

Chapter 1

The main thought in Sunny's mind as she strolled along the Mall was whether the bathrooms at the Lincoln Memorial were open on a Sunday evening -- that is, until the tree exploded.

She and Russell were almost to the Memorial when the earsplitting *boom* stopped them. She spun around, heart pounding. Were they in the middle of a terrorist attack? But all she saw was a medium-sized elm tree, identical to the others and rich with summer green, burst into flames that reached toward the sky.

What was happening? A strong moldy odor enveloped them, and sparks flew in their direction. Heat hit like a tsunami and nearly knocked them over.

"Get back!" Russell grabbed Sunny's arm and pulled her to a small rise about 40 feet away. A man in shorts whipped out a camcorder. A woman clung to his other arm, just as Sunny gripped Russell's.

The tree burned quickly, snapping and spluttering as the fire moved up and out from its center. Branches glowed red for a brief second before being consumed in the flames. Acrid smoke curled toward the small group, engulfing them in an orange haze. Sunny coughed but

stood her ground. She feared the entire row of trees would catch fire and overcome them, but she couldn't bring herself to move.

Within five minutes all that remained were glowing embers and a gap in the trees that lined the sidewalk. The trees to either side were untouched, despite their overlapping branches.

Nobody in the small crowd moved or spoke.

Then the spell broke. Three park rangers ran toward the observers, yelling for people to step further back. A fire engine appeared, siren screaming, fire fighters rushing to spray water on the embers. Sunny and Russell stared at each other and shook their heads.

"All right, folks, move along. Show's over. We'll take it from here." The young park ranger with the Smokey Bear hat smiled but allowed no disagreement as he cleared the crowd.

"Come on, let's go back to the hotel." Russell grabbed Sunny's arm and pulled her toward the street where their car was parked. "That was weird."

"I'd like to stay for a little while," Sunny replied, removing her arm from his grasp. "They're poking around in the ashes. I want to see what they find. Come on, it'll be fun." She stood facing him, hands on hips, a hopeful smile pulling up the corners of her mouth.

He sighed. "There's nothing there. Don't make something out of nothing, babe." Glancing back at the rangers squatting around the spot where the tree had been he said, "It's been a long day. I'm hungry and tired. Let's just go."

They shared a look as the seconds drew out. Finally, Sunny's shoulders slumped and the smile disappeared from her face. "All right. I'll go. But I don't see how you can think about food at a time like this. If something else happens we'll be sorry we missed it."

“You might be sorry, but I won’t. I just want to get out of here, in case it gets even weirder.” Russell grinned and took her hand. “How about we go to a fancy restaurant? What do you feel like?”

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Back in their room at the Howard Johnson’s after dinner, Russell found a baseball game on television and propped himself on the king-sized bed to watch, while Sunny packed for their return to Raleigh.

Even though she was tired from the day’s events, there was one last thing to do before sleep. She pulled her negligee, the only one she owned, from the suitcase and retreated to the tiny bathroom to prepare. She hoped a bath would wash out the smell of smoke and put her in the mood.

Half an hour later, clean and refreshed, smoke-free, she sauntered into the bedroom in her lime green negligee with spaghetti straps and a slit up the side. She had pulled her shoulder-length black hair back and tied it with a ribbon, the way Russell liked it. Part of her felt sexy and desirable in this getup, but the other part thought she looked like a tramp. The dilemma of the Southern woman, she thought – always trying to decide between being Scarlett or Melanie in Gone With the Wind.

“Hey babe,” she said in her sexiest voice as she nestled next to him. “I took my temperature this morning, and tonight’s the night. What d’ya think?” She entwined her fingers with his and brought them to her lips, where she sucked on his middle finger. She peeked out from under her eyelids to see if he was rising to the invitation.

Russell glanced sideways at her. “Okay, in a minute. The tree story’s on.” He punched up the volume.

The Channel 7 newscaster said, “And this is all we know right now about the elm tree that seemed to spontaneously combust this evening on the National Mall. This video was shot by a tourist at the scene.” Sunny and Russell watched as the tree burned to the ground in a few seconds, presumably with the video in fast-forward.

Russell frowned. “A little like Moses and the burning bush, don’t you think? The announcer said earlier they found a rock with writing on it in the ashes.”

“I knew we shouldn’t have left so soon. Maybe we could have seen it.”

“A flat piece of granite, about two by two and a half feet in size, was discovered by fire fighters as they sifted through the ashes. The rock was engraved with writing, presumably from God.” The young announcer smirked. “We’ll know more tomorrow. For now, the rock is being examined for clues to what is tentatively considered arson. Thankfully, no other trees burned, and no one was hurt. Stay tuned to Channel 7, folks, we’ll let you know when we know more.” He winked at the camera.

Russell chuckled as he clicked off the television. “I don’t know about you, but I think it was a prank. A good one, though. My guess is there’ll be ads for some computer company written on that rock. God.com or something. I think we need to get out of here and go back to Raleigh where it’s sane.”

He dangled his fingers in front of her face, probably hoping she would try again with the sucking thing. With his other hand he reached over and flicked off the bedside lamp.

“Wait a minute.” She pushed his hand away and frowned. “Seriously, I don’t know what to think. Burning a tree is strange enough. What I don’t get is why somebody would put a rock under a tree before they burned it. That makes no sense.” She paused. “That’s not how Moses got the Ten Commandments, was it?”

