



*In a post-apocalyptic world, former pastor Godfrey Langdon teams up with survivalist Bartholomew Luther. Together, they encounter Olivia and Corky, who have been altered by Project Alpha, as they confront the chaos unleashed by Juan Tetzel.*

## **The Sky Burns Red**

By Hannibal Storm

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# THE SKY BURNS RED



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# Chapter One

## I

The blood on Godfrey's hands was as dark as molasses and always abominable in his sight. He didn't like blood, though he wasn't sure what he looked at could rightly be called "blood." Nor was he keen on the lopped-off, boil-filled, snarling head resting beside his left foot. He didn't enjoy this world. This world was a vomit-filled cesspool of filth, and he was unsure how he, a former man of the faith, fit into it.

Six months earlier, he'd known exactly what he would be doing right now, at this moment. He would be filling glasses with communion wine and preparing his teaching for the little Presbyterian church that he pastored in Payson, Arizona. He would get there before the sun rose, do the finishing touches and research for what he would present to the congregation, and then he would go and unlock the doors in preparation for the morning's first arrivals.

There were, of course, as always, the familiar faces that, for some reason, as if ordained by God, arrived at the same time every Sunday. He didn't understand their habits, but the men always shook his hand in the same superficial manner, and the ladies would make bits of small talk before reaching up to the tall, middle-aged pastor for a warm hug. He could still name the exact order and time of every congregation member's arrival, and rarely did it vacillate... until the arrival of the contagion.

Godfrey did the best he could to scrub the memory from his mind. So many of his congregants died while others, in horrific, cannibalistic fashion, tried to eat each other. He shuddered at the resounding blasts of the double-barreled shotgun, watching his beautiful bride's feet lift off the ground as if the law of gravity had been suspended, watching as she was propelled fifteen feet backward into the church wall. The image of his beloved

plastered against the wooden partition that separated his office from the church sanctuary was burned into his mind like a tattoo on the back of his eyelids—he saw it every time he closed them. There could not be a God, though he would have considered himself a spiritual advisor at one time in such matters. No deity of justice would have allowed that to be the final way he saw his wife.

The former pastor looked once more at the head lying at his feet, gazing upward at him mockingly, as if it had defied death and figured out a way to exist devoid of a body. Then he put the machete back in its sheath, which was strapped to his back, and kicked the head, sending it about four or five feet away from him. He took one more look around before walking out the broken door of the house where he had taken shelter for the night.

Phoenix was always on fire. Most who had visited the desert city in the past would have agreed, figuratively, due to the ungodly 120-degree weather that assaulted the Arizona valley during the summer. However, this was more than symbolic. In the new age that had recently dawned on the world, at any point and at any time, there was always something on fire in Phoenix. The horizon never ceased to be smitten by smoke, and if one took a moment to survey the landscape, one would find that it typically came from a building engulfed in flames. Godfrey felt that it was a manifestation of the reality of the new world, that hell had broken out and spilled onto the earth in an apocalyptic fashion.

The smoky sky was nothing new to him anymore, and he had developed his own theories about why this was happening. His best guess was that when the infected attacked innocent people, they were probably cooking or using electricity. They most likely did not survive the surprise attack or had been contaminated. This meant that they were dead and couldn't prevent any accidental fires, or that the contagion had consumed them, and their instinctual natures were no longer concerned with things such as their place of residence or their workplace catching on fire.

Godfrey stepped away from the stucco-plastered house and into the surrounding neighborhood, deciding it was safe for the moment. Only months earlier, such decisions, like fetching the newspaper or checking the mailbox, were taken for granted as simple, vital, and necessary as eating an apple or going to the gym. No one associated such decisions with the possibility of death or being assimilated into the undead army. However, in the world that now was leaving a place of shelter, such as Godfrey decided

to do, needed to be done strategically. As careful as he may be, there was still the potential for unseen threats.

He had found this out only minutes earlier when he had attempted to leave the same house for the first time that day. Godfrey was always careful to scrutinize his surroundings with the same care that a fraud expert used to examine hundred-dollar bills. However, even though he had done his best to avoid encounters with the contagion victims, an infected somehow picked up on his scent and decided that Godfrey would be its next feast. From the fleeting glances that the fallen pastor had gotten of his pursuer, his best guess was that at one time, this gruesome infected was a teenage boy, no older than seventeen. However, the contagion had done its work on the boy, and what was left of his humanity and mind was swept up in a ceaseless ravenousness that could never be satisfied.

Godfrey did his best to slip back into the house unnoticed, but it was too late. Though he locked the door, the subhuman crashed through it, knocking it off its hinges and disintegrating it as if it had never existed. The thing landed on all fours like a rabid wolf preparing to pounce on a stray rabbit, skittering into the corner of the living room and assuming a crouching posture, growling and hissing all the while. No soul was left inside this human shell; what remained only operated on instinct and hunger. He grew quiet momentarily and leered at Godfrey, then sat up and let out an inhuman howl before standing up and leaping onto him.

The boy slammed into Godfrey like a sack of concrete and knocked the wind out of him, snarling and chomping violently at the air. Godfrey held his face back, carefully avoiding being bitten while also trying to maneuver himself into a position that might give him some advantage. He could hear the infected's tongue lashing out and his teeth chomping like a pair of pliers. The foul stench of hot saliva landed on his face and chin, and for a moment, he considered that these might be his last few moments alive. He could meet his Maker within the next few seconds—if One existed, or maybe, he would slip into nothingness and be consumed by nonexistence. He couldn't decide which would be more pleasant.

The strength that the contagion supplied its victims was overwhelming, along with the new species' adrenaline-fueled violence. Godfrey continued to fend off the creature with an intuition that surprised even him and, with the agility of a cat, managed to throw the boy off and leap to his feet with ninja-like reflexes. As the infected attempted to rebound from Godfrey's



miraculous escape, the ex-pastor thrust the machete forward and plunged it into the creature's stomach. The boy paused momentarily to look down at the blade and then back up at Godfrey, but that was all the time Godfrey needed. Without thinking, Godfrey kicked him back and then, with a quick jerk, sliced his head off. The contagion's carcass seemed to hover in the air for a second, but soon it fell backward, and the head rolled to a stop next to Godfrey's left foot, staring at him with the same intense anger that Godfrey felt toward the world around him.

