

CHAPTER TWO:

LUKE 17:34-35

Gary LaMonte sat at a wobbly plastic table in a nearly empty food court on the university campus. Fiddling with the lasagna on his Styrofoam plate, he watched the government man across from him, a skeletal, balding apparition in an ill-fitting gray suit. He had deep-set, judgmental eyes and big hands knotted into fists on the table. Gary didn't like the look of the man, and was sure the man returned the opinion. The suit, for Gary saw him as such, had been told he would meet with an expert, a gilded academic. A cue-balled, skinny black man in a Lakers jersey, his jeans sagging below his ass and his floral print boxers out in the wild probably wasn't the suit's idea of an established college brainiac.

So fuck him.

"The professor tells me you're doing some research of interest to the state," the government man said, "a kind of national directory of religious wackos."

Right. Gary turned away from him to the other man at the table. Dr. Ikaru laughed through a mouthful of lo mein, then cleared his palette with orange cola.

"A high concept description, I'm sure," Gary's teacher explained, his round Japanese face beaming, "and not my words, but Mr. Tuttle's."

"Sorry," the skeleton said. "No offense meant."

Gary hadn't asked for this meeting. Dr. Ikaru had dragged him to it with a promise of free food. Gary's interest centered on his nearly completed degree, not on meetings with "bigshot lawyers", as the professor had characterized the visitor. No offense indeed...

"None taken," Gary muttered, wanting to return an insult, but thinking better of it.

"As I'm sure you were informed," and the bigshot glanced at Ikaru, "we in the attorney-general's office have been tracking an increase in religiously-based crime, everything from obnoxious episodes of disturbing the peace to weapons violations, spousal abuse, abduction, even murder. Their perpetrators all have one thing in common: they justify their actions through religion, usually quoting the Bible. We've handled weirdoes before, what with all that fuss in 2000, 2001, and most recently in 2012, but these guys we don't get. They couch their mumbo-jumbo in scary prophecies, but there's

nothing there about aliens or ticking calendar time bombs or the other crap peddled by new-age doomsayers. It's all Christian mumbo-jumbo. The frightening part is that the mumbo-jumbo is spreading. They're organizing into groups, forming doomsday cults with paranoid militia leanings. Very dangerous. The federal government has posted bulletins, FBI, Homeland Security, initialed agencies I'd best not mention. The states are networking on this, trying to get ahead of a trend. The Branch Davidians, Heaven's Gate, Solar Temple, Aum Shinri Kyo. Sounds like them all over again. And that Kordish bastard. We need to know what drives these people, what makes them grow."

Gary took a bite of his lasagna, his lasagna paid for by Dr. Ikaru. "You say they invoke religion? What do they say?"

"I could get you detailed reports, but it usually amounts to lakes of blood, dragons, ten-horned monsters, and Jesus Christ coming down from heaven. That sort of thing."

Gary nodded. "Apocalypse testimony. They aren't hiding anything, Mr. Tuttle. In fact, they're naked in the open. Do you know your Bible?"

"As well as anybody, which means I'd be hard-pressed to quote anything outside the Lord's Prayer."

"You'd better start reading your Bible. They do."

"You can interpret this weirdness? That's why I'm here. I need an expert. The professor here says you're the man." Tuttle's eyes made a slow, skeptical sweep over the so-called expert before him.

Gary refused to bristle. He glanced at Ikaru. "I'm no expert. I just wrote a paper."

"Gary, that makes you an expert," Dr. Ikaru said. His voice had a grandfatherly sound. "Your doctoral thesis is just what these gentlemen want."

"I just explain; I don't understand. These people's actions have nothing to do with scripture, or reality, for that matter. The Bible gets them all worked up. What they do with it is a function of how scrambled they are in the head." Gary looked around the table. Dr. Ikaru grinned, eyes wrinkled almost shut over his round cheeks. Tuttle's eyes were dead, his mouth a thin line. He wasn't getting his money's worth, and showed it.

Well. Time to give the rube a show, but not so much that his eyes glaze over.

