

2020

A Simply Divine Mystery
(about God, Country and Terrorism)

by

Lee Raudonis

Prologue

After decades of cultural and religious conflict over issues ranging from abortion to homosexuality, the death penalty and the public display of religious symbols, Christians decide to put aside many of their theological and political differences in order to accomplish a common goal—to make the United States a more Christian nation. Joining together under the banner of the Christian Democratic Republican (CDR) Party, America's Christians from far left to far right along the political spectrum hope to end the secularism that they believe has taken over—and corrupted—American government and society.

Their success is astounding. Within a few years, the CDR becomes the majority political party in the country and begins to lay the foundation for the party's ultimate objectives—making the New Testament the basis of all civil law and changing the name of the country to the Christian Republic of the United States of America.

In the year 2020, as a vote on the Christian Republic amendment draws near—with strong opposition from the opposition National Liberty Party—terrorist bombings hit the nation's capital, taking the lives of several prominent government officials. It is now up to the Christian Democratic administration to demonstrate that it can fight terrorism while also pursuing its goal of creating a Christian Republic. Nothing less than the future of the nation is at stake.

CHAPTER 1

“O righteous God, who searches minds and hearts, bring to an end the violence of the wicked and make the righteous secure.” Psalm 7:9

The massive pipe organ of the National Cathedral had never sounded quite as majestic to Winston Tobias “Toby” Sullivan as on this sunny Sunday morning of March 1, 2020. It seemed as if the organist was putting a little something extra into the entrance hymn that was most familiar to Toby as “Guide me, O thou great Jehovah,” but today was Hymn 595, “God of grace and God of glory.” The volume was cranked up so high that Sullivan could actually feel the vibrations from the giant instrument’s 10,000 pipes as the choir and congregation prepared to join in.

*God of grace and God of glory,
On Thy people pour Thy power.
Crown Thine ancient church’s story,
Bring her bud to glorious flower.
Grant us wisdom, grant us courage,
For the facing of this hour,
For the facing of this hour.*

As Toby added his tenor voice to the baritones, mezzos, sopranos and those that he felt were most charitably described as “none of the above,” he could not help but question why he was in this magnificent house of worship. If the truth were to be told, he was an agnostic, and it was primarily his love of classical music that led him to attend this particular church. That—and he would have been ashamed to admit—the fact that his boss’s assistant, Margaret Peabody, also attended the same service, and he knew the chances were good that she would mention to Associate Director Carl Drake that she had seen Sullivan at church. Of course, Toby knew that it might be even better for his career if he attended the same church as Drake, but there was no way in hell (or heaven) he was going to an evangelical church that specialized in the latest “praise” music. Being hypocritical was bad enough, but even in this era when a person’s religion—or lack thereof—could influence his professional advancement, enduring musical torture would be much too high of a price to pay.

*Save us from weak resignation,
To the evils we deplore.
Let the search for Thy salvation,
Be our glory evermore.
Grant us wisdom, grant us courage,
Serving Thee Whom we adore,
Serving Thee Whom we adore.*

After the last note from the entrance hymn faded, Toby prepared to make himself as comfortable as possible in his usual spot in one of the rear rows slightly behind an enormous column that helped support the impressive Gothic structure. Before sitting, he glanced around to see if he could locate Margaret, and he was quite surprised that neither she nor some of the other regulars, such as United States Senator Langdon Stevens and his wife, seemed to be in attendance. Given all that had happened that week, he was certain they would want to be in their usual pews.

After completing his visual inspection of the congregation, Toby sat down and began, as was his habit, to tune out much of the service and focus his thoughts on the week behind and the week ahead. He knew that what had happened in the previous week was certain to change the course of his career and perhaps his entire life.

A violent explosion on each of three different days in different parts of the nation's capital had resulted in the deaths of a dozen people, including two United States senators and the assistant secretary of Homeland Security. As expected, Associate Director Drake, a terrorism expert, had been personally selected by the FBI director to put together a special unit from the Joint Terrorism Task Force consisting of law enforcement personnel from several different agencies including FBI, Homeland Security, CIA, Metropolitan Police, Federal Park Police and Capitol Police. Sullivan and his partner, Davis P. Rawlings, III—nicknamed “Trey”—were selected, although Sullivan was well aware that Rawlings, a member of Drake's church, was the one the boss really wanted and Sullivan was included only because he had been Trey's partner for the past two years.

Toby watched and listened as Rector Samuel York read Psalm 19:14:

“Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be always acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer.”

The bombings constituted the most serious terrorist attacks on United States soil in more than a decade and had caught the entire nation flatfooted. Not the Department of Homeland Security, nor the CIA, nor the FBI had any hint that such attacks were imminent. Nothing that had been done since 9/11/01, including a complete reorganization of the nation's security infrastructure, the appropriation of billions of dollars in additional funding and hiring hundreds of thousands of new security employees, had been able to prevent one or more people from setting off two powerful car bombs and a bomb on a train in the Metro subway system. While no one had claimed responsibility, al-Qaida was the name being mentioned on all of the television news channels and by most of the Internet bloggers. Even the usual “high ranking government officials” were telling reporters off the record that a rejuvenated al-Qaida or some other Muslim extremist organization was likely behind the attacks. Sullivan had no reason to doubt this theory.

The rector continued as the congregation kneeled.

“Dearly beloved, we have come together in the presence of Almighty God our heavenly Father, to render thanks for the great benefits that we have received at his hands, to set forth his most worthy praise, to hear this holy Word, and to ask, for ourselves and on behalf of others, those things that are necessary for our life and our salvation. And so that we may prepare ourselves in heart and mind to worship him, let us kneel in silence, and with penitent and obedient hearts confess our sins, that we may obtain forgiveness by his infinite goodness and mercy.”

