

God's Army

By Michael Hawkins

Part 1 of 3

Prologue

Dec 25, 12:00 AM

Watch thee and pray. For ye know not when the day comes.

Mark 13:33 kept repeating inside Gabriel Stone's mind as he stared at the clear night sky through prison bars. He stroked his beard with his thumb and forefinger, a nervous habit he had picked up during these days of incarceration. He wondered how much more time would pass, and what it would be like. He knew something was going to happen. But he did not know what, when, nor how.

In the still darkness of solitary, his mind wandered to John. How was he coping without his wife and son, especially knowing they had lost faith in him? He hated that John's life had been so decimated by all of this, but there was no other way. They never could have gotten the message out without him.

He hoped they would soon be rejoined. He hoped to soon be free. He hoped they would survive what was to come.

Suddenly a radiant light pierced the night sky. It shone with a yellow glow that slowly bled from orange to red. The brilliant light shone like a star that burned its brightest just before expiring. Gabriel stood on his bed and peered out of his small window just in time to see the city skyline fade to black in the light's wake. In less than a minute, the city was in total darkness.

The moment had arrived, and Gabriel prayed for God's mercy.

December 20

The wind whistled against the window of an old townhouse in Liverpool, England. Six young men sat around a large kitchen table, candles illuminating their faces in the otherwise darkened room. They wore hats, scarves, and heavy jackets to shield them from the frigid night air. Five of the men were from various parts of the East. The sixth was a bearded American, Joshua Bradley, who had allowed desert sun and bad hygiene to age him well past his twenty-three years. He scratched the dark beard he still was not accustomed to as he watched the other men share a pipe. Joshua focused on every word they said and shook his head each time it was offered. He preferred to maintain a sharp mind.

Alim Hasad, the eldest of the men and Joshua's mentor for the past year, exhaled a plume of cigarette smoke. He spoke to him in English, a telltale sign of his agitation. "You realize America is hardly a nation anymore," he began. "They mock Europe's growing secularism and unassimilated immigrants, yet the same afflictions permeate their society as well. America has nationalized everything and allowed its culture to erode into nothing. Their people hardly celebrate patriotic and religious holidays anymore for fear of offending others. Gone are the days of God and Founding Fathers. America is driven only by greed. No God can compete with their desire for wealth. Americans are more loyal to their possessions than their faith! More Americans participate in the stock market than attend church. They have shooed God out of their society for nearly a century and watched the Government fill and exploit the void He left behind. But all

along the American people are too self-absorbed to realize it. A nation of sloths with no higher purpose. God is dead in America, and it is time for us to bring Him back!

“The American Government has created this opportunity for us. The pieces fell into place much faster than we anticipated, and you, Joshua, will lead a mission that will change America as we know it. God has blessed you, my young friend.”

“I have only been here just over a year,” Joshua replied. “I do not understand why I have been chosen for this mission.”

“You are the ideal candidate,” Alim replied. “You are one of them.”

“But there are hundreds of Europeans and Americans in our training camps now, most with more experience than I have. Why not one of them?”

“Yours is an especially important assignment. All of the others in country are depending on you. You have a gift, Joshua, a gift that experience cannot replicate. You are destined to do this. Do you doubt yourself?”

“No.”

“Are you confused about what is asked of you?”

“No. I know what to do.”

“Then why are you concerned?” Alim asked, standing and raising his voice. He was a short man, but could intimidate anyone with his shaved head, full beard, and muscular build. “What greater honor is there than bringing down the world’s greatest evil? And on their most sacred holy day, no less!”

“None sir...”

“What did you say?” Alim leaned down toward Joshua, the candle bright below his chin.

“None, sir.”

Alim stared at the young man a long time before sitting down. Even though Joshua had been an informant for a year before joining them, providing countless government secrets along the way, he still found it hard to trust an American. Yet he took comfort in knowing that if Joshua turned away or failed, others were ready to stand in his place.

“Then you fly out tomorrow.” Alim took a long drink. “With God at your side.” He placed his hands on Joshua’s shoulders, taking his measure, smiling at his apprentice. “He will speak to you through me, so you will call me as soon as you arrive. Agreed?”

“Agreed,” Joshua replied.

“Very good. You will succeed, Brother Joshua. With God at your side, you cannot fail.”

It was a gray and unseasonably cool afternoon in Phoenix as Gabriel Stone walked up the front steps of the Corpus Christi Catholic Church in the heart of downtown. Once inside, his footfalls echoed through the empty sanctuary as he approached the altar. Gabriel was alone except for a deacon and nun that stood talking quietly near the front pews. They nodded in greeting as he approached, then politely left through the side door. Gabriel knelt at the first pew, rested his forehead against his folded hands, closed his eyes tightly, and whispered the same prayer he had every day for the past year.