Gary slumped back in his chair. He brought one ankle up onto a knee. "There's this end-of-the-world fever," he said. "Pre-millennialism, millennialism, post-millennialism. It came to a head in 2000, but nothing happened, no end of the world, no Jesus, no aliens or black helicopters. Not even the computers crashed. Then they discovered that their nice, round apocalyptic number was a year off, that the millennium actually began in 2001, and they got worked up again." Gary nodded at his thoughts and rubbed his shaven head. "Of course, nothing happened then, either, and a lot of these groups have been rudderless ever since. They tried getting up a head of steam in 2012, the end of the five-thousand-year Mayan calendar, convinced it ushered in the end of all time. Didn't pan out. Now they're clutching at bad forgeries of papal history, sixteenth century documents that assert the latest Catholic pope will reign over judgment day. None of it's new. The same thing happened at the last millennium, and we ended up with the crusades, over two hundred years of religious bullying. These groups have patterns discernible through history." Gary shrugged. "These things take years to build, and years to die away. They'll be with us for a while."

Tuttle nodded toward Dr. Ikaru. "The prof says that paper of yours is right on the mark, that you're the local expert on religious cults."

Gary shifted in his chair from embarrassment. "Not cults. Apocalypse groups and post-millennialism. There's a difference."

"Not to me, there isn't. When the paper's done, I'd like a copy, and I'd like to pick your brain from time to time. In either case, it'll be worth it - financially, I mean."

"You're offering me a job?"

"A consultants'hip, same as we offer the professor here from time to time. You've been his research assistant, so you know how it goes. He speaks very highly of you."

Gary saw amusement plain on Ikaru's face.

"How about it, kid? I need somebody like you on my side."

"I..." Gary began, not knowing what would follow. He needed money. As a student, he was perennially broke. But he was also black. He had no reason to trust government types. "I'll think about it," he finished.

Tuttle nodded. "That's fair." He extracted a business card from his coat. "Don't wait forever; I sure can't. Give me a call, or call the prof and he'll call me."

"Sure. I'll get back with you."

"Thanks for your time," Tuttle said, standing. He nodded to Ikaru, and was gone.

Gary watched him leave, forgetting Dr. Ikaru. He had never imagined such easy entry into the world of employment. In Gary's experience, nothing came easy.

"It's a surprise, I know," Dr. Ikaru said.

"A surprise?" Gary returned from his daze.

"Yes. Such a sudden and important offer."

"Why?"

"Because I'm retiring, Gary. See? Another surprise! I told Mr. Tuttle about you for the same reason I told Evans at the sheriff's department about you, and Clark at the state police."

Gary looked at him, eyes narrowed.

"I've done the psychotic pinhead analysis bit for years, son. That millennium nonsense was lucrative, but it just wore me out. Now, it's starting up again, for whatever reason. It's time for somebody else to play detective." He reached across the table and patted Gary's shoulder. "I can't think of anyone better to take over my extracurricular niche. You aren't a student anymore, Gary. You're a scientist in demand."

Not a student anymore, Gary thought. Time just flies...

"I imagine you could publish tomorrow," Dr. Ikaru said. "Your research is impeccable; I'm sure I'll have no arguments when I see the final draft. But--!" and, as was his habit, he let the qualifier hang. He munched another bite of noodles. Gary waited patiently, for he knew this man. After five years, Ikaru was more a father than an academic advisor.

"Your paper lacks immediacy. It's mainly historical research, Gary. That won't do with people like Tuttle. They deal with the problems of now, not a thousand years ago."

"I did the paper because of what's happening," Gary argued. "I remember back when and all the millennial things that went down -- the bombings, the hoardings, the computer scares and such. The cops treated it like something new, something unique. I found out later that it had all happened before. That's why I wrote the paper. How can the authorities deal with this latest if they don't understand where it came from?"

"A sound argument, but somewhat esoteric for the white socks and black shoes crowd, don't you think?"

"So, what are you saying, Dr. Ikaru? I should change the entire focus of my work? Maybe you should have said that a year ago."

"Look, Gary, you stand at a deciding moment in your life. You are the expert. There aren't a hundred respectable researchers on this planet as steeped in the lore, the science, and the sociology of apocalypse phenomena as you are. I'm not suggesting you redo your paper. I'm suggesting you annotate it, or add an afterward, a critical analysis, something to relate your historical data to present day trends. Make it more user friendly."