On the other hand, Sullivan told himself, he had no reason to believe the speculation, either. True, multiple explosions were a hallmark of al-Qaida and other radical Islamic organizations, and successfully killing several top government officials gave the attacks the publicity the Islamic extremists craved, but that really wasn't proof, was it? No physical evidence had been identified to conclusively link any organization to the horrendous crimes.

Then the congregation joined the rector in reciting:

“Almighty and most merciful Father, we have erred and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep, we have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts, we have offended against thy holy laws, we have left undone those things which we ought to have done, But thou, O Lord, have mercy upon us, spare thou those who confess their faults, restore thou those who are penitent, according to thy promises declared unto mankind in Christ Jesus our Lord; and grant, O most merciful Father, for his sake, that we may hereafter live a godly, righteous, and sober life, to the glory of thy holy Name. Amen.”

With the nation on the highest level of alert—it would have been Terror Code “Red” if the old color codes still existed—the taskforce was under intense pressure to identify those responsible and capture or kill them quickly. Members of Congress were both scared and angry, clearly a dangerous combination. Some of the more hawkish members were calling for the president to launch a unilateral military attack on Pakistan, Syria and Iran simultaneously, because they were certain that al-Qaida leaders were hiding in all three countries. In a special televised address to the nation, the president said “all options are on the table,” making it clear that he would not hesitate to launch an attack on any country that provided support to the people who murdered the assistant secretary of Homeland Security, two prominent members of Congress and nine other Americans.

The service progressed solemnly in the background as Toby continued to reflect on the tragedy that had the nation asking how—and why—America had once again been attacked.

He heard the priest say:

“The Almighty and merciful Lord grant you absolution and remission of all your sins, true repentance, amendment of life, and the grace and consolation of his Holy Spirit. Amen.”

And then Sullivan joined the rest of the congregation in reciting a Collect for Peace:

“O God, who art the author of peace and lover of concord, in knowledge of whom standeth our eternal life, whose service is perfect freedom: Defend us, thy humble servants, in all assaults of our enemies; that we, surely trusting in thy defense, may not fear the power of any adversaries; through the might of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. May the God of hope fill us with all joy and peace in believing through the power of the Holy Spirit, Amen.”

After the Collect, Sullivan glanced at the Space Window on the south aisle of the Cathedral. There were more than 200 stained glass windows in the historic building, but it was this one, containing a piece of lunar rock presented by the astronauts of Apollo XI, that was clearly his favorite. His second favorite was the magnificent Rose window high above the west front entrance. Briefly glancing at this spectacular work of art, Toby noticed that the thousands of pieces of stained glass were not as vibrant as in the afternoon when the sun shone more directly from the west. Even so, the 26-foot diameter window was breathtaking.

While admiring the colorful glass, Toby’s thoughts suddenly returned to the tragic events of the week and their effect on his personal faith—or lack of it. *“How could a merciful God let something so awful occur? And, if the perpetrators were in fact radical Muslims, how could any sane Muslim believe that Allah—or God by any name—would advocate or condone the killing of innocent people?”*

As Toby turned to face the front of the church, his thoughts about Muslims quickly drifted into thoughts about his own country and its majority religion—Christianity. He was becoming more and more concerned about the ever-increasing role of religion in the government. Over the course of the last two decades, Christian activists had made steady “progress” (as they saw it) in making the United States a more “Christian” nation. And in the last few years, this trend had—at least as Toby saw it—spun out of control. Christians of all denominations and political beliefs had joined together to form the Christian Democratic Republican (CDR) Party. Their goal, pure and simple, was to make the United States a theocracy.

This train of thought led him to recall a folk song from a couple of decades earlier.

I ain't afraid of your Yahweh.

I ain't afraid of your Allah.

I ain't afraid of your Jesus.

I'm afraid of what you do in the name of your god.

*I ain't afraid of your churches.
I ain't afraid of your temples.
I ain't afraid of your praying.
I'm afraid of what you do in the name of your god.*

Suddenly, Toby's mind cleared of thoughts of religion and bombs. He began thinking about Tiffany Ashley Davenport, better known to family and friends as "Tad." Tad, who had a PhD in mid-eastern studies from George Washington University and spoke fluent Arabic, had been working undercover with the CIA for nearly five years, but Toby had just learned that she was being rushed home to work for the Associate Director for Homeland Security, Terrorist Threat Integration Center, and to serve on the bombing task-force.

Sullivan thought about how much he had missed Tad during the last five years. They had been so close before she took the undercover assignment, but since then, he had been with her for only a few brief visits—once in the U.S. and twice in the Scottish Highlands at a place isolated enough to protect her cover and their privacy. He had not seen his lover for more than a year, and the thought of being with her again had him feeling both excited and anxious.

And then, before he knew it, it was time for the recessional hymn. But how could it be? He could barely recall the homily—something about not allowing one's heart to be filled with hate against an entire group of people for a vile act committed by a few evil or misguided individuals. "*Easier said than done*," Toby thought as he stood and looked at the sea of faces in the packed church. Even without some of the regulars, such as Margaret and Senator Stevens, there were obviously more people here than on an average Sunday. That was understandable. It was as if people needed to be someplace in which they could feel secure again.

Being in God's house, away from the hysterical hype of the news media and, yes, if the truth were told, isolated from those people, i.e. "Muslims," helped people feel a little safer than being in a shopping mall or even in the privacy of their own homes. God and their Christian faith would make everything better. Or, at least that is what they believed.

The mighty organ pipes, the choir, the celebrants and the congregation joined together to fill the giant Cathedral with a much beloved and comforting hymn.

*Amazing grace! how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see.*

'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, and grace my fears relieved...

