

RIVER OF EDEN

PAUL WAGNER

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Prologue

WATSON LAKE, YUKON
JULY 15, 2003

The two men had risen early in anticipation of their first full day of fishing on the deep, glacial lake near the border of British Columbia and the Yukon Territory in Northwest Canada. It was still dark as they eagerly trudged from their campsite to the boat landing, piling their gear into the small aluminum boat they had rented for the week. Although it was summer, the early morning air was crisp and biting.

“I’ve been looking forward to this trip for months,” the first man crowed, barely able to contain his enthusiasm. “How about you, Pete?”

Pete smiled back, carefully untying the mooring lines on the boat. “Oh yeah. If we were back home, we’d probably be trying to psyche ourselves up for another boring office meeting right about now, instead of getting ready to pound on some trophy pike. You ready to go, partner?”

“Absolutely!” exclaimed the second man, who took his place at the back of the boat and fired up the 10 HP Mercury outboard.

Under the cover of darkness, the pair slowly set off into the lake, hearing occasional bumps on the small craft’s hull. The bumps became noticeably more frequent as the craft navigated into deeper water

“Maybe some big storms came through here recently,” the second man, Ralph, remarked casually to his friend. “I’ll bet it’s just a bunch of harmless sticks and small branches that’s making the racket. Nothing to worry about.”

After ten minutes of steady travel, the small thuds had failed to subside. The sun wasn’t visible quite yet, but a gray, misty pall could now be seen over the water’s surface, allowing Ralph to finally discern what the flotsam and jetsam actually were. He shook his head in shocked disbelief and abruptly shut off the engine. The boat coasted to a stop, accompanied by a staccato *tap tap tap* echoing eerily across the

water.

Pete had been dozing and was caught off guard by the abrupt change of momentum. He lost his balance and fell heavily from his perch on the front casting seat to the rough wooden floor of the deck. “Hey, are you trying to get us killed?” he barked.

Pete pulled himself back up to a sitting position. Then, slowly and softly he mumbled, “They’re all...dead!”

The surface of Watson Lake was littered with thousands—maybe tens of thousands—of pike, ranging in size from ten centimeters to nearly 1.5 meters. An army of bloated bodies bobbed silently on the surface of the water, their glassy, rheumy eyes staring lifelessly up at the befuddled fishermen.

As Pete and Ralph tried to make sense of it all, a larger, official-looking craft motored up beside theirs. A burly, dark-skinned, and unusually tall man dressed in a khaki-colored uniform piloted the boat. A colorful embroidered patch on his muscular left arm indicated that he was a conservation officer for the Yukon Department of Environment. Another patch on the front of his shirt simply read *Sampson*.

The officer smiled broadly, revealing perfect, milky white teeth. “Hello, my friends,” he said in a booming, cheerful voice that contained a pronounced Middle Eastern accent. “I’ll just bet that our fine lake has you a bit confused this morning.”

Pete frowned at the giant ranger and gestured down at the water. “Confused would be an understatement.”

“What’s going on here?” Ralph chimed in. “My buddy and I flew nearly 2,500 miles from Minneapolis to get to this godforsaken place only to find...this.”

“Right now, it’s a bit of a mystery to us as well,” the officer answered. “A fish kill of this magnitude is strange enough, but the real puzzle is why it only affected one species, and a hardy one at that. The entire population of *Esox lucius*—Northern Pike, that is—are dead, while everything else in the lake is just as it should be. Very strange indeed.” He frowned. “Did you gentlemen happen to notice anything out of the ordinary?”

“Besides the pike gumbo, I can’t say that we have,” Ralph stammered. “We got in late last night, pitched our tents, and went right

to bed. This is the first time we've actually been on the water. When did all of this happen?"

"We've examined some of the carcasses, and as near as we can tell, the fish all died sometime during the past twelve hours. But we can't find any evidence of a virus or toxin that might have triggered something like this. All of our water samples test perfectly normal. The concentrations of emergent algae, microorganism populations, water temperature, pH levels, and just about everything else we can think of are just where they should be for this time of year."

Pete looked nervous. "Are we safe out here?"

"I can assure you," the officer said, smiling, "there's nothing out here for us humans to fear. You can keep fishing in complete safety."

"But without the *Northerns*, what's left for us to fish for?" asked a dejected Ralph.

"Remember, boys, only the pike have been afflicted. All the other game fish are right where they should be. Let me demonstrate. Do you see those large boulders over there? There's a deep hole just one meter off to the right where at least one or two lakers usually hang around. Cast a *Red Devil* spoon in there and see what happens."

Ralph complied. On his first cast, he connected with a keeper lake trout. Observing his friend's good fortune, Pete quickly followed suit and was rewarded with a second big fish.

"It's a double, Ralph!"

The giant started his engine and slowly slid away from the ecstatic fishermen.

"Thanks, buddy," Pete shouted above the rhythmic purring of the motor. "Do you mind if I ask how tall you are? I'd put you at more than seven feet! And how did you get a name like *Sampson*?"

The big man laughed. "Do I really seem that tall to you? I'm not even two hundred centimeters...even in my high-heeled sneakers! As for my name, let's just chalk that up to a self-fulfilling prophecy on the part of my God-fearing mother. Good fishing, my friends."



When he was out of earshot of the two Americans, Sampson picked up the boat's radio handset. The giant was grinning from ear to ear.

“It appears that we have succeeded beyond our wildest dreams, *effendi*.”

In the Beginning

And the LORD said to Satan, "From where do you come?"
So Satan answered the LORD and said, "From going to and fro on the earth,
and from walking back and forth on it."

JOB 1:7

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS
OCTOBER 2, 2024

Rebekah Berman peered out the bedroom window of her small two-story brownstone on Chicago's far South Side and beheld a gray, overcast sky that hinted of light snow later in the day. After enduring nearly thirty-four years of capricious Midwestern weather, she barely took notice of the late fall dreariness outside.

Her waking mood, however, was anything but dull and bleak. She felt particularly cheery and refreshed, reminiscing on last night's romantic, candle-lit dinner, followed by a long and passionate after course of tender kisses and, eventually, exuberant lovemaking. The object of her affections, Chicago police lieutenant Cody Neill, was now spread-eagled and snoring loudly in the bed they shared.