He emerged from the stucco house alive, yet wondering why he was even fighting to survive. Questions lined his mind like customers at the Motor Vehicle Department, each taking their opportunity to interrogate him and cause him to wonder about the validity of his choice to survive. They were the same inquiries that thrashed around in his psyche daily, assaulting him with a barrage of probing queries such as, *What is the point of continuing to live?* And, *is today going to be the same as every other day?* Of course, instinct and self-preservation always seemed to set in without his permission, and soon, the question of whether or not he "would survive another day" would emerge from his subconscious like a hibernating bear. The prospect of death, though it was constantly at the fringes of his mental awareness, both scared him and seemed as welcoming as his late wife's arms.

The hot wind of the metropolitan city blew across his face like the flames of a bonfire as he stepped onto the neighborhood road, but Godfrey moved forward undeterred, determined to make his way toward Forty-Eighth Street and Southern. As he plodded along in the desert heat, his mind flipped through the Rolodex of his thoughts and toyed with the day's possibilities, but what could there be? The idea that today would be different from any other day was laughable. Was he really going to find purpose in this post-apocalyptic world and peel his thoughts from the blighted, red-orange sky in an attempt to exist apart from the relentless depression that followed him like his own shadow? Would he find relief from the rage that echoed in the empty husk of his being? He did not know but was sure the answers would present themselves as he trudged toward his destination.

## II

Evidence of the contagion's wrath lined both Forty-Eighth Street and Southern as far as Godfrey's eyes could see. The major crossroads were

replete with the burnt-out casings of various models of cars and the corpses of the formerly living, sprawled out in different poses up and down the major roadways, in differing stages of decay.

The smell wafted into Godfrey's nostrils, and if he had not been used to it, he would have vomited. The smell was always present wherever he went; he never felt he had entirely escaped it. It was as if the entire world reeked of decay. He had given his best effort to numb himself to the world of death in which he lived, but it always seemed to overtake him like a freight train hurtling toward its predestined point of disembarkation. He had seen every dishonorable and horrific death that could be imagined a thousand times over, and yet, daily, there was some fresh reminder of the abyss in which he existed.

What drove him to continue? He was unsure, but the thought had occurred to him that perhaps lingering convictions from his previous life as "a man of the cloth" rattled about in his brain as a continuing source of futile encouragement. His story should have ended months ago when he stumbled upon his wife, face covered in blood and viscera, hovering over the two bodies of his sons lying there in agonizing repose. She turned a demented and frenzied face toward him, and he lost all hope. There was no trace of the woman he had loved for so long left inside the dead and graying eyes that stared at him. Instead, her body had been possessed by the same marionettes of hell that had devoured his town and church. He fell back in despairing shock, ready to die, surrendering himself to her destructive whims.

Then, the shotgun blasts rang out.

His wife's contagion-ridden and fury-filled face flew back with the grace of a high-speed car crash. This was how she had met her end. Those were the last images he had of his best friend and lover. She had lost all that made her unique, and instead, her fragile form was discarded the same as any of the other contagion victims that now riddled Forty-Eighth Street and Southern. As Godfrey stared at the various rotting corpses, visions of his wife and children fought for his attention at every turn. There were so many bodies at this intersection that he wondered what made this crossroads different. He was accustomed to seeing signs of slaughter and dismemberment at every turn—this was nothing strange, par for the course when it came to surviving in the new world. However, as he looked over what was once a bustling intersection, it occurred to him that there was a much higher concentration of death here than he had seen in other areas.

Godfrey checked his surroundings for any signs of danger, and after seeing none, he continued forward.

A certain number of assumptions came with the new life that had been forced upon him. For example, after the contagion had become a threat to his human existence, he assumed that most of the dead would be found within residential neighborhoods. It made sense that since people made up a neighborhood and lived in the neighborhood's houses, that was where the majority of disembodied limbs and corpses would be. However, this was not the case, and Forty-Eighth and Southern was one more piece of evidence. Instead, what Godfrey had found was that most of the houses in any given neighborhood were empty, and the closer he got to a major road, the higher the body count became. He surmised that those watching the news or listening to radio broadcasts heard of the coming infection and quickly ran to their vehicles to escape the coming pandemic, but then hit the traffic brought on by everyone thinking the same thing. Within a short period, they were overrun by those who hungered and either became meals or were inducted as members of the infected army.

The contagion didn't follow the course of any movies he remembered seeing about such things as a young man. The virus didn't take days or even twenty-four hours to take effect. It wasn't spread by bite, aerosol, or mind control. Instead, those who hungered (which was often how Godfrey thought of the mindless flesh-bots who could not satisfy their unending craving for human meat) shot their thick, muscly, black tongues out of their mouths like a Japanese Jōhyō and impaled their victims with it, sometimes from up to thirty feet away. The transformation rendered from such an attack was immediate, complete within seconds. One moment, the uninfected would be fleeing for their lives from a pack of contagients who were chasing them like wolves on the hunt, and the next, they were part of the pack, having been born again to a new cannibalistic lifestyle, fresh with bursting boils and dying skin. Godfrey had seen this happen many times before, right before his eyes, and had wondered at the efficiency of such a system.

The most unexpected thing was the animals. Godfrey wasn't sure how they contracted the infection, but the proof that the world had gone to hell in a handbasket was that he could no longer pet Fido on the top of his head or give him a good belly scratch without fear that he might pull away a bloody stump where his hand used to be.

Dogs and cats were not the only things that had contracted the hunger—from what Godfrey had determined, wild boars, elk, cows, and many other types of animals that he used to look on once as friendly had become as carnivorous as sharks and pack-wolves. Instead of the zoo being a safe place to look at the world from a distance, it was now a living death sentence. It had become clear that almost nothing was free from its grasp once the contagion struck. Yet Godfrey had seen an odd exception in the birds. He had never witnessed them give way to the hunger for some reason.

Godfrey made it to the Forty-Eighth Street and Southern crossing, where on one corner there used to be a lively Jack in the Box, on a different corner a McDonald's, across from that an Arby's, and lastly a strip mall with a bar. The area around the intersection was also littered with different food stores, tattoo parlors, a subway, and then a long stretch of nothing, which ended in a bridge that stretched over Southern Road. Of course, out of five buildings, three were burned down, and one had a large hole in its side that had been created by a car that had crashed into it. About half of the vehicle still protruded from the building, the back wheel spinning slowly. Across the top of the red car lay a corpse that looked like half of it had been eaten.

Even at seven in the morning, Godfrey's world looked like it had been cast in twilight. He wasn't sure if it was because of all of the smoke in the air from the burning buildings or if the contagion had also infected the sky. Either way, the air was shrouded in blood-red hues, and the sun seemed a little more orange than he remembered. Why was he even out here? What was the point? Maybe he was operating on instincts instilled in him, instincts that worked on his adrenal glands and engaged his fight-or-flight intuition, or perhaps he truly desired to live. Whatever the reason, if he didn't keep moving, living might soon become an obsolete option. Despite the harsh and unforgiving nature of the world around him, he persisted, driven by an undefinable determination to survive. He was aware that others had survived the transformation of the world; his experience in Payson had shown him this. But the few others who had survived were as cautious as he was, which usually meant they were very hard to find.

