



**COUNTDOWN TO
ARMAGEDDON**

A Dave and Duke Novel

GEORGE N PATTERSON

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ARMAGEDDON

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“Then they gathered the kings together in the place that in Hebrew is called Armageddon.

“The seventh angel poured out his bowl into the air, and out of the temple came a loud voice from the throne, saying, ‘It is done!’ Then there came flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder and a severe earthquake. No earthquake like it has ever occurred since man has been on the earth, so tremendous was the quake. The great city split into three parts, and the cities of the nations collapsed. God remembered Babylon the Great and gave her the cup filled with the wine of the fury of his wrath...”

Book of Revelation 16: 16-19

“The disciples came to Jesus privately, and said to him, ‘Tell us, what will be the sign of your coming and the end of the age?’

“Jesus answered: ‘Many will come in my name, claiming, “I am the Mess-bah”, and will deceive many. You will hear of wars and rumours of wars...nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines and earthquakes in various places. When you see standing in the holy place “the abomination that causes desolation” spoken of by the prophet Daniel then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. For there will be great distress, unequalled from the beginning of the world until now - and never to be equaled again...

“Immediately after the distress of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken..

“At that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the nations of the earth will mourn. They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory’...”

Gospel of Matthew 24: 3-30

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PROLOGUE

LONDON, ENGLAND

The meeting between four members of the international criminal organisation was being held in Brown's Hotel, just off Piccadilly, in London's central district. The four men sitting at one of the tables in the wood-panelled dining-room were the epitome of respectability, although their expensively tailored appearance subtly indicated that they were foreigners used to the trappings of wealth.

The four men were members of an exclusive inner circle known as "The Janus Club" because, like the mythical Janus, the associates looked both backward to the past and forward to the future. The hotel had been chosen because of its ambience of unquestionable propriety and understated luxury; it was also noted for the excellence of its French chefs. The dishes in front of them indicated they also knew the reputation of the hotel for its cooking, as caramelised scallops were followed by stuffed bass and herbs, then roast partridge, and finished with a delicious buttermilk panna corta garnished with blood-orange syrup.

The hotel venue had been chosen deliberately because of its reputation for unostentatious respectability in order not to draw attention to them. They were all using false names because, had they used their own more notorious names, they would have been detected on arrival at airports and either detained unduly or

watched throughout their stay. They were known individually to the leading governments and police forces of every nation, but they were untouchable because of their social status and there was no legal evidence of their criminal involvement.

It had been a shattering experience for the formerly confident members of "The Janus Club" when they had been exposed before the world's media in New York in the dramatic shoot-out with Dave DeMoss and Duke Buckingham in the home of the Colombian drug cartel boss, Eduardo Campo Sandoz. That gathering of nine of the criminal leaders from several nations, plus the then putative President of the United States, Senator Brendan Ganaghan, had been legally but secretly arranged. The purpose of the gathering had been to select a leader from among them, and to confirm their final plan for control of the world's financial operations, with a view to international economic leverage leading to political dominance through nuclear blackmail.

The selected leader at that meeting, Eduardo Campo Sandoz, and the assembled bodyguards of the various members, had been eliminated spectacularly by Dave DeMoss and Duke Buckingham, and the ex-New York cop Joe MacGinnis, observed by the dramatic appearance of the New York police and media at the scene. This had created organizational havoc for "The Janus Club" for some time afterwards, and it had taken over a year to establish sufficient confidence among the national criminal leaders, who constituted the international membership of "The Janus Club", to agree to meet together for unified planning once more.

It was the Japanese boss of Japan's sinister yakuza criminal organization who had taken the initiative lost by the Colombian, Eduardo Campo Sandoz, and who was the obvious host of their dinner. The Japanese criminal yakuza was a much more sophisticated operation than Sicilian cosa nostra, Russian mafiya, Chinese triads, Colombian cartels, Afghanistan warlords or North American mafia. There were estimated to be about 3,500 yakuza cells in Japan, with about 100,000 members, whose total commercial operations brought in about 20 billion US dollars a year. They were a tightly organized system reaching into the highest government as

well as commercial and financial circles by means of what was called sokaiya criminal elements. These sokaiya were employed to attend and disrupt share-holding meetings, to intimidate both directors and share-holders, and to ensure that meetings lasted only about fifteen minutes. This provided the yakuza with enormous sums of money from blackmail and protection. The yakuza made a special target of Japan's banking system, and, while they did not control it, they had sufficient influence to intimidate it into compliance. It was believed by leading Japanese police investigators that the current bad debt problems of Japanese banks - officially known there as "the yakuza recession"—had been created by the yakuza corrupting Japan's enormous wealth during its halcyon years.

The three others meeting in London with Jantara Naka were Lee Chung-ren, boss of the Chinese secret societies known as "the triads"; Evgeny Malenkov, boss of the Russian mafiya; and Prince Abdul Ibn Fazi, of South Arabia, boss of the Middle East's farang illicit drugs, gold and arms trafficking organization. Lee Chung-ren was boss of the most powerful triad in China, the "14K" which, because of its pre-eminence, was known simply as "The Triad", although there were over a hundred of these "triads"—some simply clan benevolent groups, or associations formed as legal political and social organizations, which had merged into the illegal criminal societies. These existed throughout all regions and classes of China, to include and dominate the lives of overseas Chinese in every country, from providing travel to destinations to making provision for the dead to be returned to China for burial in native birth-places. The Hong Kong-based 14K Triad was the deadly centre of the web, its criminal presence felt in every trembling national thread of extortion, vice, drugs, blackmail, and murder. The vast profits accumulated had swollen its growth into money-laundering, banking and financial institutions, gold syndicates—and top membership in "The Janus Club".

Evgeny Malenkov was a former KGB colonel who, after the break up of the former Soviet Union, used his inside knowledge, contacts and secrets to go into Russia's capitalist business operations in setting up offshore companies and accounts, and in coordinating

their money-laundering and other activities with international partners. Malenkov virtually controlled everything legal and illegal inside and flowing from Russia. There were about five thousand criminal gangs in what was left of the old Soviet Union, with about two hundred of them having international links. In the national crisis following on the collapse of Soviet Union communism the only existing political and social framework was the criminal oligarchy and, as a top official in the KGB with knowledge of the key black-marketers, Malenkov had been in an unchallenged position to create a national kleptocrat structure without the restraints of the rule of law, and the solitary channel for the billions of dollars entering the country and the billions of rubles pouring out. These channels carrying legal money into Russia also carried the illegal money out of Russia into the Janus Club enterprises across the world. Malenkov's Russian mafiya controlled export licenses and access to all hard currency, and he dealt murderously with all rivals. Recently there had been added a dangerous new element to his commercial repertoire the lucrative and highly political smuggling of plutonium, uranium, and weapons systems; so-called "peaceful use" nuclear reactors were being made secretly available to rogue nations like Iran, North Korea, Libya and Sudan, which enabled them to produce the highly enriched uranium, one of the essential ingredients of an atom bomb.