As Toby and the congregation held the note—a middle "G"—at the end of "relieved," a terrible, almost deafening explosion ripped through the sacred house of worship, shattering in an instant people's lives, limbs and whatever sense of security they had felt just seconds before. Gone were the joy of music and serenity of worship. These were destroyed by a frightening conglomeration of noises, including shattering glass, screaming children and wailing men and women.

Almost immediately, after the initial shock wave and terrifying noise had subsided, Toby recognized what had happened. He had been shielded from the blast and flying debris by the column that stood partially between the explosion and him. Others were not as fortunate. People of all ages were screaming and pushing toward the exits as fast as they could run or crawl. Some lay on the floor and in the pews, dead, injured or too stunned to move.

By voice command, Sullivan activated the miniature cell phone that was imbedded in his ear, connecting him instantly to taskforce headquarters. "This is Agent Toby Sullivan, Code Alpha John 465. There has been an explosion at the National Cathedral on Wisconsin Avenue. Send the bomb experts and notify hospitals in the area to send every ambulance and EMT they can find. Many people have been either killed or injured." And then, as he looked westward above the chaos at the undamaged Rose Window, he added emotionally, "The bastards have attacked again."

CHAPTER 2

“We must respect the other fellow’s religion, but only in the sense and to the extent that we respect his theory that his wife is beautiful and his children smart.” -H.L. Mencken

Tiffany Ashley Davenport—better known to family and friends as “Tad” since shortly after her maternal grandfather, Grandpa Johnson, had recognized how much his granddaughter disliked her “prissy” given names and began calling her by her initials when she was about eight years old—woke slowly out of a light, restless sleep. She surveyed her surroundings and attempted to figure out why a rather large head was lying on her right shoulder while a small boy with something wet and sticky on his hand was patting her left cheek with one of his gooey fingers.

Then she remembered. The gigantic man, whose real name she did not know, but whom she had nicknamed “Doublewide” for her internal conversations, was already well settled on the plane when she boarded in Frankfurt. He had apparently staked out his claim to the two adjacent seats at the flight’s origination in Istanbul. When a Frankfurt passenger showed him the ticket she had purchased for one of the two seats (an aisle seat), he refused to let her have it, claiming that his enormous size entitled him to two seats under a recent court settlement won by the National Association of Weight Challenged Americans (NAWCA). The flight attendant had been forced to move the unhappy woman to a seat in the middle of a center row in the back of the plane, promising her as compensation a free roundtrip ticket to any destination in the United States. Tad also remembered that the little boy’s real name was Steve and that, all things considered, he seemed like a nice little kid. Unfortunately, someone had given him a rather large supply of stick candy which he licked and handled constantly, creating sticky hands and a colorful sticky face surrounding his mouth.

“Oh gee, it’s ‘Doublewide’ and ‘Sticky Stevie,’” she thought to herself, as she looked again at her two neighbors in the middle aisle of the Boeing 787. *“Could I have possibly gotten a worse seat?”* she wondered as she surveyed her surroundings from the vantage point of Seat 35-E, the one in the middle of the five-seat middle row in the center of the rear economy class section. *“No doubt about it,”* she concluded. *“I win the prize. This is hands-down the worst possible seat on a plane with an abundance of bad seats. They call this plane a Dreamliner. It’s more like a nightmare than a dream. I have to escape from here for at least a few minutes.”*

Tad, slowly and with some effort, gently pushed Doublewide’s head back over to one of the two seats that he occupied, unbuckled her seatbelt and, as gracefully as possible, slipped by Sticky Steve and his sleeping mother, finally reaching the aisle and space in which to exercise her cramped limbs. After stretching her legs and torso, she walked slowly to the rear of the plane and took her position behind two other disheveled Economy passengers waiting for their turn to use the miniature restroom. While waiting, her mind began to clear from the cloudy state that attempting to sleep on airlines always produced. She tried to sort out what had happened to her with breathtaking speed.

It was just yesterday. She had barely finished teaching an English class when a woman whom she had not previously met approached and handed her a book. Before Tad could say anything, the woman said in Arabic, “Page 125 is very interesting,” and walked away. Upon opening the book to the designated page, Tad found an envelope. Inside the envelope were a passport, an airline ticket and a piece of paper on which a brief note was written: “Your cover has been blown. Your apartment has probably been bugged. Carry only essential items with you and go to the airport very early in the morning. Your ticket, passport and other identification are enclosed. Buy a throwaway cell phone and contact Charlene McGill of Homeland Security. Good luck. Ringo 911.”

Ringo was the code name of her CIA contact, and 911 was a confirmation code that the message was legitimate. She knew she had to leave, and she wasted no time doing so, following her instructions to the letter. Now she was standing in line to use the restroom of a Boeing 787 that was taking her back to a new job and a lot of uncertainty in her native country—a country that had been experiencing a wave of terrorist attacks unlike any in nearly a decade.

“Pardon me, Miss, but are you waiting in line for the restroom?” Tad realized that she had been deep in thought and that the woman behind her was trying to get her attention.

“Oh yes, I’m sorry,” Tad responded before opening the accordion-style door and entering the small space that passed as a restroom.

After taking care of business, including a thorough washing of her hands and candy-coated face, Tad took a little stroll up and down the aisles of the plane before returning to her prized seat between Doublewide and Sticky. Fortunately, Doublewide was now awake, sitting upright and reading a book, and Sticky was asleep with his cute little gooey face and hands snuggled against his mother’s lap.

As she settled back in her seat and fastened her seat belt, Davenport began thinking about Toby Sullivan and how much she looked forward to seeing him. She and Toby had become extremely close after meeting at a national security gathering several years previous. Things were getting really hot and heavy between them when she was approached by her team leader at the CIA and offered a chance to work undercover in the Middle East. As much as she had hated to leave Toby, she had dreamed of working as an “espionage agent” since she was a young girl. The offer was too good to turn down. In the five years since leaving Washington, she had seen Toby on just a few occasions, but she was still in love with him and hoped that he felt the same way. She was excited that she would see him again—hopefully, in just a few hours..