Rebekah grinned at her husband and kissed him on the forehead. The grin lingered on her face as she silently padded off to the bathroom to shower and get ready to face Monday morning's challenges at *The Chicago Daily Chronicle*.

After a brisk ten-minute shower, Rebekah dried her shortly cropped auburn hair and examined herself in the bathroom mirror. Large, expressive brown eyes, tinged with green but slightly reddened

by the previous night's excesses, stared back at her. A chilly draft from the old single-pane window caused her to shiver, and she quickly finished toweling off the rest of her body.

Wrapping herself in a red silk robe, Rebekah quietly made her way downstairs, stopping at the front door to pick up the bundled morning edition of the paper. She shivered anew when her bare feet met the cold black-and-white checkerboard ceramic tile on the floor. The kitchen, like her mood this morning, was cheery and bright. A row of skylights provided ample illumination, even on an overcast day like this one. The back wall was lined by the home's original, recently restored light oak cabinets with delicately etched glass fronts that softened the otherwise clinically stark appearance of the new stainless steel appliances and matching countertops.

Rebekah glanced at the two wine glasses sitting askew on the counter. "Coffee, four cups, strong," she mumbled to the appliance. She took her first sip of the bitter brew less than one minute later and was in the process of removing the rubber band from the rolled-up newspaper when Neill interrupted her morning routine.

"Morning, Bek," he said as he ran his fingers through her damp hair and planted a soft kiss on her exposed neck. He plopped his large, six-foot-five frame down in the chair next to hers and poured his own steaming cup.

"Morning back, Big Man," she smiled, noticing the small, crusty deposits around Neill's bleary, light blue eyes. After three years of marriage, the petite newspaper reporter and the big police lieutenant had a close and comfortable relationship that hadn't yet lost its edge of playfulness and excitement.

Neill eyed the still-unwrapped paper. "Mind if I check the Bear's score from last night?"

Rebekah laid the paper down on the table and slid it over to Neill, opting to move directly to step two of her routine. She reached for a cosmetic bag lying on the counter and propped up a small table mirror in front of her. While the kitchen afforded much better illumination than either the bedroom or cramped bathroom, she still wanted more. "Lights up, setting three," she commanded, causing the ceiling fixture to intensify.

“Oh man,” Neill grunted as he squinted under the assault of the bright light. At 260 pounds, one could easily mistake his lean, hard-muscled frame as belonging to a running back on his beloved Naperville Bears football team. A Southside mix of Irish and Italian heritage, Neill was a third-generation Chicago cop.

Apparently, the height gene had skipped a generation in the Neill family. Cody stood nearly a foot taller than his five-foot-seven father, who was dubbed *Little Man* by his peers at the Chicago Police Academy. When the younger Neill took the training some twenty years later, *Big Man* was the obvious moniker he was given. Naturally, the name had taken on other undertones in his playful relationships with the opposite sex.

“One of these days, Bek, we should get the vid version. It would be a whole lot easier to use and share.” Neill absently scratched his bushy, black moustache and unfolded the paper.

“And be like everyone else? Not my style, darlin’,” Rebekah sniped back. Although most of her activities at *The Chronicle* were conducted in a paperless fashion, Rebekah always felt that reading a newspaper should be a tactile experience. She was disappointed that less than 30 percent of the paper’s subscribers still opted for the newsprint version.

Neill scanned the paper, and his face went ashen. He unconsciously read the lead story’s large headline aloud: “*Kuwait Invades Iraq, Millions Dead.*”

Rebekah’s head snapped up in amazement. “What did you just say?” She quickly checked the headline for herself and reflexively tapped the vid phone on her wrist for messages. She had thirty-two. “Oh, no. I turned it to silent last night and missed everything!” She noticed twenty of the messages were from her boss, Benjamin Stein.

Stein’s number was on Rebekah’s speed dial, and she shook her wrist two times to make the connection.

Stein answered immediately. “Rebekah! Where have you been?”

“Sorry, Ben. I’ve been running on silent mode since around midnight.”

“I need you now. The *incursion*—if you could even call it that—began at around 4 a.m. and ended at about 4 p.m. That means you’re already more than three hours behind the rest of us. Pick up what you

can on G-SAT on the way here.”

Stein abruptly ended the call, leaving Rebekah to find out for herself how such an obscene number of casualties could mount up in only twelve hours.

“Look at this, Bek.” Neill slammed the paper down in front of her. “You won’t believe it!”

Rebekah read the story, written by Andrew Williams from *The Chronicle’s* Saudi bureau.

OCTOBER 2, 2024: AL KUWAYT

In what has been described as the most catastrophic loss of human lives in recorded history, Kuwait fired several short-range Dragon missiles at Baghdad and several other large population centers in Iraq early this morning. The missiles were believed to contain a previously unknown biological agent of mass destruction. Officials from the World Health Organization (WHO) estimate casualties in excess of thirty million people. Following the air strike, Kuwaiti forces have invaded and occupied most of southern Iraq.

The bio-weapon is based on toxins derived from the common Anthrax virus and is suspected to originate from the Phang Kow research facility in northern China, according to the WHO. Victims most likely died from asphyxiation within a few minutes after exposure to the virus.

Strong prevailing winds from a high-pressure weather system moving through the region aided in the rapid dispersal of the toxins, which were carried in a southeasterly direction approximately thirty miles from each delivery site. During the proceeding twelve to twenty-four hours, the WHO speculates that the pathogen dissipated into an inert form that was harmless to the Kuwaiti soldiers who subsequently moved into the area.

The attack came without warning or provocation. Surrounding countries unaffected by the virus have reacted with a mixture of shock and uncertainty. While all of the militias in the region remain at a high state of alert, none have

taken retaliatory action of any kind.

Following the incursion, Emir Mustafa Hamel Al Sabah of Kuwait issued a statement wherein he claimed the occupied land as ancestral property belonging to the new Republic of Pishon. Diplomatic envoys from the United States, the European Union, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Israel, Syria, and China have been granted access to the new Pishon government, but no details have been released yet.