Malenkov was also offering to sell uranium directly from so-called "peaceful use" plants in the former Soviet Union to a half-dozen nations and double that number of terrorist groups. Everyone in the old Soviet Union who worked in these sensitive fields, from scientists to security guards, was now open to offers for information, cooperation and supply — for a price. The governments of Europe as well as the USA were in a panic because the system of protection of the previous Soviet Union was now out of control and in the hands of the Russian mafiya run by the former KGB Colonel, Evgeny Malenkov.

The fourth member of the Janus Club at the meeting in London, was Prince Abdul Ibn Fazi, a maverick member of Saudi Arabia's extensive ruling royal family. He had been a radical young rebel

against the conservative Islamic policies of the royal family, then an embarrassing supporter of every form of Islamic revolution—including the armed revolt against the Saudi control of the Mecca pilgrimages in which many Muslim faithful had been shot. He had used his connections to build up a personal criminal organization from drug- and gold-smuggling, legal and illegal weapons-dealing, across the Middle East, dubbed *farang* because of its “foreign” associations. He was the youngest of the four men present, but he was the best-looking in serpentine Valentino-fashion, with hairline moustache, gelled and perfumed hair, and fashionable British clothing like the others. The four men, with their links to other members of the Janus Club not present, represented more money and more pragmatic power than most national governments and international organizations.

When they had eaten dinner in the ground-floor restaurant, during which they had taken care to discuss only general topics, they retired to Jantara Naka’s suite for more private discussion over coffee, brandy and cigars. They waited until the room service waiter had brought the trolley, served them and withdrawn, before they mentioned the serious business of their meeting. It was Jantara Naka, the nominated new leader of the Janus Club, who spoke first.

“The purpose of this meeting, as you know, is to tie up the final arrangements of Operation Shambhala, and to fix an approximate date for the nuclear strike against Israel. We have been able to push forward most arrangements through our various personal contacts, in different places, but the events are now accelerating towards the climax we planned, and we must be ready to respond. First, C.R. Could you bring us up-to-date regarding General Ma in China?”

The black-browed Lee Chung-ren—“C.R.” to his friends—nodded, and began lowly: “In the past few months there have been significant developments in China due to the paramount leader’s death, the unstable economic situation, the accelerating inflation, the impatience with the growing corruption of the Communist Party leaders, and the resentment aftermath of the Tiananmen massacre. What this means is that the race as successor is becoming more feverish.

“General Ma is now ready to leave Beijing for Qinghai Province in the north-west, to be on the spot at Shambhala when the missile is launched at Israel. His plans in Beijing are completed for his faction there to announce him as paramount leader of China immediately after the nuclear strike, when there will be total confusion among the leadership aspirants in China and uncertainty among the world’s leaders. All this unrest has created the right climate for another strong leader like Chairman Mao, and General Ma is the man. More to the point, he is our man for the job. So we need to be ready to place him in power because time is getting short.”

“Have you any recent report on the nuclear readiness?” Naka asked. “As far as we hear from General Ma, everything is ready to go. Nothing technical needs to be done. What do you know, Evgeny? You were there recently.”

The Russian nodded. “Yes, the strike-missile is in place, and all calculations are in a state of strike-readiness. Strike Zero, I understand, is still to be determined by Tariq Azir, and that is dependent on how he reads the political signs relating to the world situation and the Middle East. The way Tariq Azir explained it to me was that several major factors have to come together to create the appropriate momentum towards Muslim world domination. He gave the example of the 1980s when Ayatollah Khomeini came to power in Iran, the occupation of Mecca’s shrine by Islamic militants, the assassination of President Assad in Egypt, Hezbollah’s suicide car-bomb attack on the US Embassy in Lebanon, the expulsion of the Soviets from Afghanistan, the emergence of the Islamic Resistance Movement, or Hamas, in Israel’s occupied territories, the Islamic Salvation Front in Algeria, and the military coup in Sudan that brought the Muslim Brotherhood to power and prominence.

“He sees the necessity for a similar coming together, and acceleration of circumstances towards a critical mass, which will provide the exact moment for Strike Zero. He claims that the recent drop in acceleration of the 1980s Muslim revolution was due to a re-grouping of resources, rather than a loss of confidence, as some have alleged. He claims to detect a broad-based and more powerful

surge of Muslim revolutionary processes in effect now with the American intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan, and that it is only a matter of appropriate timing to carry that impetus to effective world domination. He argues that the United States will not intervene in the Middle East again, that the Western nations are too absorbed in after-Iraq and Afghanistan national problems, and that includes the United Nations. “

He stopped, and Lee Chung-ren intervened to complain, “It is dangerous having so much depend on one man—and especially this one man. Can’t Azir be replaced with someone more persuadable to direction?” It was obvious that the preferred person he had in mind was the Chinese General Ma.

Jantara Naka shook his head. “No. We selected Tariq Azir for very good reasons—which still apply. It is next to impossible to find a Muslim leader with whom all Muslims will agree—either for political, military, or religious reasons, or for no reasons at all. Is that not correct, Fazi?”

Prince Fazi smiled, and agreed. “Yes unfortunately. And in religion they do not agree, either.” He gave a mirthless laugh. “The Sunnis disagree with the Shi’ites; the Shi’ites with the Wahabis, and the all disagree with the secularists—they ridiculed Saddam Hussein’s so-called late conversion to Islam! The Gulf States disagree with Hussein of Jordan; Hamas disagrees with the PLO; Hezbollah disagrees with the Muslim Brotherhood. Tariq Azir was chosen because he was the only one acceptable—grudgingly!—to the important leaders of all factions. We could not have obtained the essential cooperation of Turabi of the Muslim Brotherhood and Fadlallah of the Hezbollah without him. These two alone represent the Islamic revolutionary revival feared by the conservative Muslim leaders, and passionately supported by the so-called ‘disinherited millions of Muslims world-wide’. Tariq Azir is irreplaceable.”

“That seems to settle the matter,” Naka said decisively; “One more important item on Operation Shambhala. Tell us about it, C.R.”

