

# Book *of* Angels

*The Ministering of Angels  
in the Last Days*

Kevin Z. Fair





*A disheartened NYPD detective and a sassy teenage girl, survivors of a suspicious plane crash, team up with an attractive lawyer, a professor emeritus of religious studies, and a teenage boy blessed with psychic abilities to unlock the secrets of an ancient angelic record. Emboldened by the ministering of angels, they answer a divine calling to oppose the attempts of Lucifer to obtain the record and use it to prevent Christ's Second Coming.*

# **Book of Angels**

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**BOOK OF ANGELS**  
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ISBN 978-1-61434-466-7

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Published in the United States by Booklocker.com, Inc., Bangor, Maine.

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Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper.

Booklocker.com, Inc.  
2011

First Edition

## Chapter One

“Sit down, young man,” directed the white-haired elderly lady sitting in Row 28.

“Pardon me, ma’am?” replied Detective Randall, NYPD, who was preoccupied trying to recall if one was supposed to sit toward the rear or the front of the aircraft in the event the flight plan took a sudden turn for the worse. Jack hated flying, always had, and even more so since September 11th, 2001.

Homeland Security, now there was something he could laugh about. He knew enough about airport security to figure he and his fellow passengers didn’t stand a snowball’s chance if some determined religious screwball had decided Flight 201 from JFK to Miami was the ticket to eternal bliss.

“I said sit down, young man. You’re blocking the aisle. Here, this seat is not taken.” Jack didn’t recognize the voice but he noted the familiar face as he stood in the congested aisle next to the old lady from the airport bar. He had seen her there earlier with a group of young people, mid-thirty’s Jack guessed, and a young girl maybe twelve or thirteen years old.

Except for first-class passengers, seats on this flight were unassigned, a cost savings practice that several airlines had adopted at a time when many were operating in or near the “red.”

Glancing fore and aft, he found seats were quickly filling up and three vodkas definitely hadn’t been enough pickling to prepare him for the young mother traveling with her darling twin brats in Row 10. He figured seventeen rows between there and the old woman’s offer would provide a safe buffer zone for his nerves, along with a couple of stiff drinks for good measure. Besides, if the plane went down he couldn’t think of a place he would rather be sitting than next to someone who reminded him of his mother.

“Uh, well, are you sure, I mean\_\_”

“Young man, I may be an old woman, but I still have excellent eyesight and I could see your hands shaking the moment you started down that aisle. You are scared as hell of flying so sit down here and Naomi will take care of you. Besides, you’re a good looking hummer and it’s a long flight to Miami, so I’d like to have something other than the back of this seat to stare at.” She smiled and winked as she extended a thin, wrinkled hand and touched Jack’s, adding, “If you don’t mind humoring a lonely old lady.”

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Wow, what a wildcat, Jack thought; certainly not what he would have expected given her quiet, demure appearance earlier in the bar. He recalled her sitting off to one side, appearing to listen only half-heartedly to her younger traveling companions who were engaged in light-hearted discussion. Actually, Jack remembered, her eyes had seemed to be set on his. He'd seen that look before, a faraway look like that worn by his mother the last few months of her life, the look of someone longing for the end to come. Although he deeply loved his mother, he couldn't fill the emptiness left behind following the tragic death of his father, a New York City firefighter. He wondered what sort of emptiness the old gal felt and why her young companions hadn't seemed to notice or even care.

"No, ma'am, I don't mind at all, just as long as you won't be offended if I happen to fall asleep while you're staring at me."

The old gal laughed. "No problem here, young man. I do some of my best work while the subject is unaware. Besides, as nervous as you are I don't think there's much of a chance you will be getting any shuteye during this flight."

Jack didn't acknowledge it but he knew she was dead-on with that assessment and wondered when they would start serving drinks. He had acquired at best only a slight buzz in the airport bar prior to boarding. After years of heavy drinking, it took more than a couple of vodkas to sufficiently numb his "give a crap." The drinking came five years ago after the loss of his daughter to Leukemia. The divorce came shortly after he refused to stop.

As he hefted his carry-on into one of the overhead compartments, he glanced around to see where the elderly woman's companions from the bar were seated. He spotted them up front in first class. Now that's odd, Jack thought as he squeezed past his new traveling companion and took a window seat, leaving a seat between them.

Jack wasted no time latching his seatbelt and closing the window shade. Naomi smiled as she reached over and patted his hand. "Now don't you worry, dear, you'll be safe here."

"Oh, I'm not worried," he replied coolly.

"Yes you are, young man, but you will be ok in this row just the same."

Jack hesitated, looking to the front and rear of the aircraft before asking, "In this row?"

"That's right, dear." Jack made a quick study of the old woman's face which seemed to convey a sweet sense of sincerity; although from Jack's experience that did not always align itself with innocence. Not geared up at

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the moment for discussing who was going to live or die on this flight, Jack thought it best to just let further inquiry lie...for the time being anyway.

Minutes later, the aircraft was pushed away from its parking area, following which the captain fired up the engines. Jack immediately gripped the arms of his seat at the sound of the twin jet turbines winding up. The "Fasten Seat Belts" light with its accompanying tone seemed to be wirelessly attached to his central nervous system, signaling sweat glands in his forehead. As the plane lurched forward and taxied out to join the procession of aircraft awaiting their turn for takeoff, Jack attempted to visualize himself someplace where he felt at peace. That turned out to be a bad idea as he found himself at a crime scene, the dismembered body of a mob informant lying in a pool of blood, a marquee sign scrolling across the victim's forehead saluting, "Have a Nice Flight, Jack!"

To his surprise, as the jet hurtled down the runway and rotated upward into the air with a "thump" of the landing gear, he felt himself relax, loosening his death grip on the arms of his seat. He wasn't sure why the sudden calm until he opened his tightly shut eyes, looked down, and found old Naomi's frail hand lying softly on top of his, the one that still held a sense of touch. Her delicate touch was warm and soothing, like his mother's, yet different somehow. His subconscious must have responded to it, he thought, as he looked up and directly into the sweet smile of his row mate. She had said she wanted a good looking hummer to stare at during the flight, but what he saw bore no resemblance to lust. Peace was as best he could describe it as he returned her smile and added, "Thanks."

Once the aircraft settled out in level flight, the captain's voice filled the cabin. "Good afternoon, folks. This is Captain O'Grady. On behalf of Delta Airlines and the crew of Flight 201 from New York City to Miami, I extend a warm welcome. We will be flying at an altitude of thirty-three thousand feet with a slight tail wind. Flying time is expected to be approximately four hours, which should put us in Miami at about 6:00 p.m. Currently, skies are clear over Miami and the temperature is a delightful eighty-two degrees. Stewards and stewardesses are present throughout the cabin to assist you in your traveling needs and to make your flight with Delta as comfortable as possible. I have turned off the 'fasten seat belt' sign so you are free to move about the cabin. To ensure your safety, please fasten your seat belt while you are seated. We hope you will enjoy your flight with us today."

Although the sound of the captain's voice was comforting, Jack knew it was his job to make you feel that way whether or not you had good reason to. He caught the attention of a stewardess distributing pillows to passengers

who, in Jack's mind, must be in complete denial. Anyone who could fall asleep while traveling five hundred mph with only a few inches of flimsy plastic, insulation, and aluminum between them and a six-mile plunge to the hereafter was in desperate need of a reality check as far as he was concerned.

"May I help you, sir?"

"Yes, ma'am. Could I get a vodka, please?" Naomi's touch had been reassuring but Jack wasn't about to let the old gal hold his hand all the way to Miami. What he required were chemicals and a steady supply until he returned safely to terra firma.

"The steward will be coming around to take drink orders in just a few minutes, sir. Would either of you like a pillow?"

"Right now, miss, if it doesn't come on the rocks, I'm not interested." Jack's impatient reply earned him a sharp look from the pretty blonde.

"I'd like one, dear," whispered Naomi. "And please excuse my friend here. He has a fear of flying."

Regardless of how sweet Naomi was, her comment irritated Jack. Waiting till the stewardess left, he scolded her. "Ma'am, I don't need you to make excuses for me and again, I am not afraid of flying. I am just a little on edge is all."

Naomi seemed unaffected by his rebuke. "A lot on edge from where I am sitting, dear. But, not to worry, you will be just fine here."

"Here... here in this row you mean. Like you said earlier," returned Jack. It was more of a statement than a question. "You say that as if you know something the rest of us don't." He noticed his comment seemed to make Naomi somewhat uneasy as she quickly changed the subject.

"No, no, but I do know I am excited about this trip to Miami." Jack let it lie as he saw this as a good lead-in to asking why she was traveling in coach while her companions were enjoying first-class accommodations.

"And your family sitting up front; are they excited as well?"

"Family?"

"Yes, the young folks and the girl I saw you with in the bar at the airport terminal. The ones sitting up there in first class." Jack pointed toward the front of the cabin where he could just see the young girl sitting in an aisle seat.

"Oh, my dear, no. They aren't my family. No, I'm afraid I am all alone now."

"Friends then?"



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“No, but that young one looks frightfully bored. Perhaps I should go up and ask her if she would like to come back here and sit for a while, play some cards or something. Yes, yes, I think I will. Oh, you wouldn’t mind her sitting with us would you?” Jack did mind. Since the loss of his daughter, he had shied away from any type of contact with kids. But, if it would keep the old gal occupied with anything short of psychoanalyzing him, he was all for it.

“No, I don’t mind at all.”

“Good then. I’ll be right back.” Naomi slowly made her way forward to the first-class passenger section. Jack watched as she approached the group of young people from the bar, stopping next to where the flaxen-haired girl was sitting. She touched the girl on the shoulder as she leaned over and spoke to her. Jack thought the old gal must have a way with kids as he could see the girl’s face light up with a smile. The girl turned and spoke to someone sitting out of sight to her left. Seconds later, she got up and followed Naomi back toward Row 28.

Naomi stopped in the aisle and performed the necessary introductions. “Mr. Randall, this is Kayla Hope. Kayla, this is Mr. Randall. He’s afraid of flying.”

Irritated by the introduction, Jack countered, “No, I am not. How many times\_\_” Oh, what’s the use, he thought as he shook his head and sighed out loud, “Whatever you say, Naomi.” He turned his attention to the girl. “It’s nice to meet you, Ms. Hope,” greeting their new traveling companion as she took the seat between him and Naomi. Jack guessed the girl to be near the beginning of her teen years, but in the interest of sparking conversation he asked, “And how old are you?”

