

Michael slowly opened the door. As he walked through it, he looked briefly over his shoulder to see where Luke was; it was time to send him on his way. He also caught a last glimpse of the waitress; he really liked her and instinctively found himself praying for her: “Lord, please show her the truth of what I shared, that You may use her in a mighty way. Bless her, Father.”

Michael walked a few paces onto the sidewalk, where he stopped briefly. Every move he had made since the moment he opened the door had been monitored through the telescopic sight of the cleaner. When he stopped, he made a last-minute adjustment to his focus ring. On the lower right side of his scope field the distance indicator settled at 666 feet, but the cleaner did not pay any attention to that; his rifle was automatically sighted for the distance measured. The cleaner was now waiting for his final confirmation on the target.

Sara had returned to their table to pick up the receipt when she noticed, in addition to a generous tip, the note that had been left behind. With the coffee pot in one hand and the note in the other, she slowly walked towards the counter as she perused the note. “He wrote down scriptures for me to read,” she realized. “I guess it was too obvious I was listening in.” She stopped and looked up at her ‘man with the hat’ outside the window: “Who are you?” she wondered.

Luke caught the door just as it was about to close on him.

The cleaner heard a low voice behind him. “The man with the hat: he’s your target. Take him out!”

The cleaner steadied his breathing and used his thumb to take the rifle off its safe mode. Now he tightened the grip in his right hand slightly, leaving his forefinger loose and about one eighth of an inch away from the trigger. In the scope he saw his target look down the street in both directions. When the target faced him perfectly, he stopped for a moment, checking out the side street in front of him. From the look in his face you could see that he somehow sensed the danger, but it would be too late now. The crosshairs were resting steadily on his upper lip. “This will be a textbook job—right between the eyes; he’ll be dead before he hits the ground,” the cleaner thought as he let his forefinger touch the trigger.

Michael sensed that something was not right, but there was really nothing out of the ordinary: “Unless,” he thought, “that car in the side street... Wasn’t that the same one...”

The cleaner’s forefinger moved smoothly to the back and the gun went off, almost silently. The bullet was on its way, cutting through the air at over three thousand feet per second. It drew a hole in the air, leaving a wake of airwave distortions behind as it traveled toward Michael. Then, just short of its target, it appeared to press against a shield that pushed the bullet from its original trajectory to the left.

As soon as Michael started to sense the danger, he felt a gust of wind on his right cheek and heard a ping on the window behind him. Instinctively he jerked his body around to the right, so hard that the backpack strap slipped off his shoulder. He turned his head at the same time so that he was now facing the window. His fears were confirmed: there was a bullet hole in the glass. It must have barely missed him. But his heart stopped as he focused on the scene

inside the restaurant. The waitress was standing in front of the counter.

She seemed to be frozen in time; he would not be able to forget this picture. The bullet had struck her in her upper left chest. It had gone right through her into the mirror behind the counter, blasting a hole in the glass and splattering her blood around it. There was blood on the counter as well. She lifted her head slightly, and their eyes met for a moment: hers were filled with disbelief and were screaming for help, yet there was nothing he could do.

Michael, continuing to turn, screamed at Luke, who was still inside the restaurant, “Get down!”

Luke, who had heard the glass shatter but was not sure about what was happening, immediately responded to Michael’s commanding voice. He dove back inside the restaurant.

Michael jumped back towards the door, only a few steps away. His backpack had fallen to the sidewalk.

The cleaner looked through his scope in disbelief. “Damn, this can’t be happening.” Immediately he pulled the bolt to move the next round into the chamber.

Sara’s right arm sank down under the weight of the coffee pot, which started to slip from her hands. Her eyes began to lose their expression as her body went into shock. The coffee pot shattered on the ground and her legs could no longer support her weight. As she fell to her knees, her left hand was still clasped around the note as if it were a treasure. With the weight of the coffee pot gone from her right arm, her body started to fall to the left.

Luke landed on the floor, sliding several feet from the momentum of his jump. He had clamped his eyes shut as if to close out reality. He wrapped his arms over his head to protect himself from the glass shattering around him.

