

From China With love



Karl Boyd

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By

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Prologue

In the beginning, the Bible says God created the world in six days and rested on the seventh.

The history books of the future would record it took the Chinese one day less to conquer all of North America without, essentially, firing a shot. From that day forward, they never paused for a moment.

At one second after midnight on the west coast, or the first tick of the clock on a cold, late winter day, there were approximately three hundred million residents in the United States of America. An additional thirty-two million souls lived in Canada, while one hundred and nine million people resided in Mexico.

Five and one half days later, at one second after noon, Eastern Time; and the corresponding times in the Central, Mountain and Pacific zones, plus those of the Hawaiian Islands and Alaska; given the average natural deaths and births each day, the number of warm bodies was approximately the same.

The only difference was nearly seventy-two percent were dead.

More than one survivor wondered what God thought about all of this, or if He even cared anymore.

Chapter 1

Peking, China

This was the third harsh winter in succession for China. Record amounts of snow and ice were reported throughout all regions of the country, which foretold of horrendous floods to come with the spring thaw.

Coal, gas, wood and heating oil supplies were either inadequate to meet the demand or priced beyond the means of the average citizen. As a result, thousands of deaths were reported due to extreme temperatures in the northern regions. It was not much better in larger, overpopulated southern cities where several families lived together in small, cramped quarters, sharing their pitifully inadequate food, staples and body heat in order to survive.

To further complicate matters, a severe drought during the summer resulted in shortages of produce; and, an already strapped meat supply was hit with an epidemic of mad cow disease. Combined with losses suffered to the poultry industry through a new strain of bird flu, these events were causing great suffering among millions of China's poor citizens. Although not reported to the world media, thousands had already perished from starvation.

Outside the great hall in Peking, cruel icy winds whipped drifting snow in angry circles across the emptiness of the wide, deserted main square. Inside the ornate, but stark, central meeting room, thick granite walls glistened with ice particles which melted slowly when the meager heat from four large blazing fireplaces managed to penetrate the wintry chill. The condensation trickled down cracks in thin, icy trails and refroze once more as it neared a chilly marble floor.

In a semi-circle at one end of the room, fourteen aged men were seated on matching, cushioned red and yellow lacquered chairs. They fidgeted with their long, heavy coats and pulled them closer around cold, aching bodies while staring at the fifteenth man in the room.

He was an impressive human being; big when compared to the average Chinese, with a head much larger than any of his ministers. One look into his intelligent eyes told you this man was special; possessing wisdom far beyond his age of only fifty-five.

He stood nearly six feet two inches tall, was very thin and weighed less than one hundred and fifty pounds. His black hair, long and streaked with white, was braided into a pigtail which hung over the collar of a heavy black woolen coat.

His steely eyes were coal black, and his fingers long and thin. A wispy, grey goatee several inches long hung from the point of his chin, and he stroked it occasionally when lost in thought, as he was now. From where he sat, on a raised dais in front of the others, he appeared larger than life itself.

Finally, Gin Lang Tang, Chairman of the People's Republic of China, raised his eyes from the documents lying in front of him. After removing his spectacles, he let them dangle from his right hand. Then while resting his chin on the fingers of his left, he gazed across his massive oak desk into the eyes of his fourteen ministers, one at a time.

Despite the chill in the room, each man felt warm perspiration trickle down his spine. As the chairman's unwavering eyes met theirs, cold sweat of fear broke out on their brows. Silently each wondered, "Will I leave this room alive? And, if I do, will I still be breathing at the end of the day?"

For the past hour and fifteen minutes, the only sound in the barely warm room had been the ticking of a clock sitting on one edge of the Chairman's desk, an occasional muffled cough or a tiny "clink" of china.

The ministers sat silently, curling their toes in thin slippers to ease the pain of the chill while sipping tea, first hot, then lukewarm and now cold, from fragile porcelain cups; and watching nervously as Chairman Tang painstakingly reviewed their individual reports on the state of the Chinese nation.

If truth be told, Tang did not need to read the documents. He had done so hours before. His purpose in staring at the top of his desk for so long was to make his ministers sweat blood while waiting to hear their fate and that of China. Having them watch him slowly turn over a page after making notations only he could decipher also taught his minions a little humility, while his actions put them in a state of anxiety.

"It does them good to perspire a little," the Chairman thought. "Lately

some have forgotten their place in the scheme of things as far as China is concerned. It is my job to periodically remind them."

From the expressions on their faces, it appeared his intimidation was successful. He took note of the perspiration on their foreheads and smiled inwardly, but kept his facial expression blank and began to speak.

"As I thought, the state of our country is not good. But take heart, I place no individual blame on any of you. World events have unfolded over which we had no control."

A near-silent collective sigh drifted through the room, almost as if someone let air out of a balloon. Color returned to pale faces as the ministers realized they were not to be purged or sent to a reeducation camp.

Pausing for a moment, the Chairman picked up a black marking pen. While making sure all eyes followed his movements; he held his desk calendar aloft. Then, after circling the date boldly, he asked, "Do you all know the date?"

All the assembled men nodded their heads, and more than half murmured, "Yes, Mister Chairman." They were not sure their leader required a verbal answer, but didn't want to be embarrassed by not knowing.

"No, you do not!" He shouted, and his voice resounded through the great hall.

There was a stir among his audience. By their puzzled expressions, he knew they were unsure what he wanted from them. They would soon find out.