“Just before I left on this trip,” Lee said, “I was told by some of our highly placed informants in China’s Intelligence Service that the Director had recommended to the President he request the US

President for the services of the two Americans, Dave DeMoss and Duke Buckingham - who caused all the trouble in the Adullam affair — to assist in destroying Operation Shambhala and Tariq Azir.”

“What?” Fazi and Malenkoz exclaimed together in shocked surprise.

Lee shrugged. “The request for the two men is not in itself very important, because two men on such a mission are not like the small gun battle in New York, and they pose no significant danger to Operation Shambhala. What is significant is that it probably means China’s Director of Intelligence knows of General Ma’s ambitions— if not his actual plans. He wants General Ma removed, as a threat to China’s future and potential world danger; and he needs help from someone outside China to accomplish this.”

“Can you combat this threat by the two Americans?” Malenkov enquired of Lee dubiously. “They were very impressive in that last affair—and, before that in Hong Kong, according to reports in the media.”

“We were not fully prepared on those occasions,” Lee said stiffly. “They appeared to be two relatively harmless free-lancers. This time we will be ready for them. I have already set things in motion for them to be eliminated.”

“Very good,” said Naka. “What we have to decide now is the plan immediately following the nuclear strike against Israel. As it stands at present, the first step in Ma’s take-over of power in China, followed by an announcement of a new policy on world conquest based on the Koran’s jihad, much as Genghiz Khan did in his world domination. But other than that it is not in our interests to have Ma being the leading figure, is it? Azir is more acceptable for several reasons, not least being his associations with Middle East Muslim leaders, and, frankly, his greater political and religious expertise.”

“We are going to have to deal with Azir, too, and that sooner rather than later,” Malenkov interjected. “He has this thing about righteousness and justice being the bases of Islamic revolution. He’ll want to convert us as well as the world’s politicians.”

“Once he’s blown up Israel he will get anything he wants from the Muslims,” Prince Ibn Fazi said with a laugh.

"Is he prepared to blow up Muslim Palestinians in Israel as well as Israelis?" Lee asked doubtfully.

"Muslims would have been glad for somebody, anybody, to get rid of Arafat," Fazi said cynically.

"Nobody will want to live in a nuclear destroyed country," Malenkov stated emphatically.

"Why not?" demanded Naka. "They did in Hiroshima and Nagasaki—and Chernobyl," he added.

Malenkov shrugged a reluctant acceptance.

"But to get back to Azir and his post-bombed Israel," Naka said. "I agree he will pose a real threat to our own plans for the future. Does anybody know for certain whether he will attempt to consolidate his own political power, or his religious influence—or both?"

"As a Muslim, especially one with his following, it will be religious," Fazi said definitely. "I suggest he is likely to call a meeting of Muslim world-wide leaders to devise universal policy that would be acceptable to all other Islamic leaders. Then the Muslim Conference would call a 'Religions of the World Conference' to agree to that policy proposition. Then Azir would turn his attention to consolidating the world's anti-Zionist politics."

"That sounds a likely scenario," Naka agreed. "So, do we remove him before this Muslim Religious Conference, or the World Religious Conference, or when? And who does it? And how?"

WASHINGTON, D.C. USA (I)

The fawn-coloured Buick Grand Marquis turned off the south-bound A95 to Washington motorway into the Food and Service area. There was nothing especially noticeable about the car's two occupants but as they entered the restaurant the buzz of conversation diminished and attention focused on the two arrivals. Both men were dressed in dark business suits, with light shirts and subdued ties, the tall and slim white man looking casually elegant; but his black companion, towering massively several inches taller, gave the impression of being dressed uncomfortably for some business appointment or bodyguard job. It wasn't their dress, difference in build, or race that drew the looks from the watchers, but the impression of hidden strengths and uncommon occupations.

The white man looked younger, but there were experience as well as humour lines etched around his watchfully scanning eyes; the tanned skin looked like it was burned from foreign sun rather than beside an American swimming-pool; and there were streaks of grey in the dark hair above his ears. But it was the black man who drew the most curious stares. He had the powerful neck and shoulders, the easy athleticism, of a linebacker football-player, but his broken-nosed face, with the eye-brow scars and close-cropped hair-cut, was that of a boxer. Like his white companion, even during the meal, his eyes were watchful and probing as if every incident

around them, no matter how apparently innocent, contained a potential threat.

Finishing their late breakfast they made their way to the cash-desk and their car and, after removing their jackets and placing them on hangers in the rear, the white man took the driving seat. When they stopped at the line of service area pumps to fill up with gas, and while the white man paid, the black man's watchful scan included all cars in the service area. Only when they were on the A95 South again was there a relaxation in their signs of tension.

They had met during the Vietnam War where, at first, the tough, experienced master-sergeant Duke Washington had been contemptuous of the rookie Lieutenant Dave DeMoss. But the hellish demands of fighting in the war had changed their attitudes from hostility to tolerance and, finally, to respect and friendship. In time they had become legendary for their suicidal missions against the Vietnamese, during which they had saved each other's lives countless times, and for their hell-raising leaves in Saigon.

On one of their missions they had been ambushed by an overwhelming force of Vietnamese, their unit annihilated, and Dave seriously wounded. Duke had radioed for medical assistance, and then staggered with the bleeding and unconscious Dave on his shoulders through the dense jungle to find an open space where they could be picked up by the helicopter rescue unit.

When the helicopter arrived the Vietnamese were closing in on Duke, who had to shoot and re-load his automatic weapon one-handed at the advancing Vietnamese, while he carried the unconscious Dave to the swampy open ground under the hovering helicopter. They would have been killed had it not been for a medic descending from the drop-ladder and, despite his non-combatant pacifist convictions, holding off the Vietnamese with Duke's weapon until Duke had carried Dave up the ladder into the safety of the helicopter. The pacifist medic had died in a hail of Vietnamese bullets before Duke could return to help him.

From that time Dave had picked up on the medic's spiritual convictions and, on his discharge from the army, and then with assistance from Duke, they established a drug treatment project, first

in Hong Kong, then in the United States. This had involved them both in a series of adventures with Chinese triads, and eventually they had blown up the walled city of Kowloon where the triads had their headquarters. They had been officially “requested” to leave Hong Kong, and they had returned to the United States and established a drug treatment centre there called “Adullam”, after the place in the Bible where King David of Israel had recruited the outlaws of his time and forged them into the greatest army in ancient history to found the theocratic State of Israel.