Tad touched the small video screen on the seat in front of her, producing a map that showed her flight still about three hours from Washington, D.C. She then changed the video program to “movies” and watched an old Harrison Ford flick about the hijacking of Air Force One. After watching it until the president and his family were safely rescued and all the bad guys killed, she fell back into an uneasy sleep for about an hour before being awakened by a flight attendant saying something about starting the initial approach into Ronald Reagan Airport. *Why, Tad wondered to herself, do they always say “initial” approach? Just how many times are they going to attempt to land, anyway?*

Before Davenport could figure out a logical explanation for this illogical airline jingo, she had something far more serious to worry about. She noticed the plane was suddenly banking sharply to the right and increasing its altitude. Simultaneously, she saw a look of shock and terror on the faces of many of her fellow passengers, including Doublewide and little Stevie. Before she had an opportunity to ask anyone what was happening, she heard the intercom click on and the captain, in a rapid-fire voice, attempt to explain the plane’s unusual motion.

“This is the captain speaking. As you may have noticed, we just made a sharp right turn and have begun to gain altitude. The reason for these maneuvers is to get out of District of Columbia airspace as quickly as possible. We don’t know all of the details, but apparently a bomb exploded a few minutes ago in the National Cathedral and all air traffic is being directed away from the city. We are awaiting final instructions, but our tentative plan is to land at BWI – the Baltimore –Washington International Airport. As soon as we receive our destination, I will let you know our plans.”

“The National Cathedral—for Christ sake, that’s where Toby goes to church,” Tad said to herself as she tried to pull her thoughts together as quickly as possible. Relying on the CIA training that had helped her make it through five difficult years in the Middle East as an undercover operative, she composed herself as best she could and searched the channels on the in-flight television screen on the back of the seat in front of her. She quickly found a news report about the bombing of the church.

“Details are still sketchy, but we do know that several people have been killed and many more injured this morning when a bomb exploded during a religious service at the National Cathedral,” said the man with the perfectly blow-dried head of hair and non-descript accent. “We hope to have a reporter and camera crew on site shortly, but as you might imagine, firefighters, medical personnel, law enforcement officials and other emergency personnel are rushing to the scene and roads are being closed to ordinary traffic for miles around this landmark religious site which has served as an unofficial national church for more than 100 years.”

The news report left Tad clearly shaken. It was a strange feeling for someone who normally kept her emotions in check. Maybe her senses were heightened because things in her life were changing so rapidly. Everything had happened so fast that she had only been able to speak briefly to her sister and to an old friend with whom she would soon be working at the Office of Homeland Security. She hadn't even had time to contact Toby, the one person she was most anxious to see, but also the one she was most nervous about seeing. And now, there was this news about the bombing. She knew that Sullivan had recently started attending the Cathedral because he loved organ music and because his boss expected his agents to attend church.

She wanted to find out if Toby was safe, but she felt completely helpless to do anything. For security purposes, she had nothing on her person or in her carry-on luggage that identified her as a CIA agent, and she had no way to contact anyone at the CIA, Homeland Security, or at the taskforce where she would soon be working. She could only wait until the plane landed so that she could make contact with someone who knew more about what had happened. She did know this, however: If Sullivan was injured because he was trying to "be a good Christian," she was going to be more than a little mad. In fact, she was going to be damn pissed off—and not just at the ones who set off the bomb, but also at the ones who made going to church so important to a person's career advancement. *Just one more example of religious warfare and stupidity*, she told herself while changing channels on the in-flight television, trying to find more information about the bombing at the Cathedral.

CHAPTER 3

“...begin not hostilities. Lo! Allah loveth not aggressors.” Qur’an 002.190

The scene in God’s house—normally a place of beauty and of worship—was one of chaos with people not knowing exactly what had happened or what to do. Toby knew that there could be another bomb planted in the church, timed to go off as people fled or when first responders arrived to help. He immediately identified himself as an FBI agent and quickly recruited five uninjured worshipers to help search the large sanctuary—nearly two football fields in length—for more explosives. He also asked for any doctors and other health care workers to come to the north side of the nave where the bomb had exploded in order to treat and triage the most seriously injured people until the ambulances arrived. After rushing outside to make certain that there were no terrorists waiting to shoot down worshipers fleeing the church, Toby instructed everyone else, except for the clergy who were administering to the dying and the hysterical, to run outside, away from cars, dumpsters and buildings—away from any place that a bomb might have been hidden.

Sullivan stayed at the church for several hours doing as much as he could to assist health care personnel and help preserve the crime scene until Henry Nelson, one of the FBI’s forensic experts, arrived. Then, after taking some high-resolution digital videos with his *p-Com*, the latest in personal communications devices, he headed back to headquarters where he knew Rawlings and the rest of the taskforce were waiting.

The drive from the church to the headquarters, normally no more than 10-20 minutes, took nearly an hour because so many streets were blocked and he was in his personal car—a classic Jaguar—that had no GPS navigation system. Toby used the time trapped in his Jag to reflect on the many similarities between life and the game of craps. *“When your number comes up in life,”* he thought, *“it’s really not much different than snake eyes coming up on a pair of dice—pure chance.”* Fortunately for him, he had chosen to sit toward the rear of the church behind a column, and for that reason alone as far as he could determine, today was not the day for his number to come up. He had been one of the lucky ones.

