfield, the decedent, was a Protestant. He was never confirmed in the Church. His own pastor officiated the ceremony. Father Gates wanted to attend in support of his parishioners.”

“So then he's fine?”

The bishop rubbed his forehead with the fingertips of his hand as if giving himself a massage. “On the way to funeral home, he came across an accident and stopped to render help. A pickup truck traveling in the opposite direction was carrying a tire that wasn't properly tied down in the back. The truck hit a bump, which hurled the tire from the rear of the truck, and then it rolled, bounced down the shoulder, jumped the median, and struck Father Gates, who was assisting one of the accident victims. He was killed instantly.”

## *Chapter 4*

Detective Green struggled to open the door of the office he shared with Detective Matthews with his arms full of 9x12 manila envelopes and file folders routed from the forensics labs and labeled with the case numbers assigned for the funeral home incident. He dumped the load on his desk. Because of the scope of the event, information was already flowing from other investigators, which was something he hadn't anticipated.

Opening an envelope labeled "Camera Contents (Copies) – Turin Raines," he pulled out several unassuming photographs of potential attendees standing in line in what appeared to be outside front of the funeral home. Other photos displayed the food set up in the foyer. The most interesting photographs were those of family members taken by the camera's owner in the chapel. He opened another envelope, this one titled "Camera Contents (Copies – William Sumner)." His review of the photos revealed the same image compositions of several attendees standing in line, probably friends or family of the photographer. With this set of photos imprinted with time stamps and metadata, Detective Green realized he could build a time line up to the fatal incident. The latest photo in the set noted the time 2:27. It showed quite a few attendees in the pews gazing up towards the ceiling. Several photos showed Stephen off in the background by one of the buffet tables and a couple with him randomly interspersed with the gathering of attendees.

Walking into the office, Detective Matthews found his partner sitting at his desk looking through the case files. "What you got there?" He asked.

Detective Green glanced up. Detective Matthews passed through the doorway with a cup of Dunkin' Donuts coffee. "Did you get me some?"

"Didn't know you'd be here already. I came in early hoping I could look through some of the other evidence before we go back and talk to Stephen Williams," Detective Matthews responded.

"Yeah, I had the same idea. Just going through some of it now."

"Anything interesting?"

“Not yet.”

Detective Matthews sat down at his desk and grabbed several of the envelopes and folders from the stack on his partner's desk. Both of them, engrossed in viewing and analyzing the information, were a little startled when the phone rang. Detective Green answered, “Detective Green.”

A quick pause and he continued, “We're both here now.” After another lull, “We'll be right down.” He hung up the phone.

“What's up?” Detective Matthews asked.

“Lieutenant is calling everyone in for a special meeting downstairs. In 30 minutes in the briefing room.”

Both organized what was in front of them before heading down to the briefing room.

The briefing room was full; all 25 seats were taken by other detectives and patrolmen. The overflow of other officers occupied the side walls. At the podium in front stood Lieutenant Scott Wilson; he was younger than most of the force in attendance and was considered by many an effective political strategist. Most of the station house liked him because he was charismatic, he socialized well with his subordinates, and he didn't step on his coworkers during his advance through the ranks of the division. Detective Green, one of the few, found it hard to work with him, especially since he felt he had amassed more experience being a field detective almost three times as long as Scott Wilson had been on the force. Detective Matthews, on the other hand, didn't care.

Four men in suits entered the briefing room. One-on-one conversations ended abruptly. The four stood with erect stances behind Lieutenant Wilson next to the white board. Most of the officers and detectives speculated about who the men were.

“Detectives, officers,” the lieutenant began. “First off, just a reminder of something I'm quite sure you are all well aware, don't release any information to the public. The department is having public affairs withhold all information until something more definitive is determined. The coroner won't have anything for us for at least a couple of days, so those hoping to have more information will have to wait.” He sorted through and scanned some papers on the podium before continuing. “Some of you working key points of this investigation may have already received some of the evidence from the crime scene. We received permission from the Feds to release what we do have. They will be taking the lead until it's determined that it was

not a terrorist-related act. They've already used a considerable amount of resources on this investigation.” Many in the room grumbled at the comment.

Detective Matthews attempted to suppress his continual coughing; sometimes he was successful, other times the vibration of phlegm in his throat would amplify the sound. The lieutenant continued despite Detective Matthews’s unintentional interruptions. “They think one possible motive is revenge for not being invited as a primary attendee or getting standby tickets to the funeral. Detectives Salinski, Johnson, Eidelbacher, and Juarez will work with Special Agent Normans as lead, reviewing and interviewing the list of all potential attendees. I know some of you already interviewed witnesses and those waiting outside in the standby line yesterday afternoon; do it again.”

As the lieutenant continued discussing other assignments, both Detectives Green and Matthews found their attention wandering, until their names were mentioned. “Detectives Green and Matthews will work with Special Agent Underwood talking to the only known witness. I’ll need to talk to this team right after we’re done here. Plus there was a new development since last night. Three more bodies were found that weren’t in the chapel: an attendant working in the basement, a shift manager working in the back office, and a receptionist. Folks, now is no time for speculation; we need to gather solid evidence and work to determine what went down at the crime scene. We’ll meet back here today at 1700 to discuss any new findings and pass it on to the command center for this investigation. Dismiss.”

The officers assigned to the cases spilled out into the hallway to meet with their agent counterparts while the others headed back to their offices or small cubicles. Detectives Green and Matthews caught up with Agent Underwood and made the obligatory introductions. The agent’s grip was solid and firm. As they finished up, Lieutenant Wilson walked up to the three men. “I see you’ve met. What do you plan to do today?”