But in America they had become embroiled with the national Italian mafia in their drug-running, and then with the sinister international criminal organization known as “The Janus Club” in their world-wide financial manipulation for illicit drug money-laundering of billions of dollars. The Colombian drug cartel boss aspiring to world leadership of The Janus Club had compromised the then influential Senator, Brendan Ganaghan, financially and politically, so he could be blackmailed and manipulated to conform with their world domination ambitions when he became President. The Colombian also planned to murder the Senator’s son, Rick, who was under drug treatment at Adullam, and he was indirectly responsible for the murder of Dave’s wife and son. Dave and Duke had declared a personal war of justice on the Colombian and the Janus Club and, in the process, were responsible for helping the Senator to become President of the United States on a tough-on-crime political platform.

“You’re unusually quiet today, Duke,” Dave said, smiling and turning his head to glance at his companion. “No profound thoughts or provocative comments? No sing-along radio music?”

His black companion shifted in his seat to face Dave in his reply: “I’m half-asleep, Dave, because I spent half the night wondering why the President of the United States wants to see us,” Duke replied.

“What’s to worry?” Dave asked mildly. “He said it was ‘a matter of urgent importance’”.

“I always worry when someone tells me ‘not to worry’”, Duke said sardonically; “especially when it’s followed by ‘a matter of urgent importance’. When a President says that, it’s a certified

sleep-eraser. The previous time he had ‘a matter of urgent importance’ for us he was only a Senator—and we almost lost our lives a few times then.”

Dave laughed. “Right on, partner! But remember the Senator—now—President also said it was ‘suited to your experience and talents’”.

“And that experience included killing a number of people and torching a few billion dollars of mafia money,” Duke said pointedly.

“A hundred-and-fifty billion dollars,” Dave corrected him, grinning. “All in a days’ work for servants of God,” He waved a hand dismissively.

“So, if that qualifies as our ‘unique experience and talents’”, Duke persisted, “what can we expect to brighten our day—another call to arms in another Vietnam?”

Or clean up Chinese secret societies like we did in Hong Kong? Wipe out the Colombian drug cartels in South America?”

“No wonder you had a bad night,” Dave laughed. “How about the President just wanting an experienced input on his new anti-drug program? The news reports say he intends doing more than the previous half-dozen Presidents. He wants to tackle the problem of demand in this country rather than the problem of foreign supply like his predecessors”.

“Then for that he needs God, not us,” Duke said morosely. “No, if he wants us for the drug problem, it would be for the criminal money-laundering behind the drug problem. And that means ‘The Janus Club’ of international criminals—and more mayhem and sleepless nights.

“My-o-my”, Dave grinned. “You did have a rough nightmare, didn’t you? Turn on the radio and find some soul-inspiring music to sing away the blues. It’s a new day, the sun is shining, ‘The Janus Club’ is in disarray and in an hour or so we meet the President of the USA. The day pulsates with indescribable promise—”

Dave’s lyrical prose was cut off by a blast from the car radio and Duke’s laugh as he twirled the knobs to find a station. With the sound of softly-playing blues from the radio Duke returned to the subject of the President’s call. “What do you really

think the President wants from us?"

Dave indifferently shrugged off Duke's question. "Could be to discuss family matters involving his son, Rick, or Rick's pregnant wife, Claudia," he suggested, adding jokingly: "They might want a different job away from your influence. After all, it was you who advised Claudia about virginity, and getting married instead of burning with unrequited passion, as I recall."

"That was the Apostle Paul's advice I gave her," Duke argued mildly. "I just quoted him."

"That was what Pilate said when he crucified Jesus," Dave said.

"What did he say?"

"I just quoted him'," Dave replied. "He was referring to the words used on the cross to identify the crime: 'Jesus of Nazareth, king of the Jews'."

"Why do we always seem to end up in the Bible?" Duke enquired with exaggerated interest.

"Because I never cease to hope that it might have a salutary effect on you," Dave answered with affected consideration.

Duke pretended to throw a punch at the grinning Dave, and then relaxed in the corner of the passenger seat again.

"No," he said after a few minutes' silent thought. "If it had been something family like that, Rick or Claudia would have mentioned it to us. Maybe the President wants to know our ideas on addiction treatment for some new legislative project?"

"Like your recent proposal that all addicts should begin treatment in a Scumbags Synonymous outfit, confessing to each other how they had been spending their useless lives screwing everybody, trawling in the gutter, and blaming others - including God."

"What was wrong with that?" Duke challenged. "It's at least more realistic than describing them as 'socially maladjusted', or 'domestically dysfunctional', or 'genetically disadvantaged'. At least, when I speak of them as Scumbags Synonymous they all know that I know what they know, where they are coming from, where they are heading, and what they are talking about. And you forgot to mention that I proposed they can graduate eventually to Sainthood Revealed - w-e-l-l-l, some of them anyhow."

"You mean, after you've beaten sainthood into them." Dave grinned.

They were obviously at ease with each other as they argued and discussed whatever was in their minds, the product of a long, close and valued friendship. It was these serious events that occupied their minds and conversation, between their joking bouts, as they drove on to Washington in response to the President's sudden request to meet with them.

"It could be that he wants some of the other members of the family treated for addiction," Duke suggested, after another period of reflection. "The whole family was into drugs and alcohol at one time."

"So the media reported," Dave said. "Who believes the media?"

"Hey," Duke riposted, "You were a hot-shot on television, remember?"

"That was different."

"How?"

"I was giving my own experience, not talking about others."

"You blew their minds—and your own chances of being asked back."

"I should lose sleep over that? D'you know what Samuel Coleridge - that well-known druggie writer of 'Kubla Khan' — said of Edward Gibbon, also well-known writer of 'The Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire'?"

"No, tell me – I wait with breathless anticipation."

"He said, 'Gibbon's style is detestable; but it is not the worst thing about him.' Both were media types."

"Ouch! It reminds me of somebody nameless who said of Milton the poet: 'He only seems profound because he wrote of hell, and he's dead.'"

They laughed. "Quotations," Dave said dryly, "are like diamonds in the hand of a witty person, but like pebbles in the hand of a fool."

"Was that a dagger I felt in me?" Duke proclaimed.

"What about some music?" Dave suggested, stretching to ease the aches of sitting so long in the same position.

Duke slowly scanned the radio dial. "What d'you feel like—rock

'n' roll—rhythm and blues—rap—classical—gospel?" He moved on dialling as he spoke.

"What was that?" Dave asked suddenly.

"What?"

"That station you just passed."

