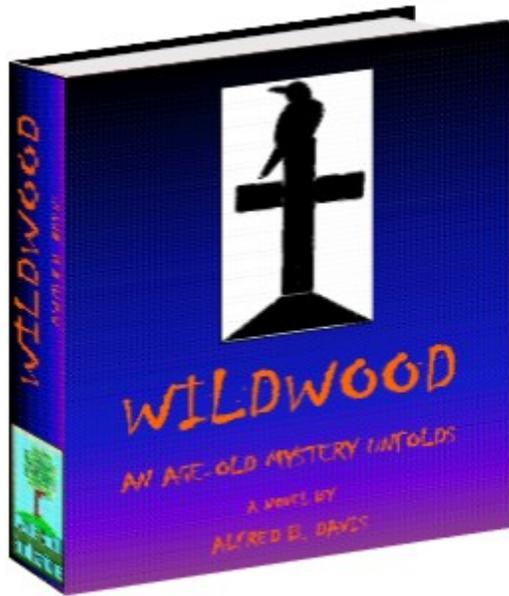


WILDWOOD

AN AGE-OLD MYSTERY UNFOLDS

A NOVEL BY

ALFRED B. DAVIS



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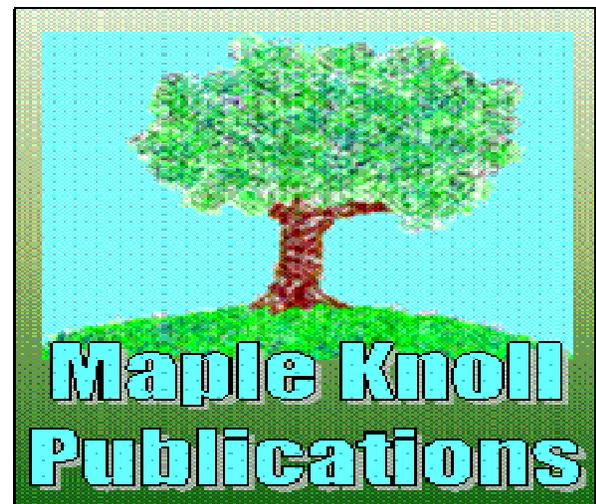
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Dedication

To
My Wife, Kimberly,
and
My Daughter, Anna

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I would like to acknowledge all those that had a part in this book by proof-reading, encouraging, and praying for me.

Especially:

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And my Lord Jesus Christ for the ability and opportunity to write.

WILDWOOD

An Age-Old Mystery Unfolds

Chapter One

Pastor John Williams glanced around nervously. Brandon Hayes had dropped him off at the main concourse before going to park the van. The ticket counters were nearly deserted. Few people were moving about the airport this early on a Friday morning, but that would change in a few hours. He carefully checked his watch while mopping the perspiration from his brow with a worn handkerchief. It was 5:21 AM, three minutes later than when he last looked.

"Brandon ought to be able to get a good parking space," thought Pastor Williams as he studied the arrivals board in the main concourse. He ran his fingers through his thin, gray hair. They trembled slightly. He started at the sudden crackling of the loudspeaker behind him.

"Attention, attention!" commanded an unseen announcer in a static-laced voice, "There has been a gate change. Inter-Continental Flight 256 from Honolulu is now arriving at Gate 7. Inter-Continental Flight 256 from Honolulu is now arriving at Gate 7. Passengers connecting with Inter-Continental Flight 256 to Philadelphia, please proceed to Gate 7 immediately."

"Twenty minutes early," breathed Rev. Williams quietly as he headed off in the direction of Gate 7. "Thank God for small miracles!"

Paul Brown waited somewhat impatiently for the seatbelt light to click off as the plane taxied slowly off the runway. He slowly stretched his five foot 11 inch frame in his seat as much as possible. After a number of years in the United States Air Force and then several more as a missionary in the South Pacific, Paul Brown, though not a pilot himself, had logged more hours in a variety of aircraft over the last 20 years than he cared to think of.

"These airline seats get smaller by the hour!" he complained to his wife, Karen, who sat next to him.

"Just be thankful we're arriving early!" laughed Karen, "How would we ever get you out of the seat if we were running late?"

Karen Brown, just a couple years younger than her husband, was a registered nurse with extensive emergency medical training. Equally at home in a modern trauma unit or a primitive jungle clinic, Karen had first met Paul on a medical missions trip to Columbia, shortly after graduating from college. He was still in the Air Force at the time and had visited the mission

clinic she volunteered at while participating in a "training" exercise that he still could not tell her about 17 years later.