“You may call me Kayla, but it’s not polite to ask a lady her age,” she replied succinctly. That took Jack aback as he had never met a young girl so direct and proper...well, there was one, a tender part of his past.

“Oh, I see. Well, I beg your pardon. It seems you now know two of my weaknesses, a fear of flying and a lack of social graces.”

Naomi applauded, “Oh that’s wonderful, admitting your fears is the first step to conquering them.” Jack started to retort just as the steward made his way to their row.

“Would you like something to drink, ma’am?” the steward asked.

“Oh, nothing for me, thank you. Would you like something, Kayla?”

“A juice will be just fine, thank you.”

“And you, sir?”

“Double vodka on the rocks,” replied Jack without hesitation. His order had been riding a wave of anticipation since he boarded the plane. Now, he thought, maybe he could get some relief.

“Alcohol isn’t good for you,” noted the youngest of his traveling companions.

“You don’t say?” Jack crossed his arms and half-turned to face his young advisor. “Are you always so blunt, not to mention being a busy body? You do know what those words mean don’t you?”

“I’m quite aware of what a busy body is and that’s not a very nice thing to say,” she replied, in turn crossing her arms but directing her face away from Jack’s incredulous stare.

Jack uncrossed his arms, rolled his eyes, then crossed his arms again as he stared at the back of the youngster’s head. He had come up against some real characters in his time on the force but not one so young. Bewildered, he considered a reply but was rescued by a double vodka, not good for him of course, handed over by his “savior” the steward.

Jack decided to put the conversation on ice for the time being while he worked on the vodka. Naomi opened her carry-on bag and withdrew a deck of playing cards and handed them to Kayla to shuffle. Minutes of silence passed before Jack, his immunization boosted, decided to have another go with his adolescent row mate.

“So, Kayla, are you flying to Miami for business or pleasure?”

Her attention remaining on her card game, she replied, “I’m going home.”

“So, you live in Miami then,” concluded Jack.

“Yes, with my mother. She’s a lawyer. I plan on becoming a lawyer too one day.”

“I see, well, that’s nice.” Jack was about to ask concerning her father but reconsidered as that may be found to be improper. “And your traveling companions up front; are they family?” Kayla quickly held up a finger between her and Jack, putting his inquiry on hold as she considered her next play in the card game.

“No, just friends of my Aunt Jo’s. She lives in New York City.”

“Really, now that’s interesting.”

“Why?” asked Kayla, turning her attention from her game long enough to cast a frown at Jack.

“Well, uh, I guess because I live there as well.” Jack was fumbling around looking for a means of generating conversation. By his assessment, he was not doing well. Kayla’s shaking head confirmed his assessment.

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“So, your Aunt Jo, she married?”

“No, she’s a model, real pretty like my mom.”

“You don’t say. So, I gather your friends are taking you home?”

“They aren’t my friends.”

“Oh, that’s right. They are your Aunt Jo’s. You said that didn’t you?”

Jack was struggling with the right line of questioning to ascertain why this young lady was traveling with these people. “Well, I’m going to make a wild guess here and you tell me if I’m warm or not. You have been visiting your Aunt Jo in New York City and being a busy model, she could not escort you home. So her friends who just happened to be going to Miami said they would see that you got home ok. Am I close?” Kayla stopped arranging the cards in her hand and stared at Jack inquisitively.

“Are you a cop?”

“Detective, NYPD, and the proper terminology is policeman. Cop is considered impolite, rude even.” Jack got a little payback with that one but his satisfaction was diminished by his surprise at the youngster’s intuition.

“My mother calls them cops and she’s a lawyer, so.”

“So, you said that earlier. Well, your mother is a\_\_”

“Mr. Randall!” Naomi abruptly interrupted, putting a finger to her lips. Jack looked over at Naomi then back to their young row mate who had her fingers in her ears as if in anticipation of the slur hanging on Jack’s silenced lips. Crossing his arms once again, he turned away and stared at the empty vodka glass on his tray table. He was irritated by Kayla’s pithy attitude, but more irritated at himself for allowing her to get to him so easily. Having performed countless interrogations, he had always maintained the upper hand, always the one in control. But a kid, a sassy, arrogant child had bested him and probably didn’t even know it; or did she, he wondered as he looked back at her again and glared.

Giving up on his tit-for-tat with the occupant of 28B, Jack made an attempt at sleep. After a couple of hours, he had managed only to doze for minutes at a time, unable to totally detach his conscious mind from the reality of his position relative to the security of solid ground. It was about 4:30 p.m. when a “thump” followed by a slight bounce and shudder of the aircraft stirred him.

Jack looked around for the steward and, finding him forward, lifted his tray table and leaned toward their young guest. “Excuse me, Counselor, I need to speak to a man about a horse.”

“A horse? What do you mean?”

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Jack stood and began to work his way past Kayla. “Never mind, just let me by.”

“It’s best to stay seated with your seatbelt fastened. We could hit an air pocket any second and you would be\_\_”

“Look, kid, I’ve had about enough of your\_\_”

Naomi raised her hand and motioned for Jack to sit back down.

“Please remain seated, Mr. Randall. There’s not much time now,” announced Naomi quite matter-of-factly.

“Not much time? Time for what?”

“Young man, don’t question, just do as I say and sit!” Naomi’s voice was firm and piercing. Her once warm, inviting spirit had given way to one that was stern and commanding.

Jack responded to her command by retaking his seat but quickly the cop in him took over. “Ok, listen, ma’am. You seem to be a very sweet old lady and I’m sure you wouldn’t wish harm on even a rabid dog, but you must realize that if your peculiar comments get out to the flight crew, it could land you in a lot of hot water. Now, I don’t know what you think you know that the rest of us don’t, but if there’s something going on here that might impact the safety of the passengers on this flight, it would be advisable for you to tell me right now. Alternatively, if nothing’s going on, then you would do well to appear a little less mysterious until we land in Miami.”

Jack stared into Naomi’s eyes that stared back with a firmness seemingly unshaken by his warning. Kayla looked back and forth between her two elder traveling companions as if trying to decide which one to align herself with. Jack awaited a reply but Naomi remained silent, her gaze intense and steadfast.

Jack wasn’t by nature cynical, but twenty-five years with the NYPD, fifteen of those as a homicide detective, had taught him that some of the worst criminals sprang from those you would least suspect, even little old ladies. And, he learned to never expect criminals to act like criminals are “supposed” to act. He could still smell the acrid odor of gunpowder and burnt flesh that sealed the lesson for his rookie ex-partner who was alive and working on the force only because Jack had taken a shotgun blast for him.

A one-arm New York City cop was a liability in the field, he knew it, but he also knew he could compensate. Unfortunately, the Police Commissioner hadn’t agreed, offering him a desk job once he had finished his rehabilitation. That and Jack’s counter offer of “screw you!” threatened to end an otherwise illustrious career of service to the community.

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Had Captain Stone not intervened and soothed the Commissioner's ruffled feathers it would have ended right there for Jack. But he and Jack went way back, having attended the academy together and partnered on the force for eight years. He had seen Jack through the loss of his daughter and he knew Jack could get past this. At Stone's suggestion, Jack had agreed to take some personal time off to clear his head and reconsider the Commissioner's offer. Ergo his current occupancy of Row 28 Seat C, engaged in a silent standoff with a grey-haired, textbook nutcase and sensing she was likely getting the better of him.

It was 4:45 p.m. when the aircraft shuddered again. It was at that moment that Jack, still held by the intensity of Naomi's gaze, was sorely aware something wasn't right. It was at that exact moment he realized that just maybe the old gal did know something he and the rest of the passengers didn't.

"Don't be afraid, Jack," instructed Naomi. Leaning over, she encircled her arms around Kayla who was beginning to tremble. Resting her old head on that of the young girl's, she appeared to be whispering something to her. Seconds later, Jack noted Kayla nodding her head, a face once approaching panic gradually giving way to one bathed in calm.

Three minutes later the aircraft shuddered for the third time. The "Fasten Your Seatbelts" sign chimed. One of the stewardesses, who had just entered the coach area of the cabin, began to speak into a microphone just seconds before the plane went into a steep dive. She was lifted upwards by some unseen force as were numerous passengers whose seatbelts weren't fastened. Jack looked across the aisle where one such passenger, an older man in 28D, hit the ceiling headfirst with a loud "crack!" That was followed by a sickening "snap!" as his head twisted precariously sideways, a silenced grimace falling from his face, his eyes open and fixed on Jack.

Human projectiles were flying about the cabin, careening off each other, some smashing into those who remained seated as recommended. Jack quickly looked down to check his seatbelt. Finding it unfastened, he locked himself in, astonished at how he had managed to remain so fixed in his seat. He didn't seem to be experiencing the same weightlessness as were the other passengers who fought against the restraint of their seatbelts. Looking immediately at Kayla and Naomi, Jack noticed that they too seemed to be unaffected, although their seatbelts were securely fastened across their laps.

The screams of the passengers were barely audible above the roar of the aircraft's turbo-jet engines. Even with the horrific gravity of the situation, Jack's detective instincts led him to wonder what had caused the aircraft to

go into such a steep dive considering the fact that the engines were still operating. Trying to remain positive, he considered the possibility that the captain had performed a violent maneuver in order to avoid a mid-air collision. That would explain the lack of sufficient warning for the passengers to prepare, and if that were the case, they could expect the aircraft to level out any second now.

Jack hated losing control of any situation. He fought to hold it together by concentrating on his investigative instincts as he quickly looked for a defect in his line of thinking. To his dismay, he found it upon recalling the shuddering of the aircraft on three separate occasions over the previous twenty minutes. That seemed to point toward some sort of structural damage or control failure, not his to lose, not his to fix.

So that was it, this was it, the end of the line for some two-hundred-plus souls. Where that line pointed to he couldn't say for sure, he just closed his eyes and tried to ignore the screams of the other passengers as they continued their plunge to earth. "Damn it!" he cursed himself loudly for not taking that desk job the commissioner had offered him.

"It's not nice to curse, especially in the company of a lady," chastised a youthful voice to his left. Opening his eyes, he found Kayla looking at him and smiling. He was amazed at her calm, her sassiness for the moment lost in the grace of her smile. It reminded him of the peaceful look on his dying daughter's face as she smiled at him one last time before she exhaled her final breath of life. He missed her terribly, her death leaving behind a permanent void in his life, in his marriage. He recalled the words of the bishop at her funeral, "This pain too shall pass," then later the words, "Till you meet again beyond the veil." Well, preacher man, a little left of center on the first one, Jack thought. Now, facing an inevitable end only seconds away, he hoped the follow-up was a bit more prophetic.

