

# Chapter 2

## New York City, New York

“Lie flat on the floor!” the man shouted again. He aimed his weapon at the stunned group of people. This time everyone obeyed. “There are plenty of other jobs in the world. This one isn’t worth dying for.”

Daring one last glance at the figure in the dark mask who was grasping the large, solid black machine gun, the night security guard quickly obeyed the order and flattened his body out on the rough plank wood floor of the large truck.

“Hands flat out in front of you where I can see them,” the man with the gun ordered, this time directing the command at him. Barely cognizant of his own actions, the security guard saw his shaking hands shoot out in front of him like a jolted Superman who forgot this position was necessary to fly.

Motion a few feet away caught the black-clad man’s attention. Without a word from anyone, the security guard heard the sharp, quick chirp of a silenced gun go off just above his head. “My God,” he thought shaking, “has someone been shot?”

In answer to his concern, another voice shouted, “That was your one and only warning shot. All of you stay still, stay quiet and don’t move a fucking inch. Challenge us and you will lose.”

A few seconds later the guard heard another, more calm voice say, “We’re not here to harm you. Do as we say and you will all be released within the hour. Now, our thermograph scanners indicated there were thirty-three people in the building. Our research indicated this number was consistent for this night of the week. However, we need to make sure this is everyone. You all work the night shift here every night during the week. You all work together. You were all escorted out and loaded onto this truck together. Does anyone know of a co-worker who was in the building who is not on this truck now?”

The security guard looked around at the faces of the other people lying on the floor of the truck, but no one spoke.

“Anyone remaining in the building will not be alive tomorrow. So I’ll ask one more time, is there anyone still inside?”

Still, none of the prisoners spoke.

“Very well,” the man said.

The guard had worked in the building longer than anyone else and knew without a doubt that thirty-three was the correct count for this time of night. Third shift folks left at ten p.m., while the first shift didn't come in until midnight. This gave the security guards and cleaning people, who constituted the thirty-three people in the truck, time to clean and secure the building. During that time, the only things running in the building were the computers, faxes, and the large presses.

“Restraints!” one of the armed men ordered.

The guard watched as several men dressed head to toe in black quickly and expertly secured each person's wrists with a plastic tie, while a few others used foot-long bungee cords to bind their feet. Once each person was restrained, another figure clad in black ran a long, nylon cord through each person's arm, making one loop per person. After every person was threaded, the ends were tied to metal loops bolted into the wall of the truck.

The guard was scared, but despite his shakiness something told him these men were not there to harm the people. Trying not to be too obvious, he carefully counted eight figures total, all dressed from head to toe in black. Each wore a black ski mask and carried either a large handgun or a semiautomatic machine gun. They moved quickly and rarely spoke to each other.

“Seven minutes, thirty seconds,” one of the men yelled.

“Incendiary devices in place near the presses. Charges are synced. The rest of the fireworks are in place and ready for the show.”

“Check,” another man confirmed.

The guard watched as their captors adroitly wove through the bodies. Each man seemed to know his role, as was evident in each precise, measured movement. They reminded him of seasoned assembly line workers. Efficient, fast and dispassionate. Taking them all in together, the guard thought they looked like a school of synchronized black fish. The motions of one unconsciously affected the movement of the others.

“What do the sensors for the adjoining buildings show?” The guard was surprised to find that this time the voice was that of a woman. Unfortunately, he could not see which black figure had spoken.

“No heat in either building.”

“Rear exterior?” again it was the female's voice.

“Negative. The box is cold.”

“Confirm minimum safe distance,” the woman ordered.

From the front of the truck a man's voice said calmly, “Quarter mile for debris, two to avoid responders.”

He was transfixed by the rapid and exact execution of each task. Watching the two men with automatic weapons, it was obvious they had experience doing this sort of thing. With his cheek pressed to the wood plank floor of the truck, the guard cautiously observed the swift, calculated movements of the two

weapons as they shifted aim from person to person. The guard felt certain they would not hesitate to fire a few rounds into anyone who posed a threat to them – or whatever it was they had come to do.

Before the thought had left his mind, the guard saw a blur of motion as Buck, one of the other guards, managed to flip himself onto his back and throw his feet over his head in an attempt to reach a gun the guard could now see was tucked into an ankle holster. The guard saw the whole thing in slow motion. The man's fingers came within inches of the six-shooter's handle when a single, muffled shot hiccupped from the rear of the truck. The guard saw the struggling man's tied hands thrown backwards a split second after a hole appeared in his right palm. The guard couldn't be certain whether the spray of blood and cartilage hit the wall and several other prisoners before or after the powerful, muted growl of anguish escaped the man's throat through the gag covering his mouth. The guard froze, expecting further retribution for the man's actions, but nothing happened. He could hear the muffled sounds of panic from several of the other prisoners. The shot had jolted him as well, but he was still watching as much of the sideways scene as he could see. The odd angle of his head, combined with the tension that came from straining his eyes and neck, was giving him a throbbing headache. But despite the pain, he couldn't steal his eyes away from the odd spectacle before him.

"Triage," the woman's voice ordered evenly. The guard heard the motion of footsteps.

"You were all warned. Now one of you has chosen to validate this warning. Any further deviation from our instructions will be met with force. Let me say this again," she paused and made eye contact with those who had dared meet her masked gaze, "We are not here to harm any of you. You are victims of circumstance. Hard as it may be to believe at this moment, had we not rounded you all up, you would be living the last two minutes of your lives right now."

The woman raised a two-way radio to her mouth and said, "Move out. T minus two minutes."

The guard heard the truck's engine come to life. An instant later a gear was thrown and the truck began moving. He tried to catch a glimpse of Buck, but he could only see the two black figures kneeling down beside him amidst the shaking bodies of the other prisoners. There was a blur of motion in which he saw medical tape, gauze, and a syringe.

"Sensors?" the woman questioned again.

"The box is still cold," a man's voice responded.

"Distance?" she asked into the radio.

"Almost a half mile from the heat."

The guard heard faint beeps he thought sounded like a cell phone being dialed.

"Gray," the woman said. "The box is clear and cold."

After a few seconds she said in answer to the other party's questions, "Ringside."

There was a pause and some muted talk from the cell phone.

Again she answered, “All accounted for. What about the other teams? Are they green?”

She listened, never taking her eyes off the people tied up on the floor of the truck.

“All five sites?” she asked.

She nodded her head, apparently approving of the answer she received. Then, with what the guard guessed was a wry smile beneath her mask, the woman answered, “No, we forgot the marshmallows.”

The guard heard another beep and a click as the woman closed the phone.

“Stop the truck,” she yelled. The truck pulled over to the side of the road and rumbled to a stop. The guard could tell the engine was still running. The vibration shook the loose planks he and the other prisoners were lying on.

The woman in black turned suddenly and looked straight at the guard. The cell phone had disappeared, but it looked as if she were still holding something. Her gaze was firm and full of intensity, but as he would later remark, even through the mask and the concentration, there was also a hint of sadness. She spoke solemnly and said, “You’re all witnesses to history. Let’s hope it’s all for the best.” The woman backed up against the wall of the truck, all the while maintaining her stare at the people bound on the floor. She raised her right hand and the guard could see she did in fact have something gripped tightly in her gloved hand. Her hand obscured the object, but he could see that on the bottom of the object was what looked like a flat, red button that was flashing.

In a deep, strong voice the woman yelled, “Fire in the hole!!” The interior of the truck seemed to contract as everyone braced for what came next.

## **Virginia Beach, Virginia**

Tzaria strolled casually down the wide boardwalk. Though she was a hair over six feet tall, she blended easily with the throng of grinning and pointing tourists, most of whom were taking pictures or throwing food to flocks of bold and aggressive sea birds. Few people even noticed the passing of the tall, quiet woman walking alone.

She wore comfortable white tennis shoes, loose black cotton pants, a white tank top, and a light gray shirt. Beneath the back rim of a tan tweed summer hat, rested a tight bun of dark brown hair. She wore dark, oversized sunglasses, a round silver necklace bearing a Macedonia Star, silver hoop earrings, a simple wedding ring, and a heavy double-headed lion torc bracelet. Completing the outfit was an oversized backpack purse and a small silver camera dangling from her wrist. Her gait was intentionally casual and unhurried, which was exactly the opposite of how she felt.

Tzaria stopped next to the weathered wood railing and took in her surroundings. To her left was a wide, white beach standing in stark contrast to the dark green Atlantic. The postcard sands were speckled with tall reedy grasses, lumbering white seagulls, two whitewashed lifeguard towers, and fresh tire tracks

from the frequent beach patrol trucks. Over the ocean and eastern horizon she could see a solid line of low white clouds. Otherwise the skies were sunny and clear. There were no ships in sight. She thought she could just make out the faint outline of an oil platform, though she couldn't be certain.