"Well, Pastor Williams and Uncle Brandon will be glad we are early," chuckled Paul. "I can't wait to see them—it's been a year since Uncle Brandon visited us in Tunoa and nearly two and a half years since we last saw Pastor Williams." Sobering abruptly, he paused and added somberly, "Unfortunately, a lot has happened since then..."

"Please remain seated until the plane comes to a complete stop and the pilot turns off the fasten seatbelt signs." intoned the flight attendant as the plane rolled along the taxiway, headed for Gate 7. "Local time is 5:22 AM. The outside temperature is a cool 46 degrees. Please enjoy your stay in Cleveland, Ohio. For passengers continuing with Inter-Continental to Philadelphia, please remain on board the aircraft. Thank you for flying Inter-Continental Flight 256 from Hawaii and have a nice day. Mahalo."

As the giant Boeing 777 lumbered along the taxiway Paul looked over to check on nine-year old Alexandria Brown and her older brother, Ben. Ben, he could tell, was excited but in his typically reserved manner. Karen said he took after his dad. Alex, on the other hand, was more like her mother. Squirming in her seat and looking intently out the window she could barely contain her excitement. She was only six the last time they were on furlough and had spent most of her young life in the Tunoa Islands. Their overnight stay in Hawaii had been too brief to get a real taste of the States. Long enough to get a taste of fresh milk, real doughnuts, and fast food though.

"Alex! Sit down!" cautioned Paul, "Wait until the seatbelt light goes off." Ben laughed as he pushed his sister back down in her seat. At three years older than his sister, Ben was nearly twice her size, not that she was all that small for her age.

"That boy is going to be taller than you yet, Paul," laughed Karen.

Paul and Karen settled back in their seats as the airplane rolled up to the gate, their minds racing. It was hard to believe that they had left Tunoa only a few days ago—it seemed like weeks. Nearly the whole church was there to see them off at the Tunoa International Airport, along with many dear friends. They were only halfway into their second term when Pastor Williams asked them to pray about returning early. The sudden, tragic loss of his wife, Joyce, a few months earlier had devastated Pastor Williams and the church. Though the official cause of death was listed as accidental, Brandon Hayes had misgivings and had been quietly digging into the matter with the help of his close friend and fellow deacon, Attorney Chuck Krankovich. Although the Browns were supposed to return to Tunoa in a year or so, both had the strange feeling that they would not be returning to the South Pacific anytime soon. Pastor Williams' last letter only fueled those feelings.

Flight 256 came to an abrupt stop at Gate 7. The seatbelt lights clicked off and passengers began spilling out of their seats, grabbing carry on bags and filling the aisles. Paul stood up and began pulling bags out of the overhead compartment, handing them down to Ben. Karen and Alex retrieved more from under the seats. Paul and Ben noticed an elderly couple struggling to get their bags out of the overhead compartment. Paul nodded at his son who quickly went over to them. "Excuse me, Sir, Ma'am," said Ben, "Can I get those for you?"

Pastor Williams hurried to the baggage terminal. He headed for Gate 7 first but airport security had informed him that he could not proceed to the gate without a valid airline ticket. "I really miss greeting people at the gate," he thought to himself as he headed for the escalator.

Arriving at the lower level Pastor Williams scanned the area looking for the Inter-

Continental baggage area. He spotted the tall, lanky frame of Brandon Hayes standing just outside the Inter-Continental baggage area about halfway down the concourse with two luggage carts at the ready. Brandon saw him at about the same time and waved in his direction.

"I was hoping you'd remember that you can't meet them at the gate, " said Hayes. "I'm parked right outside. Willy Sykes called just as I was heading to the parking garage. Said he was tracking Paul's flight on-line and it was early. So, I came around and asked if I could park long enough to run in and let you know where the van is. Got some carts on the way in for the Browns' luggage. The plane is unloading now so they should be here shortly. I'll meet you folks outside in a few minutes. Will you be o.k. Pastor?"

"Don't worry Brandon, I'll be all right," assured Pastor Williams.

Brandon Hayes relinquished the carts to Pastor Williams and headed back outside to the van. It was nearly 5:30 AM. Several cars and buses were just now arriving to pick up passengers from two Inter-Continental red-eyes and a charter flight from San Juan, Puerto Rico, due in that morning. A newer dark gray Jaguar came angling into the passenger loading area a little too quickly, almost hitting Brandon. Hayes avoided it with surprising agility. Though in his late 60's he looked much younger and had never fully lost the reflexes developed as a foreign correspondent in some of the most remote and dangerous hot spots on earth. Now, semi-retired as a free-lance investigative reporter, he had time to devote himself to his greatest passion, serving the Lord as a Sunday school teacher and deacon.