Turning to his desk once more, he picked up a red marking pen and wrote something in large crimson letters across the calendar. Then he stood up and held the pad high so they could see what he had written.

It was the date: "New China Year One - Day One."

As he let his message sink in for a minute, the Chairman stared at each man in turn. His expression was empty of emotion, yet his black eyes seemed to be made of molten steel.

Then he continued, "This day begins a new year and age for our great country. But you will not mention the change of date beyond this room. Do you understand?"

Again, he gazed at each man individually and waited for his reply. When all had answered in the affirmative, he said, "From this date forward, the situation I mentioned will change. We will control our destiny and that of the entire world. China must prevail and survive. But to do so, we require additional land and resources."

"These are my orders: You will formulate a plan to take over the entire North American continent, to include the United States, Canada and Mexico within ten years."

There was a distinct sound of breath being drawn into dry throats.

The chairman let it pass and then continued. Referring to Russia and India, he added, "At the same time, you will devise a way to neutralize our neighbors to the north, as well as the Army of India. We will not invade these two populous nations, but must reduce their capability to fight. They cannot be allowed to come to the aid of the North Americans.

"I want no horrific third world war to drain our resources or manpower. The invasion must be silent and performed with stealth, but one which will insure our victory. Use courage and deceit. Be devious in your planning. Utilize your best brains to develop a plan to achieve our goal by exactly one year from today."

Although he knew there would be none, nevertheless Chairman Tang asked, "Are there any questions?"

No one spoke.

"Go then. Do what I have asked. Save China and her people. You have one year; do not fail."

Within twelve months, the strategy was finalized and the multi-pronged invasion of North America began quietly. The devilishly clever operation was totally unobserved by the American public, their military and/or politicians, and their neighbors to the north and south.

Russia and India were also scheduled for a less severe "neutralization", which was planned to take place nine years in the future.

Contrary to the beliefs of most North Americans, who if they ever envisioned an attack from China on those three countries, it was not a large Army that destroyed them.

It took only a small group of five hundred dedicated Chinese executives, their well-trained and motivated sales force numbering somewhere around five thousand American, Mexican and Canadian employees, plus perhaps two hundred Chinese supervisors.

Their products were both large and small, and varied in nature.

As strange as it seems, one of the main ingredients was a new sugar substitute named "Nice and Thin", distributed by a completely separate division from other sales forces.

One of two remaining entities was a group of individuals tasked with selling the latest electronics and communications gear, including cell phones, pagers, IPODs, PDAs etcetera.

The last branch offered advanced computer components at bargain prices to manufacturers of military hardware and other electronic industries throughout North America.

Smaller, but still dedicated teams entered Russia and India, where they exhibited and sold the latest electronic devices and computers to the host nations' military forces and common citizens.

Cash strapped Russia was granted exceptional credit to purchase these items. The citizens of both countries, all of whom wished to keep up with the west, took the products to heart. Sales records which warmed the hearts of the Chairman and his ministers were reported by all teams.

Early in April, the following year, Chairman Tang appeared before the United Nations Headquarters in New York City with a startling announcement:

“China will no longer support the stockpiling of nuclear weapons. We are a peace loving country and plan to devote our national effort toward bettering the world for all mankind.

“I call upon the United Nations to send inspectors to China to witness our voluntary obliteration of these terrible weapons of mass destruction. For too long, we have lived under a threat of annihilation by our supposed enemies.

“We do not consider any nation on earth our foe. We hope our actions will result in the western nations and others around the globe taking similar action. If we cannot learn to live together in peace, our world will not survive.

“Join us in this endeavor. Destroy your atomic arsenals and let us form a partnership with all nations of the world to stop global warming, enrich everyone’s lives and make this a better world for our children and their descendants.

“China will lead the way in developing new global communications satellites which will instantly and economically connect all citizens of the world. From this day forward, harmony and peace are our only objectives.

“If there are those who doubt our sincerity or distrust our proposed actions, send your representatives to witness our commitment to the world peace we seek. We welcome you with open arms.

“Similarly, we encourage your investments in our new electronic technology. Those who join us will be rewarded with outstanding products at a price which will benefit every citizen of this great world, no matter their nationality.”

As predicted, the Chairman’s announcement caught the United States and its allies by surprise. From the President down to the lowest ranked Congressman, no one believed his statements.

Even after U. N. Inspectors confirmed they were given unlimited access to every nuclear facility within China, (including some they didn’t

know existed), there were still a few doubting Thomases. But to everyone's surprise, China's relations with the U. S. A. and other countries soon blossomed into a fellowship of like minds.

Within two years, China became the leading manufacturer of electronic devices, computers and every associated item known to man. As promised, those who joined and offered their dollars or Euros as investment, prospered along with the Chinese.

After watching their products diminish in value and profit, the Japanese and Americans saw the error of their ways. From June of the fourth year onward, China owned a lock on production of electronic devices throughout the world. They continued to add to their totals over the next six years.

Although it was blustery outside, Minister of Foreign Affairs for China, Mei Feng was comfortable in his spacious office, due to a new oil heater his aide, Gy found and installed three days ago. Feng never questioned where things like the heater came from. If anyone's head would roll for such "luxuries", Gy would take the heat.