Agent Underwood was about to answer when Detective Green interjected, “We’re going back to the hospital to finish interviewing Stephen Williams. Hopefully he’s more coherent today.”

“Detective Green, that’s one of the things I wanted to talk to you both about . . .,” the lieutenant began. Agent Underwood interrupted, “We already interviewed Mr. Williams this morning. There’s nothing new he can tell us at this time. If need be, we’ll head back to talk to him later.”

Detective Matthews's eyebrow arched. Detective Green reacted with an angry outburst. This was another reason Detective Green didn't like the lieutenant; he easily could've lead off with this information. "What the hell?" Detective Green blurted out, focusing on the lieutenant. "Why weren't we involved with this? This is bullshit."

Conversations in the hallway went silent. Everyone focused on Detective Green. They resumed their conversations realizing his outburst was incidental.

"Did you get a chance to review the photos and videos from the crime scene?" Agent Underwood answered for the lieutenant, maintaining a calm, collected voice.

"Yeah? So what?"

"We jumped on this, and our video forensics team downloaded and scoured the images and video overnight. Several showed Mr. Williams in the background until just before the estimated time of the event. He's not relevant at this time."

Lieutenant Wilson broke into the conversation. "Detectives, special agent, there's one other thing. An outside investigation team from the Church may be joining up with you later at the crime scene or visiting Stephen Williams at the hospital."

All three men focused a look of disbelief at the lieutenant. Detective Green turned toward the special agent and presented him with a sarcastic grin, "Sucks doesn't it?"

"Who authorized that?" Special Agent Underwood asked.

"It's been cleared through your SAIC in the command center."

Agent Underwood pulled out a tattered and scratched smartphone device, scrolled through a contacts list, and stepped away from the group to the other side of the hallway with the phone to his ear.

"Detective Green, Detective Matthews, look, between you and me, I don't think the FBI will be around during this investigation too long. They're just going through the motions right now. You know there's no way in hell they would've allowed anyone from outside our department to enter the crime scene this early in the game."

"Then why in hell are we, especially the Church?" Detective Green asked, still faintly upset.

Lieutenant Wilson moved in a little closer to the men, reducing the volume of his voice. "From my understanding, Cardinal Millhouse asked a personal favor from the chief. At first the chief denied his request, but when Millhouse somehow managed to get the Feds to allow it to

happen, they called the mayor, and next thing you know, they were allowed to investigate. Look, just babysit them and make sure they don't get in the way of our guys? OK.”

“Why would they even want to get involved?” Detective Matthews asked, finally chiming in.

“They want to rule out anything supernatural. Imagine what it does to the Church if angels are going around killing people.”

“How many are we supposed to babysit?”

“Not sure yet, but the other inside chatter is that some are already trying to call this a natural disaster, maybe a gas leak or fumes from improper ventilation from the adjacent crematorium.”

“We just need to do our job lieutenant. Let us find out what happened,” Detective Matthews injected along with a congested cough.

“Look, you both just need to deal with it. Agent Underwood is lead until determined otherwise. End of story.”

Detective Green found it difficult to accept the lieutenant's edict. But he decided to back down, knowing there are battles you fall on your sword over, others where you withdraw. Detective Matthews tended to be more laissez-faire in these situations. Sometimes this would upset Detective Green even more because he'd think Detective Matthews didn't care. Detective Matthews's view was that if something is going to happen, it's going to happen, you can't change fate. Whenever the two of them would discuss worldviews, religion, or politics, one saw life in terms of decision determining destiny and the other as destiny without influence on decisions. Both retreated to their office and left Agent Underwood talking on his cell phone in the hallway.

At their desks, they both resumed looking through the photos from several other of the victims' cameras. They were a bit peeved when Agent Underwood entered into the office without knocking. Detective Matthews could see Detective Green getting upset, his partner's face was turning several shades of red. He thought he should diffuse the situation and said, “Agent Underwood, we're reviewing some of the photos from the incident. Want to go over some of them with us?”

“No thanks. Our analysts already reviewed quite a few of them last night. I dropped the ones we cleared on your desks this morning. They didn't find much of anything.”

Detective Green, barely managing to keep his control, reacted harshly, “Why in hell would you give them to us?”

“We believe in sharing information,” the agent responded.

“Then why work behind our backs instead of bringing us in right away, and why not tell us about talking with Stephen Williams instead of us being coldcocked after the brief?”

Agent Underwood maintained his stone-faced expression but clearly sensed the antagonism in Detective Green's comments. “It wasn't my decision. I can tell you why we think Stephen Williams isn't a person of interest at this time.”

Detective Green was stunned. Detective Matthews accepted the comment and, instead of getting ready to sign on to the online case file system, he pushed his keyboard to the side to focus his attention directly on the conversation.

Agent Underwood continued, “I don't know if you've noticed that a lot of the photos on your desk have time stamps, and they run up to the time right before the incident. Any images after that were either deleted or simply disappeared from the memory. Even cameras using film were the same; frames up until about 2:29 p.m. held images. Successive frames were blank. And even though the family of the original decedent requested no video during the service, there were some who were attempting to clandestine use their phones' video. We came across the same results; the video went blank at that same time. So we immediately thought maybe some sort of electromagnetic device.”

“What did the video show before then?” Detective Matthews asked.

“Pretty much the same thing as the stills, just a bunch of activity inside and outside of the chapel at the funeral home. We saw attendees coming in, taking seats, eating food, and then the service beginning up until it appeared it was ending. After that, everything went blank.”