"Classical or gospel?"

"No, the man talking."

"A talk show? A caller? 'How I learned to love myself and hate God'?" Duke scanned back over the stations

"There," Dave said.

"Here?" Duke asked incredulously.

It was a radio preacher of some kind, and Duke looked at Dave to see if he was joking, but he appeared to be listening intently. He knew that Dave had little time for radio or television preachers of any persuasion, and he was puzzled at what was apparently interesting him now. This preacher was ranting on about Armageddon and the last days of the world, and the prophetic significance of the words "a time, times and half-a-time" and the destruction of the "Babylonian Great Harlot" and "Antichrist" as the world ended.

"There," Dave said again.

Duke listened more closely.

"In this book I have in my hand," the radio preacher said, "the author tries to argue that the Roman Catholic Church is not the Babylonian Great Harlot. He tries to prove that this Great Harlot of Revelation is a combination of what he calls 'the three false institutional religions of Judaism, Christendom and Islam'. In order to sustain his argument he has to move the historically traditional centre of the Babylonian Harlot of 'Rome of the Seven Hills' to the geographical Babylon. He devotes the whole of this dangerous book to his thesis that God's true geopolitical centres in the Scriptures from the beginning are Babylon, 'Satan's Seat', and Jerusalem, 'the City of God'. I would not give this book any publicity at all, except that I feel I should warn all those listening to me today that it could mislead them regarding the true interpretation of the Scriptural last days of the world—"

"I want that book," Dave said positively.

"Why?" asked the bemused Duke.

"Because I like the thesis that the 'Babylonian Harlot of Revelation' is not just Roman Catholicism but also Judaism and Islam," Dave said emphatically. "These three divinely revealed but disobediently institutional religions have all prostituted the Old and New Testament Scriptures in their own professional priesthood interests. I also like the Biblical thesis of the geopolitical centres of Babylon and Jerusalem."

"You mean as an intellectual exercise—a kind of Biblical aerobics?" Duke asked sceptically. "You can't mean because it has any practical significance—like stimulating the endorphins or something?"

"That is just what I am saying," Dave said emphatically. "Stimulating the endorphins has the practical consequence of curing addictions; and the Biblical teachings regarding the histories of Babylon and Jerusalem have end-of-the-world consequences of historical importance. Instead of the traditional view of meaningless theological hair-splitting argument between ecclesiastical priesthoods of different institutional religions, it makes the Scriptures a historical and practical guide-book to what is happening in the world now—as well as what is likely to happen in the future."

"I still don't get it," Duke shook his head.

"Look, let me put it simply from recent events", Dave said with exaggerated—patience. "During the Persian Gulf War the highest selling books in the United States were religious prophecy works on the subject of Babylon and the Apocalypse. For crying out loud, it even made the front page of the New York Times, and inside articles in the weekly news magazines. Two of the books highlighted Saddam Hussein and his self-identification with the former Babylonian monarch, Nebuchadnezzar, and Saddam Hussein's megalomaniac rebuilding of his ancient kingdom. The difficulty with such books, however, is that they emerged from conservative Christian evangelical circles—which had believed for a century that God's Apocalypse would emerge from Pagan Rome and the

Emperor Constantine's 'Papal Rome' of Europe, and not Babylon. This skewed interpretation of Daniel's prophetic vision of a 'ten-kingdom confederacy' at the closing 'last days', of world history emerged in its modern form in the nineteenth century, in a book entitled, *Light For The Last Days*, by a Dr Grattan Guinness. He devised a complicated arrangement of connected Biblical prophecy and secular history based on a 'year-day theory'; that is, a day in Biblical prophecy really meant a year, so that Daniel's prophetic time-span of 1,260 days was 1,260 years. Briefly, by a skilful manipulation of Scriptures and history he was able to prognosticate that the dying Roman Empire was absorbed into the Roman Catholic Church by Constantine and Augustine— which, at the 'last days of the world' would become a religious-political entity known as 'the Revived Roman Empire'.

"You lost me back there with the numbers," Duke said without interest , moving the radio dial for music.

Dave as absorbed with his thinking and continued: "This became the corner-stone of Christian evangelical expectation of imminent Apocalypse through the teachings of two remarkable theologians, John Nelson Darby, an Irish Episcopalian who became one of the Christian Brethren sect, and Dr. C.I. Schofield, the author of the evangelical, immensely influential, 'Schofield Bible'. They taught that the 'Fourth Beast' of Daniel's vision was the Roman Empire, and that the 'Revived Roman Empire' would be the entity in the 'last days' of the world from which the Antichrist would emerge to precipitate Armageddon and the end of the world. For a time in the 1930s it was even widely taught that Mussolini of Italy was that Antichrist! Later, when the European Community emerged from the Treaty of Rome, especially when it was represented by ten nations in confederacy, the interpretation has been that this is the 'Revived Roman Empire' in embryo. That theory was blown out of the water when the European Union became over twenty nations.

"Because the first Roman Empire was uniquely dominated by Caesars who were also considered divinities, it was believed that the 'Revived Roman Empire's' Antichrist would be a combination of ruler and Pope. Hence, Roman Catholicism, ruled by the Pope from

Rome, has been designated symbolically by Christian Protestant evangelicals as 'the Great Whore of Babylon'. Based on this theory, millions of Christians worldwide in this century have anticipated Armageddon, and expected the imminent Second Coming of Jesus Christ 'at any moment.

Duke switched off the radio and looked at Dave incredulously: "You really believe all this stuff, don't you? From where I sit it smacks of snake-oil preaching."

Dave was on a roll; "This is front-page stuff, not back-page sports. Some of these events are really happening today but most preachers sound like they are talking to children about fairy-tales. For a start, at no time, neither in Daniel or elsewhere in the Scriptures, is Rome ever mentioned in connection with prophetic interpretation. In fact, Daniel, and other prophets, made it clear that the significance of their visions was that they took place in Babylon, not Rome—Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, Darius of Medo-Persia, Alexander of Greece, all ruled from Babylon. Then there is silence until the fourth dictator emerges to rule again in Babylon in the 'last days'.

"Two further elements in Daniel's prophecy stand out: one, the 'ten-kingdom confederacy' is a Mesopotamian, and not Western, grouping of nations; and, two, the Antichrist 'Babylon Mother of Harlots' is a universal and plural political-religious association. What is interesting is that Daniel's visions would have greater twenty-first century relevance than the misinterpretation of the conservative evangelicals if, instead of the 'Pagan Rome' and 'Papal Rome', a combination of Judaism, Greek and Russian Orthodox, Islam, and other institutional religions were combined ecumenically to personify the 'Babylon Mother of Harlots'.