As he sat at his desk reviewing plans for "the final solution", Feng chuckled at his unintentional pun. It had been a long ten years since the Chairman tasked him and other ministers to take over North America and turn it into "New China".

During the first agonizing year, his staff found the devious solution the chairman asked for. At the same time they came up with an answer to neutralize Russia and India. When Feng thought about it, both solutions were rather simple; and so far, everything was going according to plan.

Minister Feng checked the figures of his latest sales reports. If they were accurate, every person within the geographical boundaries of North America now owned an average of three point four electronic devices manufactured in China.

Smaller, but still exciting reports came from Russia and India. Their thirst for electronic devices amazed him.

None of the recipients were aware of the biggest and best kept secret in the Chinese world. To the casual observer, each cell phone was encased in hard plastic. But in reality, this material was an explosive compound developed in secret by Chinese scientists nine years previously.

In addition, each case held a microscopic detonator. Upon receipt of a secret thirty character code transmitted from one of several Chinese communication satellites now circling the globe, these instruments would explode.

Particular attention was given to communication devices and computers meant for sale to the military community of every country. Upon receipt of another thirty character signal, all these electronic necessities, i.e., walkie-

talkies, pagers, headsets for special ops personnel and EMS personnel, plus other small, hand-held instruments would also detonate.

Secreted within every Chinese manufactured computer was a dormant virus in a small silicone chip. The computerized firepower systems of tanks, planes, ships and other military vehicles of their targeted countries would melt into oblivion upon receipt of yet another code to activate the virus.

But years before the electronic attack, there would be another silent invasion featuring a strange ally – a sugar substitute named “Nice and Thin”. This brilliant idea was the brainchild of a young man named Shan Chu, a graduate of the highly prestigious school of warfare at Peking University.

“When we combine this product with an untraceable addictive drug, our scientists can assure everyone will demand our sweetener.

“We’ll send free samples to every American, Canadian and Mexican address. Our sales representatives will insure our sweetener is the lowest priced available. With the proper sales pitch and initiative on our part, we’ll corner the market on sugar substitutes, while we addict our victims.

“Then several days before the final solution is initiated, we’ll send out another free sample of ‘New and Improved’ Nice and Thin. (The decadent Americans and their friends love anything labeled New and Improved). Only these packets will contain an instant-acting poison.

“The authorities will require two or three days to discover the cause of so many deaths. Then they will attempt to warn their citizens, which will create a panic throughout North America and cause all remaining residents to want to notify their loved ones of the danger, either by computer or cell phone.

“On the fifth day, at noon on the East coast, we will send a signal to destroy all electronic instruments throughout North America at the same instant. The combined plans will insure we eliminate as many westerners as possible in one fell swoop.”

“Outstanding,” Minister Feng said. “Initiate the program immediately. I’ll apprise Chairman Tang of your plans. I’m sure he will approve.”

As predicted, every aspect of Chu’s idea was working to perfection. Minister Feng was proud of his protégé, but also knew much credit for the program’s success would fall on his own shoulders.

“Only three more days,” he thought. “With luck, I’ll move up in the inner circle. Perhaps I’ll be posted to New China. There is no turning back. Our ships and men are waiting offshore, or on the way to their final destinations.”

Throughout the width and breadth of North America, on the first day of the invasion, across the countryside approximately fifty thousand people died. Their individual deaths were unexpected, and because they were

scattered across three nations, little note was made of the total number and cause. Most deaths were attributed to heart attacks or strokes.

On the second day, the total increased to over seven hundred thousand nationwide in the United States alone. Canada and Mexico reported a smaller, but still significant number of deaths. The beginning of a major panic ensued, but still no one knew the true cause of the many fatalities.

Russia and India took note of a strange episode unfolding in the west. However, since only a small number of deaths were reported in their countries, they wrote the occurrence off as some sort of welcomed plague which would hopefully reduce the number of their enemies.

On the third day, more than two million perished throughout North America, and finally, the cause was determined. As always, should reports prove wrong, every bureaucratic government bastard wanted to save his or her own ass, so the findings were reviewed for another yet another day.

By the time this unnecessary delay was over and authorities were able to use the massive communications systems of the United States, Canada and Mexico to warn the public of the danger, on the fourth day another six million people succumbed.

On the fifth day, at the height of hysteria caused by this disaster, when everyone was attempting to communicate with their loved ones and warn them of the danger, the real slaughter began. It was over in an instant - actually a nanosecond.

At the same tick of the clock, millions of Russians and Indian citizens were killed, (as collateral damage), while the computers controlling their military might were destroyed.

Chapter 2

High in the blue-green, smog-tinted sky overlooking San Francisco, a young Chinese man sat in his lofty hotel room watching dense fog roll across the bay and into the streets of the city. His mind wandered back to the beginning of his current situation.

The past six years were exhilarating for John Park, a former resident of China. First there was language school. He and more than seven hundred college graduates were selected for a prestigious assignment by the minister of education.

None knew what lay ahead, but the yearly wage they received was more than he and the others would have been able to earn in the local economy by working hard for ten years. The housing provided was far more pleasant than John could afford, and food in the cafeteria was free, nourishing and abundant.

“What more could I ask for?” Gin Wu asked.

That was his true name. John Park was an assigned “American” name, reflecting the type given to Chinese residents of areas in large cities in the United States often referred to as “Chinatown”.