“So what about Stephen Williams?” Detective Green asked.

“Investigators searching the crime scene found a security system with several cameras and a DVR. Our forensic digital specialists are still reviewing the video. Initially, it looks like no one tampered with it. What we've seen so far is an overhead view of the chapel with funeral in progress. Just before the incident, a lot of the victims looked to be sniffing the air and looking up, and some of them were looking in the direction of the altar.

“You can see Stephen Williams in his pew after getting some food. A little less than a minute before the incident, the video went bright white and blank for nearly 90 seconds. When the image reappears, everyone in the chapel is dead with no visible trauma and Stephen Williams

isn't in the chapel. That's when he went outside to the parking lot. One minute they're alive then, wham, they're dead."

"Couldn't he have been working with someone else?" Detective Matthews inquired.

"That's why we're still working this. When we see people smelling the air and looking around, we're thinking maybe there was a release of some sort of noxious gas. Yet we couldn't find any type of device or any tampering with the ducting or anything else in the ventilation system, nothing illicit. Discounting the other three victims being found in different parts of the facility, it's beginning to seem like some sort of weird, unexplainable accident."

"When you talked to Stephen Williams, did he spout off some weird crap about angels?" Detective Green asked, calmer than before.

"The reality is no angels were seen on any of the cameras, or video, or anywhere else. With all the hypothetical angel visits over the years, there's never been a report of one going rogue and killing a room full of people. Our only witness mentioned a lot of stuff, that's another reason we're thinking some sort of gas or chemical leak causing delirium or hallucinations."

"Aren't you making a lot of assumptions?" Detective Matthews noted rhetorically.

"No, we're making an analysis based on evidence presented. This was not a supernatural event. None of the peripheral signs of this being a terrorist or orchestrated event are there, and no one's claimed responsibility, so we just don't know."

## Chapter 5

The air was hot. The air was still. The air was muggy. Michael Saunders hated the air here this time of day. He attempted to distract himself while jogging. He missed the clear skies and cool breezes earlier in the year, the way the sun reflected across the ocean as it receded behind the horizon, light dancing off wind-agitated ripples in a sheet of sparkling crystals. During these days, a muddied splotch of gold and amber crudely pasted in the sky took the sun's place looking murky, dingy, and diffused through the haze. If not for the undulations of the water, it sometimes looked as if the water and sky were blended into the same palette. Michael pondered people who said God was an awesome creator and his creation awe inspiring, but not this image painted on the canvas of encroaching twilight. While engrossed in the sunset, Michael nearly ran into a young couple setting up a blanket by the jogging path next to the sandy beach. He observed a small cooler, long-stemmed wine glasses, and Tupperware selection of cheeses. *How can anyone enjoy having a picnic out here on this miserable, sweltering day?* He asked himself.

Breaking away from the stream of other joggers, cyclists, and walkers, Michael spotted his normal landmarks. The neighbors were engaged in their customary activities: working in their yards, working out on their patios, or sitting on lawn chairs in the small garages of the town houses and condos and watching passersby. As he approached his own small front porch, Michael witnessed a male and female walking up the small set of steps and getting ready to knock on the door. The female he recognized. Her name was Justine Dawson. His heart skipped a beat. Even with ten years having passed, she was still breathtakingly beautiful. Dressed conservatively in a gray skirt suit, black blouse, and black pumps and wearing a silver necklace with a cross, what he initially mistook for her black hair was a modest habit. He realized she had taken her vows and become a nun. Next to her was a man he didn't recognize with a light taupe skin complexion, wrinkled and baggy eyes, and Hispanic features, wearing blue jeans and a medium-gray shirt. By his Romanesque collar, he knew his male guest's occupation--priest.

“It’s been quite a few years. So you went and made the jump? Guess I should call you sister?” Michael commented to Sister Justine as he wiped the sweat from his head and flicked the excess toward the ground. “Who’s this?” he asked as he glanced over to the unknown man. “Your new boy toy?”

Father Hernandez was taken aback by the comment from the lean man with golden-brown skin and mildly curly dark brown hair, his right hazel eye looking more muted in color than the left one, and who appeared to be in his early thirties. He surmised that Michael had interracial parents.

Michael detected a hint of anger in Sister Justine’s expression while she attempted to present a look of indifference.

“Look, I followed through on what was best, that was serving in the Church,” she retorted.

“Yeah, some church.”

“You can’t expect the answers to be smack in your face all the time. You have to . . .”

Michael interrupted by reaching out his sweaty right hand to shake the unknown man’s hand. “I’m Michael Saunders. And you, boy toy, would be?”

Father Hernandez reluctantly reached out to shake Michael’s hand, wiping Michael’s sweat off his hand on his trousers when they finished. “I’m Father Jose Avis Hernandez, senior priest at Our Lady of Light parish. I’m not sure what’s going on here . . .”

Michael interrupted again, “What do you both want?”

Father Hernandez responded, “We’re here because we’re told you were an expert with . . .”

Sister Justine interrupted this time, “I believe Abriel is back.”

Father Hernandez turned sharply toward Sister Justine, amazed at her comment. Michael’s attitude of mild anger and sarcasm changed to stoicism. “Are you sure?”

“Bishop Grielle sent us.”

“Why do you think Abriel is back?”

“Because of what happened at the funeral home.”

Michael’s eyes widened, “What happened at what funeral home?”

“Still don’t follow the news? Even after all these years?”