Since leaving his cozy little town of Payson, Arizona, he hadn't seen more than one survivor a month. Most of those he'd come into contact with and who were fortunate enough—or unfortunate enough—to survive were either too concerned for their well-being to give a damn about the pastor or

were afraid that he would contribute to their demise in some way for his own selfish gain.

It had occurred to Godfrey that not only had the infection ravaged and changed its victims, but it had also brought out the worst in the human beings who remained. Instead of the survivors rallying together to defy the odds, overcome the devastation, and look after those who had endured, the human race had reverted, becoming very selfish. Charity no longer existed, love had grown cold, and humanity's tendency to indulge in selfishness instead of selflessness might very well cause its demise, instead of the infected masses that threatened to devour humankind to extinction. For the former pastor, this was all the proof needed for him to be convinced that what he once held to, believed, and preached every Sunday was a lie. No benevolent deity who cared for his creation existed; only an all-powerful, maniacal madman bent on watching his creation's destruction through to the end.

.....

In the life that was, cars may have been optional, but in the new world, they could make or break one's survival. Not only could they be used as a source of shelter, but they also did the very necessary job of quickly getting someone from point A to point B. Knowing this, Godfrey scouted the intersection area until he saw a lime-green Volkswagen on Southern facing the stoplight. The tires were somewhat flattened, but other than that, it was remarkably undamaged. He could probably drive it for a hundred miles before he needed to be concerned about the tires, and by that point, he may already have switched cars.

The windows were covered in months of dust, so he pulled his black trench coat sleeve to his palm and carefully wiped the driver's side glass while peering inside for an alarm indicator light. Alarms were always bad, and one being tripped meant a horrifying and untimely demise. He wasn't sure why, but the contagion seemed to enhance the strength and senses of its victims. Every infected had a heightened sense of hearing, and the ringing of an alarm or loud noise was like a drop of blood in the ocean for a shark. The ex-Pastor had often seen this happen with others in the last few months. In such instances, when there did not seem to be any contagents around, as soon as there were any raised voices or raucous sounds, suddenly thirty

contagients were climbing out of the woodwork like a bell had been rung for dinner.

From what Godfrey could tell of the car upon his initial examination, there was no alarm. He couldn't see any flashing blue or red light, meaning either his conclusion was correct, or the battery was dead. His answers wouldn't come until he attempted to start the green Volkswagen. With that in mind, he reached his left hand back and pulled out his machete, the handle facing the driver's side window. He paused momentarily, allowing the machete to hover in the air, not too far from his left temple, and then he brought the handle down hard on the window, shattering it.

For a moment, he waited with bated breath. In times like these, any number of things could happen. For example, the car might explode. Or, even worse, every infected in Phoenix, Arizona, might converge upon his location with appetites whetted for human flesh. Godfrey didn't think either outcome was likely, nor was he prepared to throw caution to the wind. After several tense moments, he exhaled and relaxed, deciding there was no alarm.

After resheathing his machete, he stood up just enough to reach inside the recently demolished window and tug on the door handle, popping it open. He slid inside the driver's seat and quietly clicked the door shut, again holding his breath to listen and take in the sounds around him. Everything felt unnaturally quiet, except for his pulse pounding in his ears like a pair of bongos; he could hear nothing else. He waited another moment, then decided to explore the inside of the Beetle.

Whoever the owner of this particular vehicle was, there was no question in Godfrey's mind that they took pride in their car because it was very well taken care of. It seemed to him that the lime-green vehicle had to have been parked on the side of the road long before the infected invasion; the doors were locked, and the keys were gone. It didn't look as if anyone had fled for their lives from it. No belongings were left behind, and none of the telltale signs of fearful flight were present—usually mutilated corpses and lopped-off limbs.

The Beetle had a fantastic assortment of photos propped in different corners of its compact space. Taped to the right corner of the rearview mirror was a picture of a bright, redheaded woman wrapped in the arms of an extremely muscular man who bore no smile on his face. While her brown eyes were full of the energy that came with early youth, his eyes were emotionless and grim, as if he had walked off the battlefield and into the

picture studio. In another photo, wedged between the roof and the sun visor was the same gorgeous redhead, laughing next to another young woman who looked very similar to her. This was part of a strip of photos, like one would expect to get from a photo booth at a mall or a carnival. Godfrey grabbed them to get a better look.

He hoped that this woman had survived. He didn't know who she was and had never met her, but she looked like the type of person he would have enjoyed getting to know. She seemed happy with her life, and from what he could tell from the photos, she had a lot of friends and loved ones who cared for her. Godfrey studied the photo and then shook his head. Things like this were always the toughest for him. Billions of people in the world, just like this woman, whose lives had been cut short for nothing. They had suffered and died for nothing and were discarded like wax paper or a dryer sheet. No one remained alive to appreciate and tell their stories, and if they did manage to survive, the chances of them living another day grew shorter and shorter. Godfrey put the strip of photos away and focused on the task at hand.

From the mass of bodies and the densely packed roads that were left behind in the wake of the onslaught of the contagion, Godfrey guessed that when the infection struck the Valley Metropolitan area, it had probably taken only a day for the virus to run its course before moving on to its next source of sustenance. Godfrey had seen similar scenes of destruction and mayhem in other areas of the Grand Canyon State. Though this was undoubtedly the worst he had encountered so far, almost every scene followed a similar pattern. Upon arrival, he could predict with near-perfect accuracy the sprawl of bodies and piled-up cars left behind like a blossoming flower of death offered to the god of the underworld. The center of each scene of devastation was always thickly packed with the bodies of those fleeing for their lives. At the same time, the outskirts were typically reserved for those who were quick or intelligent and may have even thought they'd managed to survive, only to be fatally ripped to pieces by the iron grasp of an unexpected, carnivorous lurker. The intersection of Forty-Eighth and Southern had proven this pattern again, and in a grim fashion that seemed to push the evidence in Godfrey's face, holding it there just in case he dared try to forget.