Although he possessed a rudimentary knowledge of the language, John spent a year boning up on English. Then he learned American “slang”, which was interesting and made for many evenings filled with laughter from John’s fellow classmates.

As they were groomed for assignments in Mexico or Canada, others learned Spanish or French. No one knew exactly what they were being trained for, but they kept their questions to themselves.

When their language training was completed, more than ninety

members were weeded out as unfit for the program. The remainder graduated from their various courses and moved on.

Another year was spent in heavy training to become members of a multi-national sales force. The indoctrination and class work was intense. Throughout the course, they were tested often on their knowledge of North American business dealings.

Chinese was forbidden in class. Everyone practiced their separate "foreign" language skills daily.

"I miss conversing in my native tongue," one student complained. The next day he was absent from class, never to be seen again.

Several more students failed to live up to the high standards required and were similarly dismissed. No one ever heard from them again. Their names were never mentioned in class or the dormitories.

"It is almost as if they never existed," John thought.

Then, a week before graduating, the four hundred remaining students met individually with an instructor they had never seen before.

After handing John a sealed package and black cell phone with the stamp of China on the back, the stranger began to speak.

"As you might have guessed, you and your classmates were selected for a unique assignment somewhere in North America. You will receive your individual final destination after you graduate.

"From your English language training, it could be presumed you would be placed within the Continental United States, overseas in one of their possessions or in Canada."

Pointing to the two items on the desk, the stranger continued, "You will keep this package in a safe place where no one else can view the contents. It is not to be opened until the day you are instructed to do so. This may be years in the future.

"The black cell phone will be carried on your person at all times. The battery will be recharged daily during the hours you are asleep. Never be without this instrument.

"If you check, you will find you cannot dial out on this phone. It is to be used only to receive your special instructions to complete the final portion of your assignment.

"Over the next few years you will be tested at odd times when the phone will ring. When you answer, you will give your name and city of assignment. Then you will listen for permission to open the package in front of you.

"If you do not receive those orders, you will hang up and wait for the next call. If you fail to answer your phone, you will be removed from the program and returned to China for re-education."

The stranger paused and asked, "Do you understand my instructions so far?"

"Yes," John replied as he gulped air and felt overly warm.

"And do you still wish to continue with the program?"

"Yes," John repeated. His mouth was dry.

"Good; now I have a very important warning. When you are told to open the package, follow the directions you find inside to the letter."

"Yes, Sir," John managed to squeak out through lips suddenly drier than the Gobi Desert.

The instructor frowned as if he hadn't expected an answer, and then continued his briefing.

"The most important thing you must remember over the years is this: When you depart for wherever the caller tells you, you will not take any electronic devices with you except for this black cell phone. Is this perfectly clear?"

"Yes," John said again. Sweat broke out on his brow and his knees shook briefly until he grasped them with his hands and squeezed.

As he handed John a clipboard with a piece of paper held under a spring-loaded clip; the stranger said, "Sign your name to this document."

John did as he was told, and then returned the clipboard.

"Thank you," his interviewer said. "You may return to your dormitory. Do not discuss this conversation with anyone."

John stood up quickly, turned and left the room. When he got outside, he felt a great urge to urinate.

Events unfolded just as the stranger foretold.

John was assigned as a supervisor of eleven American citizens working out of an office in a high rise in downtown Houston, Texas. It was a great city, but the summer heat was something he never grew accustomed to. He also missed the snow of his native land.

The years flew by quickly. He and his staff kept busy selling cell phones, pagers, IPODs, PDAs, Game Boys, hand-held walkie-talkies and radios; items used by the military, police departments, emergency response teams, and EMS teams from hospitals, plus just plain folks who wanted those toys as status symbols.

"It seems to be the driving force in America," John noted in a weekly report.

"Keep up the good work," was his reply.

"My supervisors in China must be happy," he thought while reviewing sales records during January and February of this year.

It was amazing to think that during the past four years, his small force sold over one million eight hundred thousand individual items in the great state of Texas alone.

He imagined other classmates assigned to larger cities were doing as

well, if not better. The Chinese slowly were becoming the number one manufacturer of electronic gear.

Then to his surprise, one evening in early March, his black phone rang, startling him out of a well-deserved nap. It rang at least twice each year, but there was never a reply to his statement, "John Park - Houston."

This time it was different. A voice with a Chinese accent said, "Open the package and follow the instructions to the letter."

"Yes, Sir," John said, but he was talking to a dead instrument.

His documents read: "From this day forward, if you drink coffee or tea, take it black. USE NO SUGAR OR SUBSTITUTES!

"Leave behind every electronic device except the special black cell phone. Take nothing but a suitcase with several days clothing and your black cell phone.

"Go to the airport and purchase a ticket for San Francisco. Upon arrival there, take a taxi to any good hotel near the center of town and request a room on the highest floor possible.

"Act natural. Do not draw undue attention to yourself. Stay in your room except to eat your meals at the appropriate time in the hotel dining room. DO NOT drink anything except bottled water.

"On the twenty-first day of March, you WILL NOT leave your room for any reason. Order your breakfast from room service no later than seven a.m., Pacific Time. You are to be a witness to one of the most memorable events the world has ever seen. You are the eyes, ears and mouth of a New China.

"No matter what you hear or see on March twenty-first, DO NOT leave your room until the black cell phone rings the following morning. Be prepared to view sights you have never seen before and to report factually on what you see.