“Not all the time. I don’t need to hear about the stupid things stupid people do. What happened?”

“One of the funeral homes here in town, 101 dead.”

“So?”

“There’s one possible witness, who immediately went blind after the event.”

Father's Hernandez's head volleyed back and forth during the discussion between Sister Justine and Michael, whirling with the surprise of a history between the two that Bishop Grielle didn't pass on to him during his late-night visit. Michael reached in the pocket of his jogging shorts, pulled out a key, and unlocked the door to his house.

“Let's go inside,” Michael directed to his guests.

Father Hernandez and Sister Justine entered the small Spartan-like decorated home. A simple beige cloth couch and plain oak coffee table occupied the living room. There were no pieces of artwork, painting, of photos anywhere on the off-white walls. It wasn't clear whether their hue was intended or the result of fading over the years. An unadorned analog clock hung on the accent wall; it was an hour slow. In the dining area, the only furniture was a simple country-style dinner table with four wooden chairs standing sentry to a traditional Shaker-style China cabinet in the room. The walls were bare and the same off-white color as the living room. Next to the dining room was a bedroom converted into a library and office area. It contained a desk cluttered with papers, file folders, magazines and a couple of religious journals. Two of the walls in the room staged several bookcases filled with an assortment of disorganized books. Outside the door of the study, a laundry basket rested on the floor filled with crumpled clothing. It wasn't clear whether the clothes were clean or dirty. A couple of the articles appeared to be female blouses. Sister Justine ignored the oddity; Father Hernandez didn't notice.

“I'm going to take a shower. Make yourselves comfortable in the study,” Michael commented going into his bedroom. Looking into the mirror on his bureau, he thought, *What the hell is she doing here?* She was no longer in his life. He wanted it that way after hearing from her those years ago, “Michael, we can never be together. My plan is to serve God. We can only be friends.” She made her decision by rejecting his marriage proposal. Just being friends would've been too hard. He thought she was using the church as an excuse because she was afraid of how serious they had become and possibly being pregnant. Michael forced himself to undress and proceed with his shower instead of bogging himself down in reflecting on the past.

Entering Michael's study, Father Hernandez and Sister Justine had to sidestep an open 2-foot by 2-foot square cardboard box half filled with unread newspapers, some bound with string, some rubber bands, others still inside plastic bags, resting just inside the doorway. Looking

around Michael's office-library, Sister Justine scanned book titles covering angelology, religion and society, Spiritism, church history, a Greek and Hebrew lexicon, a couple of different types of concordances, bible dictionary, and several other religious titles. Father Hernandez found himself more interested in the questions he ruminated over concerning Michael and Sister Justine. On the wall, another analog clock displayed the incorrect time, again an hour slow. Sister Justine leisurely walked to the bookshelf nearest the door and scanned the numerous titles. Father Hernandez glanced at the desk, observing a couple of stacks of papers with grades.

Several minutes of quiet passed when Father Hernandez decided to ask one of his questions. "Sister Justine, just what is the nature of your background with Michael Saunders? Is there some sort of history between you two that I should be aware of?"

Sister Justine paused for a few minutes to thumb through a medieval history textbook, noting that Michael was one of the contributing editors. Finally she spoke, "We grew up together, since we were kids all the way through high school and college. Early on in college, I felt the call to serve God as an educator. That's why I joined my particular order. Michael followed along and wanted to become a priest. I was very dedicated and would challenge him on it from time to time." Sister Justine held back that she and Michael were in a serious relationship years ago before her decision and commitment to become a nun. In ways, Michael never admitted to himself, she knew they could never be together.

"Is that why he's so aloof with you, because you challenged him in his beliefs?"

"That, and after the disappearance, many of his friends and family went missing. He felt in every way possible that God had left him, at least what he thought he believed to be God. That crushed his faith, which I don't think was that strong to begin with."

Father Hernandez moved some books over to the side of a black-cushioned futon in the corner and sat down. "So, then, why come to him to find information concerning our investigation. Surely there's someone who has more of a belief in this disturbing incident?"

"I believe you'll find Michael to be well qualified for this."

"Would that have something to do with someone you referred to earlier called Abriel?"

Sister Justine was silent. Father Hernandez pressed on, "Who is this Abriel? And what does he or she have to do with the funeral home incident?"

"I'm sorry Father, I can't tell you yet."

"Why not?"

“Probably because that snake Monsignor Grielle told her not to say anything,” Michael chimed in, standing in the doorway in a T-shirt, faded jeans, and no socks with hair still damp from his shower.

“He's a bishop now Michael,” Sister Justine commented. “One of the last ones promoted in years.”

Michael reached into the laundry basket and pulled out a red and yellow flowered Hawaiian shirt. He took a quick sniff and put it on. “Bishop Grielle huh? I’m surprised he's not a cardinal, or hell even the Pope.”

“God and the Church promote when they deem fit,” Father Hernandez interjected.

“Hey, the boy toy chimes in,” Michael quipped.

“Mr. Saunders, I would appreciate it if you referred to me as Father,” Father Hernandez said sternly while standing up.

Michael, surprised by the genuine forcefulness in the father’s voice, perceived he was attempting to establish himself as the dominant male. He had considered the priest’s sense of humility to be a cover for being reserved and introverted.

Michael raised an eyebrow and displayed a small grin. “Awright, I can do that Father boy toy,” he said.

“Michael!” Sister Justine exclaimed angrily.

“Don't worry about it Sister, he's just being driven by his human nature,” Father Hernandez said patiently.