The sun reflected off the hoods of blood-stained cars, casting the surrounding area in a bath of crimson hues that seemed to take on a life of their own, worming their way into his brain like a photo negative that would never be forgotten. He could almost hear the moans and screams of the dying

as they were feasted on like an infernal snack bar, crying out for justice that could never compensate for the heinous way in which they lost their lives. The helplessness that Godfrey experienced at every turn was almost overwhelming, and at this point, a kind of callousness had overridden his emotions. There was nothing he could do or would *ever* be able to do. The only thing that could be done was what he was sitting in this car for. He glanced at the photo of the pretty redhead again, then reached below to rip the side panel off the steering wheel column, searching for wires.

Hot-wiring cars was not in his pastoral description, meaning he got it wrong the first time he tried and almost lost his life. He was still living in the small, quaint town of Payson, Arizona, then, and he was being pursued by a persistent horde of contingents who were hot on his heels and anticipating adding another fatality to their roster. He had managed to hide away somewhat decently, and the thought struck him that he could get away quicker if he hot-wired one of the classic cars across the street from where he was holed up. In his youth, he had been a rebel and had experimented with such things rather successfully, so he thought he could remember the proper way to perform the illegal act.

Unfortunately, he was surprised that, unlike riding a bike or reading a book, the skills were not readily recalled. After frying the alternator and almost being eaten alive, he decided that he would need to hone this procedure, so he committed to practicing until he got it right. Eventually, he was able to accomplish the feat in record time—he would have been a force to be reckoned with in the previous life.

Godfrey found the wires he needed and looked up to check his surroundings. The former pastor had seen a movie or two in his lifetime and had even happened upon a cartoon. Some of his favorites were the old Merry Melody cartoons with Bugs Bunny and Wiley E. Coyote in them. He remembered watching as a child when, for whatever reason, they would end up stranded in the middle of a desert or on an island. Of course, hilarity would ensue when the cartoon characters ran out of water or food, and they would hallucinate an oasis or a picnic sprawl just ahead of them. As soon as they got to the supposed source of their salvation, they would begin guzzling buckets of water or devouring turkey legs, only to realize that they were drinking and eating sand.

Occasionally, Godfrey felt like he was in the middle of one of these childhood cartoons. He had become so accustomed to being alone in a dead



and decaying world that sometimes his mind would trick him into believing that he had seen another living person. Occasionally, the “mirage” would be so real that he would have to restrain himself from running up and talking to them. More than once, if he had, he would have been swarmed and devoured by a group of infected, having mistaken them for survivors. He had chalked it up to the fact that his mental state desired companionship so much that it was creating it for him, like the turkey legs and buckets of water in the cartoons from his childhood. He did not know how medically accurate this was, and he was sure that he would never find out because the doctors were all dead. However, as he surveyed the post-apocalyptic stretch around him, he felt again as if he was gazing at a mirage.

In the distance, Godfrey noticed something moving. He did his best to “peel his eyes” in an effort to clarify what exactly he was looking at. Was it an infected? He didn’t know, but from what he knew of how victims moved, this didn’t seem to be one. That didn’t mean much—contagions came in all varieties and sizes and possessed different talents and abilities. His demise could come about in any number of gruesome ways. But this individual didn’t have the gait of an infected. He did his best to wipe the car windshield, hoping to help his view, but it did little to clarify things. Still, he continued to watch the lone figure while fiddling with the car’s wires.

The individual in question had wandered closer to his area and was soon within about a hundred feet of his position. Though he didn’t possess the best eyesight, Godfrey could tell that this was a thin, blond woman in her mid-thirties. She was doing her best to be cautious and smart as she stumbled through the deadly landscape, but Godfrey wondered how she had survived so long in the new world. She was walking in the open air for far too long, doing nothing to cover her tracks or the noise she made as she staggered through wrecked cars like a drunken sailor. Occasionally, she would stop at a well-decayed corpse and stare at it as if it were the first time she had seen a dead body. After gazing for what felt like an eternity to Godfrey, she would move on to her next destination.

*What the hell is she doing?* he wondered as he followed her with his eyes while fumbling with wires. *She’s going to get herself killed!*

But she persisted in her mission, moving from car to car like a hummingbird would flower to flower, gathering nectar. The only thing he could conclude was that she was scavenging for parts in an endeavor to continue surviving. However, she was doing a much worse job of it than he

did. His scavenging was quick and methodical. He got in, grabbed what he needed, and moved on. You couldn't risk spending too long wandering the streets in the open air—too much risk of being sniffed out by the infected horde. Godfrey's scavenging was purposeful, akin to a strike force team.

This was not how the woman in front of him was doing it, if she was scavenging at all. Whatever the case, she was within seventy-five feet of him now, and he wondered whether or not he should help her. He raised a green wire to his teeth and chomped down on it, using his jaw muscles to strip it bare and reveal the copper beneath. He pulled out a white wire and did the same, then mashed the two together, braiding them while looking up at the blond woman again.

He decided that he would have to help her. It was not out of a religious obligation, and there was no guarantee that she would even *want* his help, but he had to try at least. Maybe he could give her a ride back to her shelter—and possibly some tips on scavenging. Perhaps she would need a ride somewhere else, and they would be together longer. He didn't know, but he couldn't leave her there. Godfrey looked back down at the spot where he had torn the covering from the steering column and pulled on a bright red wire. This was the one that would start the car once it was touched to the white and the green. He brought it to his mouth and bit down.

Something screeched in the distance as Godfrey chomped down on the wire, rushing adrenaline through his midsection and giving his hands swift reflexes. As he touched the bright red wire to the other two, there was a brief pause, and then the engine of the bright green Beetle sputtered to life in the quiet around him. The thin woman's face filled with terror as she recognized the infected cry while simultaneously seeming bewildered by the sound of a car engine. She cast a frightened gaze in his direction, and their eyes connected. Godfrey waved a frantic hand at her, beckoning her toward the vehicle, determined that she would not suffer the same fate as the corpses around them. As she recognized her rescue, she began moving swiftly toward the car, periodically scanning her surroundings. Godfrey pulled the car out, hoping to make her journey brief while setting himself up for an escape.

But the escape never came.

She made it within ten feet of the vehicle. Godfrey electronically unlocked the passenger door and reached over to open it for her, but as he did, a loud thud reverberated across his roof and over his hood. When he sat

up, the thin blond disappeared before his eyes, overtaken by four infected. They flattened her to the ground like a meteor crushing a house or a man stepping on a roach. Before he could process what he was looking at, she was screaming in ferocious, tortured howls as her arms and limbs were ripped from her like drumsticks torn from a rotisserie chicken.