Fixed by Kayla's smile, Jack didn't immediately acknowledge the address of his senior traveling companion. "Jack? Mr. Randall!" Startled, he looked up and into the still-commanding gaze of old Naomi.

"Huh?" he answered hollowly.

"Jack, this plane is going down, but I want you to know that everything is going to be just fine for you and Kayla. Just stay where you are and hold on tight to each other." Jack looked down at Kayla who still wore a look of calm then he looked back up at Naomi and slowly shook his head.

"How, how can you be so sure?"

Naomi smiled as she reached over and placed a reassuring hand on Jack's. "Well, that's not as important as your belief that all will be well.

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Now listen, I need you to promise me that you will see that Kayla makes it home to her mother in Miami.”

“Why, why can’t you do that? Why can’t her friends in first class do that? Why me? Did you know something was going to happen? How?” Jack was beginning to feel off-balance, firing off questions and wanting immediate answers, something he had always found quite irritating when coming from those he dealt with as a public servant.

“Jack, those answers will come in due time. For now, just promise me that you will take care of this child. Don’t let anyone else take her for any reason.” Jack remained confused and silent. Kayla was focused on Jack as Naomi reached down and turned her around, taking the young one’s face in her wrinkled hands. “Kayla, promise me you will stay with Mr. Randall and do all that he says without question. Will you do that?”

“Sure, but I don’t know who needs more help, him or me.”

“You need each other,” Naomi replied then looked up with a start. The roar of the engines was increasingly deafening, almost drowning out the sickening cries of the passengers as they called on a higher power to deliver them. Occasionally there was the sound of metal straining to retain its intended shape but failing.

Naomi returned her attention to her row mates. “It won’t be long now. Jack?” Jack looked into Naomi’s eyes, her gaze mesmerizing, her eyes like pools of radiant light reaching out to him. He wanted to cry out himself but a wave of calm poured over him as through silent lips, her voice filled his mind. His eyes glazed over as his inner eye fell on the scene of a strikingly beautiful, golden building. Somewhere beyond the building which held his gaze came a message in a sweet voice, a message repeated three times to which he signaled its receipt with a nod.

## Chapter Two

“NYPD, ma’am. We have a warrant to search the premises. Open up, please.” Jack Randall led his partner into the third-floor flat of a rundown apartment building on the lower east side. The scantily clad ex-wife of a two-time convicted sex offender, part-time car thief, and full-time dirtbag protested the intrusion, a protest that fell on deaf ears. They informed her that they were looking for Lonnie, having had reports he had been seen going in and out of her apartment over the past few days.

A known prostitute, she displayed her wares proudly. She insisted she was alone but Jack knew someone else was there. The telltale smell of her labors still hung in the air and it stunk as did this whole scene. Jack positioned himself in full view of all doorways leading off of the living room then directed his partner to keep his eyes open and off of what lie beneath the tenant’s robe.

The instruction had no sooner left his lips than a board creaked in the hallway. Jack turned his head in that direction, his younger partner still enamored by the revealing garment. He saw the barrel of the shotgun then the huge, hairy arms swinging it into firing position and knew instinctively there was no time to issue a warning. Jack shoved his partner into the female, spun on his heels, and drew his 9mm, firing just as the shotgun blast slammed into his arm. Lonnie’s dead body hit the floor just ahead of Jack. Jack’s right arm, or what was left of it, felt as though it were on fire. That and the smell of burnt gunpowder signaled Jack something had gone terribly wrong just before he drifted into unconsciousness.

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The azure light had been only faint at first but gradually grew in intensity, strangely encircling Jack and Kayla. Fingers of blue energy radiated from its center and bathed a small area around Row 28, fore and aft. That was the last thing Jack recalled before the lights went out, the last thing he had sensed before a burning sensation stirred him to consciousness. He opened his eyes only briefly to confirm which reality he had awoken to, then closed them quickly as he found his feet dangling what looked to be seven or eight feet above a freshly plowed field.



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Overcoming the initial shock, Jack batted his eyes and shook his head then waited for the pain to come, the almost sure pain accompanying a fall from thirty thousand feet and impact with the ground at several hundred miles per hour. Blood, blood too. He felt it before he saw it spreading across his chest and soaking his shirt. It ran down his leg, filling his shoe and finally spilling out on the ground below. He watched in silence as the once life-giving liquid spilled from his veins and painted the brown sod beneath him a dark, wet red. He was surprised at how calm he felt knowing he was dying. Just as it had earlier, while the plane made its deadly descent, Naomi's voice filled his mind along with the picture of a building, one shining like gold. But her words he couldn't remember as he waited for the pain to come.

Pain...where the hell was it, he thought, as he lifted his head and looked out across a spacious field of dirt littered with aircraft wreckage, large portions ablaze. Pools of burning jet fuel sent bright, reddish-orange flames high above the field, dense black smoke curling off the tips and filling the late afternoon sky.

Although Jack hated flying, he had always loved the smell of jet engine exhaust as the aviation fuel fed the engines and gave them life. But as drifting clouds of smoke reached his nostrils, they carried another odor, one he recognized from years of public service and countless accident scene investigations. It was a smell he never got accustomed to, and he was sickened at the thought of other fuels feeding the flames, dozens of them probably still strapped in their seats as they were instructed.

Giving up on the pain, he dropped his head and continued to watch the blood feed the spot below. Surely, he thought, he should have bled enough by now that he would have passed out. Feeling something running down his neck, he reached up and felt for signs of head injury but his hand came back clean. "What the hell?" Jack whispered to himself as he thrust his head back, looking over his right shoulder and discovering the reason he had not yet bled out.

The section of the aircraft containing Row 28 was separated from the fore and aft sections of the aircraft. It was, as near as Jack could tell, a sixteen-foot section of the cabin, the fuselage having planted itself in the dirt field at near a forty-five degree angle. Row 28 being front-most, it was closest to the ground above which Jack's feet were suspended. It was behind him where he found the source of blood streaming from the not-so-fortunate-as-he occupant of seat 29C.

“So, old Naomi was right,” Jack muttered to himself, a sense of elation coming over him as he came to the full measure of realization that his name had secured a position in the “survivor” column. Staring once again out across the wreckage site, Jack saw more than twisted metal and debris. He saw questions rising up out of the wreckage like words lifted from the page of a book, painting a picture of tragedy in the horrified reader’s mind. Jack had a talent for visualization, each piece of debris forming a connection to a question, each question tied somehow together to lead to the ultimate question...“How the hell did this happen?” As he looked out over the carnage of mangled aircraft and human body parts strewn here and there, he just wished he could turn his talent off.

Mesmerized by the flood of questions tying up his senses, Jack was startled by a sudden movement to his left followed by a sensation of light pressure on his arm. He froze, realizing he had forgotten the young row mate he had been given charge of. Fear gripped him as he fought to suppress a vision of red-stained flaxen hair draped softly across his arm. The pounding of his heart subsided at the sensation of her soft breath tickling the hairs on his arm.

Jack chastised himself for his negligence then briefly scanned Kayla for any apparent injury. Finding none, he carefully lifted her head and peeled each eyelid back to check for signs of concussion, her pupils responding immediately to the influx of light. She appeared to be sleeping peacefully. Jack took in the sweetness of her breath, relieved at knowing this young one was going to make it. They would both make it, thanks to a peculiar old lady who knew something that no one else had.

“Naomi?” Jack called out as he had just reminded himself of possibly the only reason he was still alive. “Damn it, Jack!” he scolded himself as he looked past Kayla and angered at not having been more quick to assess the well-being of his row mates. His anger gave way to alarm as he found seat 28A unoccupied; alarm accompanied by surprise at finding the seat belt still latched in place.

Carefully resting Kayla’s head against the back of her seat, Jack leaned forward and scanned the area immediately at his feet then expanded outward as his search revealed no sign of their elder traveling companion. He considered the possibility that she lay somewhere in the field behind them, having been thrown from that section of the cabin as the aircraft broke apart. He was sure, however, that the seat belt had been secured unlike most passengers who comfortably left the safety devices lying loosely across their laps. Nausea rose in the pit of his stomach as he entertained a further

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possibility, one that placed her wisp of a body directly beneath the cabin, crushed as the fuselage impaled itself in the soft dirt field.

Jack remained fixed for the moment on the horror of Naomi's possible demise. He felt a loss at not being able to visualize a positive scenario which would give hope for the survival of the white-haired wildcat who had insisted on his taking a seat in Row 28 where he would be safe. Come to think of it, he recalled, she had never included herself as one who "would be safe here," only he and Kayla. "How did she know?" he once again questioned as he heard the wail of sirens rising in the distance.

Jack considered waiting until rescue personnel had reached the scene before attempting to extricate himself and Kayla from their front row seats. As he waited, however, the wind shifted and began to bathe the cabin in a thick cloud of choking smoke rising from a burning section of the aircraft about one hundred feet in front of them. Fuel from an attached wing was feeding the fire which had engulfed that section, leaving no possibility in Jack's opinion of survivors emerging from the inferno.

At first Jack thought he and Kayla were the only survivors in their section of the wreckage, but as the acrid smoke reached them, he became aware there were others. From behind him came the sounds of choking and gasping for air followed by painful moans and cries for help.

"Ok, Ms. Hope, we gotta get down from here," Jack told a still unconscious Kayla. Turning to face the rear of the cabin, he hollered words of encouragement. "Folks, we're going to get you out of here in just a few minutes. Just hang tight. Rescue personnel are on the way."

Jack reached over and unbuckled Kayla's seat belt then pulled her over onto his lap. She choked on the smoke as she stirred to consciousness. Looking down, she quickly grabbed Jack around his neck and buried her head in his shoulder.

"It's ok, kiddo. I'll have us down from here in a jiff. Just hold on tight." Jack held Kayla with his left arm, nearest her, then reached down and unbuckled his seat belt, holding tight to one strap. Jack could have lowered half a ton with the strength designed into his right arm and not broken a sweat. It was no effort lowering himself and Kayla eight feet to the ground below.

Jack carried Kayla out of the path of the smoke and found a seat cushion, thrown from the wreckage, for her to sit on. "There you go, Ms. Hope. How's that? Can you breathe any better now?"

"Yes, I'm fine now and I told you earlier you may call me Kayla."