“Nah. God gave them to him on a mountain. Moses actually got ‘em twice, because he broke the first tablets. Anyway, that was later, long after the burning bush. The bush trick was just to get his attention, to convince him to lead his people out of Egypt. And it burned without consuming itself. So if somebody’s trying to imitate that, they got it wrong. Wrong timing. No mountain. Burning tree, not a bush. No Moses.” Russell peeled off his shirt, sniffed it and made a face. “You smell a lot sweeter than I do. Can you stay awake for a few minutes while I take a shower?”

“Uh huh. I just wonder why somebody would play a prank like that. And how they did it.”

She was silent, brow furrowed, gaze fixed out the window at the streetlight that cast a yellowish pattern on the carpet.

“Earth to Sunny. Let it go, will you? We’ve got other things to do now.” He leered, wiggling his eyebrows. “I’ll just be a minute. Don’t start without me.”

Sunny scribbled her request to God on hotel stationery and slipped it under the bed while Russell showered. Someone had told her it was best to make love over a prayer request if you really wanted to get pregnant. She wanted a baby more than anything in the world and, after two years of trying, was ready to experiment with any idea, no matter how farfetched. Next week she would be 37, and her biological clock was running down. Russell was only 35, so he wasn’t worried. But the fear gripped at her soul. Was she being punished for her past sins? Memories of her old boyfriend Matt pushed up from where she usually stuffed them and pain tore through her chest. She quickly pushed it away and focused on how wonderful it would feel to hold her baby.

When Russell popped out of the bathroom, she had arranged herself on the sheets in what she hoped was a sexy pose, one knee up to show a bare thigh. He jumped on the bed and kissed her, running his hand up her leg.

They went through their ritual lovemaking, missionary position with her legs up in the air, something she had read was the best position for the sperm to reach the egg. Afterward, they snuggled and he fondled her breast. “You were really good tonight, you know that?”

“Yeah, maybe tonight was the night,” Sunny answered absently. “Hey, did that announcer say what was written on the rock?”

“Not that I remember. Aren’t you tired? It’s almost midnight, and we’ve got a long drive tomorrow. Unless you want to take the day off and hang out here. ”

“I’ve got to get to work, you know that. I have to figure out some way to save everybody’s jobs. You know—”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to bring up work.” He straightened the sheet over her, then kissed her lightly and turned out the light. “It’ll work itself out, darlin’. You don’t need to think about it tonight. Just get some sleep and dream about our little girl.”

“Boy, you mean.” They laughed. Old joke. “By the way, your sermon was really good this morning. I think everybody liked you. Maybe you’ll get called to be their pastor.”

Russell grunted and was soon snoring. She kept her hips elevated on a pillow and offered another quick prayer for a baby before drifting into sleep. She hoped God wouldn’t punish her for her blatant lie -- she didn’t want Russell to leave his little church in Raleigh for a big one in Washington, D.C., no matter how much more it paid. But she didn’t think it would happen. His sermon wasn’t *that* good.

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They managed to find time for a quickie before breakfast. By 8 a.m. they were sitting down to eggs and bacon and the Washington Post in the busy hotel restaurant. Their plan was to check out and start for home right after breakfast.

Russell buried himself behind the front section of the newspaper. Sunny sipped her French roast coffee, beginning to worry about what was going to happen when she returned to her job as Executive Director of the Interfaith Peace Alliance in Raleigh. Last week her board of directors gave her three months to come up with an additional \$50,000 or they would have to either lay off employees or shut down the organization. She needed to come up with something fast, and she couldn't imagine what it would be.

Russell turned a page. "Here's the fire story. Barry's by-line. Quite a coincidence that we happen to be there when the tree burns and your friend gets assigned to the story, don't you think?" He read for a minute. "Apparently, similar events took place in several other capital cities around the same time: June 11, 6 p.m. local time. In every location, single trees burned, and rocks with words engraved on them were recovered under the trees. The scientists are still sorting out whether the message is the same."

He looked up. "The text of the message is on page 20." He shuffled the paper. "Here it is, at the bottom of the page."

Sunny leaned over and silently read the words.

These are my rules for living.

I. I am the God of all people. I am called by many names, and all are precious to me.

II. I can be found in churches, temples, mosques, and any place of worship. I am in nature, the arts, science, and people's hearts.

III. I made the heavens and the earth, everything seen and not seen. My techniques are my own, and greater than even the greatest of you may imagine.

IV. Set aside one day each week to honor me and to rest, but spend time with me daily.

V. Love one another as you love me. Honor your parents, respect people of other faiths and races, cherish children, love yourselves.

VI. Do not harm other people. Honor life.

VII. I made the earth for you, so do not despoil it. Do not waste my precious resources.

VIII. Do not take what is not yours. Appreciate what you have. Spiritual health is more important than material wealth.

IX. Tell the truth. Live simply and honestly, in integrity with your highest nature.

X. Help the poor and less fortunate. Helping others helps the giver and the receiver. Meaningful work strengthens the soul.

XI. Honor women. It saddens me to see any group hurt, restricted, or made to seem less than others. Both women and men are precious to me.

XII. Do not make war in my name. Woe be unto any who harm others in my name. Peace honors me.

“Huh,” said Sunny. “They resemble the Ten Commandments, only there are 12 of them. I like them, though.”