“God, please sustain my courage, and give me the wisdom to know when the time comes to carry out Your plan. Help me to know that You are with me, and to remember the man I once was, so I may better understand why I was chosen for this great responsibility. For this I pray in Christ’s name, Amen.”

Gabriel opened his eyes and looked up at the crucifix hanging above the altar. He admired the detail of Christ’s likeness, the expression of peace upon his face despite the wounds on his wrists, feet, and torso. He never tired of gazing upon it. He longed for His peace, and for God to restore his memory of the life he lived prior to waking alone and lost in the desert exactly one year ago.

On that chilly desert morning, he had awakened like a man reborn. As his eyes adjusted to the morning light, he had felt as though he was seeing the world around him for the first time. He surveyed his surroundings and saw nothing but dry desert landscape and a two-lane road that seemed to stretch forever toward the rising sun. He looked down at hands he did not recognize, a long-sleeved gray tee shirt and tattered jeans he never recalled wearing. He shivered against the cold morning air as he touched his face, feeling his high cheekbones and angular nose. In that moment he was unsure of reality, and he had remained unsure of it each day since.

As the sun came over the horizon, he could make out tall buildings in the distance. A city, but its skyline was unfamiliar. He began walking toward it against the cold wind, hoping contact with civilization would conjure up some memories. Any memories. His mind was a blank slate. Not one shred of his past remained in his consciousness. All he felt was a pull toward the city ahead and hope that he would find answers at the end of his journey.

As he walked along the road that morning, a brisk wind blew steadily against his face. He expected the rising sun to warm the air, but the desert air kept its chill. As Gabriel made his way toward the city skyline ahead, a massive blinding light appeared on the horizon. It looked like a star burning out just a few yards in front of him. Gabriel shielded his eyes, frozen in place by its blinding rays. After a few moments the light subsided, still present but far less intense. As he looked again at the road before him, Gabriel saw a figure bathed in light hovering where the bright light had appeared. Its shape resembled that of a human, but it was clearly not of this earth. Its face was

featureless and offered no hints to nationality or gender. Despite its bizarre appearance, Gabriel did not fear the creature, but instead found himself approaching it slowly in awe.

The being spoke with a voice like a loud whisper, quiet but crisp. Had anyone else been around, Gabriel doubted they would have heard it. These words were meant for his ears alone.

You must go and tell the world.

Gabriel shook his head in disbelief, but this creature and its words were as real as the cold desert itself. At first he did not respond and even tried to walk away from the being, but it remained directly in front of him no matter which direction he turned. It repeated itself, this time even louder.

You must go and tell the world.

His heart raced and beads of sweat formed on his brow despite the cold. “What are you?” He yelled toward the being. “Tell the world what?”

The enemies of God will soon rise against you.. The time has not yet come, but it approaches. When it arrives, you will know.

“What does that mean?”

Before God’s enemies strike, you must tell your people they are among us.

“Why are you telling me this? I don’t even know who I am!”

Your name is Gabriel. Your life begins anew today.

“What is happening to me? Why can’t I remember anything?”

In time you will receive answers to your questions, but for now your past is not important. Your future is all you have, and God’s people depend on you. And with those

words, the blinding light appeared again and engulfed the being and then disappeared without a trace.

Gabriel stood dumbfounded, gazing along the horizon and up at the rolling clouds. Despite his utter confusion and panic, he felt the weight of responsibility taking hold. He crouched down into a fetal position and screamed as loudly as he could into the desert, hoping either someone would hear, or he would wake from this nightmare.

Neither happened. Once Gabriel pulled himself together, he resumed his walk. The air was still freezing, the city still far away. Gabriel's heart pounded in his chest. Between what he just heard and the long walk ahead, he wondered if he could make it. It was impossible to judge the distance to the city, and Gabriel could feel his energy dissipate with each passing step.

Another mile or so up the road, Gabriel heard the low roar of a distant engine approaching from behind. He stood in the center of the road and saw a small red compact car rapidly moving toward him. He waved his hands in the air and watched the vehicle as it slowed down about forty yards ahead.

Gabriel walked slowly toward the car. There were two men inside staring intently in his direction. They showed no signs of getting out, apparently content to just watch Gabriel as he approached. He stopped once he was in shouting distance of the vehicle.

“Can you give me a ride?” He yelled at the top of his lungs.

For a while there was no response at all. Gabriel was about to scream at them again when the driver rolled down the window.

“You going to Phoenix?”

Phoenix. “Yes!”

Again they were silent for several moments. Finally, the driver looked back in his direction and yelled, “OK. Get in.”

Gabriel walked up to the car, a Toyota hybrid, and opened the back door. He sat down and slid some iPC accessory bags over to make room for himself. He extended his hand to the passenger first.

“My name is Gabriel.”

“I’m John. This is Michael.”