“That’s right, you did say that didn’t you. Well now, would you do me a favor and keep your eyes and ears peeled for the rescue personnel? I need to see what I can do to help the injured passengers out of the wreckage. I think some are hurt badly. Do you think you can be a brave girl and hang tight here until I get back?”

“I’m not a child, Mr. Randall. I can take care of myself. Mom says if I want to be a lawyer, I’ll have to toughen up. Lawyers are pretty tough you know.”

“Oh yes, I always thought so myself.” Jack followed his lie with pulling his handkerchief out and handing it to Kayla. “Here, take this and when you see the rescue vehicles just wave it real hard and point them in my direction. Oh, and don’t look at the wreckage, especially the uh, uh, well just don’t be looking around.”

Kayla shook her head and replied, “If you’re worried about me seeing the bodies, you’re too late. They’re all over the field. A lot of people died didn’t they?”

Jack scanned the horrifying scene around them, a scene that could have been taken right out of one of those airplane disaster movies. He sighed heavily as he wished the director would call “Cut, that’s a wrap!” and the bodies would get up and go home to their loved ones.

“Yes, not many were as fortunate as us. But, we’re ok, and there are some other passengers who were close to us that are still alive so I need to get back to them. Now keep your eyes peeled, ok?” Jack turned to hurry back to their section of the aircraft.

“Mr. Randall?”

“Yes?”

“Where is Miss Naomi? She wasn’t in her seat was she?”

Jack didn’t turn to face her as he answered, “I don’t know, kid. I don’t know.”

“She saved our lives didn’t she?”

Jack swallowed hard against a lump rising in his throat. “Yes, she did at that.” Leaving Kayla, he returned to the wreckage. It was a long thirty minutes before rescue personnel made it to Kayla’s location. Jack saw her pointing them to where he was working quickly but carefully, having managed to extricate four surviving passengers from rows 29 through 31.

“I’ve got broken bones and head and limb lacerations here,” Jack informed the fire and rescue workers as they pulled alongside the wreckage. “There are three more survivors on the far side of the cabin. One of them could use a chaplain if you have one on scene. You can’t miss him, he’s the

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big guy with a large chunk of metal sticking out of his chest.” Jack glanced over to where he had left Kayla. He spotted the seat cushion but no Kayla. “Hey, you guys see where that young girl went to?”

A large man with a lump in his cheek who had jumped from the truck and began giving orders spat in the dirt. “You mean the one who questioned our eyesight then jumped us about why it took so long to get here?”

“That’d be her alright,” confirmed Jack.

“Nah, don’t have a clue. She was there just a minute ago though.” The lieutenant briefly scanned the field then looked curiously at Jack. “So, hey, this may sound like a stupid question but were you two just out for a country stroll when this beast fell out of the sky or were you on board?”

“We were both sharing the Delta experience, right in this section. Why?”

“Well, we took a quick look at the girl as we came on scene and best we could tell she didn’t have a scratch on her. Hard to believe possible amidst all this carnage. You seem to be getting around ok yourself. That your blood all over your shirt?”

“Nah, dead guy sitting behind me.”

“Man oh man, I’d call that a miracle. Were you and the girl sitting together?”

“Uh, yeah, so are there any survivors in the other sections of the aircraft?”

“Nah, nothing but corpses everywhere; checked them out as we made our way to you guys. Captain just radioed and said he’s sending the rest of the rescue team down here to help us out. What’s left of the aircraft other than this is either burned out or a tangled mass of metal and body parts. God awful mess; worst I’ve ever seen. This is the only section even remotely intact. Guess you guys won the lottery when you picked your seats, huh?”

“Yeah, something like that,” answered Jack as he continued scanning the area for any sign of Kayla. He detected movement about one hundred yards to the north then saw her hair waving in the breeze near what was left of the front section of the aircraft. She appeared to be kneeling alongside a body.

“Hey, if you guys have this under control, I’m going to check on my niece.” Jack remembered Naomi’s instructions not to let anyone take Kayla from him. He could only assume that meant the local authorities as well. Guarding against the likelihood of that happening, he thought it best to set himself up as a relative at the outset. He didn’t understand why Naomi had been so insistent upon placing Kayla in his charge, but he had just come off

a win from obeying the old gal's instructions so he sure as hell wasn't going to question her now.

"Sure, go ahead," instructed the lieutenant, "but stay on scene so the Feds can speak with both of you when they show up."

"Gotcha," replied Jack as he headed off to see what his niece was up to. As he approached her position, he could definitely see that she was kneeling next to a body. From a distance, it appeared to be that of a female wearing a red and blue dress. Drawing to within a few yards, Jack saw the pool of blood beneath her. Kayla was leaning over the victim and seemed to be whispering into her ear.

"Hey, I thought I told you to stay put, young lady," he chastised as he walked up to one side of Kayla. He waited for a sassy reply but his row mate failed to answer, her lips continuing to work in the dead woman's ear.

"Kayla, answer me. What are you doing there?" Jack was upset that she had wandered off but even more upset that she chose to ignore him. "Kayla!" As if in response to his raised voice, Kayla sat up with a start, falling backwards as she gasped and clasped her hand over her mouth. It wasn't until Jack stepped closer and leaned over the body that he understood the cause for Kayla's alarm. It could be an autonomic reflex, he thought as he watched the dead lady's eyes flutter. When they opened wide and began looking around, Jack grabbed Kayla and pulled her aside then knelt close to the survivor.

"Don't worry, ma'am, we have rescue personnel on scene. You're going to be ok." Actually, Jack wasn't ready to add her name to the survivor column just yet, not judging by the quantity of blood lying beneath her. But, as his first-responder training had prepared him, you always want to give them hope.

Jack turned to Kayla. "Did you see her move from where I left you sitting?"

"No, I saw the body. I thought it might be Miss Naomi. Is she going to be ok?" Jack returned his attention to the middle-aged lady who was beginning to get restless and trying to speak. Taking her by the hand, he attempted to comfort her as she cried out.

"David? Where's my David? Have you seen David? David!" She fought to sit up but Jack quickly grabbed her by the shoulders and held her down. It wasn't as much to prevent her from further injury as it was to spare her the horror and the awful reality that her David was no longer with her. Jack held no doubt that she would be joining him shortly anyway.

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“Take it easy, ma’am. We need to assess your injuries before you move around, ok?” Jack didn’t wait for a response but turned to tell Kayla to run back to the rescue team and inform them they had found a survivor and needed a paramedic. But Kayla was already halfway to where he had left rescue personnel tending to survivors from their section of the wreckage. She must have a sixth sense, Jack thought as he watched her reach the rescue team and point in his direction.

It was only a couple of minutes before she returned with the lieutenant and a paramedic team. Jack stepped back and took the lieutenant aside, allowing the paramedics to take over.

“I thought you said you checked out these bodies as you made your way to our location,” Jack challenged the surprised lieutenant.

“We did, including this one. I swear to God she was a stiff, no sign of a heartbeat, pupils dilated and non-responsive. It doesn’t make any sense.”

“Well, obviously you misdiagnosed her, for now anyway.” Jack and the lieutenant watched as paramedics worked to stabilize the newest survivor. Curious to Jack, Kayla returned to kneel at the side of the lady, refusing to let go of her hand when the paramedics asked her to move away. Jack wasn’t surprised by her composure, but up till now Kayla had given him no reason to suspect she was of a nature to show such compassion.

The lady lay silent while the paramedics worked. Jack surmised she had probably passed out from loss of blood. Knowing what it was like to lose a loved one, he considered she might be better off never regaining consciousness, never finding her David or what might be left of him.

“How’s she doing, guys?” asked the lieutenant.

One of the paramedics stood and joined Jack and the lieutenant. “Well, sir, we’ve started an IV to prevent her going into shock and we gave her some coagulant to help slow the bleeding but she’s lost a lot of blood. I don’t know how she’s managing to stay alive but she won’t be with us for long if we don’t get her to a hospital stat.” The paramedic turned to continue assisting his partner then paused, turning back to the lieutenant. “Sir, I don’t get it. I remember personally checking this woman about thirty minutes ago and she was as dead as a hammer. I don’t know how we could have missed anything in her vitals.”

“Well, we did so chalk it up to experience, besides there’s no time to labor over the issue right now. Get her stabilized and transport her immediately. I’ll call for another team to help us with the remaining few survivors.” The lieutenant glanced at Kayla whose eyes were fixed on the near-dead lady, then turned to Jack. “We really ought to not have this

young'n hanging around all this death and what not. Why don't you and your niece jump in with the paramedics here and have them drop you off at the Incident Command Post on their way out. Should be some hot coffee and sandwiches for you there. I'll catch up with you in a short."

"Sounds great to me," replied Jack who glanced at Kayla then took the lieutenant aside. "Say, Lieutenant, if you happen to find an elderly lady, eighty's or so, wearing a light blue dress and sporting a ruby ring, would you let me know? She was sitting with me and my niece but I didn't see any sign of her near the section we were in. It sounds sorta gruesome but she might be lying underneath the fuselage."

"Old lady wearing a blue dress, huh? Don't recall having seen anyone by that description but if we do I'll be sure and let you know. Remember what I said about sticking around until the feds arrive. They'll have some questions for both of you if the girl is up to it."

"No problem," answered Jack. "But I will need to be getting hold of my niece's mother, er, my sister. Will they have communications at the ICP? My cell doesn't seem to be getting a signal out here."

"Yeah, should have a satellite phone there. Just tell them that Lieutenant Newcastle said to let you use it."

A heavy cloud cover was beginning to move in as Jack and Kayla rode with the paramedics to the entrance of the field where Flight 201 had come to rest five hundred miles short of its Miami destination. Within his jurisdiction or not, Jack always carried his badge and ID as a detective from NYPD. Flashing his credentials and mentioning Lieutenant Newcastle's name, Jack got access to the satellite phone and placed a call to Kayla's mother. It was just after 7:00 p.m. when she answered.

"Burr and Hadley. May I help you?" Jack was greeted by a feminine, yet business-like voice on the other end. He glanced over at Kayla who was busy watching the ICP commander charting out the crash site, placing stick pins in locations where bodies had been found.

"Uh, yeah, maybe. Is there a Mrs. Hope at this number?"

"This is she, and you are?" Jack was sure he heard the familiar sound of chop sticks digging into a bucket of Chinese noodles. He knew lawyer's work hours rivaled those of a cop, but was surprised to find her still at work what with her daughter arriving at the airport with virtual strangers. Obviously, Kayla expected as much, as she had given him this number instead of the home phone. That irritated Jack as he took on his own style of business voice.