After parking his car near the Joint Terrorism Taskforce headquarters, Toby walked quickly to the modern government building and took the elevator up to the third floor where the special unit was housed. As he entered the office, the scene in front of him was not nearly as chaotic as he imagined it would be. Although the noise level was quite high, people seemed to be going about their business in a purposeful and professional manner. *“Maybe we are becoming too accustomed to bombs and death,”* he thought.

The first person he encountered was Rawlings who was characteristically calm, even-tempered and filled with religious fervor. *“Praise the Lord that you were not killed or injured. I was worried about you,”* Trey exclaimed in his UVA- and Yale-educated English that still bore a trace of his distinctive Virginia Piedmont dialect in which the “u” in “about” seemed to disappear.

Although Toby knew that his friend had only the best of intentions, at this particular moment he found Trey’s religious fervor both annoying and inappropriate. *“Maybe you should give praise to the stonemasons who built the Cathedral,”* Toby suggested. *“If I hadn’t been sitting almost directly behind one of the giant columns, I don’t know what condition I would be in, but I bet it wouldn’t be very good. You should have seen the devastation—which reminds me, have you heard from Margaret? I never saw her today.”*

“The Lord has blessed and watched over her, too,” Trey responded. *“As faith would have it, she chose this weekend to visit her mother in Atlanta and is scheduled to fly back this evening. It is obvious that the Lord has something he wants you and Margaret to do on this earth, because he was watching over both of you.”*

“Or maybe we were just lucky,” Sullivan suggested, somewhat skeptical of the idea that God gets involved in day-to-day happenings on earth, such as where people are sitting in church when a bomb explodes.

“There you go again,” Trey said with a touch of exasperation obvious in his voice. “Why can’t you just accept that the Lord loves you and has a plan for you? Is it really so hard to give your life over to Jesus?”

Sullivan paused before he spoke, watching as his partner unconsciously straightened his blue and gold striped bow tie. He knew that Trey, a graduate of Yale Law School, was both intelligent and completely sincere in his faith, and it was just impossible not to like the guy, because he almost always had a smile on his face and an unshakable belief that good would eventually triumph. On the other hand, Toby had just come from a house of worship—supposedly the Lord’s house—where scores of innocent and devout men, women and even children had been killed or seriously injured. “*Just how did such an event demonstrate God’s love?*” he wondered.

“Yes, it is hard, Trey, especially after witnessing what I saw this morning,” Toby said slowly and quietly. “It is very difficult to find love in a lot of what happens in this world.”

“That’s because the devil is also real,” Rawlings explained. “Until all people accept Jesus as their Savior, death, destruction and evil will continue to plague the world.”

“Does that go for our Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist and Muslim friends, too?” Sullivan responded. “Do they have to accept Jesus as their Savior, too?”

“I know you find it simplistic,” said Trey, “but I happen to believe in what the Bible says. ‘There is no salvation except through Jesus.’ Why do I believe it? Because I believe the resurrection is a historical fact, and that pretty much makes the rest of Christianity a slam-dunk in my book.”

“I guess it would,” Sullivan said, “but I’m afraid I just can’t be as certain as you about the resurrection or a lot of what the Bible says—particularly after what I witnessed today. If, as you say, God purposely spared Margaret and me, then that must mean that He purposely allowed the others to die. Why would He do that? It makes no sense.”

“That’s because we don’t know yet what God’s plan for us is,” Trey said. “We won’t be able to completely understand His plan until we are with Him in Heaven.”

“Look, Trey, now is probably not a good time for us to have this conversation,” Toby said. “In spite of the fact that I should be thanking God that I am alive, I am more than a little pissed off at any God that would allow such a terrible thing to happen. I think we’ll just have to continue to agree to disagree about religion for the time being and focus our energies on finding the miserable people responsible for the bombings.”

“You mean the radical Muslims?” Trey said more as a statement than a question.

“We don’t know that for certain,” said Toby, “It was possibly Muslims who were responsible, but just possibly, it was someone else.”

“Possibly Muslims?” Rawlings asked incredulously. “I’d say the chances are about 99 percent, wouldn’t you?”

“I’m not willing to go above 80 or 90 percent quite yet,” said Sullivan. “We have to keep our minds open at least a little. We want to make sure we catch the people who actually committed the crimes, not the ones that everyone assumes committed them.”

“Who else could be responsible?” asked Trey. “These are the only people I know who are so filled with hate that they would commit such horrific crimes.”

“What about the Ku Klux Klan, Timothy McVeigh, Eric Robert Rudolph, the White Christian Alliance, Raymond Collins and that guy John Chapman who shot those seven doctors about five years ago?” Sullivan reminded his partner. “We have had some homegrown kooks, too.”

“Maybe so, but Rudolph and Chapman, at least, were trying to save lives by stopping abortion,” said Rawlings. “You know as well as I do that most of the terrorist acts of the last few decades throughout the entire world have been the work of Muslim fanatics. The more democracy has threatened to spread in the Middle East, the more desperate the fanatics have become. They lash out without regard to whom they harm or where, all in the misguided belief that they will go to heaven if they kill a sufficient number of infidels.”

Toby looked at his partner with a slight scowl. “You don’t actually believe that Rudolph’s and Chapman’s actions were justified, do you, Trey?”

“I don’t believe that anyone has the right to kill innocent people unless the deaths are collateral, such as during warfare,” Trey responded, “but I also understand their desire to bring an end to the barbaric practice of abortion.”

“Under that philosophy, the Muslim terrorists can justify their actions as the only way to bring an end to what they see as the corruption and sinfulness of Western culture and government,” Sullivan answered.

Before Rawlings could respond, the taskforce leader, Associate Director Carl Drake, came to their door. Always a man of few words, he did not even ask Toby how he was doing after the explosion, but said bluntly, “Please move as quickly as possible into the conference room.”