Gary's stomach tightened. He had written a historical analysis of Judeo-Christian doomsday prophecy, the stories centering on the end of the physical world and the reclaiming by God of the universe. To do as Ikaru suggested meant a reinterpretation of all the data in terms of how it explained doomsday groups today. Though the existing data still held validity and lent itself to other perspectives, a reediting process meant months of additional work.

"You're a creative person," Ikaru said, grinning. "A little imagination, and you could adjust your paper and still submit it in January, as scheduled."

"That's easy for you to say. You don't have to write the thing."

"Yes, isn't it wonderful?" Dr. Ikaru gathered his dinner waste and looked around for a trashcan. "Well, it's just a suggestion, Gary. As I said, your paper stands well as it is. But, you must begin thinking beyond your degree. This change I suggest will increase your value in an extremely limited field of expertise."

Ikaru leaned forward, searching through his coat pockets. "Mr. Tuttle and I discussed this situation, as we've discussed many such situations over the years." His eyes sparkled. "We go way back, Lawrence and I. We share many concerns, if the beer's cold enough. I know you have no contemporary hook for your work. Where does your chronology stop, the Renaissance? Anyway, he gave me this." He slapped a scrap of folded paper onto the table.

Gary picked it up. "And this is?"

"Tuttle believes it's a jump start. The person on that paper is a reporter, of sorts."

Gary noticed the hint of derision. "She writes freelance, mainly for supermarket tabloid rags, but Tuttle says she hoards as much anecdotal experience on cult groups as anybody he knows. And she's local."

"Tuttle reads the National Enquirer?"

"Tuttle collects information."

Gary opened the paper to find a name in neat block lettering:

SALLY REISER

Below the name was a phone number.

"What do I do with this?" he asked. "I can't use a tabloid reporter as a citation."

"Talk to her, that's all. You might gain some new and compelling insight." He said it with a grin at the silliness of his words.

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Gary walked the two miles from campus to the house he shared with his Gramma. He huddled deep in his inadequate Colts stadium jacket, making himself small against the bitter winter chill. The walk, occasioned by a lack of bus fare, was a dangerous feat so

long after dark, for Gary lived in a rough, even infamous neighborhood in Indianapolis. The highest number of violent crimes per capita in the entire United States, that was Gary's neighborhood. Yes, it was a terrible place and, yes, he would escape it, thanks to his Gramma and to the help of Dr. Ikaru.

Gary was a proud man, but knew to be thankful for those who helped him. His Gramma had taught him both confidence in his personal worth, and faith in God to provide. And God did provide, though in ways unfathomable by merely human means. Sure, God provided empty pockets. He provided a hungry belly. But he also provided the advanced education that made escape possible. And he provided bulwarks like Gramma and Ikaru, who had nurtured, pulled and kicked Gary to the threshold of that escape.

Could Gary's natural parents have done as well? He couldn't know, for he barely remembered them. He knew that his father had died in a skirmish, your clichéd drug deal gone bad. Mom, in despondency, had killed herself not long after. In hindsight, man, woman and baby had never been family as much as a doomed accident. Well, the first shall be last, and the last shall be first. That, Gary often thought ruefully, put him near the front of the line into heaven.

He arrived safely at the tiny, broken house he knew so well. Its roof sagged, its cramped spot of a lawn lay sparse and brown, and its porch slouched where the concrete sank. Gary knocked on the front screen door and braced himself for the expected fretful grandmother.

She answered the door after a long minute.

"Gary! Come in, I was worried." She unlatched the screen door and pushed it toward him.

"Sorry, Gramma. Dr. Ikaru loves to talk." Gary entered the house. He smelled the rank odor of old cigarettes, noticed, as always, the decrepit furniture and yellowing walls in the tiny living room, the wood across one window where the glass had shattered and couldn't be fixed. Gunshots, and poverty. He noticed these things as he always did, and his mood changed from anxiety to melancholy, as it always did. But, he also noticed the neat precision underlying age and disrepair, the cleanliness of the dismal scene. "Do with what you have, and God will bless," his Gramma always said, and lived by her words.

"Dr. Ikaru, eh? Didn't you say he'd leave you alone until January?" She shuffled her heavy form stiffly to her ancient overstuffed rocking chair, then worked herself to a seated position by careful, arthritic stages. Gary locked the front door.