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“Jack Randall, ma’am, Detective, NYPD. Do you have a daughter by the name of Kayla?” The business-like voice on the other end abruptly changed tone.

“Kayla? What’s wrong? Where is she? Is she there? Let me speak to her. Oh my God! Has something\_\_”

“She’s fine, Mrs. Hope, nothing to worry about.”

“Oh, thank God. What has happened? Is my sister alright? Kayla was staying with my sister. She was supposed to be on a flight home from New York. Oh, did she miss her flight? Is that why you are calling? Is she still at JFK?” Just like a lawyer, Jack thought, always asking the questions so you can never get a word in edgewise. On the other hand, he wasn’t exactly sure how to prepare the counselor for what he was about to deliver.

“Calm down, Mrs. Hope. Your daughter made her flight. As a matter of fact she sat right beside me and a nice elderly\_\_”

“Sat? You said sat as in past tense. What time is it? Oh, my God, it’s after seven o’clock, she landed an hour ago. I lost all track of time. I was supposed to be there to meet her and my sister’s friends at baggage claim. Is that why you are calling? Are they there with you? Why didn’t Kayla have one of them call instead of a cop? And you are from where? New York?” All the questions had Jack’s head spinning and worse, she had called him a cop.

“Mrs. Hope, if you’ll allow me, I’ll explain.”

“Please do because I really am not one for playing guessing games,” she replied, Jack noting her increasingly irritated tone.

“Thank you and I assure you I’m not playing games. Now, as I said, your daughter is fine, but we are not at the airport; not at JFK or Miami. We’re...” Jack looked at the surrounding area and realized he didn’t yet have a clue as to just where the aircraft had come down. “Excuse me for a sec, Mrs. Hope.” Holding his hand over the phone mouthpiece, he interrupted the ICP Commander who was now busy pointing out something on the computer to Kayla. “Captain, where are we?”

“We are about ten miles south of Richmond Hill, Georgia,” replied the captain.

“Thanks. Ok, Mrs. Hope, we are just outside of a small town called Richmond Hill.”

“Richmond Hill? Where on earth is that, Detective?”

“It’s in Georgia.”

“Georgia! Detective, just what the hell is going on there?”

*KEVIN Z. FAIR*

“Hold on, Counselor. Just give me a minute to explain and then I’ll let you speak to Kayla and she’ll confirm my story. The plane ran into a problem and we had to make an emergency landing short of our destination, far short, about five hundred miles or so.”

“Emergency? What kind of emergency?”

“I’m not exactly sure what happened, Mrs. Hope, but the captain had to bring the aircraft down in a field.”

“In a field? Oh, my God! Oh, my God! Exactly where? Are you there now? How do I get there?”

“Please calm down, Mrs. Hope. As I said earlier, your daughter is ok. We are at the Incident Command Post which has been set up at the crash, er, landing site and\_\_”

“Crash, you said crash! I thought you said it was an emergency landing, Detective. Alright, I want to speak to Kayla right now!”

“I’ll let you do that in just a minute, but first, you are going to calm down and listen to everything I have to say and stop interrupting me. Now, I understand your being upset, but please understand how hard I am trying not to add to your concern.”

“Well now I appreciate that, Detective, but you please understand that I am a mother and I almost lost my child in of all things an air disaster. Do you understand just how that makes me feel?”

“Yes, ma’am, believe me I do. There was an in-flight problem. The captain had to ditch the plane in a dirt field. I was sitting with your daughter in a section toward the rear of the aircraft. That section separated from the rest of the aircraft upon impact and was left virtually intact.”

The voice on the other end of the line cracked in a whispering sob, “Oh, God. Oh, God, thank you.”

“Well, someone was certainly watching over your daughter. Whether it was God or not, I’m not sure but she came through it like a champ. As a matter of fact, she was asleep,” which wasn’t exactly truthful but sounded better than knocked out, “when the aircraft went, er, when the captain began his emergency descent.”

“Was she hurt, was my baby hurt?”

“Not so much as a scratch, ma’am. Myself as well, thank you. We were sitting in the right place and were somehow spared. Your daughter didn’t even know what happened.” Another lie but Jack had to keep her calm. “Once on the ground, I managed to get us both out of the aircraft along with a few other survivors just before rescue personnel arrived on scene.”

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Jack's years of experience dealing with the public in stressful situations was showing through as the tone of the conversation had calmed and become less reactive.

"Oh, thank you, Detective Randall, and I apologize for reacting so horribly. Were there many survivors?"

"At this point, it doesn't appear so. Ours seems to be the only section of the aircraft left even partly intact. The remainder was, well, let's just say I wouldn't want the job of trying to piece this baby back together, let alone identifying the passengers who weren't so lucky."

"Oh, this is tragic. Detective, if there are bodies lying around\_\_"

"Don't worry, Mrs. Hope, she's a pretty tough kid, a bit sassy but tough. She even found a lady survivor that the rescue team had checked off as dead."

"Oh, that's wonderful. Well, I'm shutting things down in the office right now and I'm going to head up there tonight."

"Uh, why don't we talk about that, Mrs. Hope. Let's see, it is after seven o'clock now and by the time you get here it will be after three in the morning. We have to wait here until the Feds arrive to ask some questions. After that, there's no telling where they'll take Kayla."

"Take my daughter? Take her where? Why?"

"Procedure, ma'am. Being a youth, she will be moved away from the accident site as soon as possible. They won't let her wait out here until you show up. After all, she needs a place to sleep and the State will want to be sure she is protected until family can take custody of her. That could be about anywhere, a State facility or foster home. You could spend hours just trying to locate her whereabouts."

"Well I can't just sit here and wait. What do you suggest, Detective?"

"Ma'am, I'd suggest you hang tight and let me deal with the authorities. I hope you don't mind, but knowing how these things work, I told the rescue personnel that Kayla was my niece. If you will back me up on that, I'll see that she stays with me until she gets home. I can cut through the red tape pretty quick, get a rental car from the airport here, and head your way by midnight at the latest. We should be in Miami by eight o'clock in the morning."

"Oh, I don't know. I can't just entrust my daughter to a perfect stranger."

"Mrs. Hope, everyone here is a perfect stranger to your daughter. Look, you can call my captain and check my credentials. He'll tell you I can be a little cranky and impatient at times but that your daughter will be in good

hands.” There was a long pause on the other end of the line, a pause that Jack totally understood.

“Well, I suppose that’s sound logic. First, however, let me talk to Kayla and then I’ll let you know what I want you to do.” Under other circumstances, Jack would not find himself taking orders from a civilian, but he had made a promise and he meant to stick by it. Besides, he felt there was more to Naomi’s request than him just seeing that Kayla made it home safely. It was the way she had asked, the look in her eyes, her voice in his mind as if she had reached right inside him and touched something he couldn’t deny. Whatever her motive, Jack knew it was for a purpose far more important than any that met his own agenda...for the time being anyway.

“He drinks too much but he’s pretty strong. I don’t think any criminals are going to mess with us, Mom.” Jack thought he would have to do damage control once Kayla had finished describing him to her mother as a rude, impolite alcoholic. And although she did give him credit for rescuing her and several other survivors from the wreckage, judging from the way she rolled her eyes it seemed to cause her great pain to do so.

“Ok, kid, come on, we got some talking to do before the feds get here.” Jack took the phone and got the go-ahead to be the sassy kid’s uncle until he got her home. Although she didn’t come right out and say why, Kayla’s mother did add that she would have Kayla undergo a complete physical exam upon returning home. Jack got the message but bit his usually sharp tongue knowing she had full right to be concerned if not outright petrified.

Federal Aviation Administration and NTSB authorities arrived on scene about an hour later. It took nearly two hours of questioning to satisfy their immediate need for reconstructing what went on from the time the aircraft displayed signs of distress till it went into its death plunge. At first they tried to split up Kayla and Jack for questioning but Jack informed them of his guardian status and reminded them of federal laws that demanded his presence during questioning. He also assured them he knew how far they were allowed to go without placing the child at risk of emotional trauma.

As questioning proceeded, the authorities went over every sound, smell, and visible impression that seemed out of the ordinary. When asked if any passengers had displayed any peculiar behavior, Jack glanced guardedly at Kayla before they together answered, “No.” Authorities seemed particularly interested in just how the two of them escaped without any injury, not even a bruise to link them with such a devastating impact.

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“There were angels, blue angels, lots of them hovering over us,” replied Kayla. “They wrapped their arms around us and sang us to sleep.” That gave the feds a good chuckle and brought a relief-filled end to the questioning.

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As Jack had predicted, it was near midnight when he and Kayla left the airport car rental parking lot in the rain and began the 485 mile trip south from Savannah, Georgia to Miami. NTSB Agent Mulholland had driven them thirty miles to the airport, taking down Jack’s phone number and address in the likely event more questioning was needed after the plane had been pieced back together. It would be a painstaking effort that could take several months to complete.

Jack had learned as a public servant to be ready to travel on a moment’s notice which also meant travelling light. Everything he had brought on this trip was in two pieces of carry-on luggage which he had gone back to retrieve prior to leaving the crash site. Kayla had not been as fortunate. The first-class passenger section overhead luggage compartment no longer existed, being burned up completely along with her Aunt Jo’s friends. She did have luggage in the main luggage compartment but it would be weeks before the airlines sorted through the debris to recover what hadn’t burned up or disintegrated upon impact.

“My clothes smell like smoke and some kind of oily stuff,” complained Kayla as Jack changed lanes to take the Highway 95 onramp. Overhead lights along the highway lit up the interior of the rental car. Jack noted for the first time that his traveling companion’s shirt, once a light pink, had been painted by that day’s events. Patches of dried blood on the back were probably donated by the man in 29C who no longer needed it. Blood on the front no doubt belonged to the lady in blue who had miraculously risen from the dead. Her shirt and pants were both likely bathed in jet fuel vapors carried by the wind and smoke drifting across the field. Jack was glad they had made it out of the field before the storm hit and added mud and rain-soaked clothes to their discomfort.

“Here, take this,” Jack instructed Kayla after retrieving his larger carry-on bag from the back seat. “You should find a t-shirt in there to change into. Sorry, can’t do anything about the jeans.” Kayla accepted the bag, looking at Jack like he had dropped a snot rag in her lap.

“Uh, hello-o, what planet do you come from? Even if I find something even halfway presentable in here with your underwear, you honestly don’t think I am going to undress right here in front of you do you?”

“You know, you are awfully picky for a, uh, how old are you? And don’t give me that ‘it’s rude to ask a lady how old she is’ cra\_, er, stuff, ok?”