Further up the beach she spotted a large green tractor slowly making its way north. The tractors kept the beaches combed and clear of manmade and natural litter and biota, but she preferred her beaches au naturel. Picture perfect beaches were for painters to portray. Nature had taken four and a half billion years to perfect its cleanup techniques, working around whatever life and the universe threw at it. And though many would disagree with her, Tzaria felt certain nature was perfectly capable of working around mankind, with plenty of time to keep the beaches clean. Despite years of meddling, alteration, and blind consumption, the planet was not the domain of man – man was a guest of the planet. Best not to push Mother Nature's patience, lest she decide to exterminate the relatively young and decidedly ruinous species.

Wandering down the uneven walkway, Tzaria pondered nature and the universe. It was a habit she indulged in when there was time to kill. Chaos. Entropy. Natural order. These characteristics were related – siblings of the same contained system of life, death, and reorganization. Such topics had fascinated Tzaria since she was a child. Her parents, Russian defectors, had lain low in a quiet village in southern Greece, opening a small grocery store. When she wasn't working in the store, going to school, or struggling with the local Greek dialect, Tzaria would walk through the hillsides and along the beach.

Sometimes her father would walk with her. He would explain to her how nature breathed in cycles. Seed, water and nutrients, plant and flower, pollination and baby seeds, and voila the process began again. He spoke of animal life in similar terms. Humans were the same, as was the planet. Everything moved and progressed in cycles. Managed by the most ancient and sophisticated landlord known to man. Little did her father know that of the millions of species on the planet, out of the billions that had existed, one single species would begin to undermine the landlord with mind-blowing speed and potency. If her father were walking with her now, he would be astounded at the damage mankind had wrought thus far and would loathe what seemed to be on the horizon. No doubt he would see a dark, ominous future where...

“Excuse me, Ma'am, what time do you have?”

The dark thoughts receded quickly as she turned to find a middle-aged man and woman looking expectantly at her. The voice and question had caught her off guard, but she recovered quickly and said, “Signomi? Ime apó Ellada.” She donned a look of confusion. The man, realizing she didn't speak English, pointed at his wrist. She smiled and said, “Ne, ne. Ti ora ine,” and nodded enthusiastically. She reached into her pocket and extracted her father's old Swiss pocket watch. She opened the engraved gold cover and turned the face of the watch towards the couple.

“Oh, how exquisite!” the woman said staring at the watch, “It’s beautiful.” Tzaria wanted to smile, but knew better than to show any comprehension. She saw the husband was also surprised to see an old pocket watch. No doubt he’d expected a wristwatch or cell phone.

“Signomi, ala then milao Iglezika.” Tzaria feigned a look of apology and added clumsily, “Tourista. Not English.”

“That’s all right, Dear,” the woman said patting her hand. “The time was all we wanted.” The woman pointed at the watch, nodded and smiled.

Tzaria smiled sheepishly, returned the watch to her pocket and said, “Efharisto,” and gave the couple a polite nod. She turned and kept walking. Though her cover didn’t require her to be in character every moment, the more she was seen and heard as a foreigner, the better. Practice makes perfect.

The name of Leandra Nestor was the outcome of an Internet search of Greek names. Tzaria, having lived in Greece until she was nineteen, had thought it wise to create a personality from her home country. She had never worked under an assumed name or personality before and thought familiarity could only strengthen her performance. Additionally, she’d been pleased to learn that a number of women by the name of Leandra Nestor were scattered all over Greece and neighboring countries. After piecing together the name, she’d spent the next few weeks building a reasonable background. Date of birth, hometown, early schooling, orphanage years, an unremarkable adolescence and so on. The details she chose were compiled using real histories and demographics of Greek women with the same or similar names whom she’d located on various dating and personal websites, blogs, and one webcast. The latter had also been helpful in practicing her Greek, which she’d not spoken regularly in almost fifteen years. Once her committee had gone over the details and ironed out the oddities and inconsistencies, the information was sent over to *The Aenamaia’s* technical team headed by Osiro who then set about impregnating the Internet and three-dozen government and civilian databases with the Grecian tourist whose name translated as “the traveling lion woman.”

Looking down at her bracelet, Tzaria smiled. She’d been pleased with the name and personality. So much so that if all went well, she would consider replacing her current assumed name Tzaria with one that reminded her of better, simpler times. When her family had been forced to leave Greece, her father had whispered to her, “You can never go back again child.” He’d forced a smile then added, “But your mind is your domain alone. And there, you can visit and live anywhere you want.” During hard times, Tzaria had found enough comfort in that idea to get her through. And when she tired of contemplating existence, her mind would sweep her away over the ocean, back to the seaside towns of southern Greece. And she would again feel at peace, if only for a moment.

Unfortunately, Tzaria knew it unlikely she’d find much peace here. The tension building throughout her body confirmed that much. Once she’d accomplished her mission, Virginia Beach would be one place

she'd be unlikely to visit again. Hence the reason for the early start today. She'd spent the last week shadowing her target, verifying his movements matched the recon she'd been provided. So far the man had been right on queue every hour of every day, though keeping up with him had been more difficult than she'd expected. The self-proclaimed New Millennia Voice of God, sent to earth to speak to the Lord's children and provide the righteous a proper path to eternal salvation, moved about like a hyperactive pinball, bouncing from office to office, TV studio to corporate board room – even to the racing track on occasion. For a man who convinced millions of people every Sunday that the days of Armageddon would soon begin, he spent an inordinate amount of time protecting and growing his billion dollar net worth.

Over the course of the last twenty years, Gordian Iman William Robinson, known to his friends and fans as “Gipper,” had risen from a simple Baptist preacher to the wealthiest and most powerful Christian Televangelist in America. Through her research Tzaria had learned a great deal – not only about the numerous sources of his wealth, but also the jagged and shadowed path that had led to power. It had been a painful and mind-numbing experience that at times had threatened to overwhelm her. On one occasion she'd found herself standing at her front door, coat and gloves on, carrying a fully loaded rifle case in one hand and an explosive kit in the other.

Robinson's dossier was open on her desk, the address of his mansion highlighted. Slowly, she'd set down the two cases and looked out of the spy hole in her door. Half expecting to see Gray looking back at her, all she saw was the lights from the houses across the street. But in her mind she saw something else – the highways and byways that could take her to Virginia Beach by car in just under eight hours. All she had to do was get in her car, start it up, and drive. In less than a day she was certain she could take care of Robinson once and for all and be on her way home well before anyone knew what had happened. Only then could she purge her mind of all that she knew. The dirty money, the children, the adultery, extortion, countless bribes to businesses and government personnel, and worst of all – millions upon millions of hopeful, needy minds drinking the black poison spewed forth by the wretched man and his army of brainwashed disciples.

She'd stood there facing the front door for what seemed like an eternity, weighing her options. Was she ready to go it alone? Without the help and support of *The Aenamaia*? Did she really think she could pull it off on her own? She wondered if they would try and stop her. Of course they would. And what would she accomplish? Separation from the only real family she'd known since her mother and father had passed away. *The Aenamaia* might very well take her back, but what did that matter when she knew she'd never be able to face any of them again. Was it worth it? Even with *The Aenamaia*'s full support, sticking to the plan as it was would cost her plenty. Could she risk everything she cared about just to expedite the demise of a man for whom she only held contempt? “What was the cost?” she'd thought. “What was the cost?”

Tzaria pondered that same question now as she stared across the street at the white and gray-haired man standing next to the pearl white stretch limousine. “Well, well, well,” she said to herself, “The Gipper hath cometh.”

Just then her cell phone rang. She touched the screen and put the phone to her ear. “Yia Sou Oculus. Ti kanis?”

“I’m fine,” Osiro answered. “But alas, ala then milao Elinika.”

“But you *are* speaking Greek, Dear Boy,” she replied, still keeping her gaze fixed on Robinson.

“I only know how to say, ‘I don’t speak Greek.’ Beyond that I’m limited to the menu items at the local Gyros café.”

Despite the intense feelings of anticipation she felt, Tzaria smiled. “Well, we’ll have to work on that. I assume you’re calling because you see what I see.”

“Almost,” Osiro added in his dry manner, “I see you and the look on your face. So in a manner of speaking, yes, I see what you see.”

“Apollyon stands next to his chariot. Praetorians have already gone inside. They’ll wait in the lobby until the master is satisfied.”

“As the story tells. At half past the apex the carnal appetites of Apollyon are satiated. Artemis the great female warrior must be in place and ready to hunt.”

Tzaria’s jaw tightened momentarily. She relaxed, took a deep breath, and then said, “Okay. Enough with the mythology talk. Is the line secure?”

“I never utter a word unless,” Osiro said, a small trace of condescension in his voice.

Normally Tzaria thoroughly enjoyed a good vocal sword fight with Osiro, but she knew there was a schedule to keep. She hadn’t gotten all dolled-up just to miss her chance.