“The last two aren’t like the original ones at all. Somebody has a wild imagination.” He glanced at her, noting her concentration. “You don’t really think God wrote these, do you?”

“Of course not.” She hesitated. “But the last commandment, rule, whatever – it’s about peace. And peace is important to me. Maybe ... if this turns into something, it could stop the

wars. Especially religious wars. The God I believe in would want wars to stop. So – I don't know." She stared at the newspaper without seeing it, the wheels in her mind beginning to turn.

Russell sighed. "I admit the whole thing is strange, but it's way too much of a jump to regard this as some new pronouncement from God. It's more likely a hoax, or, what-do-you-call it, performance art? I bet by tomorrow the police will find whoever's responsible, and we'll have a good laugh. Besides, whoever wrote this has a pretty liberal agenda going."

They read the message again.

Sunny looked up, excited. "Hey, sweetie, let's go back to where it happened, okay? I can take the day off and call it research. This might save my organization. I bet Barry'll know what else is going on. Maybe he's free for lunch. Oh, let's go."

"Last night you insisted you had to get home." He shook his head. "What changed?"

"I have a good feeling about this. I admit it might be a hoax, but what if it's not?"

Russell considered. "I guess I could take a couple of hours. I'd like to see the Bible exhibit at the Smithsonian, and we didn't have time yesterday. We could go right after we look at the remains of the tree. It won't take long, I'm sure. The place'll look just like it did yesterday, unless God erected a statue there or something." When her eyes widened he laughed and said, "Joking, I'm joking."

She didn't laugh. He groaned. "You look like you think this might really be a sign from God. I don't want to visit the site and have you be upset when you realize how silly the whole thing is. I'd rather just go home. I'm not up for another of your causes right now, okay?"

She could feel herself reacting to his pompous tone. "Why do you automatically assume God isn't speaking to us? I admit it's a long shot, but can't you keep an open mind?"

“No, I can’t. God speaks to us through Scripture and the still small voice within, not in stone tablets with new commandments. Good Lord, Sunny, I’m an evangelical pastor. If I took this seriously, I’d have to call it blasphemy. It’s against Scripture. But it isn’t serious, and I can’t believe we’re even having this conversation.”

Sunny’s heart pounded, but she bit her tongue. There was no use arguing with him when he got like this.

“Okay, I’ll get my things together. I need to make a couple of calls. Can we leave in about an hour?” She bustled off, leaving him to finish breakfast alone.

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Sunny and Russell made their way back to the place where the tree had stood 20 feet high yesterday. The Mall was crowded this Monday morning, which wasn’t unusual for June. Most people, however, were walking in the same direction, and the couple overheard several conversations about the “miracle” and the “sacred ground.” Russell snorted, and Sunny poked him in the ribs.

They were amazed at the size of the crowd milling in front of the Lincoln Memorial. Hundreds of people sat on the grass or ambled past the yellow crime scene tape around the empty space where the tree had been. A friendly park ranger guarded the site.

Craning her neck to see over people’s shoulders, Sunny noticed an array of objects placed as offerings. There were numerous rosaries, one of those pictures of Jesus where the eyes follow you when you move, a piece of stained glass with a dove on it, a laughing Buddha statue, dozens of Bibles -- more things than she could count, spilling out beyond the yellow tape.

People talked and joked with the ranger and with each other, and the crowd had the feeling of a laid-back party. Almost like the Fourth of July, Sunny thought, without fireworks.

Scanning the crowd, she saw groups of people, some singing, others on their knees in prayer. At the far end, children threw Frisbees and played with balloons.

The last time Sunny had been at the Mall was for an anti-war rally in March. Overall, both events had brought out about the same number of people. The ones at the rally, however, were angry and chanted slogans -- “Stop the war now” – as they gathered around musicians and speakers to grow even more agitated. It was quite a contrast to the present scene. *This feels far more peaceful. If every place were like this, nobody would fight.*

She and Russell made their way to the small rise where they had watched the tree burn. It looked completely different with so many people milling about. Last night it had been just a pretty spot on the Mall, and today it had the atmosphere of an upbeat church service.

Sunny took in the view from where she stood. To the west was the Lincoln Memorial – the hallowed ground that housed the giant statue of Lincoln, with the hauntingly beautiful words of his Gettysburg Address engraved on one wall and his second inaugural address on the other. It was also the location of the famous March on Washington, where the Reverend Martin Luther King delivered his “I Have a Dream” speech in 1963. To the east the Washington Monument rose solidly into the sky, proclaiming the United States to be a great nation among nations. What a perfect place for a message of peace, Sunny thought. *If there is a heart in this nation, it is right here.*

They paused for a moment near the Vietnam Veterans Memorial next to a couple of elderly black women who were chattering about the “shrine.”

“Hello, dearie, are you just getting here?” asked the less wrinkled of the two. She wore a button on her purple polyester pantsuit proclaiming ‘I heart Jesus.’ “What you came to see is right over there.” She pointed across the grass. “Just go on over, you can’t miss it.”

Sunny nodded her thanks and entwined her fingers with Russell's as she smiled tenderly at the crowd. She could hear a few voices singing, "I've got peace like a river in my soul." She wondered if Russell would want to kneel and pray with her for a few minutes.