Hayes unlocked the door of an older 12 passenger red van with "Wildwood Baptist Church, Wildwood, Ohio" emblazoned on the sides. As he did so a small, slightly built man carrying an umbrella leaped out of the Jaguar, grinning oddly. The strange little man told the driver to wait and walked briskly into the terminal, pausing only to ask a skycap where the Inter-Continental baggage carousels were located.

Paul Brown followed closely behind as his family made their way off the airplane and into the terminal. Little Alex was chattering excitedly while her mom kept a firm grip on her hand so she could not get too far ahead. Ben was walking just in front of dad. A handful of Bible tracts stuck out of his knapsack, a little less than half of what he had started out with. The rest were scattered along their route, stuck in magazines and seat backs on several airplanes and buses as well as left in restrooms, waiting areas, and restaurants. Many more had been given to people, such as the older couple he had helped on the airplane.

"Thank you, God, for a wonderful family," Paul prayed silently as they headed for the escalator.

Pastor Williams waited anxiously near the Inter-Continental baggage carousels. He had several things he wanted to discuss with Paul and Brandon but that could wait until they got back to Wildwood and rested up a bit. Shifting from side to side, he watched anxiously as passengers from the two Inter-Continental flights and the Puerto Rico charter spilled out of the escalators into the lower concourse, converging on their respective baggage areas. He scanned the crowd nervously until at long last he spotted the Browns moving down the far escalator. Excitedly he waved at them, his unease momentarily forgotten.

"I see him, I see Pastor Williams!" squealed little Alex, pointing and waving back. She had memorized his picture on the way from Hawaii, determined to be the first to spot him.

"Yes, Alex," said Karen, "I see him too! But you'll have to stick with me. I don't want

you running off in this crowd!"

The Browns made their way through the growing crowd around the Inter-Continental baggage carousels to Pastor Williams as quickly as they could. It was a warm reunion and they paused for a brief prayer, thanking God for a safe trip. Paul and Ben put their carry on bags onto one of the luggage carts while Karen and Alex filled Pastor Williams in on the details of their trip. Several bags were beginning to arrive from Flight 256 and Paul's old Air Force duffel bag was among them. Ben swung it off the carousel and onto the floor by his dad. Paul loaded the duffel bag onto the cart as his son scanned the arriving bags for more.

Meanwhile, the strange, grinning little man with the umbrella stood at the outskirts of the Inter-Continental baggage area. He scrutinized the faces of the jostling group intently. His grin broadened in a malevolent sort of way as he spotted Pastor Williams and the Browns.

He watched patiently as they loaded several more bags, waiting for them to move out of the crowded baggage area. "Patience is a virtue," he whispered to nobody in particular, his voice betraying a vaguely French accent.

Finally the last of the Brown's nine bags had arrived and were balanced precariously on the two luggage carts along with several of their carry on bags. The ninth bag had exceeded the limit of two checked bags per person and was filled with *nie'emuge*—gifts—from well-wishers at the airport in Tunoa. Fortunately Rev. Dobemo, the newly installed pastor of *Ta Emuge Vapue Pabtesta*, Tanoan for Grace Baptist Church, had the foresight to bring an empty suitcase to the airport. A friend of his with the airline had checked it to Hawaii for free, though Inter-Continental had charged them from Honolulu on.

The little man's ice-blue eyes narrowed as he watched Pastor Williams and the Brown's leave the Inter-Continental baggage area. One cart wobbled noticeably.

His grin faded into a tight smile as he turned over his umbrella and gave the tip a slight twist, exposing a small hypodermic needle.

"To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose," he whispered to himself, striding quickly in their direction, "A time to die, a time to kill, a time to weep, a time to mourn. Paul Brown, it is your time!"

"Ben!" Paul called out sharply, "Watch that cart!" Ben's luggage cart lurched abruptly as one of the wheels suddenly turned the wrong way. The bags shifted, toppling to one side as Paul and Pastor Williams grabbed for them.

Simultaneously, the man with the umbrella came up behind Paul and pretended to stumble. His right arm flailed out in front and to the right, thrusting his umbrella sword-like toward the middle of Paul Brown's back. He did not count on Paul leaning to the side at the last minute, however, and narrowly missed Paul as he lunged for the falling bags. The man's momentum carried him forward as Pastor Williams reached out for the bags as well and the tip of the umbrella caught Pastor Williams in his right shoulder. In a flash, the hidden needle flicked out a fraction of an inch and pumped a minute amount of clear, yellowish liquid into Pastor William's shoulder before snapping back into place.

"Oh! I-I am dreadfully sorry!" apologized the man, "I was in a hurry and my bad knee gave way. I must have been walking too fast. I hope I did not hurt you!"