"That's when my paper's due. But he had other things on his mind."

"I don't like how he criticizes your work. I don't see him writing no paper."

"It's his job, Gramma."

"He takes his job too seriously. So, what did he have to say that kept you out past dark?"

"He found me some work, Gramma."

She turned slightly toward him, pleased. "Why, that's good, Gary. Another of those research assistant things?"

"No, this one's all mine. A consultancy with the state attorney-general's office."

She smiled, showing cigarette-stained teeth. "See? It all paid off. Now, hang up your coat. Stay a while."

Gary stepped away from the door. He slid his coat off and dropped it onto a chair in a connecting kitchen as neat and clean as everything else.

"How much does your new job pay?" Gramma asked from her chair.

"Don't know yet. Not much." He took a glass from a cabinet, then opened the refrigerator.

"When do you start?"

"Don't know. It's an 'as needed' kind of thing." He poured water into his glass.

"Well, Gary. You don't know the pay and you got no steady hours. You sure it's a job?"

He reentered the living room and settled onto its sagging sofa. "I didn't say I'd take it, Gramma. But, Dr. Ikaru does the same sort of thing and makes more than his university salary."

She turned to face him. He knew the effort she exerted to do so. His Gramma was older than her seventy-odd years, wracked by arthritis, diabetes, and God knew what damage caused by her smoking. It hurt her to turn toward him, so he focused on what she said.

"Dr. Ikaru, that old goat, isn't a twenty-eight-year-old student. He has that degree; he has that shingle, more than one. And he ain't black."

"I know, Gramma."

"Don't you quit school over this thing."

"I won't, Gramma."

"We sacrificed everything, me and your folks, God rest their souls. You're the first of our family to graduate college." She snorted, and reached for the cigarettes on the table beside her chair. "The first to graduate high school. You won't live in this place, Gary. You'll live out where the white folks live."

Plenty of unfortunate white folks out here, Gary thought.

"Don't quit school."

"I won't, Gramma."

She lit her cigarette and took a drag. She then struggled back to a comfortable position. "Have you eaten?"

"At school."

"Can you reach me that remote?"

The television stood six feet in front of her. Gary took the remote from atop its cabinet, and clicked on the set before handing her the box.

"What's on?" he asked.

"Oh, the Reverend Bennington. Who else?"

"How can you watch that? You could go to real church--"

"I could not. I'm too crotchety. And the Reverend gives me all the churching I need."

Gary sighed and returned to the sofa. He tried to ignore the sudden flare of noise from the TV, but it seduced him nonetheless. The Reverend delivered an artful sales pitch. The lilting announcers, the gospel choir background, and the flashy sets seen through dynamic camerawork all combined into a slick production, as mesmerizing as any game show. But, this wasn't cable. Not even the miracle-working John Bennington, Jr. could clear the pixilation of poor reception. Gary rose from his seat again and adjusted the rabbit ears to a solid image.

"And who among us shall be saved?" the man on the screen asked urgently. He looked sincere with his chiseled tan face, his perfect, conservative white hair, and his intense blue eyes. His silver and green robes lent him authority beyond his natural

charisma, gave him papal credibility. "Our driving question is clear, if also harsh. Who among us shall be saved? Certainly, many are dead to Christ. They refuse his love and attack his presence wherever they find it. God, have pity on these! When the appointed minute of the appointed hour comes on the appointed day, and the saints rise in glory to meet JE-sus in the heavens, and when those millions still living as one with the Lord vanish from the roads, workplaces, homes and prisons of our world to join JE-sus in his, when these things pass, God save those left behind in the company of the usurper, in the clutches of the Antichrist. For theirs is a terrible fate. They will live out their years as kindling for the conflagration to come, as animals to be butchered in the terror of Armageddon..."