"Re-read and memorize these orders. Then tear the documents into small pieces and flush them down the commode in the bathroom. Take care not to cause the toilet to overflow.

"Good luck. I pray Buddha will guide your hand during the next few days."

So here John was, sitting high above San Francisco, watching the sights from his fifteenth floor hotel room while dining on a steak broiled medium rare, baked potato with sour cream and broccoli smothered with cheese, and thinking, "It's a rough assignment, but someone has to do it."

Over the noise of news on television, he said aloud, "Tomorrow should be an interesting day."

After watching TV and hearing reports of huge numbers of unexplained deaths throughout North America, John thought, "It appears

something dreadful is happening to the citizens of North America. They're dying like cockroaches under the spray of poison from a pest control service."

Not realizing how apropos his thoughts were, he pondered, "I wonder if my assignment has anything to do with those events."

This morning, it was foggy outside, so John couldn't see much of the street below. From two television stations still broadcasting, he knew the death toll throughout the three nations making up North America was horrific. Millions perished in a heartbeat and hundreds of thousands of others were severely or mortally wounded.

"Is this the end of the earth?" John wondered, but in his heart he knew the catastrophe was the event he was supposed to witness and report on.

"All my training must have been for this day," he said aloud in an attempt to drown out the noise of reports on TV.

Suddenly the black cell phone lying near his elbow on an oak end table rang shrilly. After hearing the reports of all kinds of electronic devices exploding and killing their owners, John was almost afraid to answer the call he was told to expect.

"John Park, San Francisco," he said into the mouthpiece as instructed.

"Have you left your room for any reason today?" A new voice asked.

"No."

"Good," the unknown man said. "You may now leave anytime you feel is convenient, based on events you see unfolding around you. Do not make yourself conspicuous by not being wounded. If anyone asks, you left your cell phone at home.

"Do not take your black phone with you on your reconnaissance mission. You will not take written notes on what you see, but keep a mental count of the dead and living you encounter. We need accurate numbers, not estimates."

When the caller paused, John sensed he was waiting for a reply and said, "Yes, Sir."

"Use a city block as your measuring stone. Count everyone you see, dead or alive. Travel no more than six blocks from your hotel in any direction. Return as soon as you have completed your mission, but no later than three hours from now.

"Check your watch. I have nine seventeen a.m., Pacific Time. Do you agree?"

"Yes, Sir," he repeated. "My watch also says nine seventeen."

"Proceed with your mission. Good luck; I pray Buddha will guide your eyes."

His caller hung up, and John sat staring at his black cell phone.

Two hours and forty-five minutes later, John returned to his room a shaken man. Never had he seen such carnage. It was as he thought it might be if Buddha decided mankind must end their reign on earth.

There were dead and severely injured everywhere. Sidewalks, cafes, restaurants, stores and hotels were scenes of horror. Automobiles, pickups, vans and every type of vehicle were strewn across streets like pieces on a monopoly board.

The wreckage filled the area with smoke from burning cars. John saw two buses, full of bodies, against the side of a building. Blood was splattered on windows and he heard the wounded calling for help.

While on his walk, John encountered three other living people. Two were members of the homeless community, making their way down the avenue and shopping at various stores as if they were millionaires. Their grocery carts were piled high with looted merchandise. Neither paid any attention to John.

Ignoring them, he concentrated on his mental count.

The third man was a driver of a cab who ran by John with blood flowing from a wound to his shoulder

"It's the end of the world," he shouted. "Run!"

"Where is he headed?" John wondered; and lost sight of the cabbie as he turned a corner on his way to his final destination.

("Wherever that may be.")

Finally he grew tired of so much damage to his fellow human beings and turned back to the hotel. So far, he counted three hundred and twenty-four dead or mortally wounded, and three living.

The interior of his hotel was the same. Most employees were dead or dying. Even lowly bellboys seemed to own cell phones or IPODs.

An automatic elevator greeted him with bodies of a man and a woman lying on the floor. Half the man's head was missing, while the woman's body displayed a horrible wound to her left side, where her purse once hung from her shoulder.

"God," John said, as he stepped over the bodies and punched number fifteen for his floor.

Without warning, his breakfast of eggs over easy, a minute steak and three pieces of buttered and jellied toast came boiling out of his mouth. The vomit splattered onto the bodies of his fellow tourists and John's shoes.

Bent over and dry heaving, John watched the numbers light up as the elevator slowly made its way upward. When it reached his floor, John bolted off the car and ran down the hall to his room.

Fifteen minutes after entering his room, kicking off his filthy shoes and washing his face with a cold cloth, John's black cell phone rang again.

"John Park, San Francisco," he repeated as before.

"Give your report," his caller said without a greeting.

"Three hundred and twenty-four dead," John said. "I encountered only three living within six blocks."

"Outstanding," his unknown contact said, and then asked, "Was there collateral damage such as fire to any building?"

"No, but there were many automobile wrecks. Some were on fire."

"Your report is deeply appreciated and will be passed on."

"You have done a great service to your homeland. Stay where you are until noon tomorrow. Then leave your hotel while taking along only your luggage and cell phone."

"When you are able, safely commandeer a reliable vehicle and make your way to the docks. Keep track of the number of dead or living you encounter and be ready to report on the state of the infrastructure in the part of San Francisco you travel through."