Trey and Toby followed the ramrod straight, six-foot tall Drake to the meeting room, which contained a very long table, nearly two dozen leather swivel chairs and a large state-of-the-art interactive communications wall at one end of the room. The room was crowded and Sullivan and Rawlings took the only two remaining seats—the ones on either side of their boss. Other members of the taskforce from CIA, Homeland Security, the Capitol Police, the Metropolitan Police and a few other agencies filled the rest of the chairs around the rectangular table. Toby instantly focused his eyes and attention on the woman who had just sat down at the far end of the table. It was Tad. She was dressed in a casual outfit of black pants, a black blouse and a soft black jacket with some kind of subdued print—very likely one of the many travel outfits she routinely purchased from Chico’s, her favorite clothing store.

Before Sullivan even had an opportunity to say hello to his former lover, Drake looked at the 14 men and two women and asked them to bow their heads.

More as a sign of respect (and conformity) than reverence, Toby bowed his head slightly, but kept his eyes open while his boss called for Divine guidance and intervention. Such a request by a government official would have been almost unthinkable a couple of decades earlier, but recent Supreme Court decisions and the newly-enacted Freedom to Practice Religion Act had made Christianity—the nation’s dominant religion—virtually a state religion.

“Dear Jesus, we know that we are unworthy and are being punished for not living the kind of lives that you want us to live. We know that promiscuous behavior and immorality permeate our society and that we have not followed your commandments and teachings...”

While Drake prayed, Toby noticed Lieutenant Johnson of the Metropolitan Police, who was rumored to be gay, and Steve Abronovitz of Homeland Security, the only Jewish member, open their eyes uncomfortably as the boss referred to society’s sins and evoked the name of “Jesus, our Savior” to help guide the taskforce in its duties. It obviously never dawned on Drake that some people might take offense at his prayer — or maybe it did dawn on him and he just didn’t care.

Mostly though, Sullivan focused his eyes on Tad. They had met nearly six years earlier at an antiterrorism training program that had brought together representatives from the FBI, CIA, Homeland Security and several other agencies to make sure that everyone was “on the same page” as the trainers had said over and over. He was in his mid-thirties at the time and Tad was just barely 30. He was attracted to her instantly. She was approximately 5’8” tall with medium brown hair, gorgeous blue eyes and what was in his perception, a perfect figure (not emaciated like some of the so-called super models). Looks, brains and brass—she had it all. And, as Toby saw her winking at him, he had no doubts that he had made the right decision to wait for her while she was on an undercover assignment of indeterminate length that had lasted five long years.

“...and this we ask in your name, Jesus, amen.” The taskforce leader paused for a moment and then, while looking around the room with his steel-grey eyes, spoke in a quiet, resolute voice, either forgetting or ignoring the women present. “Gentlemen, we are at war. In the last six days, terrorists have launched the most ferocious attacks on American soil in more than a decade. Let’s review what we know so far.”

Drake waited for a few seconds for a three-dimensional projection of a street in Georgetown to appear on the giant video screen.

“On Monday, a car bomb exploded at approximately 7:30 a.m., just as Senator Charles Madison of Oklahoma was approaching his car. The senator and two other people on the sidewalks were killed.”

Next, a projection of Union Station appeared on the communications wall.

“On Tuesday around noon, another car bomb exploded near Union Station just as Charles Rutherford, assistant secretary of Homeland Security was heading toward the station for a luncheon meeting. Rutherford and three other people were killed.”

And then, a projection of the Metro Center train station.

“On Wednesday, a bomb exploded in a Metro train near the Metro Center station. Five people, including Senator John Morgan of Virginia, were killed.”

The projection of the Metro station was replaced by a three-dimensional view of the interior of the National Cathedral.

“And earlier today, a bomb exploded in the National Cathedral on Wisconsin Avenue. We have no firm casualty figures yet.”

Drake paused briefly before continuing. “We can’t officially say this, because it would compromise intelligence sources, but we have very good reason to believe that al-Qaida is responsible for all of these bombings.”

“*That’s interesting,*” Sullivan thought, although he said nothing. “*How could anyone already know for certain who planted the bomb in the church just a few hours ago?*” He anxiously awaited an explanation.

“In case you are wondering why I am so certain that al-Qaida is responsible for all of the bombings, including the one this morning, it is because we have an agent, whose code name is Desert Dan, working under cover in a terrorist sleeper cell in New Mexico. He has reason to believe that another sleeper cell in the Virginia or Maryland suburbs of D.C. has been activated and instructed to unleash a series of attacks in this area. Unless we find these people quickly and stop them, there will almost certainly be more attacks.”

“Do we have any leads as to where these people may be living?” Abronovitz asked.

“Nothing definite yet,” Drake responded. “Based on little bits of information he has gathered, Desert Dan believes that most or all of the cell members live outside of Washington in rural Virginia or Maryland.”

“If we have an agent under cover, how come we didn’t have any warning about the attacks?” Rawlings asked.

“That’s a good question,” Drake responded. “These al-Qaida cells are completely independent. The New Mexico cell in which the agent is imbedded knows virtually nothing about the Virginia/Maryland cell, except that it exists. These are smart and devious people. In case one cell is discovered, they don’t want that discovery leading to other cells.”

“But what if this agent, Desert Dan, has bad information?” asked Davenport. “Shouldn’t we consider the possibility that these bombings may have been the work of some domestic terrorists—or some international terrorists unrelated to al-Qaida?”

“I think that would just be an unnecessary distraction,” Drake replied. “I have complete confidence in the information we have received.”

“And so what is the plan for finding these putative terrorists?” Tad followed with another question.