Gary shook his head. So many Benningtons, and all with the same base goal: to prey on the fears of a gullible, guilty humanity. The uncertainties of the infant millennium exerted a powerful, distorting influence over the normally hard-shelled population of Earth. Supernatural fears clawed at the collective id, fears that rendered common sense inoperable and generations of religious tradition anemic. The major established religions lost membership to the crowing rabble of the doomsayers. They stood besieged, accused of subverting the very faiths they had built over centuries, while televangelism, never a bust industry, exploded with newfound wealth and power. The TV preachers assembled the new congregations of the 21st century, raking in tens of millions of followers, competing for parishioners and the money that followed them in a bizarre perversion of the free enterprise system. Raised Baptist and knowing what he did of post-millennial fever, Gary felt sickened at the thought of it all.

In that moment, he knew he'd accept work from Tuttle.

He left the living room, but the house was small, and the TV's voice hunted him with ease. He paced the kitchen, then remembered the phone number passed to him by Ikaru. Maybe he should call. Since the future's poor excuses for faith pursued him with such purpose, he might as well get some work out of the deal. Besides, the phone might drown out the television.

It did, but not for long. After four rings, Gary heard a click, then the telltale hum preceding a recording.

"Hey, this is Sally. If you're offering money, leave a message. Everyone else, use the mail."

Gary hung up at the beep. She got sass, that Sally Reiser.

He sat down at the kitchen table and buried his head in his arms. The television intruded.

"It isn't that we should hate them, or feel at all superior. But for the God-given grace of Christ Jesus, we would be them. Or, perhaps, we are. No one knows who will be taken and who will stay behind. We must be diligent, always aware of our heritage of sin. We must always seek perfection in Christ..."

"Amen, Reverend," Gary's Gramma said to the television.

Well, the Reverend Bennington had a customer, Gary thought. No wonder. His shtick convinced with a daunting mixture of ominous warning and friendly advice. Not all TV preachers treated their parishioners with as much patrician warmth. And on radio, they got downright abusive, virtually scaring contributions out of their listeners.

He thought of Davidson, that one personifying name of radio evangelism. Davidson made Bennington sound like a waffling apologist for God, and Bennington was himself

disavowed by the religious media superstars, the Billy Grahams and Pat Robertsons of the world. Davidson was a red-eyed fanatic, a frothing zealot, or that was his persona on the air. With Davidson, there was no forgiving God, no salvation except for the purest elect of a tiny fraction of humanity. All others were destined for the flaming, blistering, rat-eaten hell of the immortal damned. Davidson offered only two acts of contrition that could save a soul from eternal torture: sending money now, and unequivocal allegiance to him. To him, not the Father, or Son, or the Holy Spirit. With Davidson on your side, you needed no one else.

Such nonsense might have attracted little more than ridicule fifteen or twenty years ago, but the times had since turned ridiculous. Salvation was everything to otherwise ordinary people, and if you could buy it, more the better. Davidson claimed to lead over ten million converted, that is, those who gave money regularly. He reinforced this following with a formidable Internet presence, three books on the bestseller lists, and with the crown of his empire, the year-long Bible crusade and tent (read: stadium) revival that marched across America toward the Day of Christ's Coming. That glorious day was the twenty-third of December, and for no reason at all, as far as Gary knew. The End of All Things. Seventy cities had already survived Davidson's contentious pilgrimage, each stop ballooning regional populations by as much as a million surly, unmanageable disciples. Each hosting city saw spiking crime rates, especially where disruption of the peace, vandalizing of abortion clinics, and terrorizing "unfit" churches were concerned. Davidson's hardcore disciples cared little for the law of man, nor, apparently, for the laws of their God. They heard only Davidson, and interpreted his goading vagaries into action. Nothing else mattered. They were saved, after all, only through him. God and the devil had failed them more than once. The people shopped for newer, more hands-on deities.

Yet, to clearer eyes, their modern messiah was nothing more than an opportunistic megalomaniac. He flirted the boundary between free speech and incitement to riot, admonishing his followers to ignore the rule of law in favor of the commandments of God, through him. Some rumored that he billed himself as appointed by Jesus himself to prepare man for His final coming. But Davidson never hinted such things within range of a microphone. Anything he said of such personal importance was a gift only to his closest disciples, who dutifully leaked his views to the press. The man was many unsavory things, but not an idiot.

Which was just the kind of insight Tuttle wanted.