Osiro must have sensed her mood and asked, “Are you sure you’re ready to go in there?”

“Yes,” she said firmly, “I’ve waited a long time for this. I’m not going to sit on my ass and stew for another week.”

The line was silent for a moment. “Cold, methodical, and *im-personal*,” Osiro said. “Hate, passion and anger cloud judgment. All the work you’ve done won’t do you much good if you aren’t alive to enjoy the result.”

“Cold,” she echoed.

“Sub-zero,” he confirmed. “Contact’s name is Reginald. He’s a simple, devout and pious Christian follower...with gambling, drug and drinking problems. Loading dock, money, smile, name, stairwell. The recording for the radio spot will only take an hour. When you’re in the reverend’s private suite, dial me up and keep the phone nearby. I’ll be your ears.”

“My own guardian angel?” she said nervously.

“Something like that. Above all else, remember the panic alert hanging around his neck. If he senses trouble and activates the alert, the odds of your getting out safely are not favorable. Grab it, give the Gipper his due, and kick-start the chase.”

“I understand. The alert is the rabbit. The Praetorians, the dogs. Dogs chase rabbit while Caesar’s ultimate beliefs are proved right or wrong in the span of a moment.”

“You’re ready. Get moving, Leandra,” Osiro said, “and be careful.”

Tzaria hung up the phone and sighed. “Osiro doesn’t know,” she thought. They were all deceivers to some degree, but never between each other. She hated the feeling the deception brought. She felt dirty, like she hadn’t bathed in weeks. But it was necessary. *The Aenamaia* wouldn’t condone her decision. Perhaps that was as it should be. She would bear the burden alone. And should her gambit prove successful, she’d gladly accept all the credit. Assuming they ever spoke to her again. Reward never came without risk. And one could never live life to the fullest by denying the possibility that death was around every corner.

Movement across the street caught her eye. She watched as a well-dressed man burst through the front door of the Hilton Virginia Beach Oceanfront hotel and made a beeline for Robinson. The man wore a formal three-piece black suit with gold embroidery that made Tzaria think of a turn-of-the-century banker or oil tycoon. Even from across the street, Tzaria could tell that the tall, lanky man was either flamingly gay or an unusually flamboyant heterosexual – her file had a question mark on that point. She’d guess the former. Though Reverend Robinson publicly scorned homosexuality and damned all gays, it was well known that many of the people he did business with and employed had to be quietly tolerated by Grande Nuevo Messiah. One of a host of hypocritical notches on the Second Comings’ flaming sword.

The man in question was Preston Morton, one of Robinson’s most trusted marketing and PR advisors. Morton’s primary role was to ensure everything Robinson did or said to the public or his constituency was custom-crafted to deliver the appropriate message. Regulating what comes out of another man’s mouth is a tough job – even when it wasn’t a radical, racist, sexist evangelical preacher. Morton’s job was made all the more difficult by the demonstrated fact that Robinson’s mouth, like so many other televangelists, had a tendency to say whatever it damn well pleased. The Internet was full of ridiculous claims, quotes and predictions that Tzaria was certain never appeared on any of Morton’s queue cards. Nevertheless, Morton was always on hand to ensure that at least the pre-recorded messages were both accurate and poignant.

As soon as the two men had disappeared into the hotel lobby, the stretch limousine pulled away from the curb and exited onto Atlantic Avenue to find a parking space in a nearby lot, where she knew it would stay until summoned. This weekly event was one of the few times the Gipper did not keep a precise schedule. Surveillance notes had shown he could be in his expensive hotel suite anywhere from a half hour to three hours. Tzaria recalled feeling sick when she’d learned the variance often coincided with the number

of young ladies who showed up for what one of them quoted the Reverend as having called “spiritual penetration.” Today there would be only one other occupant in the Gipper’s suite, one in desperate need of enlightenment and freedom from mental bondage.

Tzaria took a deep breath, turned on her digital camera, and began walking towards the side of the hotel. Every so often she would stop and snap a picture or two. “Keep in character,” she kept thinking. “Greek tourist. Signomi, ala then milao Iglezika,” she whispered to herself. “Sorry, I don’t speak English. ‘Dumb Greek tourist,’” she thought with a grin. Keep it light. Focus on the plans...both of them.

“Reverend!” Preston shouted as he spotted Robinson getting into the elevator.

Robinson pressed the button for the top floor, then watched with amusement as the shiny elevator doors closed a moment before Preston Morton could reach them. The familiar look of frustration and veiled anger on Preston’s face always made him chuckle. It seemed that man was always a few steps behind him. Every week that dimwitted fairy tried to control what he said during the recording session – to steer his words into the middle of the road and keep them there, an endeavor that usually failed.

True, he willingly employed Morton and paid him handsomely for his services. And when it came to enriching dialogue with delicately crafted half-truths that sounded honest and factual, Preston was first-rate. Around the office he was referred to as the Forked Silver Tongue, a title he’d more than earned. So much so that G.W. Bush’s people had tried on several occasions to tempt Preston away from his ministry. But just like every follower and member of his constituency, Preston was even more interested in eternal salvation and forgiveness for his many trespasses than he was in money and material possessions.

Unfortunately, even after years of service, the man still failed to understand what was necessary in order to build an evangelical empire. People don’t pony up money they can’t afford to lose in order to pay for anything in *the middle*. They needed a regularly scheduled dosage of his special blend of fear, divine justice, deliverance from evil – and most importantly, a phone book-sized catalog of people to blame for all of their own inequities, doubts, and insecurities. Feed them that cocktail, build the addiction, and they’ll gladly dig deeper than the well runs. He recalled what Reverend Falwell had told him one night over a decanter of twelve-year old Scotch: “Empower the masses with judgment and righteousness and there’s no end to how much they’ll bleed for you.” Poor bastard, that Falwell. Jimmy brought the fire and brimstone, but despite his own advice, he never quite learned how to truly bleed the flock. Sure he had a huge following, but his business skills were for shit. Poor, dumb bastard.

The elevator chimed, indicating he’d reached the top floor. After a short pause the doors slid open. He stepped into the empty hall and headed for his corner suite. Thoughts of Falwell receded, replaced by warm recollections of the fiery performance he’d given during the recording session for this evening’s broadcast. “This one was solid gold,” he thought. He’d been in rare form. The content had been spicy, enough so to give Preston another ulcer, but it didn’t matter. By the close of business tomorrow, the day’s

bankroll would break his all-time record, as would the outcry from the entire gay community. He smiled and laughed. “Thank the Lord for delivering unto my hands the homosexuals,” he said to himself, and laughed again. The only way the world could get any better would be if gay men could have abortions. Until such a miracle was bestowed upon him, the controversies he and others like him stirred around homosexuality would fuel the fires of his success for years to come. “And a good thing too,” he thought. 9/11 had proved profitable for a spell, but it was a touchy subject with a short lifespan. After 9/11 he’d publicly supported Bush and the war, but that had done little to fuel the fire of righteousness. Evolution had been a good target until those two Intelligent Design idiots Behe and Fuller stepped on their dicks in Dover. What a shambles that had been. He’d gotten one last hurrah in another ulcer-inducing statement condemning the entire town of Dover, but nothing ever came of it. Islam and Muslims had proved profitable for a time, but he’d backed off considerably after Van Gogh’s murder in late 2004. “There’d be no glory in getting killed by an angry towel-head,” he thought. Martyrdom just wasn’t his thing. Best to stay out of the way and let them focus on killing each other. The Lord loves it when Muslims kill each other. It’s God’s modern-day version of Gladiator.

No, hammering the gays and feminists was his meal ticket. Those topics did well anytime – on the radio, on the 700 Club, at the university. The *where* made no fundamental difference, whereas the *when* was governed by distinct peaks and valleys. Over the years he’d discovered what he termed “fundraising seasonality.” Raging against gays and feminists always produced good profits, but he’d notice many years ago that there were patterns in the giving relative to the time of year. At this very moment he had several bright students at the university crunching the numbers. What they had found so far was early spring and late autumn were the most profitable times, though they weren’t quite sure why.

He’d shared this revelation on a visit to Jim Bakker while he served time in Rochester, Minnesota. Bakker had noticed a similar trend during his now infamous days of “prosperity theology.” Jimmy wagered spring was good because people were piss-mad with cabin fever after the long winter. They were equally pissed in autumn knowing the confinement, cold and cabin fever were about to start again. The explanation coincided with studies he’d read about peak times of depression and anxiety, so maybe Jimmy had nailed it. Like Falwell, Bakker had failed miserably in the business, but Jimmy sure had a unique talent for simplifying complex problems, except of course, his own. Regardless, he and his student researchers would flush out the real answer, then put it to the test. “Gay prosperity,” he thought with a chuckle. “Wrong. *My* prosperity.”