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Russell was irritated at all the hoopla. The heat was getting to him, and he really should have worn shorts instead of the Dockers he had chosen. *Don't any of these people work?* It was quite a sight, though. He noticed the television crews with their cameras scanning the crowd and wondered whether it was wise to be seen here. His presence might give the impression that he endorsed this nonsense. Still, it was better than the anti-war rallies that Sunny frequented.

They edged their way carefully through the crowd. As Russell suspected, there was not much to see except a pile of ashes and few pieces of burnt branches. Already the clouds were gathering and the humidity was far worse than in Raleigh. Maybe it would rain soon and they could leave. After several minutes he blurted out, "Okay, there's nothing to see here. I'm really hot. Can we go now?"

"Russell, would you mind kneeling with me and praying for a few minutes? Please?"

Startled, he noticed the tears streaming down her face. *Oh, no, here we go again – another crusade.* Still, it was the first time she had ever initiated a prayer.

On their knees they recited the Lord's Prayer. In spite of his doubts Russell was moved that they could pray in this crowd without feeling out of place. He heard other people praying, some in different languages – could that be Arabic?

After the prayer Sunny and Russell kissed, then made their way hand in hand across the mall to the Smithsonian, where they spent a pleasant hour examining the pages of old Bibles. He suddenly felt more optimistic about his life, and less irritated with his wife.

* * *

Sunny spotted Barry as she and Russell entered the crowded Post Pub and felt a tingle at how good he looked. The friend she had known since kindergarten had grown a beard and sported trendy rectangular glasses instead of those Buddy Holly ones he had worn as long as she could remember. After hugs and back-slapping the three squeezed into a booth and settled down to talk over burgers and fries.

Barry filled them in on the news about the ‘God Tablets,’ as they were being called in the West. In the Arab world, they were ‘Allah’s stones.’ Twelve tablets had been discovered in capital cities throughout the world, including Beijing, Capetown, Ottawa, New Delhi, Jerusalem, Kabul, and London, as well as Washington, D.C. The tablets were roughly the same size and shape. They looked almost like small tombstones. As far as anyone could tell, the gist of the words engraved on each tablet was the same, but written in the local language and using the word for God that was most common in that country.

“Let’s see,” Barry said through a mouthful of french fries. “I think they used the words God, Elohim, Allah, Ram, and maybe some others. Essentially they mean the same thing – Supreme Being, Higher Power, or what have you. The religious leaders are going nuts.”

“Can we see it?” asked Sunny.

“No, the government has ours locked up tight. I’ve got an interview at the FBI later to see what I can find out. Right now, they’re saying that ‘soon’ the tablet will be available to the public, whatever ‘soon’ means. The scientists have to examine it first.”

Nobody seriously thought these tablets were sent by God, Barry offered. Our government was not saying anything officially, but he thought they were convinced it was the

work of an extremist group trying to send a message of some sort. He laughed, excited about the possibilities of a good story where no one got hurt.

Sunny related their experience of watching the tree burn. Russell reluctantly agreed to allow Barry to use their names in his next piece, but he wanted it known that he didn't believe the tablets were from God.

Even so, Barry responded, many people were considering whether God had sent those tablets. "You saw the Mall today, how peaceful it was. That same scene's being played out all over the world. Crowds are gathering in parks everywhere, to just be together, from what I can tell. Churches are opening their doors, and people are piling in to sit and pray. Russell, what's happening at your church?"

Russell startled, his face turning pale. "I shut down my cell phone this morning. I usually do that on my day off." He pulled the phone out of its holder and turned it on. Sixteen messages had been delivered. He listened to the first message, which was a question from the janitor about whether or not to open the church, and he said to Sunny, "We've got to get home now. I need to handle this. Will you drive while I call these people back?" They hurriedly excused themselves, threw some money on the table, and rushed to their car.

Chapter 2

The visitor at the Monday night men's Bible study group had become acquainted with the group's leader at a meeting for Gulf War veterans the week before. The two men had discussed the need for more Christian activism, and Brother Ezekiel invited him to attend the Bible study group. "We keep our real names a secret and always use names from the Bible, so we'll remember to use these men as our guides. We don't want our real identities to get in the way of our search for truth from the Bible. I'm called Ezekiel, because this prophet foretold the restoration of Israel as a nation. I think you'll be Brother Simon. He was a leader, and I can see that you have what it takes to be a leader, too. Does that work for you?"

Brother Simon was pleased. His leadership qualities had never been recognized before, and he thought, "Jesus led me to this man, I'm sure of it." He was a little confused as to why his identity needed to remain a secret, but Brother Ezekiel promised to reveal more at the meeting.

So there he was, reading the Bible with a group of ten men in a small church on the outskirts of Raleigh. He didn't recognize any of them. They looked like bankers or lawyers, though. Not quite in his league. But he was being welcomed, so he figured he could relax. Although he attended church services he didn't really trust established religion -- it was usually

too liberal for him. His parents had stayed to themselves and read the Bible as their only book, so he knew it well. These men seemed okay, not the liberal pansies he had expected.

Brother Ezekiel introduced him to the group as Brother Simon, and the other men shook hands and welcomed him. He couldn't remember all their Biblical names, but it felt good to be there. Nobody made fun of his opinions, unpopular as they often were in traditional religions.

The meeting began with a prayer and a hymn: "Onward Christian soldiers, marching as to war, with the cross of Jesus, going on before." The Bible reading was from Revelations 13:1-3, Today's English Version.