Gary sighed. He pushed himself away from the table and back to the phone on the wall. He would leave a message for the Reiser woman, he thought as he dialed her number again. Tuttle thought it wise, and Tuttle held the pay stubs. But, as Gary listened to the steady progression of rings in his ear, he wondered what worth a politician found in a reporter, the enemy, especially one writing for--

"Hello?"

Gary hesitated, caught by an unrecorded voice. "Umm, is this Sally Reiser?"

"Yes..."

"My name is Gary LaMonte. I'm a doctoral candidate at IUPUI, that's Indiana University, Purdue University at Indianapolis, School of Public and Environmental Affairs, in Comparative Religion. A Mr. Tuttle of the state attorney-general's office gave me your number..."

"I don't know any Tuttle."

Gary heard irritation in her voice. He also heard its clear, feminine quality, a perfect telephone voice. He wondered what she looked like.

"Look, I'm sorry to disturb you, but this guy, an assistant to the attorney-general, thinks you might help me on a project. I'm doing this paper on post-millennial religious phenomena--"

"I'm busy, Mister-- whoever you are. I'm also a private person. I don't appreciate calls from strangers, and I don't answer surveys."

"Please, don't hang up. This isn't a survey. I was hoping we could meet. Mr. Tuttle and my advisor, Dr. Ikaru, think you might be a valuable resource for my paper."

"I don't consider myself a resource for anything, Mister ..."

"It's Gary. Gary LaMonte. You don't even know what the paper's about, Ms. Reiser." He found it odd that he fought so hard for this meeting. Was it the voice?

"I don't need to know--"

"Just one minute? Then I'll hang up. I'll do it happily, and never disturb you again."

He heard the sigh on the other end. "Shoot."

"I've done this study on post-millennial prophecy -- that's religious stories concerning the end of the world -- and I've documented individuals and groups that have used millennial hysteria to advance personal, political, and social agendas throughout history. Well, the state has some interest in my research, but they'd like it to have a contemporary spin. I've been told that you're the local expert on millennial groups, doomsday cults, and such."

He waited long moments through dead air.

"A history of wackos in religion?" she asked.

"It's been called that."

"An obscure way to make a living, don't you think?"

"Excuse me?"

"Never mind. Look, I appreciate that you're bettering yourself with an education and all ... well, no, I don't appreciate it. Sorry, Mr. LaMonte, but you have to find somebody else--"

Gary cursed. It just slipped out. "I don't get this," he said. "You don't need to crack on me. I just wanted insight from an expert. I'm not asking you for a lifetime commitment, and I'm not asking you to fall on your sword or flay your skin, or--"

"My, you're a passionate one, aren't you?"

"Where do you get off insulting me like this? I ain't done nothing to you."

"You called me up. And you said you'd hang up nicely."

Gary froze, gape-mouthed. Well, she had a point. Was this humor, or a needling attack? He noticed the reduced volume from the living room. His Gramma stared at him, curious and concerned.

"Okay," he said after a calming deep breath. "Okay, time out. Sorry I bothered you. I didn't think this was such a great idea in the first place."

"Nine tomorrow."

"What?"

"I'm free at nine tomorrow morning. Drop by and bring everything you know about the history of religious crazies, and maybe you can convince me to help you out a little."

"What?"

"Tell me, are you as cute in person as you are over the phone?"

What?

"Can I expect you?"

"Well, I guess..."

"Got a pencil? Here's my address."

He took it down, then she hung up. He stared at the handset for long moments afterward. It started to buzz.

"What was that about?" he heard from the living room.

"Nothing, Gramma. Business." And it certainly was, as in Sally Reiser giving him the business. Why had she played him? Did he misunderstand her, or was it all a subversive joke on the cute-sounding student telemarketer? Would she show up for the meeting tomorrow? The address on his note pad was likely that of a funeral home or some equally cutting location.

He dropped into a chair at the kitchen table. Why did he care? Tuttle and Ikaru aside, there was no incentive to interview rag reporters. He could never quote her, for none would take her seriously; she would sully his research even as an uncited source. So, why bother? Was it really her voice? Had he heard something there that tugged at him?

There, apparently, struck the hook. He would visit Reiser's funeral home, or gas station, or whatever she had given him. He would do so not for substantive gain, but for curiosity's sake.

Besides, the skeleton in the suit had wanted this to happen. Who was Gary to argue?