"You will be met there by soldiers of the Republic of China. Make your identity known to the commanding officer and submit your final report to him. You will receive further orders within the next two days. Keep your cell phone handy."

"Will it explode?" John asked foolishly.

"Of course not - what do you think we are - barbarians?"

Not wanting to give an answer to the question, John kept his mouth shut.

Without another word, his caller hung up.

John breathed a sigh of relief, then broke down and sobbed for the dead and dying. It was a good thing his contact couldn't see John's unreasonable behavior. It would have meant a trip to a re-education camp.

Chapter 3

Both women felt their labor pains at approximately the same time; three-thirty in the afternoon. Although they were complete strangers and wouldn't meet until three days later, their lives would be entwined for the remainder of their time on earth.

Carmen Hernandez was a lovely woman of thirty-two, with coal black hair, eyes to match and disposition of an angel. Or so her husband, Dexter always said.

For years she and Dexter wanted a baby, but God didn't grant their wish. Once they even thought of adoption, but couldn't find an agency willing to work with them.

Since they both came from poor families, Carmen and Dexter worked. He was a mechanic, while she was employed as a secretary to a doctor. They lived in the Long Beach area of Los Angeles, a stone's throw from the Pacific Ocean.

Even with their combined wages, they couldn't afford the cost of adoption. And, if one of them was forced to quit work to stay home with the baby, they couldn't survive and raise the child as they wanted. So, they waited and hoped God would be merciful.

Finally, nine months ago, somehow, everything went right and Carmen became pregnant. She and Dexter were so happy. Since Dexter was recently hired for a well-paying job at the nearby Seal Beach Naval Weapons Center, they could finally afford for Carmen to stay home.

And now she was feeling those wonderfully blessed pains, telling her their son was on his way to meet them.

Further down the coast, in the Huntington Beach area, just off Werner Avenue, Denise Rogers felt the same kind of pain.

"Stupidity must run in the family," her sister, Lenora said when they discovered Denise was pregnant by her boy friend, Antonio. When Antonio heard the good news, he ran off to join the Army, leaving Denise alone and frightened.

Lenora was also a single mother of a cute little girl of six. When Lenora gave him the news, her boy friend also disappeared and hadn't been heard from since. He never saw their daughter, Jean and didn't send a nickel to help support his family.

"Your old flame is probably out there spreading pollen among other young girls," their mother, Gloria said. For the first time in months, she didn't start her usual nagging routine, telling the two single mothers how things were different in her youth - no promiscuity, no out of wedlock sex etcetera.

"Things must have been dull back then," Lenora thought, but didn't say anything to upset their mother. She knew Gloria had enough on her plate, working two jobs and trying to support Denise, Lenora, Jean, and soon the baby girl Denise planned to name Susan.

"How will we survive?" She wondered silently.

As if she could read her youngest daughter's mind, Gloria said, "God will provide a way for us. Wait and see."

At the time, there was no way Denise could know her mother was a fortuneteller.

Dexter decided Carmen should go to the hospital early in the morning the day after her labor pains began. Carmen wasn't going to argue. She was hurting too much.

Denise's sister, Lenora said the same thing at almost the identical moment. After bundling Denise into her old Chevy, Lenora drove to the Methodist Hospital in a light fog while hoping it wouldn't get any thicker. She hated to drive in that icky stuff.

("It looks like ghosts are chasing you.")

Although they didn't know, Denise and Carmen passed each other in the hall, riding on separate gurneys toward the delivery rooms. Denise was in OR two, while Carmen was in number four. Both deliveries went well with no complications to either the new mothers or their babies.

Susan was born first, at seven twenty-three, two days before the world seemed to end. Ten minutes later, Carmen's son, Felix came naked into this world of woe, sin, greed and temptation.

A delay was experienced in the transfer of both new mothers and babies to their individual rooms and infant care unit. The hospital was abuzz with news of many unexpected deaths around town. All available nurses were busy assisting emergency room personnel when relatives arrived with their deceased or dying family members.

When she awoke, Carmen met her roommate, Cynthia Rodriquez from the Lakewood area of Los Angeles. They had never met before, but Cynthia's husband, Howard was also a mechanic, so the two women shared tales of trying to get grease out of their husbands' clothes after a hard day at the garage.

The rest of the day and the next went by quickly with visits from family members and feedings of Mando, Cynthia's little boy and Felix. Both mothers made the mandatory remarks concerning the cuteness of each child. But it was true; both children were beautiful babies, and if life was good to them, would grow to be handsome men.

Down the hallway, Denise met her "cellmate", as she referred to herself. Helen Perino was an older woman of thirty-six who just gave birth to their fourth child, a son she named Richie.

Food service and help in general was hard to come by. Nurses and doctors were extremely busy comforting families of thousands of people who passed away throughout the entire city during the past two days.

"If we don't find a cause soon, we may have a panic on our hands," said the Honorable Mayor of Los Angeles, William Cromwell.

But even with delays, the patients' days were also busy, filled with feedings, family chats and motherly advice from a staff member who gave each new mother a kit to read.

When the staffer left, Helen threw her copy into a trash can.

"I swear I don't know what we'll do with another mouth to feed. I know the Bible says it's wrong to prevent birth, but I'm seriously thinking of having a hysterectomy."

"Don't defy the church's teachings," Denise said. "God will find a way to relieve your burden."

It appeared Denise had learned the secrets of fortunetelling from her mother, Gloria.