Then I saw a beast coming up out of the sea. It had ten horns and seven heads; on each of its horns there was a crown, and on each of its heads there was a name that was insulting to God. The beast looked like a leopard, with feet like a bear's feet and a mouth like a lion's mouth. The dragon gave the beast his own power, his throne, and his vast authority. One of the heads of the beast seemed to have been fatally wounded, but the wound had healed. The whole earth was amazed and followed the beast.

Brother Ezekiel's tone was mild and friendly as he asked, "Okay, what does this passage mean to you? Who wants to start?"

The discussion was lively but pretty ordinary, thought the visitor. He had studied this passage many times before, and didn't find anything new in the opinions of the group members. He decided not to waste any more of his evenings on these sessions.

The meeting ended at nine, with the men on their knees for the last prayer. Afterward, while the members joked and brushed off their pants, Brother Ezekiel approached him and in a quiet voice asked him to remain for a few minutes.

After the others left the second meeting began.

This meeting had only four people: Brother Ezekiel, Brother Thomas, Brother Saul, and Brother Simon. Ezekiel thanked them for staying, and announced that the Inner Circle of the Christian Soldiers was now in session.

“We invited you to join us, Brother Simon, because we believe you’re the kind of man who wants to be more of a soldier for Christ than just studying the Bible. Is that right?” His light blue eyes pierced into Simon’s soul.

Simon took a deep breath. *What’s going on here?* “Of course, we talked about that. You know I’ve picketed abortion clinics for years. I saw you when we shut down that clinic in Atlanta. What else are you talking about?” He wondered if these could be cops in disguise.

Ezekiel responded with a slight smile. “Yes, we’ve seen you, too. And we’ve done some research on you. We think you might fit with our little group of Christian disciples. Before we get to the meeting, though, we need to know you’re with us. We’re a paramilitary group, with me as the leader. If you join us, you’ll obey orders without question, and you’ll be rewarded in heaven.”

This was beginning to sound like a speech Ezekiel had given before, thought Brother Simon. He nodded politely.

“We’re the Chosen, and our work is to stop the march of false prophets and false religions. You took an oath to defend America against foreign enemies. Now the Christian Soldiers call upon you to continue to fulfill your oath and help us defend the nation against equally dangerous domestic enemies.”

He leaned forward, his eyes holding Simon’s. “You also need to know that sometimes we’re called to do things the Godless call illegal. We serve a higher purpose, God’s law. You’re free to turn down any assignment, but once you accept it, I’ll expect you to complete the

assignment. We're a large organization with groups all over the world, but you'll only know these men here. You need to tell me now whether you're with us or not. If not, you will always be welcome at the Bible study group. But if you're with us, you'll have the opportunity to be more of a soldier for Christ."

Brother Simon hesitated. He was tempted, but something about this seemed, well ... strange. Not that strange was necessarily bad, but maybe he should learn a little more before he committed.

"Um, could you give me an example of what kind of assignments I might have? What have you guys done besides picket abortion clinics?"

Brother Ezekiel turned his steely eyes on him. "Soldier, much of our work involves carrying out orders from those higher up, just like you did in the army. I can't tell you any details until you sign on. But trust me, our work is important, and you'll be able to make a contribution to our Lord's service."

He straightened and smiled, the spell broken. "Let's get a cup of coffee and you can have a couple minutes to think it over." He stood, stretched, and sauntered over to refill his mug from the Mister Coffee machine. Simon studied the other two men. Both seemed to be in their 30s and looked strong and sincere. Brother Saul had the short haircut of a soldier with the beginning of a paunch. Brother Thomas was tall and slender, a little younger. He reminded Simon of his high school biology teacher, but more intense. Brother Ezekiel was older, with gray hair and piercing eyes, but he had the body of a boxer: solid and strong. *Boy, you never know people. Who would think these guys are activists? What kind of a crazy group is this?*

None of the men spoke to him as they grabbed stale donuts from the Krispy Kreme box and sipped bitter coffee. He sat on his folding chair and pondered what he might be getting himself into.

He had loved the army – hanging out with a group of men talking trash about women and daydreaming about what they would do after their tour, when it seemed that the future beckoned, open and inviting. He had been a truck driver in Desert Storm, driving supply trucks between the port at Jubayl and the front at Mishab. It had been dusty, dirty, mind-numbing work, but he liked making the contribution without actually having to do any fighting.

Except for that one day when he was driving and he got lost. He and his buddy ended up on a sandy road in the middle of nowhere. He saw something funny in the road, so they stopped and got out to investigate. *Oh, God, those were mines! Get back, Jerry, don't go there.* When the explosion happened, he saw his friend rise up into the air and come back down in a weird position. He made his way over to him and saw that Jerry was missing his left leg below the knee and was bleeding like a stuck pig. *Oh no oh no oh no.* He made a tourniquet as best he could and ran for the radio. It seemed like hours before the helicopter arrived, and by then Jerry was dead, burbling blood with his last words.

He would never forget those last words. *I see Christ. Tell my mom I met my Savior, okay?* That was it. He was gone.

After the tears and the guilt for taking a wrong turn and getting his buddy killed, he had felt like dog turd when he got back to the States and found out he was a hero. He was no hero, that's for sure. But he never talked about it when people asked.