Michael launched himself through the door and back into the restaurant. The door window shattered around him as a second bullet grazed over his shoulder. He hit the floor and quickly slipped behind the wall, hiding himself from the sniper’s vision. He looked to his right and saw that the waitress had fallen hard to the ground and had rolled onto her back; her eyes were without expression.

At the far end of the restaurant, the older couple was lying flat on the floor, trying to hide under the table as much as possible.

Michael heard a thump on the wall directly in front of him, followed by a whistling sound; a third bullet had struck the wall but ricocheted back into the street. “Thank you, Lord, for solid brick walls,” he thought.

“Luke,” Michael yelled. There was no response; Luke remained motionless on the ground with his arms over his head. Again Michael called to him: “Luke!” This time his voice was calm and deep, as if he were a different person. Luke lifted his head and slowly opened his eyes. He was face to face with the waitress and he was horrified by the blank look in her eyes.

“Oh my God,” he said softly to himself, “she’s dead.”

“No, she’s not,” Michael said in the same calm, deep voice. Then he continued in his own voice, “I need your help, man—snap out of it!”

Michael looked around and grabbed an ashtray from the counter, making sure he kept his body low to the ground.

“Here,” Michael called out as he slid the ashtray across the floor to Luke, who caught it with a puzzled look on his face.

“I’m going to have to get back out there,” Michael continued. “I need my backpack.”

“Are you crazy?” Luke screamed. “You want to go back while some idiot is out there shooting at everything that moves?”

“That’s right!” Michael responded. “On my signal, throw the ashtray through the window to your right. That will give me time to get out there, get the backpack, and draw their fire away from here.”

“You are crazy,” Luke said.

Again Michael spoke in the calm, deep voice: “There is an abandoned home just outside the town going south. Take the girl there and wait for me.”

“I’m going crazy as well,” Luke muttered as he lifted the ashtray and got ready to throw it.

Michael peered through the hole in the broken glass of the door and looked down the street to make sure no one was coming. “Please, Lord,” he prayed, “protect us as we make our move.”

For a moment Michael prepared himself mentally and then nodded to Luke, who immediately threw the ashtray at the window as hard as he could.

The cleaner panned his scope to the left when he noticed one of the windows breaking apart. Instinctively he fired another round at what he perceived to be something moving behind the glass. As he pulled the bolt to chamber the next round, the target came through the door at full speed, picking up the backpack and continuing down the sidewalk. By the time the cleaner was ready to fire again, the target had moved out of sight behind the building at the corner of the street.

There was silence. Inside the restaurant Luke crawled next to the waitress and tried to slip his hands under her lifeless body. Once again, he convinced himself that there was no hope for her and questioned his own actions. “Why am I bothering?” he wondered. “This poor girl is dead.”

“No, she is not,” spoke the familiar, deep voice. Luke quickly looked around; had Michael come back?

Luke was scared, but even more fearful of what could happen if he stayed behind; he lifted the waitress and carried her to the kitchen and out the back door.

In the abandoned apartment the darkness was as eerie as the silence. The cleaner was the first to speak: “There is something wrong with this rifle. I’m telling you, I had him right on!

There is no way....”

The Doctor interrupted him. “You incompetent fool! That restaurant looks like a war zone and you still missed him.”

The cleaner was determined to defend himself. “This is not my fault. I’m telling you...” He started gasping for air as the Doctor focused his penetrating eyes on him; he seemed to have a choke hold on him without physically touching him.

“You will tell me nothing,” the Doctor said in a threatening voice, “you’re not just incompetent, you’re totally disrespectful to your superiors. I do not tolerate either one.” While he spoke, he kept his eyes on the cleaner and slowly closed his right hand into a fist. The cleaner was turning red and his eyes opened wider.

“Sir,” Jack interceded in an attempt to make him change his mind. The Doctor turned his head towards Jack. The fury in his eyes shocked Jack, who stepped backwards. Jack had never seen the Doctor like this, but knew not to say anything or he might suffer the same fate.