Still grinning at the irony, Robinson fished out his electronic key and opened the door to his suite. Closing the door behind him, he walked absently past the security panel into the tile foyer, removed his jacket coat and hung it on the coat stand. The elation he’d felt after the recording session was starting to wear off. If he was to be ready for his weekly visitors, he’d better have a pick-me-up before popping his magic performance pills. Last week he’d almost lost his rigidity before wearing out that young Asian girl.

He'd made a note to up his dosage slightly this week, as he'd been promised two new pristine Russian imports for tonight.

The appetites he satisfied once a week came at a high price. Absolute secrecy was paramount. If he were ever caught, the weakness of the flesh and the influence of Satan could always be tapped to help soften the blow, but time and history had proven this to be a one-time fallback only – one usually followed by sizeable damages and a lot of back-peddling and groveling. Best to keep that ace for a real calamity. That's where Haggard came in. Robinson had been extremely careful in selecting a single individual to handle procurement, delivery, and to manage the young girls and boys when he was finished with them. Most were foreign. The ones he was a little rough with were always sent back to their home countries. The others were never aware of who the man in the dark had been. And with rare exceptions, most never came back for a repeat visit. Haggard was thorough and methodical. He had a clever system for getting his prizes in and out of the suite and hotel with no unwanted witnesses, including the youngsters themselves.

Haggard had been resistant in the beginning, but he owed his freedom to Robinson, who could easily put him back in prison for life. Robinson had called in a huge favor, and Haggard knew it. After a few months of smooth sailing and even smoother cash payments, Haggard had relaxed into the role. Even commenting on how much he enjoyed the weekly challenges of finding quality stock, coordinating delivery and return, and covertly exporting those who couldn't be allowed to stay. The lingo was always business-like, never specific or personal. Names were never spoken. Anyone who managed to tap and record a call would think Robinson was paying for cigars, cognac, rugs, artwork, delicacies, etc. In one instance Haggard had referred to a young Roman boy who'd come all the way from Vatican City as a "sweet and tender ivory cherub statue sent with best wishes by the College of Cardinals." That had given him a good laugh. And oh, how sweet the boy had been.

Thoughts of the young boy made his mouth water and he realized how parched he was. He walked into the large living area and made his way towards the crystal glasses and carafe next to the large plasma screen. He was again thinking of his radio speech when he saw something out of the corner of his eye that caught his attention. Something was odd. He stared at the plasma, the bookshelf, the entertainment center...and then he saw it. The wall on the far side of the plasma was bare. It took him a moment to realize what was supposed to be hanging in the space. It was the large wooden crucifix, given to him by Oliver O'Grady as a thank-you before he fled to Ireland. Robinson had been instrumental in persuading the prison parole board to release the now infamous pedophile and had quietly helped finance his one-way trip to Ireland. The priest had returned the favor by sending him an authentic Irish crucifix that had once hung in the Cathedral of the Assumption in Thurles. O'Grady had never explained how he'd come by the three-foot tall cross, and Robinson had thought it best not to ask.

But now it was gone. Must've been those damn cleaning people. He could feel the blood rush to his face. Last month they'd forgotten to dust. Two weeks ago they'd failed to re-hang his painting of Mr. Rob, the half-million dollar thoroughbred colt he'd purchased a few years back. Now they'd removed his antique crucifix. "A hell-worthy trespass," he thought angrily. One he'd be sure to mention on his next show. In the meantime, he needed to be sure it wasn't here and that it had in fact been stolen. "Maybe those stupid spics put it in the bedroom," he thought wryly.

He was about to head for the bedroom when something occurred to him. The alarm tone hadn't sounded when he'd walked in. Normally the security panel beeped until he entered his eight-digit pin to silence it. Rage welled in him as he realized the cleaning people had also failed to re-arm the alarm when they left. He would have someone's head on a platter before the day was done. First he would locate his crucifix, then he would bury it in some illegal's useless, empty skull.

Before Robinson could turn towards the bedroom he felt a sharp blow to the back of his neck. The pain spread through his body with explosive, debilitating speed. It was like a controlled demolition blast tearing through his structure, weakening bones and muscles. Unable to support his own weight, he fell to his knees, barely noticing the unyielding granite tile. He tried to yell but the electric pain shooting out from the top of his spine prevented him from making a sound. The muscles in his body constricted, followed by a wave of nausea and dizziness. In that moment a thought formed amidst the pain, "He'd just been assaulted in his own suite." At the same instant the realization hit him, something struck him hard on the side of his head. The force of the impact sent his already stunned body crashing into the wall. Having lost control of his faculties, Robinson collapsed onto the hard tile floor and rolled onto his back. Slowly, and with considerable effort, he opened his eyes. Though his vision was blurry from the tears, he could just make out the image of a figure standing over him holding a large cross. His cross. The person carelessly tossed the large crucifix onto the black leather sofa and stared down at him. "It's a woman," he thought. "But why? Who is she?" Before he could utter the question, the woman's foot came down hard on his face and blackness engulfed him.

"Atheism leaves a man to sense, to philosophy, to natural piety, to laws, to reputation, all which may be guides to an outward moral virtue, though religion were not; but superstition dismounts all these, and erects an absolute monarchy in the minds of men...the master of superstition is the people; and arguments are fitted to practice, in a reverse order."

Gordian Iman William Robinson was frozen in an abstract and indescribable darkness. The quote, one he'd used many times in his sermons hammering on atheists and secular humanists, seemed to hang before him in a kind of vague, watery limbo. The words, uttered by one of the earliest known godless heathens, Sir Francis Bacon, now seemed to embody a consciousness. There was form here. Intent.

Purpose. Though what it might all mean was lost on Robinson, whose own consciousness struggled to discern basic reality. Half of his mind was convinced this was simply a dream taking place in a dark, solitary room somewhere. The other half suspected the situation was much worse. The darkness was terrifying, though he wasn't sure why. The pitch-black space offered no warmth, light, orientation, and most importantly, no options. The place that time and space had forgotten. He felt cramped and immobile, almost claustrophobic. No dreams or calming images would come to him. His normal sense of God and his own divinity was gone. It was as if existence itself had vanished – or had been permanently supplanted, leaving only nothingness in its place. And still, the conscious quote was there – living, breathing, waiting, and looking down on him with disdain. It was alive. Judgmental. Unforgiving. But could it be real? What was happening to him? How had he come to be trapped in a void, alone with only these blasphemous words like a heavy weight burdening his blind self? “No,” he thought. He was not alone. He was certain of it. There was someone or something there. He could taste its acidity. Close. Yes, very close now.

And then everything changed in a flash. Sensation overwhelmed his thoughts. The dark room receded and vanished into oblivion, replaced by an awareness of tightness, a feeling of constriction. Numbness. Before the haze faded completely, another wave broke over him. This time the darkness vanished, replaced by bright light. It was sunlight. Robinson gasped desperately, clawing towards consciousness. Through sheer will and concentration he slowly forced his heavy eyes to open. The brightness was acute, and his eyelids clamped down tightly. Spots bounced animatedly around his vision. He was shivering. It was then that he realized he was cold and wet. His breaths came in short fits as his body worked to deliver heat to the gelid and wet areas. After a few seconds he slowly opened his eyes and tried to focus. White and blue filled his vision. Clouds above an endless expanse of deep blue water. It was the ocean. Recognition dawned and his heartbeat quickened. He knew that horizon. It was his panorama. One he'd paid a lot of money to have at his disposal. Relief at the familiar sight quickly faded as he recalled what he'd sensed before the cold and shivers. He couldn't move...and someone was near.

“Good afternoon, Reverend,” said a mild voice. “Or should I call you Bill?”

It was a woman. He tried to turn towards the voice, but found he was unable to move. What was happening? Anger welled up inside him. He shouted, “What in the hell is going on here!” but the words were muffled. Several things occurred to him at once: he was sitting down, something was across his mouth preventing him from speaking, and he was unable to move his arms and legs. In an instant his anger vanished, replaced by a gripping panic.

The woman seemed to sense what he was thinking. “I figured a mouthpiece like you would start screaming like a little girl as soon as you woke up. Thank God for duct tape.” The woman's voice was serious and yet also sarcastic and playful. Robinson tried to shout again, but all that came out was a low, indiscernible string of gibberish.

“Must be strange for the ‘Right Hand of God’ to find himself bound and gagged, as helpless as say...a confused twelve year old Vietnamese girl?” An unmistakable razor’s edge laced the woman’s voice. “Or maybe two eleven year old boys from Vatican City sent here to ‘study’ under your expert tutelage?” Robinson could tell the woman was pacing behind him as she spoke.

“And what did they learn, Reverend? Did they feel the touch of God? Or were those simply your perverted, eager hands? Did they find anything different here than all the other children? Or the prostitutes? What about the few who left without bruises and cuts? Did they leave with their faith intact? Well? You sick, seditious fucker!”