“You started to say a dirty word, and I’m fourteen, well, almost. I’m also old enough to know that the only thing on boy’s minds is sex, so I’ll just keep my clothes on if you don’t mind.”

“Oh really? Your lawyer mother tell you all about boys did she? Well, I’m not a boy and right now I’m responsible for your welfare. So, find a clean t-shirt, crawl in the backseat, and change out of that dirty rag right now, young lady.”

“I don’t\_”

“Now, and no back-talking your Uncle Jack!” He shot Kayla his best “bad cop” look following which she quickly unbuckled her seat belt and slid into the back seat. Jack covered several miles of highway before she crawled back into the front passenger seat and crossed her arms, looking straight ahead. After a few minutes of silence she turned to him.

“I have to go to the bathroom and you are NOT my uncle anything!”

Jack chuckled. “Believe me, I am glad we aren’t related and I thought you just went in the airport not thirty minutes ago.”

“I pee a lot when I’m nervous.”

“Look, kid, we have a long way to go. Do you want to get home to your mother or not?”

“Do you want your shirt wet on?”

“Well now, that’s just wonderful,” Jack mumbled to himself, tightening his grip on the steering wheel and gritting his teeth at knowing he had already lost this argument. Up ahead was a sign that read “Food and Gas Six Miles.” Twenty minutes and a coke-he-knew-he-would-regret-letting-her-have later, Jack brought the rental car back out onto the interstate heading south. It frosted him that he had given in to her demand for a soda but consoled himself knowing that he had stood his ground on insisting it be a small. “And only 445 miles to go,” Jack breathed then silently chided himself for having given in so readily when old Naomi asked if he would mind the little “pain” joining them in Row 28. There was something about the kid, however, that captivated him. He suspected what it was, but fear kept his suspicions in check. To acknowledge it meant to acknowledge years of painful memories drowned in countless numbers of double vodkas.

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For the next hour, the two remained silent as Jack pushed the speed limit in order to make up for lost time. Noting Kayla didn't seem any too anxious to sleep, Jack decided to make an attempt at conversation, even against his better judgment.

"You know, I've got this if you want to grab a nap."

"No, I'm fine. I get car sick if I sleep. You wouldn't like it."

"Well, we certainly wouldn't want to throw a damper on the fun we're having now would we?" Kayla did not respond, remaining silent as she stared out at a dreary, rainy night. "So, how about I ask you some questions and if you feel like it, you can respond? If not, that's ok. Just talking helps me to stay awake. Wouldn't seem right surviving an airplane crash just to be wrapped around a telephone pole later would it?"

Kayla continued her silent vigil.

"Yeah, right." Jack watched the rain bounce off the windshield as he considered a suitable line of questioning. "So, you a church goer are you?"

A sigh came from the passenger's seat. "Sometimes."

"Well, that's good. I was once myself but I quit."

"Why, they kick you out for drinking?"

"You know, kid, you don't have to be rude. I'm just trying to make conversation here." Jack let a minute of silence go by before he tried another go at religion, a topic he chose with a particular goal in mind. "So, when I came up on you and the lady survivor in the blue dress, you were kneeling at her side and whispering something into her ear. You mind me asking what you were saying to her?"

There was a long moment of silence before his traveling companion replied, "Nothing really. Just a stupid ole prayer."

"Really, well that was nice of you. The Lord's prayer was it?"

"No. It was one Miss Naomi taught me on the plane."

"Is that right? Did the lady ask you to pray for her?"

"No, I thought she was dead. I was about to finish the prayer when you came up and interrupted me. Then she woke up."

"Yeah, well, sorry about that. So give me your best fourteen, er, almost fourteen-year-old opinion. Do you believe God answers prayers?"

There was another long moment of silence. "I don't know, sometimes I suppose."

"Sometimes and not others?"

"I don't know. Maybe you should ask him." Kayla seemed irritated by the line of questioning, so Jack chose to change the subject. He recalled the

voice of Naomi filling his mind then the building and the three words he couldn't recall.

"So, did Naomi say anything else to you when she taught you that prayer?"

"Don't think so. Like what?"

"Oh, like something she wanted you to remember, something about a building. A bright one, like it was painted in gold."

"Building? Gold? No, I think I'd remember something as nutty as that. Are you sure you don't have a concussion or something? Maybe you need to see a doctor."

"Thanks for your concern, kid, but I'm fine. Would it bother you if I asked you something about the plane crash?"

"Why not, you probably will anyway."

"I'll take that as a yes. So, what was the last thing you remember before you woke up after the crash?"

"Mmm, I don't know. Going to sleep I guess."

"Kind of an odd time to take a nap don't you think? I mean, it was your first plane crash. Can't imagine you would want to miss any part of it."

"Ha ha, funny." Kayla stared down at her lap for a few seconds, seemingly immersed in thought. "But, I guess it was sorta strange going to sleep like that."

"Yeah, well, anything else? Like did you see anything unusual before you went to sleep?"

"Yeah, but it may sound sorta weird."

"I'm ok with weird."

"Well, it was a light, sort of a strange light."

"Really? That's interesting. A blue light was it?" That connected with Kayla as her eyes lit up and her interest in this line of questioning suddenly took an upturn.

"So you saw it too?"

"Sure did. It seemed to be strongest around us but radiated out somewhat to cover a few rows behind ours."

"Yeah, it was kinda like a small cloud hanging around where we were sitting. It felt really weird and made my hair get all frizzy. Then there was this buzzing noise and my eyes got real heavy. That was the last thing I remember before waking up in your..." Kayla stopped just short of finding herself in Jack's arms. Her eyes avoided Jack's as she continued. "So, what do you think it means?"



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“I don’t know. Might have been static electricity brought on by the sudden change in altitude, or it could have been the physiological affect of our minds shutting down. We both passed out at some point, coming to only after the captain had somehow miraculously brought us down in that field.”

Kayla stared off into the distance for the next mile or so then asked, “Why only me and you?”

“You mean surviving the crash? There were several others in our section that made it too if you recall.”

“No, I mean why did only you and I walk away without getting even a scratch? Doesn’t that seem a little creepy to you?”

“Oh, I don’t know. I was thinking a little more like downright freaky.” Kayla actually laughed a little at that one.

“Miss Naomi knew didn’t she?” suggested Kayla.

Jack recalled the number of times Naomi had not only asked him to sit with her but also seemed insistent on his remaining seated. “Yeah, the old gal knew something. Just what and how I don’t know, but she knew something was going to happen to that plane.”

“Do you think that is why she asked me to come back and sit with you and her?”

“Well, either that or she was trying to torture me.” Jack couldn’t resist the opening she left him.

“Now you’re being rude,” admonished Kayla.

“Sorry, kid, but I couldn’t help myself. Yeah, I don’t know. Your guess is as good as mine. One thing is for sure though.”

“What’s that?”

“Well, without her you wouldn’t be going home sitting up and I wouldn’t be looking forward to a glorious week of deep sea fishing.” Jack didn’t have all the answers. He was as much in the dark as Kayla about the strange old lady in 28A. But, the more questions the kid asked, the more his investigative juices began to flow and the more eager he became to find the answers.

## Chapter Three

It was a quarter till nine in the morning when Jack swung the 2013 Ford Mustang into the gated drive of 2123 Fordham Lane, located in an upscale neighborhood outside of Miami. Having the nation's highest per-capita crime rate, Miami was a detective's playground but Jack wasn't in the mood for games. He was tired after driving all night and just wanted to drop Kayla off then find a hotel and crash.

After punching a few numbers on a key pad, Jack drove through the gate and weaved his way up a cobblestone drive lined with well-groomed hedges. Gardeners were busy harvesting the South's winter crop of flowers groomed to likely fill what Jack envisioned to be expensive Florentine vases worth more than his car.

He had no sooner brought the rental car to a stop at the front entrance than a massive, ornate oak door opened and a tall, slender blonde, who probably had great legs but you couldn't tell because she wore a business suit, hurried out. Being a lawyer, she already had one strike against her; but any obviously good looking woman who wouldn't show off a great set of legs moved right to the top of Jack's list of people to avoid. Sunglasses hid what could be beautiful eyes as the lady rushed to the passenger side of the car and threw the door open.

"Oh, my sweetie, are you alright?" the blonde cried as she pulled Kayla from the car and squeezed her long and hard.

"I'm ok, I'm ok, Mom!" she replied then gasped to reclaim the air driven out of her by the pretty lady's excited embrace. "Don't squeeze so hard, I have to pee real bad!"

"I'm sorry, baby, I just missed you so much!" Oh, so that's why you forgot to pick her up at the airport yesterday, scoffed Jack to himself as he waited to be recognized for his part in the effort to return her baby home safe and sound.

"Yeah, I missed you too, Mom. Now, can I go pee? Oh, and this is Detective Randall. Watch out, he's kinda grouchy and I don't think he cares much for lawyers." Kayla broke free and ran into the house leaving Jack to fend for himself following the gracious introduction. The mystery lady behind the dark shades held her silent gaze, Jack breaking the faceoff as he stepped from the car and provided his own introduction.

"Uh, like the kid said, I'm Detective Randall, Jack Randall, ma'am." Jack extended his hand, half-expecting her to pull a ten spot out of her

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business suit and send him on his way. Taking his hand, she disappointed him.

“Yes, we spoke on the phone. Thank you, Detective.”

“Jack, call me Jack.”

“Jack then. Thank you, Jack, for bringing my baby girl home safely. Won’t you please come in?”

“Oh, I really need to be getting on. Got an appointment with a hotel bed. That is, if they haven’t given my room away already.”

“Oh please do come in. I’m sure we’ll be able to find you a room somewhere. Besides, I have a long list of questions to ask you about the, uh, the...” It was clear that she couldn’t bring herself to address the awful reality that her daughter had narrowly escaped being disintegrated in an airplane crash. Jack was quite accustomed to seeing this type of response from family following the loss or involvement of a loved one in a tragic accident. He thought of Naomi and how she had insisted on his staying with Kayla until he got her home. Taking that charge one step beyond could only serve to honor her gift of life to himself and Kayla.

“Crash, ma’am. And I suppose I could come in for a short while. How’s your coffee?”

“Just put a pot on and Leann has baked some apple-nut bread. Are you hungry?”

“Coffee and apple-nut bread sounds just fine, ma’am,” Jack replied as he followed the counselor inside.