They hadn't seemed to notice the running car yet, but the dying woman knew it was there. As her ear-piercing screams gave way, she turned her dying breath toward him and stared at Godfrey, eyes filled with unrecognizable levels of pain that were incommunicable. The gaze she cast pierced through his calloused soul, and for a moment, he felt as if he were being ripped asunder, too. She beckoned at him with amputated limbs and begged for help that he could not give, and as she did, the infected turned to look at him, noticing for the first time his presence. They crouched to pounce on the Beetle one at a time while the contagion in the center dropped its jaw to emit its earsplitting cry. Godfrey slammed his foot on the gas, swore liberally, and drove away.

### III

There was no survival guide for the apocalypse. If Godfrey was going to be honest with himself, he wasn't even sure that he was in the apocalypse now or if he even believed in such a thing. But the world around him did seem to bear all of the signs of the four horsemen of the Book of Revelation, except that he used to believe that such things were symbolic at best and only meant to be fulfilled at some future date at worst. Maybe it was selfish of him, but he had always believed that he and his loved ones would be long gone by the time such things occurred, should they not be allegorical. Now, with his friends and family dead, his hometown overrun by the contagion and laid waste, and a suicidal depression engrossing him daily, surviving in this hell-world was an almost unbearable daily task. Things he'd never foreseen as a need had become paramount to his survival now. In the former world, he'd used a machete on camping trips in the Mogollon Rim in Gila County, where he and his family would go every summer to escape the encroaching world and create memories that would last a lifetime. Now, he had to use it as a defensive weapon, and he had become quite proficient. The very same tool he had used to hack through foliage and vines now divided boil-infested flesh and snarling lips.

However, his survival pack contained more than just defensive measures—he also had to eat and sleep. This meant that picky eating had to give way to efficient packing and that things like tuna, sardines, and ramen had become staples of his diet. He hated tuna, and the smell of sardines was god-awful, but the size of the cans meant that they were easy to haul, and ramen was good whether it was broken or whole. His duffel bag had become a cornucopia of energy-efficient eating, wrapped in the unwelcome smell of spilled sardines.

Aside from a few other necessary things like pain relievers, a can opener, and a blanket, Godfrey’s “survival pack” contained nothing else. He had learned early on that packing light was necessary in a world where every corner was a game of Russian roulette. Should he traverse the wrong building or step out on the wrong street, it could be the end of his life. He needed to be able to move quickly and react speedily. A cumbersome bag filled with delectable treats would likely mean his untimely meeting with the Grim Reaper.

But Godfrey never carried a bag into an unexplored area anyway. Even though he packed light, he tended to leave it behind, grabbing only his machete. If circumstances permitted, he would go back for it later. Though this meant having to travel the same area twice, which increased his chances of running into the victims of the contagion, he preferred to have all of his limbs free to scout out possible shelters and scavenging grounds, able to run should he be unlucky enough to encounter the infected horde. This reasoning didn’t guarantee his survival, but it seemed to work so far.

The Beetle weaved its way through abandoned and totaled cars, plodding along Southern Road like a persistent specter searching for a new place to haunt. Occasionally, Godfrey would have to find a creative way to navigate four-car pile-ups and overturned semis, which brought back memories of the times he would go four-wheeling with his boys in their Jeep Wrangler. But the car he had acquired did not have the same capacity for such tricky navigation, so he took turns more carefully than in his four-wheeling days, crossing over rounded curbs and medians with the same tentativeness that an antique dealer unloaded their merchandise. Eventually, he made it to his destination, and with a cautious approach and his head on a swivel, he stepped out of his vehicle.

The forlorn pastor stood before a freshly constructed apartment complex painted a pastel pink over stucco. He wasn’t sure why the entire valley

metroplex area was so fascinated with the stucco design. Still, it felt like anyone in the construction business had to sign a contract requiring them to use the horrid motif in their construction work. Godfrey hated the pattern and would have been happy if every plant producing the materials to make stucco possible had burned down simultaneously—without the people in them, of course.

He hurried over to the right side of the apartment complex, where two large dumpsters were shut behind a gate, which he pulled open. Stepping into the enclosed area, he disappeared behind the dumpsters to retrieve the dirty and dingy camouflage duffel bag, which he heaved over his right shoulder. He took a moment to look around, and after being satisfied that the surroundings were safe, he jogged back to the Beetle, threw his bag in the back seat, then hopped into the driver's seat and drove away.

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Godfrey felt this Sunday might be different, but he wasn't sure why. Maybe it was how the sun crested off the Mogollon Rim and shone down into Arizona's Mountain Town, lighting it afire with angelic shades of white and gold in anticipation of the Lord's Day. He allowed himself to gaze out of his office window and soak in the beatific scene, giving it time to imprint on his thoughts, and as it did, a smile dawned on his face with the same effect of the sun's rays cascading across the mountains. *Today is going to be a good day*, he thought as he left his office and worked toward the main sanctuary.

The tall, middle-aged pastor made his way to the church's front doors to open them and wait for the first congregants of the morning. Most of them would arrive at the same time every Sunday, as if it were some unwritten law of the universe, strolling through the doors of St. Peter's Presbyterian, eyes filled with love and expectancy while searching for their dear pastor. Usually, by now, at least two or three cars were sitting in the parking lot, awaiting their invitation to enter the tiny, brown church. One of the cars he had grown accustomed to seeing in the parking lot was that of his wife and children—their little gold Honda CR-V. He made eye contact with his bride of fifteen years, smiled, and waved, and in response, his wife and two boys waved back, mouthing variations of *I love you* and *Hi, Daddy*. Soon, they would pack up their Bibles and notepads and enter the church, where they would begin their Sunday routine. The beloved pastor allowed himself another moment's indulgence as he continued to revel in everything God

had given him, and then he turned to look at the stained-glass windows on either side of the large oak doors.

*This is the life*, he thought as his eyes followed the artistic displays of brilliant colors inlaid within wooden frames. He had the posture of a man examining a magnificent piece of work, but though his eyes settled over the stained glass windows, he didn't really see what was in front of him. He allowed his fingers to run over the uneven surface and trace the kaleidoscope images trapped like prisoners in the metal molding. For a moment, he almost felt as if he were rooted to the spot, allowing his mind to wander and replay joy-filled moments from the life he had been given. He truly did love his life, and it was not lost on him that he might have been given better than he deserved. This knowledge drove him to take advantage of every moment and to frantically capture every image, especially with his family, as if it might be their last together. But his "last moments" hadn't come yet, and he wasn't keen on creating them. The grateful pastor focused on a stained-glass, blood-red rose, and he touched it absentmindedly while turning to look back at the golden CR-V. His wife had exited the vehicle and searched for something in the back, but the door was partially closed. The two boys ran around and chased each other in circles in the parking lot. Godfrey watched them for a short time longer, basking in the moment, smiling like a drunken man.