“You know, neither of you even corrected me about the bishop being a snake,” Michael commented as he moved over to his desk and sat in a faded blue swivel chair.

“Look, he’s not a snake and we're not here about Bishop Grielle,” Father Hernandez countered. “We're here to get some background about what happened at the funeral home and the possibility of an angel causing the death of over a hundred poor souls.”

Michael slouched in his chair and stretched out his legs. Father Hernandez noticed he was still barefoot. “What do you wanna know?” Michael asked.

Father Hernandez sat back down on the futon and in a calm, focused voice directed his question to both Michael and Sister Justine, given that she had remained quiet during the trip over to the house not answering any of his questions. “First off, what do you both know about angels?”

Michael answered first, "I know that I studied them quite extensively before I left seminary. Lots of people say they've seen angels, especially over the last ten years during all these presumed visitations at funerals. I don't know if I believe in them. I've learned the use of angels is a basis for a common mythos to validate a belief in an afterlife," Michael noted, with a look of dawning understanding on his face. "I really should develop that more."

Father Hernandez was visibly surprised. He hadn't fully comprehended Sister Justine's earlier comment. "You were in seminary? Studying to be a priest?"

"Yep, almost all the way through. Just about ready to execute the rite of ordination. I quit right after the disappearance."

"What happened?"

"Because a lot of Catholic, Evangelical, Fundamental, Mormon, and other churches with different kinds of Christian belief systems were still populated with large numbers of good-hearted religious believers here on this mud ball, a lot of people, like myself, thought there definitely was no rapture. Then you have portions of the population of Muslim nations, Jews, and Hindus, along with other religions who were never the true converts or believers in their native religion, all also disappearing. Maybe the New Agers were right that the missing were whisked away to be reeducated and then to be returned with a renewed sense of global awareness, or some crap like that."

"So you didn't think anything religious happened with all of those disappearing?"

"To summarize Joseph Campbell, I've come to see religion as a social construct, building common norms and standards as a means to establish a moral and social foundation that binds cultures and societies together. I never saw any proof of a God."

"You were influenced by Joseph Campbell's, *The Power of Myth*?"

Michael responded to Father Hernandez with another large grin, "The reference of the metaphor in religious traditions is to something transcendent, which is literally not anything."

Sister Justine, although finding the conversation somewhat interesting, felt these two could go on talking for some time and lose focus on the assignment. But at least they weren't badgering each other. She put back an old physics textbook she had taken from a shelf and said sharply, "I'm glad you both found some common interest between the two of you. Now it would be great if you could remember why we're here and get back on track."

Sister Justine's directness amazed both men.

“Well my dear, aren't we more of a straight shooter these days?” Michael quipped. “If you were more like that ten years ago, you could've prevented a lot...”

“Let it go Michael,” she interrupted.

“You don't understand what . . .”

“Michael stop. We're not going to have that discussion now or ever. The past is the past. Let it be.”

Father Hernandez recognized it was his turn to steer the conversation back onto the original topic. “Mr. Saunders?” Father Hernandez interjected.

Michael raised an eyebrow at the father's formal address.

Father Hernandez continued, “We'd like to discuss with you some of your opinions as to the funeral home incident yesterday.”

“And what did Sister Justine tell you so far padre?”

“She hasn't revealed much at this time.”

“Really, because I don't know how I can help. The research notes I had from last time were stolen by the Sister's slime bag of a bishop.”

Sister Justine ignored the sharpness of Michael's comment, feeling the need of a new tactic to counter Michael's antagonism. “We don't know if that's what happened to our notes, Michael.” She calmly replied.

“Research notes on what?” Father Hernandez questioned.

Michael gave Father Hernandez a small smirk. The Father was not sure why Michael was being so smug. Michael focused his attention on Sister Justine, who was reengaged with perusing the books on his smaller, unfinished, oak bookshelf.

“Research on the previous trip down to, wait a minute, you never told him about Aguascalientes?” Michael asked Sister Justine.

“No.” She answered timidly.

“Hmmm, well I gotta teach a class in about an hour, and you know what? I'm hungry,” Michael remarked while grabbing a stack of graded papers from his desk and shoving them disheveled in a faded brown, soft-case leather attaché. Closing the locking tabs, he clutched it and departed from the room without saying another word. His two guests were astonished to be alone.

“Sister, why are we here? He's not going to help us. We have God's work to do,” Father Hernandez noted.

“Father, just wait,” she pleaded.

Michael popped his head in the doorway. “You two coming? We can talk while we eat at my favorite deli.” He flashed a playful grin. “Lunch is on you boy toy.”

\* \* \* \*

“I'd like to order the free-range chicken salad with organic tomatoes and lettuce,” Sister Justine requested of the server at the counter.

“Organic?” Michael snickered. “Kills me when someone says ‘organic.’ Aren't tomatoes and lettuce organic by their very nature? It's not like you're eating inorganic tomatoes or lettuce made out of Styrofoam or cardboard.”

“You know Michael, you can be a real . . . patootie sometimes.” Sister Justine's rebuke of Michael caught Father Hernandez off guard.

“Patootie?” Michael responded while chuckling.

“I've dedicated myself not to curse.”

“I don't think God is going to come and strike you down just because of a word. Just say what you're thinking. Just because it sounds sterile doesn't mean the words you use are going to change your intent or meaning. Just say that I can be a real ass. Different word, it's still the same meaning. Better yet, asshole would've been better or, hey, even asshole. But patootie, might as well say rear end or gluteus maximus. I guess patootie is more colorful though for a nun.”