The interior looked like a scene right out of “Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous,” one of those places where if you dropped crumbs on the floor you picked them up and slipped them into your pocket. Not the type of home where you could relax, kick your shoes off, and cozy up to your mate. His stomach unsettled after a long night’s drive, Jack hoped he wouldn’t feel the urge to pass gas. Then again, he was too tired to fight it should his colon insist, so he figured why worry.

“Nice home,” Jack offered, quickly noting the absence of anything that remotely resembled a recliner in what looked to be the living room as they passed by on their way to the kitchen.

“Thank you, I decorated it myself.”

“Figures,” whispered Jack to himself.

“Excuse me?”

“Uh, nice, nice job,” Jack covered. “So, you and the kid have this all to yourself, huh? Must be what, three or four thousand square feet?”

“Closer to five,” she replied, removing her shades and dropping them on the kitchen table. Jack did a double-take as he caught a quick shot of the most piercing blue eyes he had ever seen. “We do a lot of entertaining so the need for the extra space. My sister visits us several times a year when she does photo shoots in the Miami area, so she has her own room. Kayla just loves her Aunt Jo, but thank God she wants to be a lawyer and not some skinny, undernourished model.” From what Jack saw, this lady could fill either role.

Kayla’s mother removed two coffee cups from the cabinet then paused, holding her forehead. “My God, I am so glad that Josephine couldn’t bring Kayla back home this time. If she had, she and Kayla would have been in first class with all those other poor people who perished. Oh, I need to call Jo and tell her about her friends. God, those were her dearest friends. She is just going to die!”

“Uh, ma’am?”

The piercing blue eyes turned to face him. “Yes?”

“Coffee?”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” she apologized, pouring a cup and handing it to Jack. “I’m still quite shaken up by all of this. I haven’t had an ounce of sleep since you called yesterday. And,” pausing to look at her watch, “I’ve got to go into work in an hour.”

Jack swallowed hard on a mouthful of hot coffee, stunned by what he had just heard. “You are going into work? Today?”

“Yes, I have a difficult case this afternoon. The head of the firm insisted I make the opening statement in this case myself.” Jack continued to study this fine specimen of a lawyer-mother, finding himself baffled at her seeming detachment from the reality of having almost lost her daughter, for good. “Oh, I know I should be here for Kayla, but she is strong and she will probably sleep most of the day anyway. Besides, she is quite accustomed to my busy schedule. If she is going to be a lawyer one day, she needs to face the reality of the demands it places on one’s life. We are a service-oriented business after all. People need our help.”

“Yeah, well, I’ve always said that lawyers have the worst hours next to a homicide detective. But, it is a matter of choice isn’t it?”

“Yes, yes it is.” Joining Jack at the kitchen table, Kayla’s mother stirred her coffee slowly as she gave Jack the once-over above the table top. Jack returned the favor as they studied one another, two public servants approaching their service from sometimes opposing angles yet not so different in the demands placed on their lives.

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Jack's hostess broke eye contact first, staring down at her cup of coffee. "So, Detective."

"Jack."

"Oh yes. I'm sorry. And do call me Mary."

"Mary, that's a pretty name."

"Thank you. It was my mother's as well. So, what happened? Why do you think the plane went down?"

Jack took a sip of coffee then gave a few moments of consideration before answering. "Well, I'll have to leave that to the experts. All I remember is there being a series of three thumps several minutes apart, each time the aircraft shuddering horribly. I've hit air pockets that shook an aircraft but nothing as strong as this. After the third instance, the plane went into a steep dive that it never recovered from. I have to give the captain kudos for bringing the craft under enough control to keep from driving the whole plane deep enough to strike oil. He must have come in at a shallow angle, allowing the craft to absorb some of the shock along the belly. That is probably why the plane separated into sections, ours somehow remaining intact."

"Well, thank God for the captain. By the way, Kayla said something about an old woman who asked Kayla to join you and her back in coach. Did she make it?"

"No, I'm afraid not." Jack didn't tell her that Naomi's body had not been located prior to his and Kayla's departure from the crash site. In the world of police work, as a general rule if there was no body then there was no crime. But in this case, it was a pretty sure bet that no body didn't mean there was no death.

"Oh, the poor woman. I'll make a note as soon as I get to work to send flowers to her family."

"I'm afraid that won't be possible. According to what she told me on the plane, she had no family."

"Oh, how sad not having anyone to grieve for you." Leann interrupted their conversation as she brought over two pieces of hot apple-nut bread. Looking over a cup of hot coffee raised to her lips, his hostess inquired, "So, how about you, Detective. Do you have any family back in New York?"

"No," Jack replied, deciding to keep things simple.

"No wife, kids?" she pressed.

"No, not a good fit for the life of a homicide detective." Jack raised his cup to his lips in an attempt to cover the forlorn look on his face.

"I see." The counselor took another sip of coffee then pointed her cup towards Jack's left hand. "Is that a wedding ring?" Jack glanced at the gold band he wore as a reminder of a time when he looked forward to coming home from work. Back then there were two reasons he wore it. Now it was more to remind him of his daughter than of the woman who had once vowed to support him in good times and bad. Truth be had, it was his obsession with his daughter's death and ensuing relationship with the bottle that drove his wife away, covenant or not.

"You're very observant, Counselor. Yeah, divorced."

"I see. Any kids?"

"One, just one, a daughter. She died when she was eight."

"Oh, I'm so sorry. Please forgive me. I have a tendency to pry. Comes with the territory you know."

"Don't worry about it. We share a like handicap. So, what about you? Kayla didn't mention anything about having a father. Divorced?"

"No, her father was a Marine officer. He was killed in Iraq four years ago. She loved him dearly but she never talks about him. The psychiatrist says she has suppressed his memory, sort of a self-preservation thing. Sometimes at night, I will hear her talking in her sleep. She calls out to him, asking him to come back, to be with her again." A tear formed in the corner of the counselor's eye, a sign to Jack that there was a good heart behind all that business fluff. Sometimes, detectives have to be part psychologist, Jack surmising that this might just be the reason Kayla had been so smart with him, he being a target of opportunity for a child left behind.

"That's tough." Jack had the same feelings toward his daughter for leaving him. Just then he remembered how irritated Kayla had been when he asked her if she believed God answered prayers. Maybe she felt He hadn't answered her prayers for her father to come back, just as He hadn't answered his.

"Yes, it hasn't been easy being a single mother and a lawyer in a busy firm. If it weren't for her Aunt Jo, I don't know how I would manage. She has been so good to take her during school breaks and for most of the summer. Not that we don't do things together, but her and Jo are like pees in a pod." Jack caught the faraway look in the counselor's eyes, like that of a mother who wanted so much to be a mother but didn't know how.

"It's good that you and your sister get along so well," Jack noted and then glanced at his watch. "Well, I believe you have work to do and I need to find a hotel before I pass out on you. I thank you for the coffee and bread, Mrs. Hope."

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“Oh, I would so hate it if you got out on the road and fell asleep at the wheel. I tell you what. Why don’t you stay here in one of the guest rooms until you have rested up?”

“Oh, no, I appreciate the offer but I snore and\_\_”

“No problem, the guest room is in the back of the house and you won’t disturb anyone. Besides I would like to speak to you some more concerning the crash. Right now, however, I need to get going so I can prepare for my opening statement. You will stay won’t you?” Jack could feel the tug of a long, sleepless night on his aching eyelids and the burn in his eyes. He looked at his watch and let out a long sigh.

“Well, I am tired and I’m not sure where to get a hotel right now.”

“Good, that’s settled then. I’ll go tell Kayla you will be here for a while and to be quiet so you can rest. I will be back later this afternoon. Leann, please show Detective Randall to the blue guest room.”

Jack was escorted to a large and very blue but comfortably furnished bedroom where after washing up he stretched out on the bed. He struggled to fall asleep but that wasn’t unusual for him. He often found himself running through the evidence of a crime scene, analyzing each clue, reconstructing and visualizing the actual crime itself. And, he rarely slept more than four hours at a time, a habit he had developed after years of being interrupted by homicide investigations. Evidence had a way of disappearing if the crime scene wasn’t secured properly and some bungling detective or inexperienced young policeman stumbled around with their head positioned in full view of their large intestine.

Finding a remote on the nightstand next to the bed, Jack flipped on the large, hi-def TV and scanned through the channels, hoping sleep would take him soon. Pausing on CNN, he wasn’t at all interested in what the Professor Emeritus of Religious Studies at Duke University was telling the CNN Reporter, but with any luck it would bore him to unconsciousness. Sleep, however, wasn’t to be had any time soon as Jack’s attention peaked at the reporter’s mention of a robbery from the university’s Center for Archeological Research.

“Professor Cambridge, exactly when did the robbery take place?” questioned the reporter.

“Well, let’s see, it was just after students returned from Christmas break. We had been working on translating the tablets uncovered during the excavation of a tomb in Jerusalem back in November of last year.”

“So, they were stolen in January then. This is March. Why has this not come to the attention of the media until now?”

“Well, it’s embarrassing you see for us as a major university to be entrusted with a find of such historical and theological significance, only to let it slip out of our hands and into the hands of God knows who. The Israeli government was furious with us, so to avoid further embarrassment we started our own investigation in hopes of recovering the tablets before the media became aware of the theft. Regretfully, someone at the university leaked the news of the theft to the media, so we decided to make an official announcement before speculation of what was behind the theft got out of hand.”

“I see. Could you tell us what was on the tablets that might be of such significance that someone would want to steal them? I mean, what value would they have to a common thief?”

Jack laughed at that one. He knew thieves stole for many reasons; some for the thrill of a challenge, or practice perhaps for something much bigger in the works. The professor hesitated before answering, adjusting his tie while glancing at a set of notes he held in front of him, a sure sign to Jack that the university wasn’t about to tell the whole story today.

“Who knows why criminals do what they do?” answered the professor. “To those who study ancient artifacts in an attempt to reconstruct history, in our case religious history, these tablets are priceless. Unless the thief knew the significance of the writings on the tablets, he would have no means of measuring their historic value or what to expect their cash value to be. So, speculation as to why the tablets were stolen would serve no purpose.”

Jack couldn’t turn off the detective inside of him as he made a mental note that maybe this thief knew more about the tablets than the professor was aware of or was allowed to reveal to the public. Maybe the thief didn’t care about cash value at all. “Come on, Professor, give it up. What’s on the tablets?” he muttered to himself.

Jack’s investigative juices were beginning to flow, something he feared he wouldn’t be able to turn off, even in the face of much-needed sleep.