Turning to look at Jack, the cleaner seemed to get another breath of air, but it was short-lived. The Doctor looked him straight in the face as he closed his hand and turned his fist, snapping the neck of the cleaner, who sank silently to the floor.

Still angry, the Doctor turned to Jack: “Never, ever, question my judgment again.” Then regaining his composure almost instantly, he looked outside. Except for the broken windows, the street looked normal, almost peaceful; there was no indication of the horrible scene that had taken place inside the restaurant. A car drove by and a young woman and little girl emerged from a store some fifty yards away from the restaurant. Oblivious to the events that had taken place, they began walking down the sidewalk.

The Doctor picked up the sniper rifle and snapped the bipod up against the stock. He examined the weapon to see if anything could be wrong with it. Then he resolutely wrapped the sling around his left hand, brought the rifle up to his shoulder, and pointed it into the street. His grip was steady as he panned the crosshairs along the sidewalk in front of the restaurant.

He stopped panning when the little girl walked into the scope’s field of vision; she was holding the hand of the young woman. The woman squatted down before the child, smiling as she spoke to her and straightened the bow in her hair. From this angle, the scope showed only the back of the child and the woman talking to her. The scope followed the woman as she stood back up.

Jack stood only a few feet behind the Doctor; his heart skipped a beat as he realized what might happen next. He watched the Doctor tighten the grip on the rifle just slightly and bring his forefinger into position. The scope still showed a close-up of the woman as she quickly looked both ways to ensure that it was safe for them to cross the street. She turned her head toward the little girl and said something. The crosshairs followed her eyes down, but then rested on her heart.

At the moment they were to take their first step off the sidewalk, the rifle went off and the woman was stopped in her motion. Time seemed to freeze as well. The shock wave through

her chest from the impact of the bullet jerked her body backwards, away from the child. As her body began to fall, she was still trying to hold onto the girl's hand. In the end, her fingers lost their grip and slipped from the child's hand. In a motion that looked almost graceful, her body rolled on the sidewalk. When she came to rest, her head was still turned toward the child; there was no pain in her eyes, only overwhelming sorrow. The girl turned around and her eyes met those of the woman. She sensed that something was terribly wrong with her as she cried out: "Mommy? Mommy!"

Jack was shocked; he could not move. As horrifying as the scene was outside, he only now shivered as he observed the total apathy on the face of the Doctor when he put down the rifle.

With no emotion in his voice, the Doctor said, "He was wrong."

The words made Jack snap out of his trance. "Sir?"

"He was wrong," the Doctor repeated. "There is nothing wrong with this rifle. That means our man has special protection." As he walked casually past Jack on his way out, he murmured to himself, "This is going to be harder than I thought."

Silence had again returned to the street. Some of the pedestrians farther down the street were slowly emerging from their hiding positions and coming to the aid of the child, who was sobbing at her mother's side. The setting regained a sense of normalcy, especially when the Doctor came walking across the street. His firm, steady pace seemed to reassure the crowd that whatever had happened was over now.

Jack followed him at a short distance and noticed that he never slowed down or even turned to look as he passed the woman on his way into the restaurant. Jack, on the other hand, could not keep his eyes off her. The girl had grabbed her mommy's hand again and was crying loudly. While he walked past her, he saw the intense emotion in the mother's eyes as they beheld her child for the last time. There was no sound, but Jack saw her lips slowly form her final words: "I love you!"

Because he continued to keep his eyes focused on the woman's face, he almost ran into the restaurant door. He slowly opened the door and stepped inside where shards of glass broke under his shoes. It was a disaster area. There was nothing anyone could do here except call for a forensic team. The Doctor had come to the same conclusion as he let go of the swinging door into the kitchen; he looked disgusted.

Just above Jack's head, the TV was still playing. Jack glanced at it and caught a glimpse of the pope kneeling down to kiss the hand of the Messiah, the one ultimately responsible for the creation of this wonderful new world filled with 'peace.'