"Now you're talking'", Duke clenched his fist and punched the air. "I know about harlots. Go to it preacher. Give'em hell! Hallelujah".

Dave's eyes were on the road but it was clear his mind was somewhere else wrestling with a personal question. "Judaism, Christianity and Islam are all derived from the same God, believe the same Old Testament prophets, and over the centuries they all have prostituted themselves theologically through their institutional

priesthoods to advance their organizational self-interests in defiance of God's commands. With the collapse of atheistic Communism what is now emerging on the world scene is the rise of a greater threat than politicized Catholicism or pseudo-religious Communism, and that is a militant political religiosity. This is evident in the expansion of fundamentalist Islamic ambitions from the Atlantic Ocean to the China Sea; the Pope's political ambitions for authoritarian Catholicism in Eastern Europe, Asia and South America; and Israel's Biblical ambitions for a restored 'Promised Land'. But the most imminent danger lies in the region defined by Daniel's prophecies—the Mediterranean coastal nations, and the world's geopolitical heartland with Babylon as its centre. Nineteen Moslem nations stretch from the Atlantic to Iran; and at least seven more are in the former Soviet Union from there to the China Sea. As Communism fades, fundamentalist Islam is planning to take over—especially in nuclear and oil-rich Central Asia, Iraq has opened a consular office in Tajikistan. Iran is planning to make Tashkent an important centre of its expansion to the east. Turkey is cultivating Azerbaijan and the other Turkic-speaking republics, and dreams of a pan-Turanism commonwealth. The Saudis are opening up financial operations in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, and desperately trying to stem the tide of fundamentalist Islam in their own country. Algeria has the fundamentalist Islamic Salvation Front, and exultant Muslim militants in Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, Libya, Morocco, Sudan and Tunisia declare their intentions of ultimate world conquest.

"Meanwhile, the apathetic Western countries sell to these Muslim nations wealthy enough to buy, four-fifths of the world's most modern armaments. They are said to be recruiting the impoverished Soviet nuclear scientists to develop their own arsenals. Saddam Hussein brooded about, not just the destruction of Israel and the intentions of George Bush, but glorifying Babylon past, present and future.

"Finally", Dave grinned at the incredulous Duke, "and with this I will sit down, as the pastors say. In the beginning in the Scriptures you have a record of God working in the Mesopotamian region, in Babel, and in the later Babylon; also in the Promised Land and in

Jerusalem. All Scriptural history revolves around these two areas of Mesopotamia and the Promised Land—peoples, civilizations, and religions. And the same is true of all the Scriptural prophecies of the last days of the world—nineteen prophets over 250 years between the seventh and fourth centuries BC all declared categorically that was where and how the world would end: between Jews and Gentile nations, between Jews and fellow-Semites, between Jews and Antichrist, and between Babylon and Jerusalem. That is where Armageddon is to take place. And it's all happening right now in front of our eyes, isn't it? You only have to take one look at the Middle East."

"You must be out of your cotton-pickin' mind," Duke said with mock seriousness. "I knew all that reading was bad for you."

Dave laughed. "Just write down that station name and number. I will ask them to find out about that book he was denouncing, and I'll buy it."

Duke took a notebook from out of the glove compartment, and wrote it down. He returned the notebook and said to Dave, "Seriously, you think there is a real historical pattern in all these old prophecies?"

"Hey, I'm as surprised as you, man," Dave stated. "When I first read them I assumed they were a record of ancient Jewish history, the same as everybody else. But then I began to notice that there was a near future and distant future element in many of them, and the specific nature of God's promises regarding the Jews and others in the last days. I tell you, there's more about that in the Bible than there is about being saved and going to heaven. Another thing: almost every week now—every day—in the modern media there is something about the Jews and Arabs and the Middle East. So I made a detailed study—and ended up more confused than when I started!" He laughed. "There are more theoretical theories about the millennium than there are economic theories about a nationally balanced budget. Alan Greenspan on the economy is about as believable as televangelist Jimmy Swaggart on prophecy."

"So, what was so special about that broadcast?" Duke asked, intrigued despite his mockery.

“If there is one predominating factor above almost all others in all the Scriptures—both Old and New Testaments—it is God’s denunciations of false prophets and hypocritical priests, the professional religionists. From Jewish Tabernacle and Temple Prophets, to Christian Church Evangelicals, to Islamic Mosque Sufis, God emphasizes a spiritual organism commanded by Himself and individual responsibility to Himself. But from Babel to Babylon, from Thebes to Delphi, from Judah to Israel, from Rome to Constantinople, from Mecca to Wittenberg, professional priesthoods have corrupted the divine vision in pursuing their own harlotries of institutional and material interests. It’s not just the Apostle John who speaks of the Great Babylonian Harlot. God used this term several times, through Old Testament prophets like Daniel and Ezekiel and Isaiah, to describe the harlotries of the Judaism of the priests at the same time as Socrates, Plato, Aristotle and others were placing the human mind above God. Jesus regularly denounced the Judaistic harlotries of the Pharisees, Sadducees, scribes and doctors of the Law. So, anyone seeking total power and world domination in the present—or some future Antichrist—would first have to get control of the world’s religions, and the most organized and numerous are Judaism, Christendom and Islam.”

“Whew!” Duke whistled. “I’m only just beginning to get a handle on repentance and forgiveness and love, and here you are at Apocalypse Now!”

“As the fisherman Peter said to the scholar Paul,” Dave grinned. “Interesting, though, isn’t it—Moses and the Messiah more currently relevant than Mohammed and Machiavelli?”

“I’ll need a year to think about it,” Duke grumbled. “I just got started on Christianity and now you’re talking about Judaism and Islam.”

“Hey, who’s counting, man?” Dave laughed. “Just sit back and enjoy the ride.”

“Speaking of the ride, we turn into the Beltway just ahead. Any ideas about parking?”

“Not on this trip,” Dave said firmly. “We drive to the White House in style, kiddo, and tell the guys at the gate we’re guests of the

President. They better do more than salute.”

“Hallelujah,” said Duke, sitting back comfortably.

*

“Hi there, Dave - and Duke.” President Ganaghan rose from the armchair beside the fire in the family living quarters of the White House to greet the two men as they entered the room. “How are you guys doing?”

“Doing well,” Dave replied. “How are you and the First Lady keeping?”