“Michael, just shut up already.” Sister Justine snapped, focusing her attention back on the deli clerk, who showed approval of her comment to Michael. Completing her order, Sister Justine grabbed her orange plastic tray with a diet Pepsi and bag of kettle chips, and found a seat outside on the patio. Michael and Father Hernandez followed after placing their orders.

“So you gotta tell me, is this one of the best delis you've ever been to?” Michael asked, quizzing his two religious companions. Both were halfway through consuming their lunch platter. All three had pretty much kept quiet during the meal.

“I must admit it's not bad at all,” Sister Justine forced herself to answer, forgiving Michael for the earlier incident.

Father Hernandez nodded in agreement, his mouth still full.

As soon as Michael was ready to take another bite, a squeaky voice caught the attention of the three. "Excuse me professor."

Standing by the table was a petite, sandy-blond hair college student carrying several books. Numerous flower tattoos covered her right arm. Her hair was tied in a loose bun with several pens and pencils sticking out. "Will there be a quiz this Friday?" she asked, her eyes darting rapidly between the other occupants at the table. Sister Justine sensed a brief piercing gaze when she was the focus.

"Which class are you in hun?"

"Introduction to World Religions," the student replied, centering her attention back to Michael.

"Oh, and did I mention that there was going to be a quiz this Friday?"

"No, but it was on the syllabus."

"And have I been following the syllabus up to this point in the class?"

"Well, yes."

"What's your name?"

"Alicia."

"Then there's a good chance, Alicia, that there'll be a quiz this Friday," Michael noted in a caustic tone.

"Thank you professor," Alicia responded, somewhat perturbed.

"By the way Alicia, what's that about anyway?" Michael asked pointing and waving his finger in a haphazard pattern at Alicia's hair bun.

"I don't understand professor?"

"Your hair? Utility or fashion statement?"

Alicia reacted to Michael's question with a quizzical look.

"The pens and pencils in your hair. Are they there as a fashion statement or are you using your hair as a pen holder?"

"Oh." Alicia smiled. "Both."

"Well it looks silly."

Her smile converted to a tiny frown. Alicia turned and walked away appearing hurt. Father Hernandez thought to himself that he might not be the only target of Michael's abrasiveness. It

seemed to be one of his attributes. Sister Justine didn't remember Michael being this sardonic. She dismissed the exchange and continued eating.

"OK Mr. Saunders," Father Hernandez began to comment before being interrupted by Michael.

"Michael, just call me Michael."

"So Michael, let's talk about this angel situation," Father Hernandez continued.

"Yes, let's talk about angels. Ever wonder about angels, I mean if they got wings, do you think they fly around up above spiritually pissing on us?" He questioned with a wry smile.

Father Hernandez and Sister Justine both gave Michael a piercing look. Michael knew his comments were on target. He already knew of Sister Justine's background and her sincerity and wanted to know the seriousness of Father Hernandez.

"Look Michael, we'd like to discuss this. It could help us out quite a bit."

"You know, if that snake boss of yours hadn't stolen my notes and research documentation, I could give you quite a bit."

"Michael," Sister Justine interjected, "he didn't steal your notes and information."

"So says his cheering section. Anyway, what do you want to know about these alleged visits?"

Father Hernandez began, "I do know that they started about ten years ago. According to the sighting information collected by the Vatican, the first one was in France. If I remember correctly, it was right after the worldwide disappearance."

"Yeah right," Michael responded somewhat snidely.

"Why do I have the feeling you're gonna tell me that's not the case?"

"You'd be correct. The first supposed event was almost a week prior to the mass disappearance. It was in a small church located outside of Aguascalientes, Mexico."

"What? Why didn't any of the Church leadership mention this?"

"The church sent two individuals down to examine what happened but decided to keep it quiet."

"What did happen?" Father Hernandez asked, noticing that Sister Justine continued to eat as if oblivious to the conversation.

"How many died the other day at the funeral home?" Michael continued.

"They think 98."

“Let's just say that almost half that many died down in Mexico.”

“You mean this happened before?”

“Yep.”

“Wait a minute, who were the two who investigated what happened down in Mexico?”

Michael smirked. Sister Justine stopped eating to give the Father a look that was both stoic and sympathetic.

“You two?” Father Hernandez continued. “Why didn't you mention this before Sister? Or the Church?”

“You're probably going to find out there's a lot she hasn't mentioned yet, and probably because our friend the bishop told her not to until the right time.”

“Sister?” Father Hernandez asked.

Sister Justine remained quiet for a minute before responding. “We thought it'd be best to wait and introduce things incrementally, to help you absorb the magnitude of what's happening.”

“Incrementally? I don't see why the Bishop couldn't have mentioned this when he came to visit me.”

“I never try to understand why he does things the way he does,” Sister Justine commented.

“Well, what else don't I know? What exactly happened down in Mexico?”

Michael sat back in his chair with his arms folded and a large grin on his face. “Go ahead Justine, tell him. Hell, I can't remember since my notes are gone.”

Sister Justine capitulated. “Well, at the parish outside of Aguascalientes, 46 were found dead inside the church after a funeral service. We went down to investigate for Rome. They didn't want anyone with too high a profile in the Church going down and making it seem like something out of the ordinary happened. We got down to Mexico a couple of days after the event. The Federales wouldn't let us in the church. We came to find out that the locals felt God put a curse on the place. They hadn't even removed the bodies. Many of the local doctors and clinics in the area had quarantined the church and town fearing a virus outbreak of some sort. Of course, no one has ever heard of anything killing that many that fast. Those who found the bodies weren't infected. Didn't seem like there was any sort of biological event. Even stranger was that they mentioned they couldn't even smell the rotting bodies. It was as if everything in the church was masked by an extremely sweet smell. When an international team arrived and

conducted their first investigation, they believed there was a viral outbreak. They felt the immediate quarantine had helped contain any further infections.”