“That’s why I have called you all together Miss Davenport—to determine exactly how we should proceed,” Drake responded, obviously not appreciative of Tad’s questions. “I can tell you, however, that I have some special assignments here at headquarters for you and Miss Robinson. I feel confident that these assignments—as well as things that will come up to assist the men in the field—will keep you extremely busy and be of tremendous value to the investigation.”

“*...assist the men in the field*”? Had she really heard that correctly? Tad sat motionless trying to absorb what she thought she had just heard. As a recent undercover agent and an expert on Islamic and mid-eastern culture, she was unaccustomed to being treated as a “gofer.” Having been away for five years, she knew very little about Drake’s attitude about women, and she could never have imagined that he would be as blatantly sexist as he appeared, even in an age when fewer and fewer women were pursuing careers.

“Pardon me, Director Drake, but I would prefer “Doctor” or “Agent” instead of “Miss,” and I am not sure I understand what it is you just said,” Tad answered firmly as Toby winced and waited for Drake’s response.

“I’m sorry, *Doctor* Davenport,” Drake responded with a very heavy—and somewhat sarcastic—emphasis on the title, “but the people in the field will be in extreme danger, and I do not believe in putting women in that position. There will be plenty of important work to be done here in the office.”

Knowing Tad’s temperament as he did, Toby braced himself for a forceful reaction to Drake’s explanation, but, amazingly, she said nothing further, although he suspected she was very likely fuming inside.

The only other woman on the taskforce—other than Drake’s assistant Margaret Peabody who had not yet arrived from Georgia—was a Metropolitan Police lieutenant named Lucinda Robinson. It appeared to Toby that she was poised to respond to Drake’s remark as well, but he spoke before she could open her mouth.

“Sullivan, you were at the Cathedral when the bomb exploded. We are all very grateful that the Lord was with you and you were not injured. What can you tell us about the attack?”

“One thing I can tell you is that it could have been a lot worse,” Toby responded as he used a laser device that he borrowed from Drake to point to the three dimensional projection of the Cathedral. “All of us who escaped injury were probably saved by the fact that the bomb was attached to the underside of this seat on the north side of the nave and only a portion of the device exploded. If it had been located closer to the center aisle and exploded with its full force, there may have been many more people killed and injured.”

Sullivan hesitated and then continued. “We can also be grateful that Margaret was away for the weekend, because she usually sits close to the seat where the bomb was hidden. And another fortunate coincidence is that Senator Stevens and his wife were not there. When they are in town, they almost always attend that service and sit close to where Margaret sits.”

“Any ideas why the Cathedral was targeted?” Drake asked.

“If this was in fact the work of terrorists,” Toby hypothesized, “it could be that they were looking for a soft target that would produce the maximum amount of publicity and residual terror. After all, where can people feel safe if not in a house of worship?”

“Why that church?” Trey asked.

“My guess would be because it is such a prominent landmark in the city or because they were targeting Senator Stevens,” Sullivan speculated. “Terrorists usually attempt to get the most attention they can for each attack. It isn’t so much the number of people they kill, as it is the symbolism attached to their targets. For example, when Eric Rudolph set off the bomb during the 1996 Olympics in Atlanta, relatively few people were killed or injured, but the attack achieved enormous media coverage.”

“Which is yet another reason that al-Qaida is the group most likely responsible for the attacks this week,” Drake said. “A series of bombings; all in our capital city; aimed at government officials and one of our country’s most prominent religious symbols. It fits their M.O. perfectly.”

Drake stopped briefly and then continued. “And I agree with Sullivan that it is quite likely that Senator Stevens was a target. He has been a very outspoken supporter of our country’s antiterrorism efforts...just one more reason the terrorists may have chosen that particular church.”

Although Toby still had not seen any concrete evidence to link al-Qaida to the bombings, he had to admit that the radical Islamic terrorist organization was high on the list of suspects. And since no one had any better ideas, the members of the taskforce spent the next two hours discussing possible strategies for locating the members of the alleged metro D.C. cell. Obviously, they would rely heavily on the forensics team to find solid evidence to lead to the bombers, but until such evidence turned up, they had to pursue the leads they had, and at this point, the only lead was the New Mexico tip.

Drake divided the taskforce unit into teams of two men each and assigned each team a specific geographic area within which they would work with local law enforcement personnel to find evidence leading to the capture or death of the terrorists. Sullivan and Rawlings were assigned the Leesburg,

Virginia area, and as the meeting adjourned—with another prayer—they quickly made arrangements to meet at headquarters early the next morning. “I’ll be here at 7:30,” said Trey.

After acknowledging Trey’s remarks— “May Christ be with you”—Toby wished his obsessively neat, spiritual and punctual partner a good evening and then caught up with Tad who was waiting for him at the elevator.

“For Christ sake, Tad, you might have let me know you were going to be here today. Do you have time to talk now?”

Tad grabbed Toby’s arm and pulled him into the elevator. “Yes, I have time to talk, but I need a drink first. I can’t believe what just happened.”

CHAPTER 4

“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” U.S. Constitution, Amendment #1

“I still can’t believe what that Bible-thumping SOB did,” Tad gave Toby an earful as they left the building and stepped out into the cool evening air. “If I didn’t really want to be on this taskforce, I would have told him just where he could put all of those things he expects me to fetch for him and his boys.”

“Well, I missed you, too,” Sullivan responded. “I’m glad to see you haven’t mellowed in your old age.”

Tad stopped walking, grabbed Toby, hugged him and planted a big kiss squarely on his lips. She then looked in his eyes and touched his face gently. “I’m sorry, Toby. How selfish of me. I haven’t seen you in more than a year, you almost got blown up in church a few hours ago, and I’m carrying on like a spoiled brat. You don’t know how much I’ve missed you and how worried I was when I heard about the church bombing. It’s just that I am really upset. I spent five years in a region where women are treated like crap and I was really looking forward to getting back to the good ole U.S. of A. And then after spending an eternity on a flight with Doublewide and Sticky—but, that’s another story—I finally get home and find that the country I came back to isn’t the same as the one I left five years ago. I can’t believe they put a Neanderthal like Drake in charge of such an important taskforce. Who made that decision?”