Maybe this work would help him honor Jerry's memory. And maybe it would give him the chance to actually be a hero. He ignored the little voice in the back of his head that warned him to be cautious. It was his mother's voice, and he had never listened to her, not once in his life. Sure, it had gotten him into trouble more than once, but he had always gotten himself out of it. *Just like I can get myself out of this group if it doesn't work out. Why not give it a try? Nothing to lose. Especially compared to Jerry.*

Eventually the men gathered their chairs into a circle and looked expectantly at Simon.

"I'm in." He took a deep breath and felt excitement settle into him. He would be doing something meaningful with his life again.

Brother Ezekiel's eyes were blue-white flames. "You need to know that life will not go easy for you if you don't keep your word. We expect honor from our soldiers. Our war is our secret for now; it's not to be shared with family members or anyone outside this group until I give permission. Is that clear?"

"Completely." He felt his spine straighten and his right hand twitch like it was trying to salute.

"Do you pledge to support the Christian Soldiers as we prepare the field for Christ's Second Coming, to maintain complete secrecy to the outside world about our activities, and to give your life to the Lord's service if necessary?"

Brother Simon gulped. "I do," he said, a slight tremor in his voice.

"All right. Welcome. Let's move on to business. Brother Thomas, what's happening with the transfer of the weapons?"

“They’re being transported by cargo ship to Israel, as usual, through several other ports in between. We’ll move them from our temporary storage unit to the boat down at Morehead City this weekend.”

“Weapons? What weapons?” This tweaked Brother’s Simon’s interest. He loved to shoot.

Brother Ezekiel’s face twisted. “Brother Simon, we operate on a need to know basis. And you don’t need to know that just yet. Now, on to other business.”

So that was how it was. He would be quiet and listen, and he could walk out the door any time he wanted.

The next topic was whether to paint or burn crosses at yoga studios in the area, to keep people from turning away from God and mistakenly regarding yoga as merely an exercise routine. Brother Ezekiel explained how the Hindus worship many false gods, and they sucker unsuspecting Christians into believing that meditation and chanting aren’t really religious activities. The men agreed that too many well-meaning Christians were buying in to this blasphemy and endangering their souls. The action would take place during the next week or two. They were eager to wake up the good people of Raleigh and keep them from being lured into the devil’s trap.

Around 11 p.m., they ended with a prayer. “Remember,” Brother Ezekiel warned Simon and the others, “We are Christ’s covert army. This is only between us. Even our families can’t know yet what we’re doing. We all took a solemn pledge to do God’s work. We’re Soldiers of Christ, and we won’t show our mighty sword until the time of our choosing. Amen.”

“Amen,” chorused the other three soldiers.

Driving home, Brother Simon chuckled to himself. He'd expected something pretty dangerous when he heard that crazy codger's big speech. But painting crosses, he could do that. And targeting yoga studios – what a joke! He didn't know anything about yoga, but it seemed pretty farfetched to think yoga was going to threaten the Christian way of life. Even more farfetched was the claim that this little group was involved in a worldwide Christian army. That old guy sure had some imagination!

This evening had turned out to be a lot more interesting than he had anticipated. He could hardly wait to see what happened next. Milk and cookies to a former soldier.

Chapter 3

The offices of the Interfaith Peace Alliance, three blocks from the North Carolina Capitol building, were bustling when Sunny arrived on Tuesday morning. Their office suite was in a first floor section of the First Baptist Church Family Life Center in downtown Raleigh. The nonprofit organization wasn't affiliated with the Baptists, but the rent was cheap, and offices were readily available. Sunny and her staff sat at old metal desks and complained about the institutional green walls, but Sunny enjoyed being the boss of her little empire, in spite of the dingy surroundings. She hoped the empire wouldn't topple before she could restore it to health.

“Staff meeting. Now,” called Sunny as she made her way to her corner office, the only one with a door. “Put the phones on voicemail for an hour.”

People drifted into her office and found seats on mismatched chairs around the battered oak table in the corner. Most of the staff members were relatively new to the organization. Only Norah Webster, her assistant and secretary extraordinaire, had been with the IPA for the entire twenty years of its existence. Norah had turned down the Executive Director's position numerous times because she didn't want the responsibility, and was looking at retirement soon. She met Sunny's gaze and smiled, readying herself to take notes.

June Mallory had replaced Sunny as marketing coordinator nine months ago when Sunny had been promoted to Executive Director. Unfortunately, June hadn't been as successful as Sunny had hoped. In her twenties, blonde and energetic, she spent most of her time planning vacations to exotic places instead of doing her job. Her father was on the board, so Sunny couldn't fire her as she would have liked. She hoped June would soon tire of working a regular 40 hour work week and resign, so she could hire someone more competent. That is, if the IPA made it past the current crisis.

Two social work interns, Donell and Maria, had been with them for about two months. Both in their early 20s, they were sincere and eager to organize peace rallies and participate in efforts to end the war in Iraq. Sunny loved their youthful exuberance. These dear people worked for free, and they actually paid graduate school tuition to work in her organization. *Talk about poorly paid.* It was nice to see some diversity among their formerly all-white group. Donell's brown skin and friendly smile complemented Maria's Latina intensity.