“Was there a virus?”

“No one knows. If there was, medical staff and responders at the time were surprised at how fast and lethal it was. Through all of that, there was only one survivor who reportedly been in the church at the time of the event.”

“A survivor?”

“Yeah. He was quarantined in one of the local clinics with those who went into the church and discovered the bodies. He was even isolated and kept under watch by the local gendarme. Those in town who talked to him said he mentioned he’d seen an angel before passing out and going blind. And guess what he said the angel’s name was?”

“Abriel?”

“Everyone thought he’d gone mad since he started talking about angels.”

“And he went blind? What happened?”

“Once again, no one knows. Doctors couldn’t find anything wrong, the same as to the only witness to what’s happened here in town, Stephen Williams.”

“Did you get a chance to talk to him?”

“We did, but our time with him was limited. He told us everything he could recall. We even got a chance to see the church where the incident occurred. Afterward, we were called back to the States and arrangements were to be made for him to come up and talk to us and others in the Church.”

“Well, what happened?”

“He was one of the ones who went missing during the worldwide mass disappearance.”

Michael got up to empty his tray into the trash can and returned to his seat as Sister Justine continued to explain the events in Mexico. He was amazed at how much she remembered. Much of it he’d tried to put out of his mind.

“And when did all of this happen again?” Father Hernandez continued with his querying.

“Over ten years ago a week before the mass disappearance.”

A thought flashed into Father Hernandez’s mind. “And Bishop Grielle doesn’t think it was a biological event then or now does he Sister? He thinks there’s some sort of connection doesn’t he?”

“We don't know. Back then, we never came to a definitive conclusion as to what happened. That's why, when Michael is done with his class today, we're going to come back and pick him up and we're going to head over and talk to the survivor. Then sometime over the next couple of days we're gonna head over to the funeral home.”

“What?” both men responded.

## *Chapter 6*

To say that Detective Green was a little upset at having to escort Michael Saunders, Sister Justine, and Father Hernandez while they investigated the incident scene would be an understatement. He was thoroughly livid. He was confident he was wasting his time while not out investigating with his peers and their FBI counterparts. It didn't help that their FBI liaison had been called back to the station's incident control center to be assigned to another active investigation team. And having to provide key crime scene information and portions of their investigation to the Church's team didn't help to improve his attitude. Detective Matthews, whose hacking cough disrupted the eerie silence, took the assignment in stride taking time to play a word puzzle game on his smart phone. The three others perused the empty chapel annex deep in thought and attempted to rationalize the cause of all the deaths. In the foyer, they inspected the platters, buffet trays now devoid of food with plastic number markers and chits placed in their stead. Fanciful wicker baskets fortressing elaborate patterned silverware, stacks of unused gold-trimmed porcelain plates both large and small, folded cloth napkins, and several artistic centerpieces sat undisturbed upon seven white-cloth-covered service tables. Sister Justine and Father Hernandez glanced at a couple of the photos and the floor plan they received from the police. Nothing appeared moved out of place. Whereas most of the fatalities had been in the sanctuary, only a couple of body markers rested on the floor by the doorway from the foyer to the main sanctuary and near the buffet tables.

An hour passed; both detectives kept to themselves believing they wouldn't find anything new since the site was thoroughly scoured over the previous couple of days. If there were an alleged visitation, the remnants turned out to be elusive. They deliberated whether they would ever find anything else.

Father Hernandez gingerly walked the outer perimeter of the pews, careful not to disturb the number markers where the bodies laid three days prior. He browsed the marker positions and then surveyed a copy of the floor plan to ensure their placement still matched. Michael and Sister Justine pondered the front of the sanctuary near the altar. According to what Stephen had said during their earlier interview with him, it was where the angel was to have made his

appearance. The dark maroon carpet on the two steps and adjoining dais appeared completely new, without a blemish of dirt. Where the casket would've rested during the ceremony, the softened sunlight shining through the Picasso-esque patterned stained glass windows and downward-directed diffused ceiling lighting gave an otherworld impression. A wisp of air circulated through the chapel. Michael was now intrigued by his sense of smell. Sniffing with an inquisitive look on his face, Sister Justine watched a rapid change to Michael's expression, and before she could phrase and ask a question, he dropped to all fours and smelled the carpet.

"Michael, what are you . . ."

Before she could finish, Michael stood up and put his hands on Sister Justine's shoulders to coax her down. He told her to take a whiff. Eyes widening, they both stared at each other with amazement. By this time, the other three men had raced to the altar where the Michael and Sister Justine were still on all fours.

"What's so interesting?" Father Hernandez asked first.

"Get down here and smell boy toy," Michael answered.

An irritated scowl formed on the Father's face. When assailed with the puppy-dog look of "please" on Sister Justine's face, he complied. His eyes widened after taking a sniff. The two police detectives followed seeing the priest's reaction.

"So, it smells nice," Detective Green, noted thinking he was going to smell something out of the ordinary. "They use carpet freshener, big deal."

"You don't understand detective," Father Hernandez said. "Remember what Stephen Williams said, and according to reports of other angelic events, they mentioned a distinct smell of flowers, almonds, and an indescribable sweet scent. That's exactly what this smells like."