In response to these unprecedented events, President James Randall spoke before the United Nations General Assembly in New York early this morning. Randall stated that the United States is closely following events in the region as they unfold, but is taking no action at this time.

Randall ended his brief remarks by offering a prayer for the victims of the catastrophe and their families. He then quickly left the building without answering questions.

“Mustafa, you creep!” she shrieked. “How could he do such a thing?”

“Didn’t you interview that guy for *The Chronicle* a few years back, when he was the Energy Minister?” Neill asked.

“Yeah; the Hormuz incident of *eighteen* had already made Mustafa a national hero in Kuwait, and he was getting a lot of press on the social reforms that his administration was driving. *The Chronicle* had sent me out to do a human interest story on him.”

Rebekah’s mind was reeling. To think that she had actually shook hands with a man capable of such destruction and loss of life! She took a deep breath and calmed herself. “But Mustafa was just a kid back then, barely out of his twenties. He was arrogant and self-centered, but certainly not a madman. Why would he do such a thing?”

“And you must have been all of, what, twenty-six or so at the time? People change,” Neill teased.

“Okay, Big Man. I get your point.”

Rebekah recalled her initial impressions of Mustafa. He was certainly pleasant enough to look at, with a dark, smooth complexion and tall, muscular frame. He wore a well-tailored dark blue business

suit and cream-colored turban with black, curly locks spilling out from under its edge. In sharp contrast to his conservative attire, he sported a pair of dark green Tony Lama snakeskin boots and wrap-around Gargoyles sunglasses that looked more suited for Venice Beach rather than the plush, air-conditioned office in the government palace where the interview was held.

When Mustafa pulled off his shades to greet Rebekah, he displayed large, unusually dark eyes with almost indistinguishable pupils. His smile revealed perfect, white teeth framed by a full, thick beard. Turning his head slightly to the side, Rebekah noticed his sharp, aquiline nose.

After exchanging a few brief pleasantries, Rebekah began the interview. She had brought along a translator chip for her wearable computer but found that the Cambridge-educated prince spoke flawless English. It didn't take very long for Rebekah to get a clear sense that Mustafa was rather full of himself and his accomplishments, much of the latter she attributed to simply being in the right place at the right time. Still, the future Emir's obvious intelligence and charisma made his cockiness a bit more tolerable.

The interview had lasted forty-five minutes. Afterwards, Rebekah asked Mustafa to pose for a few publicity shots to accompany her article. But as the photographer was setting up for the shoot, Mustafa had turned to Rebekah and whispered an invitation to participate in a wholly different kind of posing altogether.

Rebekah was thrown off balance by his graphic, inappropriate proposal. She had taken great care that morning to dress in a prim and altogether puritanical manner in deference to Islamic custom, although most modern Kuwaiti women dressed in a Western style.

Her face reddened, but she kept up a professional pretense as the photographer clicked off two rolls of film. As Rebekah left the room, Mustafa caught her eye and gave her a lecherous wink.

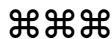
She had wanted to get this distasteful experience behind her as quickly as possible. By the time the plane had touched down at Heathrow four hours later, she had already logged the story into Stein's vid phone, aided by seven glasses of Chablis to calm her nerves. The published account had appeared in the Sunday magazine section of *The*

Chronicle. Rebekah had been careful to maintain her journalistic neutrality and avoid revealing a glimpse into the man's lecherous nature. In fact, she hadn't given the creep another thought until now.

Rebekah had never shared the gritty details of that day six years ago with anyone and intended to keep it that way. "Who knows," she continued, "maybe Ben intends to send me out there again." Although she dreaded the thought, Rebekah knew that she was the only one on Ben's staff with any personal connections to the man that most of the world was most likely talking about this morning.

"Be careful, baby," Neill said as he hugged Rebekah.

She headed upstairs to get dressed and prepare for the inevitable fireworks at *The Chronicle*.



Twenty minutes later, Rebekah was inching up the gridlocked Dan Ryan Expressway en route to her appointment with Benjamin Stein, the publisher and editor of the largest independent newspaper in the city. Although Rebekah had an office in the Loop, she typically worked out of her home or from a hotel or airport in whichever city she found herself while covering that week's assignment. As the paper's senior political editor, she had a lot of ground to cover.

Apart from being Rebekah's immediate supervisor, Stein was also her mentor and close friend. They had met fifteen years ago when Rebekah was a journalism student at Northwestern University in Evanston. Stein, a devout Jew, taught an evening course in newspaper ethics while working days as *The Chronicle's* religion editor.

Stein was impressed by his student's intelligence and tenacity. When a junior features editor spot opened up at the paper, he offered her the job.

Rebekah's rise up the ranks of the organization was nothing short of meteoric. Gifted with solid writing skills and a knack to be at the right place at the right time, she had earned a byline within two months. Rebekah was able to balance her often brusque, unabashed tenacity with just enough diplomacy to get to the heart of her subject

matter. Two National Press Club awards served as a testimony to her journalistic talents, although the actual plaques sat unnoticed in the bottom drawer of her desk.

As Stein progressed to the International Affairs desk and eventually to the Chief Editor spot, he pulled his star pupil up the ladder with him. It proved to be a good professional marriage, and one that caused little resentment or friction with coworkers at the paper. The pair was generally well liked and respected by most of their peers.

From her car, Rebekah accessed the Global Satellite Network—G-SAT—and scrolled through the numerous breaking stories on the Iraq invasion. Her shock and disbelief grew in proportion to the number of entries that popped up on her windshield's vidscreen.

By 8:35 a.m., Rebekah finally entered Stein's cluttered office on the seventh floor of *The Chronicle's* headquarters on North Michigan Drive.

The publisher sat with his feet propped up on the corner of his oversized mahogany desk, looking over the initial galleys for the noon edition of the paper. A scowl marred his otherwise grandfatherly visage.

"Edit mode, page one," he spoke in a slow and distinct tone to his terminal. "Change paragraph three, second sentence from *annihilated their rivals to exacted revenge from ancient enemies*. Send."

Stein noticed Rebekah at the doorway and waved at her to come in. His tired, red-rimmed eyes met Rebekah's. "What could you possibly have been doing that was more important than missing the genocide of an entire nation?" he yelled. "While you were doing God-knows-what, millions of people were dying!"