Startled, Pastor Williams rubbed his shoulder, unaware that something had been in-

jected. "I'm alright," he said, "The end of your umbrella caught me but no harm done. Just smarts a little. How about you?"

"Fine, fine!" answered the man as he turned to leave.

Karen had seen the man stumble. "Are you sure?" she asked with a note of concern in her voice, "Are you able to walk?"

"Sure, sure," said the man, "It happens every once in awhile." He quickly strode off before she could ask anything more.

"That's odd," mused Karen aloud, watching as he walked quickly out of the terminal.

"What's that?" asked Paul, looking in the direction of her gaze.

"Well, for a man who just stumbled as bad as he did on a trick knee, he doesn't seem to be limping or anything." With that Karen turned her concern to Pastor Williams as Ben and Alex finished helping restack the bags. "How's your shoulder, Pastor? That was quite a blow."

Pastor Williams continued to rub his shoulder. "It tingles a little but I'll be o.k. Let's get you folks out to the van and back to Wildwood. There is a lot I want to talk with Paul and Brandon about."

Brandon Hayes waited patiently outside, leaning against the van. He watched as the stream of people leaving the airport quickly swelled and then slowly began to trickle off. He could hardly wait to see his nephew, Paul, and his family again. A sudden movement caught his attention as the little man with the umbrella rushed out of the airport and jumped into the Jaguar parked two spaces ahead of Brandon. He was no longer grinning.

Obviously angry, the little man said something to the driver as he was getting into the car. Brandon only caught a few of the man's words, something about "missed him!" and "wrong one!" before the door slammed shut and the car roared off.

"Seemed a little upset. Must have been here to pick up someone who was on another flight," surmised Brandon to himself.

A few moments later Pastor Williams and the Browns came out of the airport. Brandon forgot all about the man in the Jaguar as he ran up to the Browns. He scooped up little Alex in one hand while wrapping an arm around Ben, giving both of them a big hug. Letting Alex down and Ben go, he turned to give Karen and Paul a welcoming hug as well.

Pastor Williams stood quietly off to the side, watching the family reunion take place. He knew that Brandon Hayes was more a father than an uncle to Paul. Ever since Paul's parents died with Brandon's wife in a tragic car accident shortly before Paul graduated from high school in 1979, Brandon, who had no children of his own, had taken Paul under his wing. In spite of his own loss, he helped Paul, an only child, with the funeral arrangements, taking care of nearly all the expenses himself.

Paul went through a rough time after the death of his parents but Pastor Williams credited the quiet support and steadfast love that Brandon, though grieving deeply over his own loss, had shown him with keeping him on the right track. Paul had gone on to college at Ohio State University, earning his Bachelor of Science in Forest Biology with a minor in Military Science in 1984. Following graduation Paul fulfilled his ROTC obligations by going into active duty with the United States Air Force barely a month later. For a time Pastor Williams, and even Brandon Hayes, had lost contact with Paul but he surfaced again a couple of years later in Columbia.

Brandon was running down a story concerning American drug interdiction efforts in Co-

lumbia when he chanced upon a group of American missionaries operating a medical mission in a remote jungle area. He was interviewing the missionaries, including a group of medical volunteers from Kentucky, for a sidebar story when several American military personnel stumbled into the clinic, surprising everyone. They were all in rough shape, bruised, scratched, and suffering from varying degrees of exhaustion and dehydration. Several had severe cuts and lacerations and at least one had a badly infected gunshot wound.

Brandon pitched in to help a young RN, Karen Florenson—now Karen Brown—sit one of the men down long enough to make a brief examination of his wounds. Much to Brandon's surprise the man turned out to be his nephew, Captain Paul Brown, USAF. He barely recognized him due to the dirt, camouflage paint, and dried blood caked on his face. Besides, it had been nearly two years since they had last seen each other.

As Karen began cleaning out a particularly nasty gash on his leg, Paul filled his uncle in on what had been happening. He had been, as his uncle had last heard, originally trained as an Intelligence Officer and stationed at an airbase in central England. Six months ago, due to his background in forest biology, he was assigned to a special joint Air Force-Army task force based at Homestead Air Force Base in Florida. Actually, his particular unit operated out of the American embassy in Bogata, Columbia.

They had been dropped into the jungle east of Bucaramanga, near the Venezuela border 10 days ago. Their mission was to identify and obtain a rare variety of wild coca that did not produce the chemical compounds that the Colombian drug cartels refined into cocaine and smuggled to America. It was rumored to be growing in the region. Officials at the DEA in Washington hoped that the rare variety could be cultivated and the seeds spread by air over known cocaine producing areas throughout Central and South America. Plant biologists at the Department of Agriculture theorized that it would hybridize with the cultivated coca, drastically reducing the amount of cocaine produced per pound of leaves and drying up the profits.