“As they say: ‘As well as can be expected in the circumstances.’ No, we’re enjoying good health, thank God—and the Presidency, too.” He laughed. “Before we talk, can I get you something to drink—coffee, tea, beer?”

“Not for me,” said Dave.

“I’m OK,” agreed Duke.

“Miriam will come in shortly to see you,” the President said, “and we can have something then. I told her we wanted a spell on our own first.” He waved to the other empty chairs around the fire. “Make yourselves comfortable. I hear from Rick and Claudia that you are opening new drug treatment centres in Europe now.”

“Yeah,” Dave said. “Both of their personally donated inheritances have made it possible for us to push ahead—as well, of course, as their own enthusiasm for expansion.”

“That’s one of the things I want to talk about today,” the President said. “Can you hold them back for a few weeks to release you both for a possible important job I have for you?”

Dave took his time to reply, his eyes searching the President’s grave face for some intimation of what was coming. The President’s eyes were shadowed with concern, but there was no sign of undue tension or restlessness hinting at whether it might be national or domestic. “If it’s important enough we could both get away and leave the running of Adullam to Rick and Claudia,” he agreed

“It’s important enough,” the President said grimly. “In fact, it’s nothing less than a world crisis.”

Dave's eyebrows lifted, and Duke stiffened in his lounging position. "I asked you to come and see me here in the White House family quarters," the President said, "not just because you're friends of the family, but because I didn't want any official record of our meeting and conversation that would be the case if we met in the Oval Office. What I have to say to you is only known to the Director of the CIA, the Secretary of State, and the head of National Security, under top-level need-to-know conditions of secrecy. If you agree to take on the job, that's how it will remain until you're finished with it. We agreed that I should discuss it with you alone before we considered possible alternatives."

"You mean that this is something that cannot be done by any of the government's normal operatives - CIA, Delta Force?" Dave asked with a mixture of puzzlement and incredulity.

The President took a deep breath, and let it out slowly. "You'll know the reasons why when you hear all the details, but I wanted to brief you two on the main points to see if you would be willing to take it on. The first reason is that you were specially requested by an old friend of yours — Feng Pen-fai, the former Director of China's Intelligence Service and present chief adviser to the President of China. He has nominated another friend of yours, Li Chi'en — to be your official associate in the task if you agree to take it on.

"The second reason for your proposed participation is that the crisis involves the international criminal organization, the 'Janus Club', with whom you tangled over the money-laundering affair a year or so ago. Apparently they have got themselves organized again with a group of new leaders, and they are now a bigger threat than ever because their ambitions now are more political than financial, and it appears they are overtly planning world domination from a financial base.

"That brings me to the third reason. They are not only using drugs and money and terror as levers of power, they are using religion —"

"Huh!" Dave gave an exclamation of surprise, and glanced at the impassively lounging Duke, who nodded his understanding. "Sorry for the interruption," Dave said apologetically. "We just happened to

be discussing world religious politics in the present time on the way here. Please continue.”

“Again, the details can come later, but it’s enough to mention for the present a couple of main items. One, you may or may not have noted when you were involved previously with the Janus Club that there was no Israeli, no Jew, among all the people listed as members in the newspaper articles by Nelson McCabe?”

Dave shook his head in negative response; he hadn’t noted it.

“It’s not as if there’s no Jewish gangster or financial crook,” the President said ironically. “After all, there was Meyer Lansky who was the financial genius in building the Luciano mafia into an international as well as national organization. The fact that there was no Jew in the Janus Club didn’t seem an important omission at the time of my involvement with them, but I’m told that one explanation may be that the Israelis have their own influential ‘International Club’ other than the official Mossad looking after Jewish political and financial interests in Israel and world-wide. If you take on the job, you may want to check this out with the journalist Nelson McCabe. Another important item, of those I have mentioned, is the rise of Islamic fundamentalism as the new threat to world peace. You look surprised again?”

“Yeah, this was another thing we mentioned in our conversation coming here,” Dave commented. “But, surely, that’s only a current minor and not a major threat?”

“That’s what I thought until my talk with the President of China and Feng Pen-fai,” the President said. “Obviously I’m giving you all this in short-hand and I didn’t get much more from them, but I got enough to believe their version—and they got it from an informant inside the Janus Club. Here is what they say. China is seriously facing the prospect of internal revolution when the present aging leaders die. Historically, it appears when there is no strong ruler in Peking the country splits up among regional warlords. One of the possible modern warlord revolutionaries contending for current control of China is the north-west China region General Ma Wen-huie, a Muslim. There are about eighty million Muslims in China, most of them in the north-west region, with Suinkiang to the

north also Muslim. You get the picture so far? OK.

“The north-west of China is also where the most important nuclear installations are located. That shakes you, eh? And I’m not nearly finished yet. Wait till you hear what’s coming! If nothing else interests you religious guys, this will. Apparently the Muslim fundamentalists have found a visionary leader who has been quietly organizing a plan for world domination, based on Muhammad and Saladin in the early centuries of Muslim imperial conquest. This revolutionary is said to be a combination of Nasser and Khomeini, Saddam Hussein, Gadaffi and Osama bin Laden—but more political, more revolutionary, and more fanatically religious than all of them put together.

“He was a Tibetan national, born to Muslim parents in Lhasa, the Tibetan capital, who was first educated like all Tibetans in Buddhist monasteries then went to China’s Marxist universities, spent some time in India as a Sanskrit scholar and Tibetan radical journalist, came to the USA and obtained a doctorate in political science at Berkeley. Then he disappeared, except for occasional vague reports of activity in the Middle East. It now seems he has accomplished more than anyone before him in acquiring the broad support of all the usually warring Muslim factions, including the rich oil countries —plus the Janus Club. I thought that would pull your chain! But, listen to this! What he has, that no-one else has been able to obtain, is general agreement of all of these elements to set up a special nuclear facility in the region north of Tibet and north-west of China. You get the connection? The Janus Club supplies unlimited money and the nuclear expertise of the former Soviet Union, and now Central Asian Muslim nuclear experts, for their own financial, criminal and political ambitions.

“I am told that a modern bomb can be built with as little as thirty-three pounds of weapons-grade uranium or eleven pounds of plutonium. The Soviet Union produced hundreds of tons of these materials, which are now shared or used at dozens of different sites. Most of that is still stored in Russia, but important quantities are still being stored and used in the successor States, with lax or non-existent security. Any country with a national nuclear weapons

program—say, for example, Pakistan, North Korea or Iran—having access to this uranium or plutonium, could complete their program in months instead of ten years or so. As it is, at the present rate of production, plutonium programs around the world will produce five hundred metric tons of plutonium from the spent fuel of nuclear power reactors within the next ten years. That is a few hundred tons more than the combined nuclear arsenals of the United States and Russia.