Robinson was about to protest when a heavy object struck the back of his neck. He groaned in pain, though the tape over his mouth muted the sound. The next moment he caught sight of something dark out of the corner of his eye a split second before it struck his side. The Reverend heard a dull crack as the object impacted his ribs. Moisture welled in his eyes an instant before the terrible pain hit. He let out another involuntary series of low, muffled howls. The tears streamed down his face. He half expected to taste the saltiness, but the duct tape prevented the liquid from reaching his lips. Instinctively he tried to buckle forward only to find his torso was locked in an upright position. He groaned again as a new onslaught of pain and nausea swept over him.

The flow of time governing Robinson’s life seemed to stand still. In the span of a few moments, his whole world had contracted. Every minute of his existence now was committed exclusively to breathing through the thick streams of pain flowing from his neck and ribs. Bouncing around his mind was a potent mixture of mortal terror and the most profound feelings of regret he had ever experienced. Though ironically, the focus of the regret was having been caught off guard.

As the country’s most popular televangelist and spokesman for God, he had many enemies. Over the years he’d dedicated significant funds and resources to keeping him safe from those who would silence the country’s most beloved spiritual voice. Security and surveillance systems, a team of bodyguards, thin next-generation Kevlar vests for public appearances, even a Walther PPK he kept in a custom-made lower back holster. Through the fog of pain, Robinson suddenly wondered if he still had the pistol with him. Carefully he shuffled around in his chair trying to see if he could feel the weight of the gun and holster, but he couldn’t be sure. Just then something caught his eye. Through the blurry tears he noticed several items sitting on the windowsill a few feet from where he sat. For a brief moment the pain ebbed, partially replaced by confused curiosity. Blinking rapidly to clear away the tears, Robinson tried to focus his eyes. Like a camera coming into focus, his blurred vision resolved.

Sunlight pouring in through the window illuminated the three evenly placed objects sitting on the windowsill. The reverend’s brow knotted as he tried to figure out what he was seeing. On the far left sat a glass vial that resembled a clear CO2 cartridge. The thin container was roughly four inches tall and was filled

with a deep blue liquid that reminded him of a rare sapphire he'd once purchased and given to a senator's wife – a luxurious velvet blue that could only impart sophistication and wealth. He'd told the woman the stone was the exact color of God's eyes. The line had been a means to an end, but staring at the vial now, he wondered if it could be true. He wondered how soon he might see for himself.

With some difficulty Robinson stole his gaze from the beautiful translucent liquid and noticed another small glass container to the far right of his field of vision. This vial was shorter than the other. It was about the size of a D battery, with a similar cylindrical shape, and it was filled with an opaque, milky white liquid. A label stuck to the glass ampule displayed an ominous black biohazard symbol, which Robinson had always thought looked like a symbol for the devil. At this moment, something told him he just might be right about that.

Sitting between the two glass vials with the barrel pointed in his direction was his silver and black double-action Walther PPK. Robinson had no way of knowing for sure, but he felt certain the gun's magazine was full. He always kept it loaded, something he immediately regretted doing.

A second wave of pain fired through his body. Reverend Robinson winced, then coughed awkwardly. The duct tape kept the expelled fluid from escaping which caused him to gag and cough again. This time saliva and mucus shot out of his nose. The feeling disgusted him but he fought back the impulse to cough again.

“Kind of pathetic for a man who once called himself ‘Christ Incarnate’.” The woman was close, speaking quietly into his ear. “Ironic that God's Right Hand can't use his own right hand to wipe snot and spit from his face.”

Robinson tried again to yell through the tape, but nothing discernible came out. He heard the woman's quiet footsteps as she walked out of the room. Concentrating all of his strength, the reverend struggled against his bonds. The chair rocked back and forth as he growled and fought, but he could not get free. The effort reinvigorated the pain in his neck and ribs, forcing him to stop. Breathing hard through his nose, he tried to think of what to do next, but no practical ideas materialized.

Soft footsteps sounded behind him, announcing the woman's return. Without a word, a towel was thrust roughly into his face, shimmying back and forth. The reverend resisted the temptation to pull his head back and in a moment his now-raw face was relatively clean and dry.

“Ugh. Disgusting,” he heard the woman grumble. She threw the towel on the windowsill next to the vial containing the blue liquid. Alarm rang out in Robinson's mind as he noted several dark red spots on the white towel. It was then that he noticed a bitter, acrid taste in his mouth. The woman also noticed the spots. “Funny, I was sure your blood would be black. Or even coward yellow. Perhaps you are human after all. Try not to stress about it, Reverend. Coughing up a little blood should be the least of your concerns.

Your life is about to take a very drastic and wholly poetic turn.” Her tone was dark, cold and derisive. And Robinson believed every word.

“Whether you like it or not,” she said, her voice now businesslike, “we both know the full extent of your...trespasses. Oh yes, I’m quite familiar with the life you’ve tried so hard to keep in the shadows. It would be impressive if it weren’t so revolting. One could be forgiven for thinking you must be some perverted, amoral atheist – an aberration as atheists go, but a non-believer, nonetheless.”

Robinson growled a response but she shushed him dismissively.

“How else to explain your behavior? How could a man like you believe in a judgmental God along with the fiery biblical hell of the Old Testament, and still do the terrible things you do? When I first started researching you, I chalked it up to the same delusional, narcissistic, holier-than-thou perspective religious leaders have historically used to justify the atrocities they committed. Somewhere in the world, way back in the day, the first of these scourges convinced himself that he had been ordained, and more importantly *empowered* by God to do His will. The next step in the thought process was obvious and, in many ways...inevitable. He determined that if God had a plan, and God worked His will through him, then he could do no wrong – for any actions he took, no matter how wicked or atrocious, must constitute the precise Will of God. Why else would God not stay his hand? Prevent the heinous event from happening? And suddenly, the world was his for the raping. That was until the next self-ordained idiot came along and challenged him.”

Robinson could tell the woman was again pacing back and forth behind him while she spoke.

“I thought for sure you had acquired that same delusion, but I was wrong. The more I learned, the more I realized you were too smart for that. Your business sense, financial savvy, even the strategic nature of your weekly attacks, all pointed towards someone rooted in the reality of the world. The majority of your predecessors were different. They shot the delusion directly into their veins, all the while ignoring reality. And in most cases, reality eventually tore them down. Most of your contemporaries have either fallen or are on their way down. But you are different. Not only is your head above the water, but no part of you even gets wet.” The woman snickered then added, “Until now.” He glanced down and noticed the water stains on his shirt and slacks.

“You’ll have to forgive the ice water, but I was getting tired of waiting for you to wake up. I must say though, Father O’Grady’s generous gift made one hell of a good bludgeon. Really a remarkable piece of sculpture, though I’m normally not a fan of crosses. After I broke in and silenced the alarm with your personal pin code,” the woman paused to let that little tidbit sink in, “I took a look around. As soon as I saw it hanging on the wall, I instantly knew what I wanted to do. Call it an epiphany,” she said with amusement in her voice. “Of course, I could’ve just used my handy metal pipe, but I just couldn’t resist the delicious irony of hitting a crooked televangelist preacher with a perfectly proportioned, stolen sixteenth-century wood

crucifix. Yes, stolen. O’Grady filched that cross from a basement storage room in the Cathedral of the Assumption. I swear there was no limit to that man’s psychosis. It’s amazing the things you can learn from a shaking, pedantic pedophile with a shotgun shoved under his chin. The confessions we got were twice as disturbing as those in John Manly’s deposition. Of course, a man getting ready to chew on the barrel of a shotgun will probably say anything to stay alive. That’s why we made him do it three times. Over the course of a week we got the same sick confession over and over again, the details never changed. Neither did his incontinence.”

He felt her breath on the back of his neck as she whispered, “I wonder what tales you could tell us. I’m almost sorry I didn’t bring the shotgun.” She stood and took a few steps. Robinson heard a chair being dragged across the tile.

“O’Grady was a confessed pedophile and rapist, and yet the church continued to ignore what he had done. Even after he managed to leave California unscathed, the church still would not get involved. Disgusting, don’t you think?”

The reverend could see O’Grady’s gaunt face in his mind. It had been some time since he’d heard from the unfortunate fool. And though he was curious to know what they’d done to him, right now his sole concern was his own hide.