The newest member of her staff was Pierce Owens, the outreach coordinator who had been with them only for a month. Pierce's job involved spending most of his time on the phone trying to convince conservative Christians that peace wasn't subversive. *Now, there's an uphill battle.* Sunny wondered for the thousandth time whether Pierce's jet black hair was dyed. He favored the old Elvis look, pompadour, sideburns and all. At 40, he didn't seem old enough to need to dye his hair, but she didn't think it could be that black naturally. He nodded coolly when he saw her gaze on him. *No love lost there.*

"Let's get started. We have two agenda items: the budget and the God Tablets. As you know, the board has given us three months to increase our revenues or we'll be closed down or

drastically cut back. We've got to raise another \$50,000 immediately. What ideas do you have?"

"Sunny, dear, I know the budget is vital. But I wonder if we might wait to talk about that until we discuss the God Tablets." Norah shuffled some papers. "I've kept track of the phone calls we've taken since yesterday, and it's around 70 calls. These are mostly new people who want to know what position we're taking on the tablets. They might want to contribute if we had some relevant projects."

"That's a lot of calls. Have we had that many inquiries in the last six months total?"

"No, I don't think so."

"All right, we'll talk about that first." Sunny described her experience with the tree and her visit to the site yesterday, focusing on how spiritual it felt. Everyone but Pierce seemed mesmerized by her story. He frowned and doodled on his yellow legal pad.

"Pierce, what's your viewpoint here?"

He cleared his throat and set down his Bic pen, but didn't quite meet her eyes. "I hate to be the only dissenter. But I don't think we should take a stand on this issue right now. Probably one-third of the phone calls have been angry about the tablets. Those people are demanding that we take a position clearly stating we believe the tablets to be either heresy or a joke."

"What about the other two-thirds? Norah?"

"Oh, those people are excited. They range from people wondering if they should prepare for the Rapture right away to others wanting us to form a new religion around the tablets. Most callers say the message fits well with our peace orientation." Norah's glance toward Pierce seemed to say *take that, young man*.

"So what do you all think we should do about these tablets?"

June twirled a strand of her hair. “Why don’t we have a big meeting to discuss the tablets with our members? We could get lots of media attention. Maybe more people would join. I think I could organize it for later in the week, while the issue’s still hot.” Sunny could almost see the wheels turning in June’s head. Maybe she had misjudged the young woman.

“Okay, we’ll do that. Unless anybody has a problem with it?” The room was quiet. “Donell and Maria, you help June. Let’s try for Thursday, if possible. Call as many members as you can. We probably won’t have a huge attendance, so we shouldn’t need a big room. Maybe the church has something we could use, if you can’t find anyplace else. Tell callers what we’re planning, and invite them. Oh, and if they want to contribute, let’s not discourage them.”

She cleared her throat. “I know we don’t want to face this, but we have to. Any ideas about how to resolve the budget crisis?” They discussed ideas for fundraising, but Sunny could tell their hearts weren’t in it. This was her job, after all. Finally, in frustration, she dismissed them.

Sunny sighed as everyone rushed out to get started on planning the meeting. Would hosting this event be one of her last acts as Executive Director?

* * *

The membership meeting was scheduled for 2 p.m. on Thursday in the fellowship hall of Christ Church in downtown Raleigh. A local Christian radio station had announced the meeting, and a small blurb was in the daily News and Observer. Still, Sunny would be happy if half of the 150 individual members and 30 churches and synagogues were represented. Parking wasn’t great this close to the state Capitol, and that always had a detrimental effect on attendance, but they were lucky to find any place at all on such short notice.

By 1:30 the registration table outside the big room was set up and filled with IPA brochures. Inside, folding chairs for about 50 people were positioned in rows, and additional chairs were stacked along the walls. Sunny paced back and forth across the creaky wooden floor, both fearing that no one would come and fearing they would. She decided to walk the two blocks to the Capitol and back to calm herself down.

When she returned she found a madhouse, with all seats filled and more people streaming in. A couple of television reporters had set up microphones at the podium, and June was trying to convince them to move their cameras further back. Her staff appeared harried as they worked to create order in the room. She tried to locate Russell in the crowd. Finally she realized he must not have come, even though he had agreed to attend and she had made a point to remind him that morning. *I'll think about that later.* She straightened her jacket, checked her lipstick, and made her way to the podium.

She recognized a number of old friends in the crowd. But a large portion of the audience was new to her: young people -- high school or college students, by the look of them -- and older people who must be retired with time to attend such functions in the middle of the day. And men in suits, possibly pastors or businessmen who worked downtown. Apparently, lots of people wanted to consider whether the tablets had something to offer them. With a sense of joy and confidence, she smiled and began.

“Thank you for coming. We’re here to discuss the message of what are being called the God Tablets. None of us knows at this point whether this can be considered a real communication from God or a hoax. We may never be sure, unless some solid evidence is found one way or another. For now I suggest that we proceed as though this is all we’re going to know, and decide how to respond.

“Our goal is to settle on a strategy for the Interfaith Peace Alliance to deal with this amazing event, and hold in abeyance whether or not we believe the tablets are authentic. We hope to reach consensus, if possible, about whether or not we support the message. Not all of you are members yet. We have materials on the registration desk, and we invite you to join us today or in the future. For now, let’s set up some ground rules. Only members may vote, although everyone is welcome to join the discussion. We have two hours scheduled for this meeting, so let’s get started.”