Unfortunately, things had gone badly wrong six days into the mission. Paul and his men had identified several possible plants and were collecting them when either a rouge Colombian military patrol or a band of rebels, they were not sure which, surprised them. A few shots were fired but the Americans managed to elude the Colombians by sliding down a steep hillside into a rain-swollen creek below. They splashed hurriedly along the creek while the Colombians, reluctant to slide down themselves, raced along the ridge above firing down on them. As the Americans ran along the creek they suddenly hit a slippery steep area where they lost their footing and slid into a larger stream that took them nearly three-quarters of the way down the mountain before they realized what was happening.

By the time they regained their footing the Colombians had given up the chase. Paul and his men took stock of their situation and realized that they were all accounted for. Only one man had been shot and their medic quickly bandaged up his wound and checked over the others. Everyone was banged and cut up to some degree but able to walk. Unfortunately the radio and most of their supplies had been lost or ruined.

Paul headed them downstream figuring that eventually they would reach the Magdalena River and find some way to get in touch with the embassy. Three days later they spotted the mission clinic near the tributary that they had been following. They watched carefully that night and well into the next day, not sure if they should risk approaching it. What little food they had was gone and their comrade's gunshot wound desperately needed treatment.

Paul, a born again Christian, prayed fervently about what to do when he noticed a tall, familiar looking American arrive and enter the clinic. "That looks just like Uncle Brandon!" he

told himself, "But it couldn't be, not out here in the middle of the jungle! But then again, maybe God is trying to tell us its safe to go in."

Cautiously the Americans got to their feet and made their way out of the jungle and into the clearing surrounding the clinic. Paul was the first to enter the building, which was little more than a sheet metal roofed shack, and was surprised to find a number of Americans and several Colombians who were just as surprised to see him. The American missionaries and medical team, after getting over the shock of having a bedraggled band of American Air Force and Army personnel unexpectedly walk in quickly began taking care of them. Paul did not see the man that looked like his uncle at first, at least not until after a pretty, dark-haired nurse named Karen made him sit down so she could look at his wounds.

The man Paul had seen outside came over to help Karen. Paul managed a wry smile, "Uncle Brandon, I presume?"

Paul convinced his uncle not to include him or his men in his story and used the mission's radio to call for a med-evac flight to come and pick them up. They had managed to retain a few of the plants that they had collected but the project was disbanded two months later and Paul's team was dissolved. He wound up stationed at Fort Meade, Maryland, after a brief furlough back home in Wildwood.

Brandon Hayes surprised his nephew with Karen's address and telephone number. A few months later they were engaged to be married on March 2, 1987, one year from the day that Paul had stumbled out of the Colombian jungle and into her life.

Pastor Williams' thoughts were interrupted as the Browns and Bro. Hayes joined him by the van. "How's your shoulder, Pastor?" inquired Brandon while opening the side door of the van. "Karen told me some guy hit you with an umbrella."

"I'm fine," answered Pastor Williams, "Though it still hurts a bit. Sort of tingles. Actually, it is starting to throb now. Burns a little, too. That umbrella must have jabbed me harder than I thought."

"You should let me take a look at it, Pastor!" said Karen motioning to Pastor Williams. She patted the van seat and continued, "Maybe it broke the skin. Let the boys load the luggage in the van and you have a seat here while I take a look."

Pastor Williams grudgingly complied with Karen's request. He might have argued with her but, how do you argue with a nurse? Besides, his shoulder was beginning to hurt more by the moment. The throbbing was turning into a fiery sensation that was spreading across his shoulders and down his back and arm as he removed his jacket and unbuttoned his shirt.

"Paul! Uncle Brandon!" cried Karen, "Come and look at this!"

Paul and Brandon hurried from behind the van, leaving Ben and Alex to finish loading the bags. They gasped at the angry looking bluish-white spot with bright red lines radiating out from the center that was spreading across Pastor Williams shoulder.

"What is that-!" began Paul.

"I think we should head to the hospital," interrupted Karen, "I don't like the look of this at all. Something must have been on the tip of that umbrella and it got into his shoulder. He needs to have this checked out by a doctor right away."

"Southwest is not too far away," said Brandon, "Paul, you get the rest of the stuff and the kids loaded and I'll start the van!"

Paul and the kids hurried to get the remaining bags into the van. Karen got Pastor Williams settled in the van and climbed in next to him with a serious look on her face. Paul could

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