“The Muslim oil countries of the Middle East are contributing financial, military and political support on the basis of Islamic religious domination and the guaranteed destruction of Israel. And they all support the development of the most advanced nuclear devices at the nuclear facilities in north Tibet and north-west China where the Muslim Chinese General—when he gets control of the country—hopes to bring China into the new Islam-dominated world organization. Scary, isn’t it?

“Hear me out. There’s not much more to come. Apparently, this secret ‘underground’ revolutionary Muslim articulating the visionary plan has named the nuclear facility ‘Shambhala’, which, I gather from the Chinese, is a legendary place in Tibetan Buddhism from which will emerge a ruler of the world at a time of crisis. At least one nuclear device being developed in this Shambhala is directed towards Israel, and the estimated plans of Chinese intelligence sources is that there will be a sudden selective strike to destroy Israel, and then intimidate the world by Islamic demands and conquest. You can imagine the thinking, can’t you? If a crowd of yobos like the Serbs can render the whole world helpless with left-over military hardware, what could the Muslims do with nuclear capability after destroying Israel, especially after the UN policy of aiding the destruction of Muslims in Bosnia, with its policy of arms sanctions against them“?

The President paused, obviously seeking how to phrase something important. and Dave and Duke waited with intense expectation. “It could happen tomorrow according to the Chinese President,” he said sombrely, “and we are almost totally unprepared. We need immediate up-to-date and on-the-spot information about

this “Shambhala project”. We need somebody capable of getting inside the nuclear facility and capable of destroying it, if possible. We need you two—right now.”

Dave and Duke were silent as they contemplated what they had just heard. Each of them acknowledged in his mind that there was a certain reasonable logic for them to be chosen. Their involvement with the Janus Club, their close association with Feng Pen-fai and Li Chi'en his agent who had worked with them in Hong Kong against Moonflower and the Chinese triads, and their unique experience of war in Vietnam and religion in Hong Kong and the United States, made them seem a natural choice for the obviously concerned President.

Duke moved first, taking in a deep breath as he straightened in the chair and then letting it out slowly in a “Who-o-o-ee”. He made no attempt to speak, but his menacingly impassive face in repose eased into a slight smile of approval as he looked at Dave quizzically. Dave raised his shoulders slightly, and gave a nod of agreement as if in response to Duke's gaze.

“Feel like a break?” he asked Duke.

“Like God said to Moses at the burning-bush?” Duke replied whimsically.

Dave laughed, and the President looked bewildered. “Am I missing something?” he enquired.

“Moses was herding sheep in the desert,” Dave explained with a smile, “when God appeared to him in a burning-bush to tell him he was elected to go to the Egyptian king with an ultimatum to release the Israelites from slavery and let them go to the Promised Land—or else. Ten plagues and miracles, the destruction of Egypt, and forty years of territorial adventure later, the Israelites reached the Promised Land. As Mark Twain said of John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*: ‘It was a tough job.’”

The President laughed. “I see your point. The problem with you guys is that you make the tough jobs seem easy—like Moses, I suppose.

“How are you for time?” Dave asked him. “Have we time for that coffee now?”

“Right”. The President picked up the ‘phone beside him, and asked for coffee, and for his wife to be informed that she was expected to join them. “We’re OK. I cleared a couple of hours for this meeting.”

“And how are you regarding information? Do you need to be kept ignorant so that what we do is deniable?”

The President thought about it for a moment then shrugged. “I better not get into details with you fellows, because I recall your methods are not always according to Hoyle. But a reasonable report of main points is acceptable.”

Dave nodded. “Okay. We need to get China’s cooperation for us to return to Hong Kong, and for them to get Li Chi’en to meet us there. We left there in what might be described as ‘sensitive circumstances’.”

“I’ll get State and the CIA to clear that with the Hong Kong people,” the President agreed. “And I will be speaking to China’s President and Feng regarding your acceptance of the job. They can get Li in Hong Kong to meet you.”

“From the time we leave you today we will make no attempt to keep in direct touch with you,” Dave continued with his outline. “We’ll talk with Nelson McCabe and his wife, Lauren, here in Washington, to check on what they know of recent activities of the Janus Club. Both are astute journalists, responsible individuals, but a reporter is a reporter is a reporter. They will smell a story and will want an agreement to publish. What can I offer, if anything?”

“I’ll speak to Nels,” the President said. “I’ll promise him a Presidential exclusive when the job is completed. That will leave you free to discuss with him whatever you need.”

“After getting what we can from him we go as quickly as possible to Hong Kong; from Hong Kong we enter China and cross the country to Tibet. Li will decide the best place to enter Tibet to find this, what-do-you-call-it? Sha - something?”

“Shambhala.”

“Right. Shambhala. Fascinating. I must look into why this Muslim revolutionary chose that particular name for his nuclear location—”

He was interrupted by a knock on the door, and the President's wife, Miriam, entered carrying a tray with coffee, crockery and cookies. "Refreshments, gentlemen," she said, laying the tray on the coffee-table. Her voice still had the traces of an Irish accent. "Please sit. How are you both?"

"Fine thanks," Dave and Duke responded smilingly.

"How do you like your coffee?"

"Black, no sugar, please."

"Same, please."

When she had finished pouring she said to the President, "Would you like me to go or sit quietly while you finish your business?"

"I think we're finished," the President said, looking at Dave and Duke inquiringly.

"Yes," Dave agreed.

"Then tell me about Rick and Claudia," she said. "Is Claudia still having trouble with morning sickness?"

"Yes," Dave said, "but it's wearing off. She's the typical mum-to-be; radiant, blossoming, excited. Ask Duke. He keeps daily—or is it hourly? - track of her condition."

Duke scowled in pretended displeasure, but his eyes gleamed. Claudia and he had become close friends since the death of her mafia godfather parent, and he was her confidant.

"No sign of you getting married, Duke?" the First Lady teased him. "I'm surprised a handsome hulk like you is not snapped up."

"He's too shy," Dave said sardonically.

"I'm too busy keeping Dave out of mischief," Duke growled. "He keeps getting into dangerous situations to compensate for his feelings of insecurity."

They all laughed, and talked about family and Adullam matters until it was time for Dave and Duke to go.

Chapter 2

will be available on this site on the 1st July 2010