She divided the crowd into 12 small groups, each to ponder four questions about a different commandment in the God Tablets. The questions were: Is the commandment consistent with what we know about God from other writings? What does your heart say? Would it help or hurt people of faith if this new commandment is accepted? What about if the new commandment is rejected?

Those attending arranged their chairs into circles to discuss the questions. The noise in the room was staggering as a dozen groups argued and laughed. A half hour later, they were ready to report.

A Congregational minister, in a black suit and white blouse with a ruffle at the throat, reported her group’s response on the first new commandment. “The commandment reads: ‘I am the God of all people. I am called by many names, and all are precious to me.’”

She paused and looked at the audience, smiled hesitantly, then read from her notes.

“This commandment is consistent with the first commandment given to Moses: ‘You shall have no other gods before me.’ The new one appears to be an updated version, except that this God belongs to all religions. Do we want an inclusive God? Our hearts say that inclusion is

positive rather than negative. Our group asserts that we all pray to the same God, whether we are Christian, Jewish, Muslim, or other faiths.”

She paused to review her notes. Sunny hoped the murmuring she heard among the participants was more positive than negative. She leaned forward to hear more clearly.

The minister continued. “What are the effects if we believe this commandment? Without sounding too grandiose, it may have a profound impact throughout the world if it’s generally accepted. If we believe that all religions see different manifestations of God, then we’re all brothers and sisters. Sort of like the elephant being touched by a bunch of blind people. They all feel a different part of the elephant and say, ‘So elephants are like this – hard and hairy if they are touching the skin, long and stringy if they have hold of the tail, thick and round if they are holding the trunk, and so on.’ But if they get together and compare notes, they’ll eventually come up with a pretty good description of an elephant. If we all compare notes about God, we may arrive at a bigger description than what any of us has now.” She smiled nervously.

“If we don’t accept this commandment, we don’t think much will change in the world. Nations will continue to go to war, and some of them will still try to push their notion of God down the throats of other nations.

“So, we would like to go on record as supporting this commandment. We don’t know whether or not it came from God, but we find that it gives more hope for humanity if we believe it than if we don’t.” She sat down to thundering applause.

Sunny studied the faces of the participants. Most were beaming, but a few appeared to be angry and disgruntled. One man in particular caught her attention as he glowered at the people around him, causing them to edge their chairs as far from him as possible. She didn’t recognize him, didn’t think he was a current member of her organization. He was white, middle-aged, and

dressed in jeans with a tucked in white dress shirt. His taut muscles distinguished him from most of the other middle-aged men in the room, whose soft bellies bulged over their belts. Sunny thought he would have been sexy if he hadn't had such a scowl on his face. She wondered if she should intervene. She couldn't expect everyone to agree with the reports, and he should speak up if he wanted his opinion heard. On the other hand, maybe it was her responsibility to give him the opportunity to speak.

"Excuse me, ladies and gentlemen. In the interest of full discussion, we need to give time for dissenters to voice their disagreement. Does anyone want to say a few words against the report from this group? We welcome all points of view here."

Silence greeted her words. People glanced at each other and shrugged their shoulders. The glowering man looked down at his feet and said nothing. After a moment Sunny asked the groups to continue.

Each of the commandments received similar endorsements. Number six was the most controversial, because it might or might not result in ending abortion.

The group erupted in conflict. Sunny kept her eye on the scowling man, but he never contributed to the debate, and he eventually moved away from his assigned small group to sit by himself in the corner. After much discussion, the participants agreed they couldn't accept some commandments and reject others. Not everyone was happy about the implications, but they agreed to move on.

The final commandment, about not making war in God's name, raised another storm. "Is it saying that God will punish those who go to war?" asked an older man wearing a yarmulke. "Does that mean we can't defend ourselves if we're attacked? Most of my family was killed by

Hitler, and I can't believe God wouldn't let us defend ourselves from madmen." He shrugged as he looked around the room, which had grown quiet as others pondered his question.

The man in the corner finally spoke, his voice confident in the stillness. "Hitler never claimed to be acting in God's name. That was a different kind of war. Now we've got to support Israel, no matter what it costs us. The Israelis aren't making war, they're responding to others who want to wipe them out." He nodded to acknowledge the scattered applause, then hurried out, head down.

After a moment the discussion continued, with many unanswered questions. Why did God need a separate commandment about honoring women? Weren't they included in the rest of the commandments? Could it mean that God was a woman? Has the world changed so much that we really need new commandments? What was wrong with the old ones?

The meeting continued well past its original time frame and into the early evening. The cookies and soft drinks June had provided were long gone, and people looked hungry and tired, so Sunny summarized the day's conclusions.

"The Interfaith Peace Alliance is not at this point endorsing the 12 Commandments as coming from God. Even though we still have questions and don't all agree, it appears the majority of you are willing to move ahead with a position that these commandments, if followed whole-heartedly, could encourage peace in the world. Since we're an organization dedicated to supporting peace, this is consistent with our mission, and we support the commandments as words of wisdom, without regard to their origin.

"We'll meet again if and when the situation changes. Thank you all for your hard work today."

As participants streamed out and the media packed up their cameras, Sunny high-fived June and Norah. The meeting was a huge success. They had collected more than \$5,000 from donations. Even Pierce was smiling. She decided to treat her staff to pizza at Old Chicago.

Then she remembered that Russell hadn't been present to witness her success. A knot formed in her stomach as she anticipated the discussion they would have when she got home.