“Actually, I think the president decided that the FBI should take the lead, and then the director chose Drake,” Toby answered. “They’ve known each other since college days and belong to the same church, and besides, he does have a good reputation in the counter-terrorism business.”

“Same church, huh? Well that explains it,” Tad shot back. “This government is becoming more and more a government of the churches, by the churches and for the churches. What the crap was Drake doing starting and ending our meeting with a Christian prayer? Does he not realize that there are still people of other faiths—and even some nonbelievers—in this country?”

“I’m not sure it matters to him,” Toby said, “but he probably means well.”

“Means well? Jesus, Sullivan—I see you still give everyone the benefit of the doubt,” Tad said as she stopped walking. “By the way, if I can change the subject, you do still keep a large stash of wine in your condo, don’t you?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact, I bought a case of really nice Bordeaux yesterday. Are you inviting yourself over?” Toby asked.

“Of course I’m inviting myself over,” Davenport responded playfully. “You don’t mind, do you?”

“What do you think?” Toby answered. “I’ve only been waiting for this day for five years. My car is right up the street.”

After a short walk that led to Toby’s silver sports car, Tad looked at the vintage auto and exclaimed, “I can’t believe you’ve still got the old Jag!”

“Why of course,” he answered. “I’ll keep this car until it dies—or until the government takes it away from me for polluting too much. Hop in—that is, if you aren’t too embarrassed.”

After Tad and he were securely buckled in their seats, Toby turned the key and the powerful V-12 gasoline engine responded with a satisfying roar. Within a matter of minutes, they arrived at Sullivan’s 1940’s era condominium building just off Connecticut Avenue above Woodley Park. “Remember the days before the return of the blue laws when you could actually buy alcohol in restaurants on Sundays?” Sullivan asked as they took the elevator up to the 10th—and top— floor.

“It wasn’t all that long ago,” Davenport said, “but it seems like ages. What’s happening to this country, anyway?”

“The times, they are a changing,” Sullivan answered in a short burst of an old folk song as he opened the door to his spacious corner apartment with its 10-foot ceilings, crown molding and parquet floors

throughout—and a spectacular view of Rock Creek Parkway on the east side and the city and monuments in the distance on the south side.

“I love this apartment,” Tad said as she walked in the entry hall and noticed some photographs she had not seen before. “Who are these people?”

“My family,” he answered.

“But I thought you were adopted by a couple that had no close relatives and you never knew your real parents?” Tad responded.

“That’s right,” said Toby.

“So, how did you find photos of your relatives?” Tad asked, obviously still puzzled.

“Well, they are actually my ersatz family,” Toby explained. “I don’t know who any of my real blood relatives are, but I was at the Georgetown flea market one Sunday a few years ago and saw the late 19th century photo of that couple up on the top left and bought it. Why? I don’t know, except I just thought it was a neat photo. A few weeks later, I was in an antique/junk store and saw a lot of photos of people taken all during the 20th century, so I had this weird idea to invent a family. I tried to find photos of people who had some features similar to mine—like look at that skinny guy in the middle row in the three-piece suit that looks like a banker. Doesn’t his nose look a lot like mine?”

“Now that you mention it, he did look a lot like you,” Tad said.

“Meet my great-uncle Ned,” Toby continued. “And that couple at the bottom-right with the baby—that’s me with dear old Great Uncle Hiram and Great Aunt Louise.”

“Toby, you’re incorrigible,” Tad said while laughing. “Has anyone ever asked you about them before?”

“Oh yea, and the amazing thing is, a lot of people tell me that I am a dead-ringer for my uncle or my cousin or some other relative. Almost everyone sees a remarkable family resemblance—although it’s more on the Parker side of the family than the Sullivan side.”

“Toby Sullivan, I see you haven’t lost your bizarre sense of humor. What else have you changed since I was here last?”

“Only the kitchen,” Toby replied. “I just finished remodeling it—not that you care much about kitchens.”

“Let me see,” Tad said excitedly. “I do care—especially if it means that you are more likely to cook for me.”

Toby smiled at Tad and led her into the rectangular kitchen that was extremely spacious for circa 1940’s construction. Davenport surveyed the handcrafted cherry-stained wooden cabinets, black granite counter tops and the latest high-tech appliances. “Boy, it looks like you sunk some money into this setup.”

“A fair amount, but I saved a lot by doing most of the work, including building the cabinets,” Toby replied.

“You built them yourself?” Tad asked, obviously impressed. “Where’s your workshop?”

“We have a communal workshop in the basement,” Toby responded.

“Boy, you are a Toby of all trades, aren’t you? I know you will enjoy cooking here,” Tad said as she noticed the gray-spotted white cat eating out of a bowl on the floor. “Is that J. Edgar?”

“Of course, although he responds better to *Jeddy*,” Sullivan said as he picked up the small short-haired cat who squirmed briefly before relaxing and allowing his staff of one to rub his stomach while simultaneously opening the refrigerator, pouring some half and half in a special bowl and warming it briefly in the microwave.

“Oh gosh, don’t tell me you’re now giving that spoiled cat warmed cream,” Tad said in amusement. “And what is wrong with that?” Toby asked while trying to appear serious.

“Well, I guess it’s okay—but only if you promise to use these fancy new appliances to spoil me some, too,” Davenport answered. “However, I do have one question.”

“What’s that?” Sullivan asked.

“Where’s the cook-top? I see the oven and microwave, but there are no burners.”

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