He could have sat there and watched them all day without getting bored. It seemed that the older he grew, the more he enjoyed watching his family be a family. He could never quite place a finger on when this became enjoyable for him, but it was something he grew to love more every day. As he watched his boys playing with Legos or swinging bats at softballs, he felt a joy inflating his heart like a beach ball. At times, he believed his chest might burst with the jubilation he experienced in those moments, as if the happiness would spill out all over everyone around him. He had no words to describe how much he loved being a husband, a father, and a pastor, but he was truly blessed.

Godfrey reluctantly turned around and walked into St. Peter's, making his way over to the podium where he would be speaking in a short while. He riffled through pages of handwritten notes to remind himself of what he would be talking about that day. The topic would be "God's providence," which was an intimidating word on the surface, but it meant that God was in control and that everything in life has a purpose and a reason.

The idea of God's providence had often brought Godfrey comfort, a light to him in many dark circumstances. Maybe more so than most. His upbringing, especially an unpleasant encounter with his father, had created such an instability within him that the idea of something reliable had become a foreign thought. At a very young age, Godfrey had spiraled out of control. Nothing was solid or sound to him, and until he met his mentor, he felt that nothing stable even existed.

However, he believed that serendipity intervened at a crucial point in his upbringing. Looking back on important points in his life, though he didn't realize it at the time, he had learned some essential lessons about the world he lived in, the people he cared about, and the faith that he would later be trained in.

Most people who had faced the issues that he had dealt with as a teenager would more than likely have been another statistic of drug abuse or trouble with the law, which would have attested to the truthfulness of the influence of parental figures in the home. But, at the perfect moment and at just the right time, an intervening force interjected itself into Godfrey's life and steered him away from what would have been a path of deadly destruction. He could confidently say that Providence was using every significant event and state of affairs to shape him into a stronger man of faith who could help others through their ailments and struggles, rather than being a victim of circumstance.

He meditated on these lessons, and as he did, the scripture he would be teaching that morning ran through his mind like a scrolling banner. Romans 8:28 was probably the best representation of teaching on providence in the Bible that the pastor knew of. Often, he felt as if the verse was written just for him. Godfrey opened his Bible and turned to the scripture once more to read it.

"And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose."

Godfrey paused to take in what he was reading and to contemplate its meaning. These were some of the most well-known and beautiful words written by Paul the Apostle, and though Godfrey was familiar with this verse, every time he read it, he found a sense of freshness. These words helped to define him as a Christian and shaped his worldview. According to

scripture, nothing happened to him by chance; instead, all events had an overriding purpose that led to Godfrey being the man he was and doing what he was doing. No, life did not have to be perfect, and it *wouldn't* be. But Godfrey could take solace in the fact that God was in control and would be there with him in the midst of it.

As he leafed through his Bible, the first congregation members entered through the doors he had opened. They were an aged couple in their early eighties. They had a slight hunch in their gait, and it looked as though gravity pulled extra hard on them as they walked. Yet they plodded forward in their Sunday best, right up to the front row.

The elderly gentleman, Fred Lassbock, turned his head in a slow arc, searching for Godfrey. When his eyes found the Presbyterian pastor, he flashed a crooked half-smile and said in the wheezing voice of the aged, "Always a pleasure, Pastor."

Godfrey left his podium and walked over to the couple, seeing that the elderly man had extended a hand forward, a hand twisted and gnarled with age. He shook his hand, finding that it still possessed surprising strength while also making sure that he met the man's gaze. Godfrey knew well enough that people of this generation wanted to be looked in the eye. It was a sign of respect and was taken very seriously. Even as awkward as it made the pastor feel, he met the elderly man's eyes while the man assessed Godfrey with a gaze that pierced through him like a stark brown laser beam.

Of course, this would have been much more uncomfortable if it were Godfrey's first Sunday at St. Peter's. But seeing as he had been pastoring the small church for several years, it was all par for the course and something he had become accustomed to. While many would probably feel that Fred was trying to intimidate them into submission or was acting downright rude, Godfrey knew that he was a war veteran who had become a Christian much later in his life than most and that if he had no respect for Godfrey, he wouldn't even take time to say hello or stare at him with that awkward gaze. In this man's eyes, Godfrey had passed his test and earned his due.

After a couple of moments, the two of them had released each other's hands, only for Godfrey to be pounced on by Edna, Fred's delightful and fragile-looking wife, who requested in a shrill and unstable tone, "Come give me a hug, Pastor Langdon." She wrapped Godfrey in a frail embrace that made him feel he might break her arms if he turned too quickly or suddenly coughed. She had the kind of scent that was probably delightful to men her



age and may have been highly recommended by her friends, but anyone younger than fifty would say she “smelled like old people.” Godfrey didn’t mind it, though, because he knew that the woman who wore it was a kind and thoughtful person who would help him and his family at the drop of a hat if he needed it. The truth was, he loved her perfume because he loved her like a mother. He stared at her for a second, then gently squeezed her, putting her head under his chin. She smiled widely and made a sort of gurgling sound that Godfrey assumed was supposed to be positive.

“You and Fred are such a blessing, and you come up in my prayers frequently,” he said with a gentle squeeze.

“I know, I know,” she rasped, patting his hand. “You’re always telling me that, young man, and I believe you.” She squeezed him again and then sat daintily in the church pew. Fred turned his attention to his wife, gave Godfrey a nod, and then plopped down next to Edna, who was at work adjusting her Sunday hat.

“Get back to what you were doing, Pastor,” ordered Fred, waving a dismissive hand. “No slacking on account of us rascals—we know you’re a busy man.”

Godfrey turned around, obediently walking back up the stage to his podium. “You two are never a bother—I was just poring over some notes and scripture for today’s message.”

Fred muttered something inaudible but was cut short by the rhythmic tapping of precise footsteps. He looked as if he were contemplating continuing his trivial comments, but temptation got the better of him, and he turned to see who had interrupted his profound ramblings.

It was Rebecca Langdon, a gorgeous, slim, and commanding woman who walked with a confident stride and yet had a subtle humility about her. Her demeanor said, “I belong here,” and indeed she did, seeing as she was the pastor’s wife. She walked in the doors of the Presbyterian church with two boys in tow and came down the aisle, making a beeline for Godfrey.