"I'm so sorry, Ben," Rebekah began. "Cody and I had a special, ah, celebration last night. I turned my vidphone on silent...just for a while."

He rose, exhaled slowly, and stared Rebekah down. Not only were his eyes red, they glistened with moisture. "I'm sorry, too, Becky," he said after a moment. "It's just that I feel so...helpless."

Rebekah reflexively looked away from Stein's gaze and noticed his black tweed overcoat and briefcase haphazardly thrown in the corner of the room.

He continued, "I've been here ever since Williams woke me at home with the news. The more I dig into the story, the more it affects me personally. Let me explain. As I drove down here this morning, I kept thinking about the stories that my father had told me about the Holocaust when I was a kid. Like many people of my generation, the war was something far removed from my life. It was from another era, another time. Heck, I'm sixty-five years old, and that stuff happened before I was born."

At five-foot-six, Stein stood three inches taller than Rebekah. His paunchy, overweight frame was clad in a rumpled black suit, white shirt, and no tie. Red suspenders draped over his puffy middle. As always, Stein wore his black yarmulke, in the tradition of Orthodox Jews.

"Dad was one of the lucky ones. When the war broke out, he was already living in New York, attending Columbia College. His parents and older sister, though, remained in Berlin. My grandfather was a senior officer at a small, Swiss-owned bank—a good, well-respected man who always took time to be with his beloved wife and daughter.

"But everything changed after Hitler came to power in the late 1930s. In the years following Germany's defeat in World War I, inflation was so bad that it took nearly a wheelbarrow full of Deutschmarks just to buy a loaf of bread. Hitler conveniently blamed the greedy, elitist Jewish moneylenders for their triple-digit inflation, even going so far as to couch his remarks with references from the Talmud. Well-known families like ours—former pillars of the community—became especially vulnerable targets during the early wave of anti-Semitism. In fact, Dad's family was among the first group to be sent to the death camps."

Stein wiped a tear as it ran lazily down his cheek. "Back in America, my father kept all of the letters that his family had sent. The earlier ones were filled with cheery news and gossip, but towards the end they had taken on a dark and foreboding tone. My grandfather clearly knew which way the wind was blowing.

"Then one day, the steady stream of letters simply stopped. My father, and the rest of the world, soon found out why. Dad became an orphan just before his twenty-fourth birthday."

“That’s horrible, Ben,” Rebekah said as she placed her hand in his. “I knew you had lost relatives back then, but you never told me just how deeply it had affected you.”

“I’m ashamed to admit that the Holocaust never really had much impact on me before,” Stein said. “Intellectually I knew that it occurred, but I just couldn’t grasp how civilized humans could possibly do that to one another. Now the horrors in Iraq make the Holocaust a real and plausible thing to me. But as evil and despicable as Hitler and his followers were, Mustafa must be the devil himself!”

A shiver ran through Rebekah as she thought of her last encounter with Mustafa. Still, she was the best reporter that Stein could send out to cover the current crisis and steeled herself to accept her inevitable next meeting with the man.

“During the Gulf War,” Stein continued, “we viewed the Kuwaitis as victims when Saddam waltzed in and snatched their land right out from under them. It must have been hard for the old Emir—Mustafa’s uncle—to sit back helplessly and watch the much-hated U.S. get it back for them. After that, Kuwait had no choice but to openly embrace the ideals and protection of the West, while apparently plotting in secret to administer their own brand of justice when the time was right.”

“An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth,” Rebekah said.

“No, more like *millions* of eyes and *millions* of teeth,” Stein said. “Saddam claimed that Kuwait rightfully belonged to Iraq when in fact it was the Kuwaiti Bedouins who had settled the Southeast regions of Iraq thousands of years earlier. As outrageous as it sounds, that supports Mustafa’s claim that Iraq is his people’s ancestral land, rather than the other way around.”

“Wars have been waged for less noble causes than that,” Rebekah said. “But no land, for any reason, is important enough to justify the taking of so many lives.”

“I don’t think that everyone would agree with you, Rebekah,” Stein replied. “The Arabs have a word for it: *jihad*. It means ‘holy war,’ and we’ve just witnessed the mother of all jihads. In twelve short hours, more lives were taken than in all the centuries of endless fighting on the entire planet. And what’s even more amazing is that it was accomplished without literally spilling a drop of blood!”

“Perhaps the actual bloodshed is still coming,” Rebekah said. “I can’t believe this cataclysm will pass without some serious retribution from us and the rest of the world. Saudi Arabia must be thinking, *Are we next?* And what about Israel? Historically, whenever things go south for an Arab tyrant, he just turns his guns on Israel, and everybody kisses and makes up to join in the fun.”

“Yeah,” Stein replied, “It’s far from being over. Watching President Randall’s response on G-SAT this morning, I kept thinking that he looked like a man in shock. Even though he said that we weren’t doing anything, I have to believe that our boys in Washington have the situation sized up pretty well.”

“And do you still believe in the tooth fairy, too?” Rebekah teased. “The time to act is long past. Our response should have been immediate and decisive. History shows us that diplomatic overtures to terrorist situations are rarely effective.”

“I don’t think I entirely agree with you on that one, Becky. Remember six years ago when the Cartel once again threatened to cut off our oil supply? The prevailing opinion was to apply the *three strikes and you’re out* rule and blast their so-called free enterprise to kingdom come right then and there. Luckily, cooler heads prevailed, and diplomacy won the day. They backed down, and oil flowed freely once again.”

“But don’t forget that it was Mustafa who led the charge for the Cartel,” Rebekah said. “That’s what propelled him into the international spotlight in the first place.”

“True, but thousands of lives were potentially saved that day,” Stein countered. “And don’t forget that Mustafa has invited diplomatic envoys from the U.S., E.U., Russia, and Saudi to come to his palace and presumably negotiate a settlement to this crisis.”

Mustafa’s lecherous smile crept into Rebekah’s mind and she exclaimed, “Crisis settlement? Those diplomats are most likely there only to serve as eyewitnesses to Mustafa’s next stunt. What really scares me is that Mustafa might be planning something so big that it has Washington more worried than it is now. We need to find out what’s really going on.”