Nurse Stephanie Gifford walked into Carmen's room first. A few minutes later, she told Denise the same thing; "You're going home with your baby tomorrow. Let your family know you'll be released at two p.m. Please be sure you have a way to get home."

They didn't know it at the time, but the next day they learned Nurse Gifford wasn't much of a fortune teller. She would never be able to master the trade. Stephanie wore a pager on her shoulder and a cell phone on her belt.

The next day, outside her room, Carmen could see a variety of birds and pigeons flying in a clear blue sky or perched on limbs of trees which were bare, with leaves gone in the wintertime. She was surprised that for

a change she could hear their chirping above the noise of traffic. It seemed there were no vehicles on the pavement below.

Carmen lay in her hospital bed waiting for someone to come to her aid. She was afraid to move from a prone position, as a shard of plastic from her roommate's cell phone was protruding from Carmen's right eye.

Knowing her eye was gone, Carmen could still see out of the left, and what she witnessed frightened her so much she thought she might die at any minute.

Cynthia lay dead in a pool of blood on the bed next to Carmen. Most of her head from her mouth to the top of her shattered skull was missing after her new "no hands" cell phone exploded and killed her almost an hour ago.

With shaking hands, Carmen tried to throw a pillow over what was left of Cynthia's gory face, but missed. The puffy white cushion slipped off and fell into a larger pool of blood between the two beds.

"Oh God," Carmen cried out. "What have we done to deserve this? What about our babies? Where are the nurses and doctors?"

No one answered her call, least of all, God. If He was up and about, He wasn't in the land of the free and the home of the brave.

Suddenly Carmen saw a figure move up the hall and start to pass her room.

"Who's there? I need help."

"It's only me, little mother," said another patient Carmen had seen in the recovery room.

"What's wrong?"

"My eye," Carmen said and pointed towards her injury.

"Yes, I see," the stranger said. "Can you walk?"

"I'm afraid to try. Where are the nurses?"

"They're all dead. My name is Denise and I'm going to the nursery to get my baby and go home."

"They're all dead?" Carmen asked, still in shock and not wanting to believe what she heard.

"Yes; it's God's will. The end is near and I'm going to spend it with my family if I have to walk clear across Los Angeles. Do you want to come with me?"

"I can't stay here," Carmen said. "I need my baby boy."

"Then get up and walk," Denise ordered. "If you remain here, you and your son will die. From what I saw out my window, there won't be any help arriving soon. Everyone is either severely injured or dead. The streets and sidewalks are covered with bodies."

"What happened?" Carmen asked.

"I don't have time to tell you. Either come with me or stay here and perish with your son."

"I'm coming," Carmen said as she climbed out of bed, only to discover her shoes were half-full of Cynthia's blood. After pouring it out, she slipped them on her feet, wiped her hands on a sheet and felt weak, but knew she must be strong.

"Your face is bleeding," Denise said, "but I don't think it's bad. Let's go."

Although Denise warned her, Carmen was unprepared for the destruction to human forms in every area of the hospital. They made their way slowly to the nursery, while stepping cautiously over or around many bodies.

The only sounds heard were soft murmurs of injured people saying their prayers, and babies crying in their bassinets. It was eerily quiet for the middle of the day.

"How will we get home?" Carmen asked.

"I'll find a way," Denise swore.

Her face was stern, and Carmen had no doubt about her statement.

"Here we are," Denise said as they arrived at the nursery. "Find your son and let's get out of this terrible place. I know where Susan is, over there on the end."

Carmen read three name tags before finding little Felix. He was crying softly, but seemed unhurt.

("He's probably hungry. I'll try to nurse him later.")

"I'm ready," she said to Denise, who was standing in the doorway holding two babies.

"Did you have twins?"

"No, this is my roommate's baby. She's dead and I'm taking him with me in case no one shows up. She was a nice lady and treated me well. When this is all over, if I can find his daddy, I'll return him. If not, I'll raise him as my own."

They walked to the elevator, slipping and sliding through what seemed to be a river of dark red blood. Carmen kept count of bodies she saw until she reached twenty and then gave up. It was too much to comprehend.

"There are so many," she said to Denise.

"God is punishing us. There can be no other answer."

"God didn't make the cell phones explode," Carmen said.

"I know; it's easier to blame Him than anyone else."

"I hope He understands," Carmen said and crossed herself.

When they finally reached the street, other than a multitude of bodies, it was deserted. Vehicles of every size, shape, color and design lined the road in haphazard form; most wrecked when they crashed into other

vehicles after the drivers died from wounds inflicted by his or her electronic toys. They could see blood splattered across windows and knew each contained another victim or more.

"We need transportation," Denise said. "We can't be squeamish - they won't feel anything. Hold the babies while I clear one of the cars of bodies."

Struggling with the weight of three children and feeling faint, Carmen did her best to avoid watching as Denise pulled the bloody carcass of a woman from a large SUV and dragged it to the curb.

After taking her daughter and other baby from Carmen, Denise said, "She was alone, get in."

Ignoring blood on the front seat, they placed their babies on the floorboard on the passenger's side and cushioned them with the blankets they wore. Carmen sat with her legs on the center console and felt slippery remains of the dead lady's brains on her legs.

The keys were in the ignition and the motor started on the first attempt. One fender was bent and dented, but the vehicle seemed to be in good shape.