John Wallace and Michael Rush worked for Worldspan Communications, the largest Internet Service Provider in the world, headquartered in Phoenix. They were on the way back from visiting a hub in Tucson. As Michael drove, Gabriel could not help but notice how much the two men like to talk about themselves and their work. They seemed very entertained by their lives.

Gabriel kept stealing glances at himself in the Toyota’s rearview mirror as they drove. The stranger’s body he found himself in was a thirty-something, healthy man with an athletic build. A thin brown beard framed his narrow chin and his hair was straight and long. He was attractive, but not too attractive, and a complete stranger.

After several minutes of small talk and IT jargon between the two men in the front of the car, John finally asked Gabriel a question.

“What are you doing out here?”

Gabriel smiled. “I have no idea.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means I don’t remember how I got here.”

John and Michael both laughed loudly.

“One of those nights, eh?” Michael joked.

“No. It was nothing like that. At least I don’t think so.”

Michael laughed again. “Man, you must have been really messed up.”

“I was visited by a spirit,” Gabriel found himself blurting out.

John and Michael looked at him curiously. “You what?” John asked.

Gabriel smiled again, trying to appear at ease with the words escaping his lips.

Despite his best efforts, he could not stop himself from talking.

“A spirit visited me and told me I was supposed to deliver a message.”

“What’s the message?”

“That our enemies are upon us.”

John looked at Michael and rolled his eyes. “What does that mean?”

“I don’t know. But that is the message I have been called to deliver.”

John and Michael laughed again, although much more uncomfortably this time.

“Why are you telling us this?” Michael asked as he drove.

“Because,” Gabriel replied, “I think you two are supposed to help me.”

John Wallace and Michael Rush laughed their loudest yet, but it was tinged with anxiety. As the half-hour drive to Phoenix wore on, they found themselves listening quietly while Gabriel described his encounter in detail, from the total amnesia to the mission delivered by a mysterious celestial being. By the time they reached the outskirts of the Sun Valley, Gabriel knew John and Michael remained skeptical of his story, but he managed to convince the two men to meet him after work so they could discuss the best way to message millions of people simultaneously before the Media or Government saw

it coming. Whether they believed his story or not, Gabriel's calling presented a challenge too tantalizing for John and Michael to pass up.

Gabriel remembered nothing of his life before that morning. In a year, not one memory had returned to him. But as much as he longed to remember his past, he remained devoted to his calling. Once it was fulfilled, Gabriel hoped there would be time for him to find out what his life had been before he awoke in the desert that cold morning, but that would have to wait for another day.

As Gabriel exited the church, his footfalls seemed louder than ever. He walked onto the streets of downtown Phoenix, the midday chill upon him. With his long beard and solid white clothing, he drew stares from passers by as he made his way to the corner of Lincoln and 38th. When he stopped to hail a cab, a shiver ran suddenly up his spine. The sky brightened suddenly and the objects around him became luminous. A blinding blue and white light appeared and Gabriel fell to the ground, clutching the pearl-studded crucifix he always wore around his neck. It was happening again. He gasped for air, his heart pounding against his sternum. He had read scripture and religious books for a solid year, prayed and meditated daily, but nothing could prepare him for this feeling. His anxiety rose so quickly he thought he might pass out. Then the being appeared exactly as it had a year before, but it was as if Gabriel was seeing it for the first time. He had no doubt this creature was from heaven. It spoke with the same stern whisper he had heard in the desert a year before, but this time it echoed even louder inside his head.

Tomorrow your calling will be fulfilled.

And in a bright flash of light, the being was gone

Gabriel backed up against the brick building behind him, slid to the ground, and pulled his knees to his chest, the dirty sidewalk staining his white clothing. He called out to God under his breath. A crowd formed around him, curious and concerned, but careful not to get too close.

“Are you OK?” a Hispanic woman said with a thick accent.

“They’re here,” Gabriel whispered in reply.

“Who?” The woman asked.

“Our enemies.” Gabriel took several deep breaths and reached for his iPC. He dialed a number and moments later, John Wallace was on the screen.

“Gabriel?” John said. “Where are you? You look awful.”

“The time has come,” Gabriel replied. “Tomorrow.”

“What?”

“I cannot explain now. Meet me in Carefree in an hour.”

With that, Gabriel hung up his iPC and stared indifferently at the growing crowd around him. He marveled at how his sense of purpose overwhelmed his fear. He remained in a fetal position for several minutes, but he felt God’s strength infusing him with the will and knowledge required to fulfill his calling. The message must be sent. The weight of responsibility was greater than ever, but he knew that as long as he had faith, he was up to the task. He would be called a liar, a madman, perhaps even a terrorist, but the message must be sent.

Finally Gabriel Stone rose to his feet and the crowd took a collective step away from him. He hailed a cab and as it pulled to the curb, Gabriel turned to the curious onlookers and spoke calmly but with urgency.

“Watch thee and pray, for ye know not when the day comes.”