The diehard journalist in Rebekah needed to uncover the truth.

Laying aside her intense dislike for Mustafa, she swallowed her fears and volunteered, “Washington or Kuwait, Ben—you pick. I can be packed and at O’Hare within the hour.” Part of her wanted to see how Randall would respond to the crisis, and part of her couldn’t resist the urge to be in the thick of things in Kuwait, or rather, Pishon.

“That...ah...won’t be necessary.” Stein looked away into the corner of the room. “We’ve got those bases covered for now.”

Rebekah’s shock and disbelief made her voice raise an octave. “What do you mean I’m not going? Who else would handle the story better than I would? This is the story of the decade!”

“I’m sorry, Becky,” Stein said. “Ray Oldham in the Washington bureau has been on top of the story since it broke last night and Andrew Williams from the Riyadh office is already in Pishon covering the special diplomatic envoys. I’m sending a team to assist him, but it’s his story for now.”

Rebekah’s professional veneer cracked under the unspoken insult. “Come on, Ben,” she snarled, “Oldham has only been with the bureau since March, and Williams has never been an in-your-face type of reporter. I am. Besides, I’m the only one from *The Chronicle* to have actually made contact with him.”

“I don’t disagree with you,” Stein responded, “but I have another assignment that I want you to tackle for me.”

Rebekah’s eyes glinted with the realization that Stein hadn’t left her out in the cold after all. He must be following another angle to the story, an even bigger one. “Okay, I’ll bite. What have you neglected to tell me?”

“Nothing much. First, I want you to use your firsthand knowledge of Mustafa to put together a profile for the team to use. Next, you’ll go to West Virginia to see John Hawke.”

“John Hawke!” Rebekah shouted. “You mean that crazy backwater preacher in Appalachia who pulls miracles out of a hat? Do I look like a stringer for the *Enquirer* to you?”

“Calm down, Becky. That *backwater preacher*, as you call him, has quietly drawn a huge group of followers to his ministry. After Islam, he represents the fastest growing religious denominations in the world.”

“Denomination? Sounds more like a cult to me.”

“The masses turn to their gods in a crisis,” Stein continued. “The bigger the crisis, the bigger the turnout. Right now, thousands are converging on his headquarters in Bluefield, West Virginia. There are even a few notable personalities among them, including a Nobel Prize-winning physicist and two ex-Presidents, besides the numerous Hollywood celebs you’d expect to see.

“I believe Hawke is linked in some way to what’s happening in the Middle East. It seems too coincidental for him to have contacted *The Chronicle* on the eve of the invasion, telling us that he has an important message to convey to Mustafa. I want you to find out how he is connected to all of this.

“Hawke has been reticent in the past to grant interviews with the media, but he wants to speak to us now. Not only that, he asked for you by name. Apparently he’s been following your career since you took over the religion beat from me. Considering your familiarity with Mustafa, you are clearly the best one to investigate this.”

“Oh, great,” Rebekah responded, “now I’ve got a religious fanatic as a groupie.”

“Make no mistake,” Stein countered. “This is a major story in the making, and you’re on the ground floor. No one else has the right background to attack it. I need you on this one, Becky.”

“Okay, okay, I’ll do it. Just stop calling me Becky, huh?” She grinned. “I’m not that naive, fresh-faced kid from Northwestern anymore.”

“Done.”

“But promise me that you’ll keep me in the loop on this Pishon thing, Ben. I want to know that I’ll have a place to come back to before the shooting starts again.”

“Also done,” Stein said. “And thanks for your help on this one. I’ve already got your ticket; the plane leaves for Charleston tomorrow afternoon at three. Naturally, I’ll expect the Mustafa backgrounder on my desk before you leave.”



THE ROYAL PALACE, AL KUWAYT

As the sun's first light peeked over the cascade of sand dunes shaped by the previous night's windstorm, Emir Mustafa Hamel Al Sabah of the Republic of Pishon entered his office in the Royal Palace in Al Kuwayt.

Just two days earlier, the Kuwait National Army invaded neighboring Iraq—a seemingly foolhardy exercise considering that the Republican Guard outnumbered their forces by at least four hundred to one. Yet the Kuwaitis didn't encounter any resistance whatsoever. Everyone was dead.

All told, forty-three missiles had been fired simultaneously at key military installations, industrial sites, and population centers in Iraq. Each warhead carried a new strain of a bioengineered virus, created at a research facility in northern China. Named *Ethnos Fonias*, or in English, *Nation Killer*, the virus was a mutated form of common Anthrax, with some particularly nasty buggers built into its gene coding sequences.

Within twelve hours, the airborne pestilence had infected and killed all human life within a twenty-mile radius of each impact site. But after twenty hours had passed, the deadly virus obeyed cues embedded into its DNA matrix and rendered itself inert, leaving behind a gruesome tableau of dead bodies that offered neither the threat of physical resistance nor bodily infection to the Kuwaiti forces whose mission was to burn the bodies and insure that their victory wasn't snatched away by any number of common diseases that could be triggered by the piles of rotting corpses.

The day after the incident, all the major wire services were running a story on the new Republic of Pishon that comprised the countries previously known as Kuwait and Iraq. Mustafa choose the name from a fabled river that wound its way northeast from its source in the Garden of Eden through the land of Havilah—now modern-day Arabia—and eventually spilled into the Persian Gulf near the site of Mustafa's palace in Al Kuwayt.

That legendary waterway was supposedly one of four mighty rivers that once flowed out of the Eden, the other three being the Gihon, Tigris, and Euphrates. Archaeologists and paleogeologists have long

debated the Pishon's very existence; although deep-scan radar imaging photos from G-SAT have provided hints of an ancient riverbed cutting across the desert from the Hizaz Mountains near Medina.

Of course, the world community was outraged and horrified by these unprecedented and unimaginably inhumane events. But lack of reliable intelligence reports and fears that an attempt at retaliation might invoke a new round of *Ethnos* kept Arab and Israeli neighbors at bay for now. Half a world away, the U.S. and its allies were meeting around the clock to discuss options and shape an appropriate response.