Godfrey flashed a broad smile at the sight of his family and left his podium behind to meet his wife and children as they walked in his direction. He was proud and thankful for the family God had given him. His beloved bride, Rebecca, was a strong mother and wife who was the perfect support for Godfrey as he did what he believed he was meant to do in life, and his two children added more meaning to life than he ever thought possible. Jack, the oldest, was a blond-haired, brown-eyed, energetic boy of thirteen, and

his younger brother, Hezekiah, was a redheaded, blue-eyed eleven-year-old with energy to match. Jack and Ezzie pummeled through the church entrance behind their mother with all the irreverence of children their age. They stormed down the middle aisle of the tiny Presbyterian Church, finally free of the invisible forcefield their mother had projected to keep them behind her and right up to where their father was standing.

As soon as they were within five feet of him, they opened their mouths and verbally assaulted him with a million questions, answers, comments, and ideas. He smiled and nodded occasionally, taking in every word while also meditating on how blessed he was to be able to parent these two explosive balls of energy. Soon, they were dragged back a couple of feet by their mother. Rebecca offered a quirky smile to her husband and then said in a mildly sarcastic tone while straightening his collar, "You would think they hadn't seen you for millennia."

She gave Godfrey a quick peck on the lips, then spoke to the children who were simultaneously standing in place and managing to run in circles. "Children, we need to let your daddy do his job. You know Sundays are his busiest days." The mandatory moans and groans of disappointment emerged from the two boys and an attempt at bartering, but she scolded them softly.

Turning back to Godfrey, she said, "I'm praying for you, babe. I'm always so proud of how God chooses to use you." She grabbed his hand, giving him one more peck on the lips and whispering, "I love you," followed by a wink before she turned her attention back to the two boys, who embodied nuclear fission perfectly.

Rebecca reached down and grabbed each boy's hand at the same time, in quick and ninja-like fashion as they flailed about, and then dragged the two boys down the stairs of the stage, as each one yelled back to Godfrey in differing intonations, "I love you, Daddy. See you soon!" Godfrey grinned, following them with his eyes until they were out of sight, and then walked back to the podium again to study his notes.

Dale and Wanda Clark were a plump couple who looked like they should each be in chef's suits. They were in their mid-fifties and seemed unable to frown. As soon as they stepped inside the church, the sanctuary felt as if it had brightened by several shades; they greeted the room with broad, glowing smiles. They were both dressed in button-up church wear, and as was tradition, Wanda was wearing a broad-brimmed purple hat that

matched her clothing. They greeted the pastor from the back of the church and then headed to the middle, taking a seat closest to the aisle, where they had been sitting every Sunday since Godfrey had become the pastor of St. Peter's.

Next in was the groundskeeper of the church, Old Man Bob. That was all anyone knew him as. He was the quiet, cantankerous type that seemed only to be able to communicate in growls and snarls. Godfrey knew he had a last name but was pretty sure that the rest of the congregation had no idea what it was, and he'd never offered it. As he came in the church entrance today, Godfrey welcomed him the same way he did everyone, and Old Man Bob returned this act with something barked and a look that should've caught the pastor on fire.

Godfrey knew better than to take offense. In his private conversations with Old Man Bob, Godfrey learned that the man was as faithful as any congregation member he had met and gotten to know at St. Peter's. However, Godfrey felt that Old Man Bob could probably have worked on his interpersonal skills a little more.

After a few minutes, it was eight-thirty in the morning, and the church was almost full. With only a few more interruptions as his congregation members made sure they showed their respect and greeted their beloved pastor, Godfrey managed to finish going over his scriptures and his notes with a few minutes to spare. The usual church attendees met, welcomed, and embraced one another. The ladies caught up on the latest business for the week, and the men sat idly by, trying very hard not to look like they were praying for a visit from the Grim Reaper.

The pastor scanned the crowd for newcomers, which would have been a welcome surprise, though not unheard of. The Payson area was essentially a retirement community where people flocked so that they could enjoy their "golden years." As such, there was an unusual concentration of senior citizens, and the Gila County town had a constant influx of new people moving in on a monthly, sometimes weekly basis. He was accustomed to seeing and meeting new folks regularly and did his best to ensure they knew they were welcome at St. Peter's anytime.

Godfrey pulled his left wrist toward him to look at the time, seeing that he had about ten minutes until he needed to get the ball rolling.

Another couple walked into the church doors, holding each other's hands and smiling broadly. They held their heads high and proud as if they

were celebrities, and they practically were given the part of town they came from. Their end of town required those who lived there to pay a hundred thousand dollars a year in membership fees just for residency before the cost of the house they purchased. Tim and Rhonda Sykes, the health advocates of the church, were always talking about the latest trends and trying to encourage as many members as possible to join them. One might have been inclined to resist, but their demeanor suggested that they were genuinely as committed to their fitness routines as they claimed to be. They were in their early sixties, but they were a good-looking, fit couple, the kind that inspired you to either want to punch them in the face for being so damn healthy or made you want to move out of your house and into the closest gym.

Fortunately, they had one thing going for them: they were as active in the church as they were in the health spa, for which Godfrey was very thankful. Tim and Rhonda waved at him, then took their usual spot in the middle rear of the church.

Godfrey gave everyone a few more minutes to fellowship while allowing stragglers time to enter, then glanced at his watch again. It was eight forty-five, which meant it was time to begin. Godfrey gave Old Man Bob a knowing look, and on cue, the man hefted himself out of his pew and walked over to the doors to close them. As if a gun had gone off, at the doors closing, all conversations ceased, and everyone's attention turned to the pastor. One by one, congregation members began pulling out hymnals without Godfrey having to utter a word, and then stood up on their feet in anticipation of the day's worship.

Godfrey looked out over the congregation with a swelling sense of pride as everyone made their way to their feet. He loved these people and knew they truly loved being here on a Sunday morning. They could have been elsewhere, but instead, they chose to be here, with him.

Godfrey waited until the last person stood, then thanked God for the day and entreated help as he taught the congregation the scripture. He then instructed them to turn to page 217 in their hymnals, which stated the song's name in big, bold letters: "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God."

They all started singing the hymn in unison, many not even bothering to open their hymnals because they were already familiar with it.

When he arrived at St. Peter's, Godfrey was fresh out of seminary and full of ideas to "take over the world." He was young, ambitious, and eager—and also lacking any humility. But his friends, these people, bore with him,

treated him like one of their own, and even showed him what being a pastor was all about.

One of the biggest influences in his life was a man who had become like a father to him, the former pastor of St. Peter's, Robert Charles MacArthur. Godfrey had learned more from Robert than he had from being in seminary. The seminary had given him knowledge; Robert, a man much older than him, full of battle scars and experience, had given him a way to apply what he had learned. The man had been a gift to him—a father, a mentor, a friend, a grandfather to his children. He had even presided over Godfrey and Rebecca's marriage. If Godfrey could have been like anyone, he'd want it to be Robert MacArthur. He sincerely did not know where he would be without the man. Godfrey scanned the congregation he led in song, looking for Robert, but he didn't see him. It was unusual for the former pastor not to be in service, so Godfrey made a mental note to check on him later while continuing to lead in song.