“That makes sense, I suppose,” continued the reporter. “Can you tell us then just what was on the tablets that your research group was in the process of translating when they were stolen?”

Jack noted that one of the professor’s eyebrows twitched as he prepared to answer the reporter’s question. That meant something to Jack but the reporter didn’t seem to notice as he awaited the professor’s response.

“Well, as I said earlier, we were in the process of translating them, so that work wasn’t quite complete before the tablets were stolen.” Jack noted the eyebrow twitch again. “But, we do know that they dated back to around



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the time of Christ's ministry on earth. We are not sure, however, of whom made the record or if the information on the tablets relates to fact. It may be no more than a story handed down through the ages with no factual basis, a fable if you will." Another twitch.

"Written in ancient Hebrew, one of the tablets relates the story of Lucifer being cast out of Heaven after a war of words with the Council of Gods. The Archangel Michael and his army of angels cast Lucifer and a third of the hosts of heaven down to Earth after a battle stemming from a disagreement over the proposed Plan of Salvation for mankind. Failing in his bid for glory, Lucifer vowed to fill the Earth with his army of fallen angels and prevent as many of mankind as he could from accepting the Plan of Salvation and returning to their heavenly home."

"Another tablet bears the record of angels who were assigned the task of ushering in each millennium of man's existence on Earth, six angels in all."

"Millennium, now that is what, a thousand years?" inquired the CNN reporter.

"Yes, that is correct. It is our best estimate that there have been 6,000 years to date of man's dominion over the Earth. It began, as told in the Book of Genesis in the Bible, with Adam and his help-meet, or wife, Eve. That began the first gospel dispensation and the first thousand years, or millennium, of man's earthly estate."

"I see, so how does the story or account recorded on this tablet relate to the first tablet you mentioned where Lucifer was cast down from Heaven?" asked the reporter. Jack, although not particularly religious, found he was actually curious of the answer to that as well.

"Well, as the account goes, and such an account is not mentioned in the Bible so it is suspect, each millennium had to be ushered in by one of these six angels. Once the assigned angel had entered the earthly sphere, it would receive a human body and be given a 'key of power' over that millennium and those to come. It would use that key to minister to God's holy prophets and to protect the Earth from destruction by Lucifer and his dark angels or demons. Each succeeding millennium would be preceded by the appearance of another angel and another key of power, ushering in that period of mankind's mortal existence. So far, if the account is factual," another twitch noted by Jack, "six of these angels to date would have come to the Earth. It is during the final millennium that Jesus Christ is expected to return to the Earth and begin his one thousand years of millennial reign prior to the end of the world in its present, fallen state."

“That’s very interesting,” interjected the reporter, “but you still haven’t answered my question as to how the account on this tablet relates to the account on the first tablet of Lucifer being cast out of Heaven.”

“Yes, I am getting to that. You see, Lucifer’s objective here on Earth is to prevent as many of mankind as he can from coming to Christ and accepting the Plan of Salvation. He has led many away from that straight and narrow path mentioned in the scriptures, and the longer he has to work the evils of his plan, the more souls of mankind he can prevent from returning to their once heavenly home.”

“Now, the second tablet explains how Lucifer can extend that period of time he has to accomplish his plan. As I said earlier, each of the Millennial Angels were to receive a human body once they had completed ushering in their assigned millennium. If they do indeed exist, they each possess a key of power, each key being different in nature and function. The tablet records that if Lucifer can find these angels and destroy them, which he has the power to do while they are in human form, then he can gain possession of one or more of these keys of power. Once a key is in his possession, he can use it to disrupt key millennial events which could in turn delay the Second Coming of Christ and prolong the earthly estate of man.” The professor paused to pull a handkerchief from his back pocket and wipe the beads of sweat that had been growing on his forehead, just above his twitching eyebrows.

Jack wasn’t sure he was buying much of this religious mumbo jumbo, but years of being a cop wouldn’t let him dismiss it as such until he had all the facts. So far the professor’s explanation of the account recorded on the tablets didn’t do too much for separating fact from fiction. If the accounts were factual, and Jack considered that a big if, then mankind would literally pay hell should “Ole Scratch,” the Devil himself, ever get hold of even one of those six angels. That brought up another question in Jack’s ever-inquisitive detective brain. How would the Devil, Lucifer, know where to find any of the angels?

“Excuse me,” said the professor as he wiped the last bit of sweat from his face. “Where was I?”

The reporter answered, “You had just said that each Millennial Angel, should they exist, has a key of power and that by obtaining them, Lucifer could prolong the time he has to take mankind down the wrong path. Isn’t that about right?”

“Oh yes, thank you, and that is correct. As I said, according to the Bible the final millennium marks the Second Coming of Christ to the Earth, after

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which he will reign supreme over all nations, tongues and people for one thousand years. Following that, many believe the Earth will be changed to its paradisiacal glory as it was before Adam's fall from the Garden of Eden. Any delay of Christ's return places mankind under the threat of further condemnation and the certain loss of many more souls to the enticements of Satan."

"So," said the reporter while scratching his head, "if what you are saying is fact and was to happen just that way, then this would be of grave concern to believers. It might well even unseat some of us who are riding the fence so to speak."

Professor Cambridge withdrew his handkerchief and once again dabbed at the moisture now running down his huge face and soaking his shirt collar.

"Yes, one can only speculate as to the far-reaching effects on the Christian community. But like I said earlier, we refrain from treating this as absolute fact. We were in the process of verifying the source and authenticity of the accounts on the tablets when they were stolen from the research center."

Jack noted that recurring twitching of the professor's eyebrows. To Jack that meant the professor wasn't giving the complete story and was most likely misleading the viewing audience as to just how much of this account had actually been verified as fact, versus the vain ramblings of some cuckoo clock from the fifth millennium.

Jack still wanted his question answered about how Lucifer would know where to find any of the six angels. Did they have angelic names? Human names? You had to have names, Jack thought. Couldn't even begin to do a proper Yahoo search without one. The CNN reporter must have been thinking along the same lines as Jack when he asked his last question.

"This is all such an amazing story, Professor, and one that seems to need a lot of work to sort out. Let me ask one more question and then I'll let you go because I know you are a very busy man. How would Lucifer go about finding any one of these six angels?"

Professor Cambridge, still sweating profusely, fumbled through his notes for a few seconds before answering. "Uh, that is a good question, but I'm sorry to say that we do not know. If the tablets revealed that answer, they were stolen before we could find it." Just then, someone off-camera said something to the increasingly nervous professor. "Oh, I am sorry. I am being called away, perhaps news concerning the investigation into the missing tablets. I must wait and answer more of your questions at a later date. Maybe we will have more to tell you then. Thank you and good day."

“Damn!” Jack said out aloud. He sensed the professor was hiding something. Years of detective work had given him a keen sense for reading between the lines or lies as it were. He was especially suspicious of the quantity of information that the professor and the university were willing to share about what was on the tablets. Why were they so eager to share their translations up to the time the tablets were stolen? If that stuff were true, wouldn’t they want to keep it quiet? There was only one reason he could come up with for such open communication and that was misinformation. Sometimes offering a portion of truth was an effective way of hiding the complete truth. Give the public a little information, add a few disclaimers, and then play dumb from that point on. Takes the heat off.

Jack was still hanging onto the last statement made by the professor. In response to the reporter’s question about how Lucifer could find the six angels, the professor answered that they did not know. He said that if the tablets revealed the answer, they were stolen before it was found. Now to Jack, that reply seemed almost mechanical, as if it had been rehearsed. Why else would the professor have checked his notes before he answered such a straight-forward question?

If Jack had to draw a conclusion right then, he’d say that the whole interview with the media was staged in such a way as to lead to that last and final question, one not prompted of course by the university, but one that allowed them to express their sorrow at not having the answer. Bullshit misinformation, Jack thought as he turned the TV off in disgust and lay back again on the soft, cool bed.

He found himself going back through the events of yesterday’s near-death experience from the moment he walked on the plane till he and Kayla were on their way south to Miami. He wasn’t a believer in predestination but he certainly believed that timing was everything in life, that lives crossed paths at specific times for specific reasons. It was, he felt, given to the individual to make choices at those specific times which would lead to either a positive or negative outcome. He shuddered as he considered how different his day would have ended if he had boarded the plane before Naomi, choosing one of the doomed seats, or if he had boarded after the seats in Row 28 had been taken. He might well have traded places with the occupant of 29C who now probably occupied a slab in some cold, dark morgue.

The most baffling of all was the mysterious Naomi and the question, was she a fruitcake or a saint? Naomi knew something was going to happen to that aircraft but how? It was as if she was there at her appointed place at

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the appointed time, waiting on a one-armed NYC detective to show up at his appointed place and time. She could have asked anyone to sit with her, so why him? And Kayla, why her? Why not some other child of which he had noted several on board. Was Kayla meant to survive? If so, did that blow his theory about predestination, or was she there to take her sassiness to the next level as a result of a choice? She had reminded him of his daughter, bringing back memories that hurt. Maybe it didn't matter what Naomi was. Maybe this was about him and Kayla, maybe...

Jack sat up with a start. Sometimes when detectives are searching for a critical piece of evidence, something staring them right in the face, it takes thinking all around it to finally allow the evidence to surface. Something had been bugging him ever since the crash but with everything going on, his mind had suppressed it. He couldn't recall ever having told Naomi his name, yet when she introduced Kayla she had called him Mr. Randall. And later, just before the aircraft shuddered for the third and final time, she said, "Don't be afraid, Jack." How had she known his name? Jack ran the visualization of events over and over in his head and each time he came up with the same answer, she could not have known, but she had. Perhaps she was a psychic. That would certainly explain her knowing that something was going to happen to the aircraft. Yes, that had to be it. Jack had worked with several psychics over the years. They were amazing at seeing past events, but then the past was what he had always dealt with in investigating homicides. Could they also predict the future? Was the old gal a modern day Nostradamus? Her voice filled his mind once again and the picture of that beautiful golden building. But he couldn't recall the words, the seemingly important words her voice had repeated in his mind three times over. They must have some special meaning but what?

Jack thought about Kayla and how she had suppressed the memories of her father, how she was angry at him for leaving her and her mother. He felt the same misplaced anger toward his daughter as if she had chosen leukemia. He felt bad for being angry with her. Maybe Kayla felt bad as well but didn't know how to get past that and let herself remember the good times she and her father surely must have had. Maybe he was meant to help her. "Nah, no way, Jack," he concluded as he felt a wave of sleep pass over him, a protective response perhaps, he thought as the room went dark.