The twenty-year threat of renewed violence from Iraq's unstable democracy was swiftly and decisively replaced by a new menace in the Middle East: Mustafa Hamel Al Sabah.

As a member of the Kuwaiti Royal Family, Mustafa had led a privileged existence that included private Swiss boarding schools and a formal education at Cambridge. He was a favored nephew to his Royal Highness, Sheik Sabah Al Ahmed Al Sabah and fourth in line of succession to the Emirate. Only the sheik's two sons and Mustafa's father came before him.

Throughout his youth, Mustafa lacked direction and discipline, not uncommon characteristics to those lucky few who want for nothing in their lives. But the prince was blessed with an infectious, gregarious personality and a strong drive to succeed, in spite of his innate laziness.

While at Cambridge, Mustafa's tenacity and aggressive nature earned him a starting position on the varsity soccer squad. Although his low grades would have placed him on permanent academic suspension, all of Mustafa's professors routinely fudged on their grading reports under the guise of support for that year's championship team. In truth, most of them were genuinely fond of the handsome and charismatic young prince.

Few of Mustafa's advocates, however, were aware of the prince's darker tendencies. It was rumored—but never proven—that the prince was involved in a series of sexual attacks upon young coeds at the university. But rather than performing the deeds himself, Mustafa arranged for other men to stalk and violate the young women while he watched the scene unfold and pleased himself from a safe vantage point. The subsequent investigations into the matter were lackluster at

best, and no arrests were ever made. Each of the young ladies quietly moved on to other schools, reportedly well compensated for their hellish experience.

Upon graduation, Mustafa immediately embarked upon a jet-setting lifestyle that utilized virtually none of the training and skills that he had learned at some of the world's finest schools. At this juncture in his life, the prince's carefree attitude and lack of self-discipline gave no indication that he was destined to become a global icon in a few short years.

But things would change remarkably for Mustafa when the oil embargo of 2018 presented a rare opportunity for personal distinction.

In the years following Saddam's expulsion, the West had imposed a number of subtle, yet stifling economic controls on Iraq intended to hasten their transformation into a democratic state. The Iraqis then made a passionate appeal to the powerful United Arab Oil Cartel to help put an end to these sanctions. The Cartel agreed to immediately cut oil production in half, causing the price of gas in the states to skyrocket by four dollars practically overnight.

The United Nations' response was just as swift, authorizing an immediate blockade of the Hormuz Strait by the U.S. naval armada stationed nearby. The Cartel was caught off guard by such a quick and coordinated response. Their members divided into two camps, some favoring military action and others seeking a diplomatic solution. Mustafa's father, Hawadah Hamel Al Sabah, was the current Secretary General of the UAOC and a strong advocate of nonaggression.

Hawadah fought vigorously to resume full oil production as quickly as possible. Both factions of the Cartel appeared deadlocked as the U.S. naval fleet readied itself for action. Fearing military retribution, the Cartel secretly moved its headquarters from downtown Riyadh in Saudi Arabia to Jasra in neighboring Bahrain. But on the drive down the magnificent King Fahd Causeway to his new office, Hawadah's Mercedes was struck head-on by a careless motorist, killing the occupants of both vehicles.

As the Secretary General is determined by one's rank and position in the Saudi monarchy structure, Hawadah's post automatically transferred to his royal heir. Thus at the tender age of twenty-seven,

the untried billionaire playboy was thrust into the eye of a political hurricane.

After a seven-hour debate held behind locked doors at the Jasar Hilton, the shrewd and charismatic young man convinced the Cartel to reinstate the previous production levels. Oil flowed freely through the pipelines once again and most of the Middle East—with the exception of Iraq—praised Mustafa for averting an armed confrontation with the West.

The victory was the catalyst for Mustafa's quick political ascendancy. *Al Jazeera* had even dubbed him *Desert Hawk* in deference to his sweeping vision and advocacy for a new order in the Middle East. Playing upon the public's desire to end decades of abuse from Western economic interference, he again called upon the Cartel to restructure its distribution quotas, this time favoring the interests of their giant trading partner to the north, China. A mere six months after the blockade was lifted, the political deck of allies and enemies had been reshuffled throughout the region. In effect, Mustafa had single-handedly changed the balance of power in the Middle East forever.

But his meteoric rise to power didn't stop there. Kuwait embraced him as a national hero and he soon became Minister of the Interior. Mustafa's four-year stint in this influential, high visibility position allowed him to pass numerous popular reforms and extend his political power base. The handsome prince was also Kuwait's most eligible bachelor, idolized and fawned upon everywhere he went.

Family tragedy struck in his favor once more when both of his cousins—the only sons of the Emir—died in an airplane crash while en route to the dedication of a new water desalinization plant at Shuaiba. When Mustafa's uncle, Sheikh Sabah Al Ahmed Al Sabah, died quietly of old age a few months later, the Emirate fell to his eldest nephew.

Mustafa's overwhelming popularity and newfound political clout made it relatively easy for him to cement an alliance with the energy-hungry Chinese government. For the privilege of exploiting the bounty of Kuwait's rich oil fields, they eagerly exchanged advanced weapons technology—chemical, biological and conventional—along with a cadre of scientists, military consultants and security personnel to put them into play. In the end, this political marriage provided Mustafa

with the means to extract a chillingly final revenge on the Iraqis.

A mere eight months after Mustafa became Sheikh, a hellstorm of bio-engineered viruses had completely erased Kuwait's ancestral enemy in less than one day.

The world had just become a different place.

A Distant Thunder Over Galilee

He created man from sounding clay like unto pottery,
and He created Jinns from fire free of smoke.

QUR'AN 55:14-15

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

Philip Duvall was in his office no longer than five minutes when his first of many Starbucks Moroccan Paradise coffee cups was interrupted by “*It’s the Vice President on line two,*” over the intercom.

Duvall loosened his tie and pushed the answer button. “Thanks, Kate,” he replied to his personal assistant. “It’s not like Dan to call so early. I’ll wager that he wants to complain about Randall’s performance on vid last night.”