The verses of the hymn rang out with the voices of the worshipers in one unified stream of perfection, reverberating against the church ceiling, raining back down on them in angelic echoes. As Godfrey listened to the congregational choir, his heart leaped at the sound that momentarily seemed to emulate the heavenly atmosphere he hoped one day to see. He wanted them all to see it. Closing his eyes, he listened to the words as they poured from the mouths of the faithful:

“A mighty fortress is our God,  
A bulwark never failing;  
Our helper He, amid the flood  
Of mortal ills prevailing.  
For still our ancient foe  
Doth seek to work his woe;  
His craft and power are great,  
And armed with cruel hate,  
On earth is not his equal.”

The pastor had loved this hymn since he first came to faith. It painted a picture of God for him that was everything he needed, everything that had been missing from his life until that moment. As he led the congregation in worship, he sincerely hoped God would be their fortress. If he could, he

would will it into existence. But he wasn't God, so as he guided them through the verses, he silently prayed to the Creator that they would allow Him to be their bulwark that never failed. He continued to conduct his friends through the next verse and then the one after it:

“Did we in our own strength confide,  
Our striving would be losing;  
Were not the right Man on our side,  
The Man of God's own choosing.  
Dost ask who that may be?  
Christ Jesus, it is he;  
Lord Sabaoth is his name,  
From age to age the same,  
And He must win the battle.”

With a clatter and a boom, the front door interrupted the holy moment that had spread among the congregation. Most of them were so focused on their worship that the slamming startled them more than it typically would have.

Godfrey recognized the individual standing in the church doorway as Neville Kravitz, a man in his late thirties who was more of an occasional attendee. He had just moved into town about six months ago and was starting to get used to the Payson lifestyle. Neville was a shorter fellow with a skinny frame, glasses, and a balding head.

The pastor recognized almost immediately that something was wrong with him. Neville's gaze was crooked, most of his body weight leaned on his left leg, and his clothing was disheveled. He looked grayer than Godfrey remembered, with more than a few boils gathered into a single spot next to his right temple. The pastor was about to return the service to order, but something stopped him. Neville looked at Old Man Bob, who had gotten up to confront his unorthodox entry, and took a small step back. Godfrey wasn't sure what to make of the scene he was looking at, but he hoped it would be over soon. Old Man Bob lumbered to Neville with a scowl that told the pastor it would never happen again if he had things his way.

Neville crouched... and leaped high enough in the air that his head came within inches of the twelve-foot church ceiling. Most of the congregation

stared at this feat like it was an actual miracle. The man had captured everyone's attention.

As he soared through the air, he released a high-pitched howl that scared the crowd into action. A few people started to back away, and some got on their cellphones to call the police, or at least this is what Godfrey assumed they were doing as they spoke frantically into their cellular devices. Neville landed on Old Man Bob with force, and Bob crumpled beneath the weight like a folding chair on the Fourth of July, knocked unconscious. A few more yelps emerged from those still watching, and one ran forward in a futile attempt to rescue Bob.

Futile indeed, because Godfrey saw something that the eagerly empathetic congregation member did not. The pastor's vantage point from the stage allowed him to see the teeming masses of twenty or more of Neville's "friends," who had been lurching forward slowly in the background and must have come with him on his journey to St. Peter's. As Bob's rescuer ran forward, one of these others pounced on him from the background and began chewing on his face. More screaming—full panic had now swept over St. Peter's Presbyterian congregation.

Godfrey was unsure what to do—he was horrified and shaking, and his congregants had forgotten that he was there. As the congregation dispersed in every direction, another member was pounced on by one of the human predators. It was Fred, who ran faster than Godfrey ever would have thought possible, and yet he could not shake the tailing creature, who took him like a kitten pouncing on a ball of yarn. Godfrey tried to avoid being seen as he moved away from the podium slowly, waves of revulsion and nausea sweeping over him. He managed to get to the door that opened up onto the stage, but not without vomiting across the stage twice.

By now, the auditorium had been emptied of its attendees and replaced by victims. It seemed all of those who had followed Neville had found a meal. Godfrey, shaking violently, was getting ready to open the door while fighting back another wave of nausea, but he stopped. He had noticed something familiar in his peripheral vision and turned in that direction. It was dear, sweet Edna, and she was hunched over and facing the stage.

*What is she doing?* Godfrey wondered, fighting to think clearly in the horrific chaos surrounding him. As if reading his mind, she raised her head slowly, unnaturally, and cast an empty, lizard-like stare upon him. At first, the position of her head and predatory gaze reminded Godfrey of a

velociraptor he had seen in a movie once. Her face was stained with blood, and the front of her blouse looked as if it had been used in a butcher shop. She stared at Godfrey with a deadly curiosity that told the pastor that Edna had “left the building” and had been replaced with something vile and nefarious.

She stood a little straighter, with a quick jerking motion, then hobbled toward Godfrey, carrying something in her left hand. She stopped at the stairs and gazed up at the pastor as if trying to remember who he was. In that instant, he became more terrified than ever. As the sweet lady who had supported him throughout the years stared at him with dulling eyes and a graying face, he realized what she was carrying in her left hand. It was the arm of another congregation member. He didn't know which one, but Edna—dear, sweet Edna—had probably embraced them less than half an hour ago. She may have even sung a hymn while standing next to them. Yet here she stood, holding their amputated arm and void of conscience.

The pastor felt a sob creep into his throat, his eyes swelled with tears, and he almost became paralyzed by the horror that he was witnessing. Edna began to creep up the stairs, and the occasional raspy wheeze escaped her throat as she breathed. She lifted the bicep of the chopped-off arm to her lips and bit a chunk out of it as if it were an apple, never taking her eyes off Godfrey. Suddenly, and very unexpectedly, she shrieked so loudly that it induced a ringing in his ears. By sheer reflex, he reached up and covered them—and then he panicked because he realized Edna was no longer in front of him. Instead, in the space of the time it took the old woman to shriek, she had launched herself into the air and, in Neville-like fashion, was about to land on Godfrey.





*In a post-apocalyptic world, former pastor Godfrey Langdon teams up with survivalist Bartholomew Luther. Together, they encounter Olivia and Corky, who have been altered by Project Alpha, as they confront the chaos unleashed by Juan Tetzal.*

## **The Sky Burns Red**

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