“I know almost everything about you, Reverend,” the woman said casually. “And there’s a lot. I studied everything available online and in print. I spoke to family members, friends, colleagues, even a few other religious men who feel you’re just too big and popular for your own good. Of course, that’s merely their way of showing disdain while trying to mask their envy. *Envy*,” she repeated, as if tasting the word. “Sin number six, if I remember correctly. *Invidia* in Latin. Do you recall what Dante said about Envy, Monsignor Robinson? He said envy was ‘love of one’s own good perverted to a desire to deprive other men of theirs.’ Sounds like a winning premise for televangelism to me. But then how can I know for sure that’s your recipe for success when you’ve got several deadly sins under your belt? In fact, aside from Sloth, I’d say you’re batting a thousand on the sins. But,” the woman said, her voice now enthusiastic, “what all this really comes down to is priorities and choice, right?” She slapped him hard on the back causing him to cough. “Well, here’s your chance.”

Robinson’s chair was pushed forward until his knees pressed against the low wall beneath the window sill. Before him sat the two vials and his gun.

“My job, Mr. Robinson, was to sneak in here and end your life. No pain, no punishment, no choice. Deliver your judgment with no remorse, no absolution, nor call for shrift. I was to simply open the door to the great unknown and shove your fat ass through it. But the more I read about you, the more I realized that there was a more...poetic option. One designed to offer a choice in lieu of death. And isn’t it always better to choose for yourself rather than have someone do it for you? My thinking exactly!”

“Now, the vial on the left contains a fast-acting, painless, and thoroughly untraceable poison. The vial on the right contains a particularly virulent strain of the Human Immunodeficiency Virus or HIV. You remember HIV don’t you? Back in the early 90s a number of televangelists, including yourself, praised the arrival of HIV, saying it was a clear sign that God was punishing the evil sodomists. You tried to scare the religious right out of their minds and their wallets with predictions that God would spread HIV to supporters of gays and gay rights. ‘The Lord will strike down even the most pious men for lending support to the Godless homosexuals.’ I believe that’s how you worded it,” she said derisively. “A few years later you maggots realized HIV had infected all manner of persons – men, women, and children alike. So you backed off for a while. That was until the angle changed. One of your many epiphanies. You told your flock that God himself had revealed to you and you alone the secret behind HIV. It had started out as his weapon to slay the Godless homosexuals, but the Devil himself had gotten hold of this weapon and was using it against everyone. Then you managed to turn all the wrong-doing back on the homosexuals. Suddenly it was they who were responsible for everyone else’s misery. They had incurred the wrath of God and had wound up bringing pain and suffering to the innocents. You’d come full circle, through a delicate issue, and still managed to blame it all on the gays. Both clever and utterly disgusting.” The woman’s voice dropped to a low, menacing growl. “The lowest act from the lowest life form.”

The reverend felt his pulse rising again. Anger fought through the strong currents of pain and queasiness, landing squarely behind his eyes. This little whore had assaulted and insulted him and had now graduated to outright judgment of his actions. No woman on earth was allowed to judge him. The inferior sex had always been too imperfect and impure to hear the true voice of the Lord God. To know His will. That’s why men continued to lead the church to this day. How dare she! With renewed determination he began struggling again, this time trying to overturn his chair. Perhaps if he fell over, the chair would break and he could get loose. But the woman was no fool. She sat patiently behind him, her foot on the rear support bar. After thrashing about for almost a minute, he gave up. Sweat beaded on his brow and he breathed hard through his nostrils.

“You really are a slow learner, aren’t you?” the woman said mockingly. “As I was saying, life is all about choice. And now it’s your turn to make one.” For a few thoughtful moments she was silent. “Before I leave here,” she said with a sigh, a tiny hint of resignation in her voice, “you will receive an injection of fluid. *Which* injection is entirely up to you.”

The woman stood, took hold of his chair and slowly pulled him away from the window. The huge expanse of ocean that had filled his view was reduced to a thin horizon of blue resting on the silver window frame. The reverend heard soft footfalls and watched as his captor made her way to the window sill. She was turned away from him and appeared to be examining the vials and his gun. Robinson suddenly realized he still had not seen this foul woman’s face. Now all he could see was a slender body dressed in casual, every-

day clothing. He felt something akin to disappointment. He'd imagined a tight black leather suit. Or something reminiscent of a Bond girl – long flowing hair, mildly European features, light skin, and holding some kind of oversized weapon – maybe even a motorcycle helmet. Instead, what he saw was a secretary out for a casual day of shopping. How had this woman managed to assault and bind him?

The woman turned to face him. Robinson was shocked to see the plainly dressed woman was stunningly beautiful. Smooth alabaster skin with a hint of tan, claret red lips, strong cheekbones with no blush, cinnamon hair pulled back and intense brown eyes that now seemed to be studying him from beneath an unwrinkled brow. Despite all of his suffering, he felt instantly aroused.

The reverend's eyes narrowed as he tried to memorize the details of her face, her clothing, everything. If he managed to get out of this situation alive, any information he could provide the authorities would help in her capture. His eyes slowly scanned his captor from the face down. It was then that he noticed the rubber gloves. The sight confused him. What did it mean? No fingerprints. Was that it, or had this evil woman been even more meticulous in her assault? What if she didn't leave any evidence of her presence? Would the authorities or the press even believe him? Without proof, his story would sound crazy. They may decide to search the whole place looking for proof and wind up finding things he'd kept safely hidden.

Robinson tried to think logically, but his mind was bogged down with the pain signals his body was still sending. "Gloves," he thought with a mental nod, "Certainly a lot of calculation and patience." She obviously knew a great deal about him, which meant time and research. His eyes widened slightly as one word appeared in his brain: premeditated. Preparations, timing, planning. Up until this point, he'd assumed this was just another angry woman intent on extorting money, as several others had. But as he continued to stare wide-eyed at the rubber gloves, the dark and dire reality of the situation hit him almost as hard as the wooden cross had.

The woman noticed his gaze and with a sly grin slowly flexed the fingers of her gloved left hand. Their eyes met briefly. In that moment, in those intense brown eyes, the reverend saw confirmation of his worst suspicions. For the first time since he'd regained consciousness, he realized he might never leave this place alive. His body tensed with fear and anxiety as a single question loomed over him: Am I going to die today?

The woman watched him for another few seconds, then apparently making up her mind, held up the two vials. "If you choose the blue vial, you will be dead within minutes, but you have my word that your ministry will remain intact with no hint of scandal. All your transgressions and evils will die with you. You may even achieve instant martyrdom. Perhaps the so-called Christian Nation's faith will be galvanized by your passing. But make no mistake, you'll be as dead as a door nail. Of course if you truly believe that

which you preach, then who better to arrange for the world's second great resurrection than the Right Hand of God himself?"

She lowered the blue vial and shifted her attention to the other one. She held the vial aloft and studied it for a moment, tipping it from side to side, as if something of its power could be seen at just the right angle. When she finally spoke, her attention was still focused on the small vial.

"If you choose option B, you have a chance to live on. You may be lucky enough to be a carrier of HIV, but to live for years and years without ever developing AIDS. Even if you do get AIDS, perhaps all your wealth and power might be channeled towards research and development of medicines – or even a cure. However," the woman leaned closer to him, "when your followers and board members learn you've contracted HIV, they'll abandon you with the utmost haste. All your years of preaching of the divine plan for HIV and AIDS will come back to bury you. Additionally, I will personally unleash a deluge of damning and condemning virulent emails, blog posts, and Tweets, spewing forth in every social medium I can find. It will be a shit storm the likes of which the internet has never seen, seemingly confirming the Lord's punishment that has been bestowed upon you.

Lastly, I will publish every bit of research I have on you. Articles, photographs, private interviews, hour upon hour of incriminating recorded conversations, tax returns, O'Grady's full confession, and of course, a documentary-style release starring twenty of the children and young teens to whom you've provided 'sexual enlightenment'. *Everything* will be fair game, Reverend. Once all the shit hits the fan, it's doubtful anyone will even consider the possibility that someone broke into your private, guarded suite and injected you with HIV. When the waters are that chummed up, the sharks don't spare a moment to consider anything inconsequential. They have no desire to see through the delicious crimson cloud. They want only to feed."

Just then the woman's expression changed and a faint smirk creased her lips. Her eyes locked onto him. She appeared to be considering something. After a moment she gave a resolute shrug and said, "Poor little Billy. There must be so much conflict and turmoil festering in that conniving, demented little brain of yours right now. What to do? What to do? Well, I'm going to help you out. I'm going to tell you something that only a few other people know. The group that sanctioned your execution is called *The Aenamaia*. Before I joined *The Aenamaia*, I made it a point to – how shall we say, *freelance* – in a similar line of work.