Across the hall, Kate smiled to herself as she put the call through. It was a scenario that replayed itself almost daily at Underwood Duvall Limited. The client roster of the Chicago-based public relations firm read like a who’s who of celebrities, politicians, and power brokers from around the world, including Vice President Daniel Sorenson. Kate manned the bank of phones that held direct, encrypted vid connections to the firm’s most important clientele. She alone fielded those calls, as

the topics of discussion were usually confidential and secretive in nature.

If they only knew who else shared these lines... She sighed.

Kate Franklin was a fixture around the agency. She was the first employee Duvall hired nearly thirty years ago. In the years hence, the petite and strikingly beautiful young secretary had added sixty pounds to her frame. Her long platinum blond locks had transitioned to sensibly short-cropped and dirty gray. Where she had once been soft, sexy, and naive, Kate was now an imposing figure that commanded authority around the office. She was Duvall's gatekeeper, and her loyalty to her generous employer was beyond question.



Duvall's cynicism quickly changed to sweetness as he took the call. "Good morning, Mr. Vice President. How are things at the White House?"

The middle-aged face on the other end of the vid phone looked haggard and tired. "Unfortunately, no better than yesterday...or the day before, for that matter," he tersely replied. "Public opinion is definitely not on our side. No one would have expected that a guy like James Randall—a decorated hero from *Desert Strike*—would stand down to a madman like Mustafa."

"I don't know either, Dan," Duvall agreed. "Even Randall should be able to see that a despot like Mustafa needs to be severely punished. Our Commander-in-Chief should have just nuked him to kingdom come...no questions asked."

"Amen, brother," Sorenson said. "And speaking of nukes, our latest intelligence reports indicate that Mustafa may have a 500-mile nuclear strike capability. That's in addition to the sophisticated chemical and biological delivery systems he's already acquired from the Chinese."

"What was Randall thinking when he helped pass legislation that granted *most favored* trading nation status to a country that has publicly declared an agenda of world domination—no matter if it's accomplished through commerce or force?"

“China isn’t the only threat to our national sovereignty, Danny Boy,” Sorenson said. “The Bear appears to be setting aside its internal bickering in favor of pulling the old empire back together with some order and economic stability behind it. Right now, it’s like Karl Marx meets Generation X. Money-making opportunities are there for the taking by anyone with a few rubles and a capitalistic streak.”

“Don’t forget, Philip, the surviving remnants of the KGB and the Russian Mafia want a piece of the action, too. So besides keeping our eye on China—and the latest bully on the Arab block—we have to wage a new cold war with the high-tech, money-hungry Russian Confederation!”

Duvall observed the pudgy face on the small vidscreen get redder and redder. Sorenson and his angst were definitely on a roll.

“And another thing... It wasn’t my idea to run on the same ticket as that self-righteous war hero to begin with. If you hadn’t convinced me that this was my best shot at the Presidency, I never would have agreed to it.”

The son of a popular and influential ex-Governor from North Carolina, Sorenson had been able to ride his father’s coat tails to claim two terms in the Senate. While Sorenson proved himself to be a capable legislator, no one would ever accuse him of being brilliant. To his credit, however, he thoroughly understood that the media could make or break his career at any turn and had the foresight to enlist the services of UDL early in his political career. The decision had paid off handsomely for him.

Sorenson continued his diatribe. “For Randall to blatantly disregard the recommendations of his own National Security Advisor and the Joint Chiefs of Staff is totally irresponsible, not to mention a serious breach of our national security policies. To think our own President stood in front of the UN with a billion eyes around the world trained on him and, in effect, condoned Mustafa’s vile actions. Unbelievable! The press is having a field day.”

“Don’t worry; I’ll take care of them,” Duvall replied.

Decades ago, Philip Duvall had been dubbed the *King of Crisis* for his decisive—if not miraculous—handling of the media during potentially disastrous public relations nightmares. His clientele

included leaders of global corporations, Hollywood's elite, major sports celebrities and powerful heads of state.

The potential problem with the latter group of clients was that Duvall often covertly represented the interests of governments that were not always seated in the same section at state dinners. Despite the fact that his business ethics were questionable at best, Duvall nonetheless amassed a staggering power base from which to operate.

So staggering, in fact, that not only was UDL ranked as the number-one public relations agency in the world, it boasted assets that rivaled those of the multi-national corporations it represented. The company conducted business in thirty-five offices around the globe, but it was Philip Duvall who clearly ran the show. It was even rumored that before the major networks ran a controversial story, they discretely ran it by Duvall first to corroborate the data and predict how the public's reactions would influence their ratings points.

"Philip," Sorenson asked, "is there any way that you can save my career and keep my chances alive for November? You know how the press is blasting the whole administration over this one."

Duvall was keenly aware of the gravity of Sorenson's predicament. The Vice President's political survival hinged on what the savvy PR man would do during the next few hours.

"You don't even know how good you've got it, Danny Boy." Duvall's voice lowered an octave and slowed to the hypnotic cadence that was often imitated by late-night talk show hosts. A media mogul as powerful and outspoken as Duvall couldn't help but be a celebrity himself. "Just think how the fickle media will react when a strong voice of leadership emerges from the ashes of Pennsylvania Avenue, so to speak, and takes swift, decisive action that crushes that turban-clad terrorist once and for all. And, of course, this will guarantee your successful bid for the Oval Office."

Sorenson let out a long breath. "I should have known that you would find some kind of angle to turn this thing around. You always amaze me with the opportunities you create from the messes we throw at you. What do you have in mind?"

"Before we get to that," Duvall continued in his melodic rumble, "let's put things into perspective. In spite of his considerable short-

comings, I was able to place Randall into the White House and even keep him in office for a second term. Don't think for a minute that his understanding of the complexities of the political process was any better eight years ago than it is now. No." Duvall smiled to no one but himself. "Randall's only saving graces were his squeaky clean military record and all-American good looks. I knew that after a long-suffering decade of indiscriminate terrorist actions on American soil, he was just what the voters were looking for. And when the capricious press gave him credit for the most decisive moment in the Afghan War, well, I knew for sure that he was my boy."

"Oh yeah," Sorenson chuckled, "some boy he turned out to be. After the first term, he began mistaking his own idiocy for brilliance. As I recall, he even fired you, Philip, when you told him to take a tougher stance with our so-called allies in the Middle East. Quite a foreign policy to trade arms and technology with a lunatic like Mustafa for the sake of maintaining the stability of the region. And by the way, I also hear Randall is working with Bob Waters at Waters & Glenning now that you're out of the picture."