"You know how some smells invoke memories?" Michael asked Sister Justine.

"Yeah, I was just thinking the same thing," she replied.

"What's going on?" Father Hernandez asked.

"Ever smell something so delightful you can't describe it, yet it brings back earlier memories? Well, this smell reminds us of exactly the same smell we experienced down in Mexico years ago. If I didn't know better, I would call this the same smell."

Detective Green stood up and worked his way to the end of the dais by the wall next to a brightly polished brass, three-legged flowerpot stand. "Well then, let's check something out." Reaching the wall, he got back down on all fours again to take another whiff of the carpet:

carpet shampoo, glue compounds, and a synthetic plastic-like smell, nothing resembling what he just experienced by the altar.

“Well, what do you smell?” Detective Matthews asked standing up.

“Just carpet.”

The remaining three stood up. The action of Father Hernandez putting the floor plan atop the altar caught Detective Matthews’s attention. Staring attentively for a few seconds and tilting his head to the left, he shifted himself around to view the map to where the wall he was facing was toward the top of the page.

“What’s up Dion?” Detective Green asked, noticing his partner's actions.

Detective Matthews remained quiet. Staring intently at the page, he focused on the evidence marker number positions identifying where the deceased bodies had lain. Patterns began to appear.

“Dion, what's going on?” his partner questioned again.

“Hold on,” Detective Matthews responded. No one noticed the rasp in his voice was now completely cleared. Detective Matthews gazed for several minutes at the 11x17-inch sheet containing the chapel floor plan. Dismissing each actual number, he viewed each grid square as if a distinct spot and was confident a pattern did exist. Even though the shapes of the pews, walls, doorway, and other objects drawn on the blueprint were outlined, they didn't distract Detective Matthews from seeing the pattern of dots form two words. “Do you guys see that?”

Everybody else stared at the floor plan. Each in their own perspective could only make out a random pattern of numbers overlaying the layout of the furniture. Father Hernandez and Sister Justine thought possibly there was an image of a face or religious symbol. They dismissed it as superfluous after viewing a few more minutes. Detective Matthews was confident of the pattern his mind formed. Grabbing a pencil from his pocket, he started to connect the dots. Although each letter he connected was not the same size or orientation, he continued forming the words. They became more pronounced to the others watching: “two hearts.”

No one could utter a word, each bemused for different reasons. Detective Green divorced the words from any significance with the incident, thinking this was just a mere coincidence. Both Father Hernandez and Sister Justine began thinking of the significance of the words in relation to their understanding and knowledge of the Bible: no immediate correlation. Michael thought of himself and his past relationship with Sister Justine. Associating nothing else with the

words, his mind went blank. Detective Matthews felt this was way above him and made sure he wrote the words into his notepad and recorded the date and time.

“Well? What does it mean? You’re the religious experts,” Detective Green asked.

“We’ll need to take this back and do some research. We’ll probably cross-reference with church history, Biblical references, who knows?” Father Hernandez answered.

“So what you’re saying,” Michael jumped in, “is you don’t have the slightest idea what any of this means?”

“You do? Aren’t you supposed to be the real expert?”

“No, it’s probably just a coincidence those words were formed from the pattern of the bodies.”

“My thought exactly,” Detective Green commented. “Does this mean anything?”

“Let’s see if we can find anything else. You never know what it could mean,” Sister Justine said.

“So how come no one saw this before now?” Detective Matthews asked.

There was silence. No one could think of an immediate response. Father Hernandez decided to answer. “Maybe because no one was looking for it.”

All five felt energized by the revelation and continued to look for any clues as to what might have happened in the chapel. Two hours passed. Michael now felt this might not have been too much of a waste after all. Coming out to placate Sister Justine was his main purpose, and if he didn’t find anything useful, he would call it quits and head out on his own way, abandoning the investigation. They broke away from the altar to search the sanctuary of the chapel, the other viewing rooms, the office and administration areas, and the waiting rooms. They decided not to check the body holding area, preparation area, or other areas downstairs, feeling they were of no relevance. In the rooms they did check, every time something appeared somewhat out of place, out of the ordinary, or distinctive in some way, they would spend extra time surveying the area.

Father Hernandez examined one of the offices where one victim died outside the sanctuary while working at his desk trying to see if the number marker and floor plan held any hidden secrets or patterns. Studying the sheet for 15 minutes, nothing jumped out, just a simple number. Sister Justine analyzed the multi-tiered candelabra on the dais, even going as far as trying to see if there was any significance in the different heights of each burned-down candle. Michael decided not to be as thorough. This was partly because he felt that if the words they’d found

were important, in the obtrusive nature of how they were discovered, anything else found probably wouldn't be as obscure. The other reason was that he didn't know why he'd been talked into tagging along with Father Hernandez and Sister Justine when he would rather be reading or researching something more interesting.

Another hour passed. Detective Green recommended that it would be a good time to end. Finding that the map of the bodies on the floor plan spelled out two words was peculiar, but if they did find anything else, it wouldn't be as dramatic. A soft marimba sound echoed in the chapel. It was Detective Green's cell phone. He saw Dr. McKay's number displayed on caller ID.

"Hey Doc, what is it?" Detective Green asked. "We'll be right there," he said, ending the call after a minute of silence. "We gotta go," he directed to his companions. "Doc is saying there's something strange going on concerning the bodies from what happened here."

Neither detective nor Father Hernandez noticed Michael and Sister Justine pass a glance of concern to one another.

\* \* \* \*

I hope you enjoyed the sample.