"I investigated vermin like you on my own time. I watched, I listened, I researched, I questioned. It's really quite amazing how much information you can obtain if you have the guts and confidence to ask. I learned a great deal. I tell you this because your good friend Ted Haggard was my first serious project. I'm the one who discovered his homosexual infidelity, though I never took any credit for it." She watched with satisfaction as surprise and incredulity swept across his face. "The answer to your unspoken question is also

the reason behind my telling you this. I confronted him with the proof of his disastrous and blatantly hypocritical transgressions. I gave him a choice, as well. He could choose a quick and painless death and all would be forgotten, or he and his wife and his followers could live with the disgrace his duplicitous and nefarious deeds would reap. At the time, I was a tad more compassionate than I am now and therefore did not infect him with HIV. Instead, I told him that should he choose the path of humiliation, he would have to agree to never again be involved with organized religion. No preaching or teaching of anything related to religion. That was the deal. The whole world now knows what his decision was, though no one knew he was given a choice. He consciously chose to put his family, friends and followers through public shame and ignominy – to flush any credibility and dignity he once had. ‘How does such a man stand erect, when within his body the spine is absent?’”

The woman exhaled deeply and began pacing. “Cowardly though it was, I upheld my end of the bargain and let him live. I set events in motion and took a back seat while the flames of indignity raged. And though he was forced to endure it, he was nevertheless alive, as we’d agreed. However,” she said, her voice growing darker, “I recently learned that he is not keeping to our agreement. He’s building a new church and attracting a new congregation. Perhaps he thought because he’d not seen or heard from me in years that he was in the clear, that I forgot about him. Well he’s wrong. He’s dead wrong. This time there will be no negotiations or deals. They’ll find his body in a dumpster, his blood chock full of strychnine or tetrodotoxin – and a note in his hand that reads, ‘Teddy has been a bad boy.’ But I digress.” The woman stared out the expansive window for a few long moments, then returned her attention to her bound and gagged subject.

“And so with you, Robby, I decided there would be no outs – no room to renege on our deal. If you choose to live, you’ll do so with much greater disgrace and loss than Haggard, but with one of the world’s deadliest viruses coursing through your thick, black veins. Or you can simply go to sleep. Forever. Now all that’s left is for you to decide is which path to choose. The path of the righteous man or the path of the red-handed thief?”

The woman slowly returned the vials to the windowsill and picked up the handgun. “I suppose the other option would be for me to empty all seven rounds of this gun into strategically-chosen areas of your body. Then, just as you’re about to pass out from the copious loss of blood and the unbearable pain, I’ll choose the vial for you.”

Robinson watched as the woman expertly handled the gun. First she slid back the hammer and peered into the ejection port. Seeing nothing inside, she released the magazine. Satisfied with what she saw, the woman adroitly shoved the magazine back into the gun and, in one quick motion, pulled back on the slide and chambered a round. Robinson saw her click off the safety. As the woman held up the handgun and

aimed towards the far wall, he could see her arm was completely still. She squinted as she took aim, sitting perfectly still.

He recalled that the man who'd sold him the gun had mentioned the unusual calmness and focus common for many female shooters. The man had warned him, "Never enter a shooting match with a woman unless you're a damn good shot." At the time he thought the man was probably just sore over having lost to a female shooter. Now, he wasn't so sure.

Fear spread across the reverend's face as he realized in an instant that this woman was capable of killing him – that was indeed what she had come to do. This was not a joke or an extortion attempt. She'd made no demands. There was no use in trying to talk her out of it, and no chance whatsoever that she was bluffing. There was pure malevolence in those brown eyes, mixed with a calculating and terrifying sense of patience. She would either inject him with one of her poisons or she would happily shoot him seven times, waiting for a few moments between each shot, drinking in the pleasure of watching him bleed and writhe in pain.

Grotesque imagery burst into his mind. He saw himself bleeding, crying, terror filling his eyes as his body gave up the fight. Then death. Unseen flashes burst on all sides as his lifeless, chalk-outlined corpse is photographed over and over again. He could hear the pop of old-fashioned flash bulbs firing in quick succession. He could see his dead body reflect the bright white light for a split second, as if it were pulsing, releasing. Headlines rolled by like a funeral procession professing the end of the Robinson legacy, the 700 Club, his university – all of it gone in an instant. The IRS would investigate his bank accounts and most likely seize his assets. He watched as the scavengers swooped in and pecked at his life's flesh as his body was slowly rolled into the crematorium. Faces of people he knew, people he had used, people whom he openly mocked, all with wide, greedy, thirsty eyes, waiting for their chance to drink of his blood. The images kept coming, each one more terrible than the last. Eager faces, gnashing teeth, his bruised and lifeless body again, the headlines, disillusioned followers committing suicide, and those who feared and hated him dancing merrily in the streets. It was all too much. Heat and sweat engulfed his body. He began to shake, his breaths coming in fits. There was a gripping tightness in his chest.

In a blur of movement the woman reached a gloved hand back and brought it full force across his face. The shock at being slapped so hard momentarily replaced the terror he'd felt only a moment ago. Before the sting in his cheek registered she brought the backside of the same hand across the other side. A torrent of emotions jockeyed for control of his mind, but before one took the lead the woman brought the loaded gun up under his chin. He tried to gasp, but the tape prevented it. He coughed awkwardly, air and more snot shooting out of his nose and onto his sodden silk shirt and tie. As soon as he recovered he felt the gun shoved harder upward and he found himself eye to eye with the woman, her face only inches from his. He felt the heat of her skin and smelled the anxiousness in her scent. And then the terror returned.

“You have one chance to decide for yourself,” she said through clenched teeth. “I’ll give you sixty seconds to think about it. Then, I’m going to remove the tape from your mouth. All you get to say is ‘blue’ or ‘white’. If you scream, I’ll put a bullet through your corrupt little brain. The police will find you lying on the floor with this gun in your hand. After scraping small bits of brain and skull off the ceiling they’ll rule it a suicide. Incriminating photographs and audio recordings found stashed in your bedroom will seal the deal. News of your cowardly death and all the other dirt I have on you will have circled the globe twice before they have time to tag your toe and zip up the body bag. You’ll be another pudgy, pathetic little religious hypocrite who couldn’t bear the scandal he knew was coming and therefore took his own life and would be eternally damned to hell for it. Or,” she said with a deliberate pause, “you can tell me which vial has your name on it. Painless death, intact legacy and eternal martyrdom on the left – or life, shame and a crumbled empire on the right? You have sixty seconds to decide, Reverend Robinson. The choice is yours.”

### **New York City, New York**

The masked woman’s arm swung down and smashed the red button into the side of the truck. An instant later there was a thunderous boom followed immediately by a loud, sustained cracking sound, like lightning tearing through the center of a giant redwood tree. Instinctively, the guard curled into a protective fetal position. The noise was deafening. It sounded like an enormous rocket was lifting off right next to the truck, which was now shaking twice as much as it had when they’d been in motion. Loud, sharp jolts sounded randomly as heavy objects landed on top of the truck or crashed into its side. Thoughts of 9/11 unwittingly coursed through the guard’s mind and he felt the tinge of a familiar fear. “Maybe these people are actually terrorists,” he thought. Domestic terrorists. Why then go to the trouble of rounding up all these people? Unless they were to be hostages, though for reasons that eluded him, that scenario seemed unlikely.

The rumble continued for what seemed to the guard like several minutes, then finally tapered off. Quietly, he exhaled the breath he was holding and cautiously inhaled. He had expected something to be in the air – the smell of smoke and fire or of chemicals, but there was nothing. Only the heavy, musty smell of a well-used truck that had carried a host of odorous cargos.

There were scared sobs and whimpers from the people on the floor who were starting to shuffle about, but otherwise all was calm. “Status?” the guard heard the woman ask, a hint of apprehension in her voice. He could not see her face, but her voice betrayed the fact that even she had been startled by the violence of the explosion she had initiated.

“Good Neighbor,” one of the other men called into a radio, “Do you have a visual? Over.”

“Hold,” a faint voice said with a heavy Scottish accent, “all we see is smoke.”

“Is everyone okay?” the woman asked the passengers.

Before anyone could answer, the radio crackled again, “Boy is my grandma goin’ ta be fumin’ angry! Bealin as hell, I tell ya.”

There was an eruption of hurrahs as each of the black-clad men and the woman embraced each other and exchanged congratulations. This sudden outbreak of joy and emotion stunned the guard and confused the rest of the prisoners. He would later describe the atmosphere as being warm, jovial and friendly.

In a few moments, the woman hushed the celebrants and again spoke into the radio, “Corgi...your grandmother doesn’t read *The Star*. Can I assume the other missions were successful?”

“I’d say that’s an understatement lassie. *The National Inquirer*, *The Globe*, *The National Examiner*, *The Star*, and *The Sun* will all spend the next six months digging out what’s left of their printing presses and delivery trucks. And they’ll have to do it without the help of their fearless and soulless leaders.”

“What do you mean?” she asked, her voice suddenly serious again.

“We just learned that the CEO and second in command of American Media who owns all these abominations of free speech have gone missing.”

“What?” the woman asked, frantically waving a hand to hush the others who were still celebrating. She was obviously taken aback by this news. “One of ours?”