Duvall smiled again. One of the private phones in Kate's care was wired directly to W&G's offices in Philadelphia. Bob Waters seldom took on a new client, much less wiped his nose, without getting Duvall's approval first.

"The good news for you, Danny Boy," Duvall interjected, "is that you are now *my* client. And I won't make you wait until January to be sworn in as our next Commander-in-Chief. We're going to see to it that Randall steps down before the week is up."

After a moment of stunned silence, the Vice President quietly responded with, "You know that I'm in, Philip. Just tell me what you want me to do."

"The wheels are already in motion, *Mr. President*...sounds good, eh, Danny Boy? We'll meet for lunch tomorrow at the Drake to work out the details."

Duvall abruptly ended the call with a quick tap on his desk and poured himself his second cup of Moroccan Paradise. This one was interrupted as well.

The knock on Duvall's door was Nathan Smith, UDL's bookish

Research Director. Smith had been with UDL for more than four decades, a holdover from the days when Wilson Underwood ruled the company—known then as The Underwood Agency—with a firm but fair hand. Underwood had always maintained a veneer of confidence and control, without displaying the haughtiness and arrogance that typified Smith’s current boss.

“Come in and tell me how the *Big Picture* is running, old friend.” Duvall beckoned his longest-tenured employee to take a seat near him.

Smith accepted the invitation and slowly closed the door after him. Before answering, he sat down in the overstuffed leather chair in front of Duvall’s mahogany desk, ran his thin hand across his balding pate, and removed his thick, tortoise shell-colored glasses. “God knows how, Philip, but I’m happy to report that the *Big Picture* is still on schedule,” Smith said, waving his spectacles in the air.

“God, indeed.” Duvall chuckled.

Smith slipped his glasses into his shirt pocket. “The Euro is at its lowest point in history, and the exchange rate between the dollar and yen is almost ridiculous. While the global economy has taken the nosedive we expected, the human factor has been a bit more difficult to control. But even considering current events in the Middle East, the probability of a favorable outcome is still within acceptable ranges. Besides, we’ve weathered numerous random events and unpredicted variables during the past forty years and been able to stay on track. Just to be safe, I’ve charted the more notable anomalies on a spreadsheet to see if there are any events that bear closer inspection...”

“Could you please give me your report in plain English, Mr. Smith?” Duvall interrupted.

Smith allowed himself the rare privilege of a barely perceptible look of annoyance. “The bottom line, Mr. Duvall, is that your grand plan is swiftly being realized. Everything is falling into place within acceptable limits of deviation.”

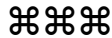
“Splendid,” Duvall said in a condescending tone. “But maybe next time you can save us both some time and get right to the heart of the matter. However, I’m sure that Wilson would be very pleased if he knew how far we’ve come.”

Duvall ushered Smith out of his office. “If anyone is looking for

me, I'll be at the club."

Smith turned and walked down the hallway, his countenance displaying an expression of pure disgust sensed by his watchful employer.

Alone, Duvall flicked his wrist five times to connect with another line that Kate held in confidence. He smiled. "I'll see you twenty minutes from now, at the usual place."



After speaking with Duvall, Nathan skulked back to his office and plopped down into his plush red leather chair. His temper was just a few degrees shy of the boiling point, a typical reaction elicited by these project update meetings with his boss. "If only Wilson were still alive," he said to no one but himself. "I'd be calling the shots instead of that arrogant jerk." *Why did you have to go away, Wilson?*

Nathan blinked hard and took in a deep breath to clear his head. "Connect to Allison," he commanded to the vidphone that sat on the corner of his massive oak desk, an antique once owned by renowned financier J. Paul Getty.

"Hello, honey," Nathan said as his wife's smiling face popped up on the screen, "it's been another one of those days around here. I thought a friendly face might be just what the doctor ordered."

"What did that jerk do now?" was her stock reply. "Sometimes I wonder if your work is important enough to put up with a man like Philip. What good is leaving a legacy behind if it kills you in the process?"

Allison was hardly old enough to be called matronly, but her thick, silver hair and calm demeanor had a way of making her appear years older than her actual age. But the appearance of her radiant smile always seemed to peel them back again, despite the thin wrinkles around her eyes that were exposed in the process.

"I don't know how to answer that anymore, Allie," Nathan replied. "When Wilson and I first conceived the *Big Picture*, I had a clear sense of what we wanted to accomplish. Now...I just don't know."

In the years following Wilson's disappearance Allison's brilliant smile had made fewer and fewer appearances.

"You're a good man, Nathan," Allison said. "But that snake Duvall has twisted everything around. Can't you see that all he wants to do is grab more money and power? He doesn't care about making the world a better place, like you do."

"He twists things around all right," Nathan agreed, "but I'm trying as hard as I can to twist them back. But I have to be careful that Philip doesn't detect any sudden anomalies in the ebb and flow of the variables that make up the *Big Picture*. Given enough time, they should cancel each other out, and things will be back to normal." Nathan had blindly assured himself with that line of reasoning for so long that even he wasn't sure if it was valid anymore.

"One way or another, I'll find a way to stop Philip," he said....

For more of the story, read on...

RIVER OF EDEN

PAUL WAGNER

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About the Author

PAUL WAGNER, a marketing executive for a heavy equipment manufacturing company, is also a seasoned veteran of the Chicago ad and public relations market. He lives in central Illinois and is the father of four grown children. When not writing, you might find him kayaking a nearby river in pursuit of a trophy catch or chasing after his energetic grandchildren (when, of course, they're not chasing him!).

Although Paul has written and published numerous nonfiction pieces throughout his professional career, *River of Eden* is his first novel. Watch for the return of journalist Rebekah Berman in a thrilling story now under development that pits the feisty Jewish skeptic against a cadre of new enemies—both carnal and supernatural. Once again, she must unite with the unlikeliest of allies as Judgment Day looms even closer, and key biblical prophecies are perfectly fulfilled in chilling and wholly unexpected ways.

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