"She must have been parking," Denise said. "Her bad fortune is our salvation. Help me watch for bodies. I don't want to run over any, but if we have to, they won't feel it. Don't get sick on me."

"I won't," Carmen promised. "Where do you live?"

"Over on the coast. What about you?"

"Close to Del Ray," Carmen said. "If we make it to your place, I can call my husband."

Then she stopped and thought of what she said and began to cry.

"What's wrong?" Denise asked.

"We only have a cell phone."

"Damn," Denise replied and drove off slowly so she wouldn't run over the body of the prior owner of their new SUV.

A few minutes later, Denise said, "Wait a minute, I have to stop."

"Why?" Carmen asked, looking out her window and seeing nothing new.

"Just sit here and watch the babies."

After she climbed out of the SUV, Denise walked to the bodies of two Los Angeles policemen lying in the street near an accident they had been directing traffic around.

Both cops were dead; their bodies blown almost in half by the force of electronic instruments of their profession attached to their belts.

Reaching down, Denise found and removed the officers' bloody weapons - two Glock 15s, fully loaded. Other than the gore, they appeared serviceable.

She wiped them on one cop's shirt – she didn't think he would mind. She found only one extra clip, embedded in a hip of one body, pulled it from its gory resting place, wiped it off and put it in her pocket.

After Denise returned to the cab of their appropriated vehicle, she handed a gun to Carmen and said, "Here, you might need this. Do you know how to take the safety off and fire the weapon?"

"Yeah," Carmen said, "my husband is big into firearms and taught me how to use one. I may not look like it, but I'm a pretty fair shot."

"That might come in handy," Denise said, as she put the SUV into gear and drove carefully around the wreck while making sure not to run over either of their benefactors.

Two miles further down the highway, Denise exited onto a side street, turned into a large shopping mall and parked in front of a Super Wal Mart.

"Watch the babies," she said. "I have to do some shopping, but won't be long. If anyone tries to hassle you or attempts to steal our vehicle – shoot them."

"You can't be serious," Carmen said.

"I damn sure am. Stop acting as if it's a normal day. If we're going to survive, we need this SUV. Don't let anyone near it."

Taking the other Glock and spare clip with her, Denise made sure Carmen locked the doors. Then she pulled an empty shopping cart from a rack near the door and went inside.

Fifteen frightening minutes later, Denise emerged with the cart full of boxes of diapers, sanitary napkins, bandages, baby formula, baby bottles with rubber caps and two cases of bottled water. She also had a portable, battery operated radio made in the U. S. A. Piled on top of it all, were three large fluffy, white pillows.

"Open the doors," she shouted to Carmen, who did as she was told.

After she raised the rear hatch, Denise loaded her loot aboard and then slammed the door down, climbed back into the driver's seat and said, "We're all set. When we find out what's up at home, we'll think about another stop for foodstuffs."

"What was it like inside?"

"You don't want to know," Denise said firmly; then paused to look at Carmen's eye.

"We need to get that piece of plastic out of your eye."

"Yeah; it's bothered the hell out of me, but I didn't want to say anything."

"Here, let me try to pull it out," Denise said. "If it hurts, don't be afraid to tell me."

Surprisingly the two inch long spear-like shard came out easily. Some fluid ran from Carmen's eye and Denise sopped it up with a tissue.

"I guess you know you'll be blind in that eye," Denise said.

"I knew it from the beginning."

"I saw a first aid kit in the back," Denise said. "Hang on a minute. I'll put some gauze on your eye and tape it up.

When she finished, Denise patted Carmen's hand and said, "Help me avoid any bodies. I want to get home to see if any of my family survived. Then we'll check on yours."

"I'm glad you found and brought me along."

"You're good company yourself," Denise replied. Then not thinking, she said, "Keep an eye out and don't let go of that weapon. I hope the kids sleep until we get home."

Carmen smiled at her remark but didn't say anything.

A light to heavy drizzle was falling as they pulled up to Denise's home. It seemed God was weeping with the citizens of the U. S. A. over the carnage they viewed on the way here.

Denise climbed out and went into the silent house. Three minutes later she walked out the door, visibly shaken and crying softly.

"They're all dead," she sobbed, as tears flowed from her eyes.

"Even my sister's little girl. She was playing with her 'Game Boy' and it blew up."

Their appropriated SUV sat at the side of the street in front of Denise's family home. Inside the ramshackle house were the bodies of her mother, sister and niece. It appeared the two adults were victims of poison. They were found with a cup of coffee in front of each. Only the little girl's body was torn apart by the blast.

It took hours to make the trip, using side streets and avoiding Interstates which were crammed with damaged and/or abandoned autos. There were more wrecks than they could count and dead bodies beyond comprehension.

Often forced to detour around congested areas, sometimes when necessary, they drove on sidewalks. The once shiny SUV now carried several scrapes and dents along both sides. The left-hand side view mirror was broken by an unseen telephone pole, and slivers of silver glass were stuck in one corner.

"God, I'm sorry," Carmen said, while reaching out to caress Denise's hair.

Denise sucked up her pain and wiped her eyes with a tissue.

"There's nothing we can do for them now. Here, let me back the car into the driveway. Then help me move the babies into the back seat and cushion them with pillows. I can't stay here, so I'm going inside to pack a suitcase.

"While I'm gone, take the hose and wash out the front seat. There are