“Gray isn’t sure,” Corgi said uncertainly, “All of our principals are accounted for, but I hear told there are rumors of a few mavericks in our den. I think we’d best be getting back to the cave to sort this out.”

“Roger that. Rendezvous as planned. We’ll drop our parcels and head back.”

“Aye, we’re on our way.”

The guard had managed to squirm onto his side and was now looking up at the beautiful, concerned blue eyes behind the black mask. Even with the mask obscuring most of her face, the guard could tell she was scowling. The woman was staring at the floor of the truck, her eyes darting back and forth as if she was trying to catch sight of something important that was eluding her.

One of the men put his hand on her shoulder and whispered something. It took a moment for her to react. When she did, she snapped immediately back into business mode. “I’m okay,” she said firmly. “Everyone move out and scatter. This truck is no longer our shelter. Let’s move!”

The rest of the men in black moved quickly to the rear of the door and waited. In a few seconds the guard heard a few clinks and clanks as the door was opened from the outside. He could feel a rush of cool air on his face – and this time the air smelled of dust and smoke.

The men jumped down quickly and disappeared from sight. Once they were gone, the guard turned his head again and was surprised to see the woman was now standing only a few feet away. More startling was the fact that she was staring right at him. When their eyes met, she took a few careful steps then knelt

down in front of him. The guard could see her eyes were intent and full of purpose, but not unfriendly. He would say later that hers were the eyes of a teacher looking down on a new student.

“You’ve been watching all of this very carefully, haven’t you?” she asked casually, almost playfully.

The guard was still lying on his side, but managed to nod nervously a few times.

She reached behind his head and untied his gag. “What’s your name?” she said tilting her head slightly.

He hesitated, and then said quietly, “Venustiano. But everyone calls me Vinnie.”

The frightened man saw small wrinkles appear at the corners of her eyes. Even with the mask obscuring most of the woman’s face, he was sure she was smiling. The effect was strangely disarming and he relaxed a degree. Her eyes narrowed. She seemed to be studying him. The sensation was not altogether unpleasant, though he still did not trust her intentions. After a few moments she said, “I’m gonna go out on a limb here and guess you were named after Venustiano Carranza Garza, the Mexican revolutionary. Yes?”

Vinnie couldn’t suppress his surprise. Despite the fear instilled by the events of the last hour, and in spite of his loathing of violence, he couldn’t help but return the smile and nod graciously.

“My parents liked history,” he offered.

“So did I – in my former life. I was fascinated by all that history could teach us, should we be open to learning. To me, the relevance and application of history stood out in sharp contrast relative to other disciplines. The study of history almost seemed like a prerequisite for carving out a proper existence. Not so much a blueprint for the future, but certainly a guide to drawing one. But up until that point, the endeavor had been largely academic. Until one day, sitting in the garden of an old estate in Nassau, a good friend convinced me that history was absolutely useless if we didn’t learn from it. Useless...” she repeated. “Wouldn’t you agree?”

“Yes,” Vinnie said with a nod.

“Would you also agree that when it comes to learning from the mistakes of old, that we’re very slow learners?”

He nodded and said, “Very slow indeed.”

She cocked her head and asked, “Do you think Venustiano Garza was hoping to change history?”

“Yes. And for a time, I believe he succeeded.”

“So do I,” she said. “Well, Venustiano, it is indeed fortuitous that you were here to witness these events today, for another revolution is at hand. And this one is quite different from anything history can speak of. Since the dawn of written time men like the one you were named after have fought injustice through open violence in the streets. Common men were sent to blindly defend the spineless men who were the real source of all the problems. Innocents killing innocents – men killing men who could have just as easily been lifelong friends. Rarely did the real murderers and rapists ever see justice. Corrupt rulers can

keep their power because they manipulate and control other men who are willing to bear arms and die for a paycheck, hollow promises of better times, or an afterlife brimming with mythical and eternal rewards. Only when they lie dying in the streets, terrified almost to the point of insanity and staring up at an ordinary sky do they realize that, were they to do it again, they would immediately lay down their arms and assume a life dedicated to peace and humility. But the message always comes too late. Always too late.” Her voice trailed off as she looked around at the other people who were now looking at her, their fear replaced by a rapt curiosity.

“Venustiano,” she said, her voice regaining its strength, “It will be your job to report what you have seen here today. You will corroborate what the press and authorities are just now learning – that the buildings housing the printing operations for the major U.S. tabloid newspapers have been leveled, the machinery rendered useless. We did everything in our power to ensure there was no loss of human life in these operations. Only time will tell whether we were successful. This is but one of many steps to come that will eliminate some of the filth that engulfs our country. It is neither our policy nor our wish to be in a position to make demands. Such actions have always proved useless in the face of men with guns defending their ill-gotten wealth and power. In order to convey our message, we have to speak their language. Bring the fight right to their doorsteps.”

She leaned in closer to Vinnie’s face and said quietly, “Tell them what you have seen and heard. Do not leave anything out. Tell them about the Revolution.”

Without pausing the woman stood and walked to the end of the truck. She turned and addressed the people tied to the floor of the truck, “Do not be afraid. This revolution is for the people, not against them. Hopefully someday we’ll all think for ourselves and control our own fates, and such rash actions won’t be necessary.” She paused and added, “Help is on the way. Best of luck to you all.”

With that, the woman in black was gone and the truck was sealed back up. Fifteen minutes later police, firemen and EMTs were on-site tending to the hostages and asking questions.

The following morning, Venustiano Ramirez gave a detailed account of the incident to the police and the FBI. The other people in the truck would be questioned as well, but would refer to Vinnie when their memories became vague. The authorities quickly realized only one witness had a consistent and detailed story to tell. Before he’d been allowed to leave, news of the incident had spread beyond the hallowed halls of the FBI offices in New York – along with the name of the storyteller. By the time Vinnie crossed the lobby to exit the building, he’d already received seven offers to appear on TV. Out of nowhere, strange men and women with cameras and microphones were suddenly very interested in him, his life, and the ordeal he’d just survived. Less than twelve hours after he’d watched the strange woman in black hurry away, Vinnie was being asked to appear on a variety of shows and news programs. But for reasons he could not explain at the time, even to himself, Vinnie chose only two programs, one which aired exclusively on PBS, the other on

NPR. During one of these interviews the long-time host of the show asked Vinnie why he had declined the offers from the major media, a few of which had offered him a substantial amount of cash.

Vinnie paused, took a deep breath and said, “Although this group...*The Aenamaia*, chose to contact *USA Today* to disclose their intent, I chose PBS because I do not trust the regular media. I believe that these people are on a mission to do something that has never been done before. To take the war directly to the generals and presidents and dictators who see their soldiers as nothing more than numbers on a game board. They want to strike at the black heart of those things which serve to poison and enslave mankind. The tabloid newspapers and the mainstream media make up a large percentage of that poison. They are messengers, if you will, bringing bad things. The mainstream media feed the public with whatever it is the puppeteers want us to believe or what the people are thirsty to consume. They push the agenda of whoever happens to hold their reins. And they’ve become very good at their work. How else do you think President Bush got re-elected? How is it we saw none of the gruesome imagery after the ‘Shock and Awe’ bombing of Iraq? How is it most Americans don’t realize that anywhere between 85,000 and 1 million Iraqis have died since the start of the war? Did the media not sensationalize the Iraq War – fill our citizens with awe and magical wonder towards our marvelous weapons? Idealize our role in an unprovoked war?”

Vinnie shook his head, “How did we miss it? How could we, as thoughtful, caring human beings, for one moment think there was anything at all good about war? I should’ve known we’d gone terribly astray when I saw Dan Rather’s teary-eyed apology to the American people. The failure was obvious, if you opened your eyes to what was happening.”

“I myself was employed by one of the responsible companies until the day after the building I’d spent twelve years guarding was brought to the ground in a massive explosion. Once I learned the truth, I knew I could never go back to work there. Unfortunately, it had never occurred to me prior to that day to question the company I worked for.” Vinnie shook his head wearily. “I’m glad someone else did what I should’ve – and took action. On that same day, all across the country, other such companies saw their production facilities permanently destroyed. In a few cases the entire building was brought down to its foundation. It wasn’t until two days later that Americans realized the newsstands looked and felt different. Clean and condensed. Without the usual garish distractions, people found there were other things they could be doing with their time, other things to read to engage their minds. It was only when I put all this together that I realized that the woman in black had been telling the truth that night. This is a revolution – one that has been sorely needed for a very long time, one the American public should’ve demanded all along. Now that it has arrived, Americans need to stay on the sidelines and simply cheer.”

A curious, eager grin spread across his lips as a newfound energy seemed to pulse through his body. He leaned forward and said, “So you see, had I gone to the popular media, little or none of what I’ve said

would've been heard. Because the *truth* is the last thing they want to hear or see in print. Fortunately, the truth cannot be stopped!"