

God's Army

By Michael Hawkins

Part 2 of 3

December 21

John Wallace pulled his Corolla into the same parking spot it had occupied for five years at Worldspan Communications knowing that after this day his life may never be the same. On that chilly December morning, everything seemed crisp and new. The sky resonated an impossibly deep blue and the cars around him appeared radiant against the black pavement. He looked up at the Worldspan Communications office building, towering like a beacon against the red mesas of the Sun Valley even though it stood only four stories tall. It wasn't just the morning chill getting to him, either. Everything was sharper because John felt truly, completely alive. Today his life would begin anew, and he was completely at peace.

As John got out of his Corolla, he reached into the collar of his shirt and fingered the cross around his neck. He caressed its white pearls and closed his eyes in prayer before making his way toward the office building for the final time.

The cross once again concealed beneath his shirt, John walked into the front entrance of the Worldspan complex. He passed the security desk and scanned his general access card. The atrium seemed majestic that morning as he descended the stairs to the data center. He tried to be calm and friendly toward the other employees he passed in the hallway, but he wondered if his colleagues' passing gazes concealed suspicion. Did his face betray the anxiety boiling within him? By the time he reached the data center, John's inner peace was infected with paranoia. Sweat ran down his face and his heart thumped in his chest. He went into the bathroom and grabbed a handful of paper towels, locked himself in a stall and wiped his brow while taking deep breaths.

It's all in your head. No one knows what you are about to do. Today is just like any other day.

Once he regained his composure, John left the bathroom and walked to the data center entrance. He placed his hand firmly against the black glass of the palm reader and spoke in as even a tone as he could muster, "John Wallace."

A soothing female voice responded, "access granted," and two thick Plexiglas doors slid open. John stepped ahead two paces and stopped in the security chamber as the doors zipped shut behind him. With his right hand on a second palm reader and a swipe of his general access card, the doors to the largest Internet traffic hub in the world opened before him.

The data center was bright white, floor to ceiling. A black cubicle labyrinth surrounded four server cabinets in the center. Worldspan Communications managed Internet traffic for nearly a billion IP addresses, more than any other service provider in the world. The two hundred employees in the central data center worked together to keep these servers up and running at all times. Most employees had limited access for security reasons, but John was among the few with access to all systems.

John went to his desk and loaded his iPC into its dock. His plasma monitor hummed to life, and he spent a half hour checking emails and security threat sites just like he did every day. But today he was not really reading. Words blurred against the screen. Pictures seemed distant and unreal. John could focus on nothing but the task at hand, and 8:00 AM could not come sooner.

When John accepted this assignment, he knew it was his calling as much as it was Gabriel's. For years, he had languished in a job that demanded sixty hours per week and

offered no personal fulfillment. The day he picked Gabriel Stone up off the side of a desert road, all of that changed. His life's purpose was suddenly crystal clear. All those years of overtime and on-call hours that forced him to miss countless family events were a small price to pay for the opportunity to warn America of the coming disaster. And the time was upon him.

Ten minutes to go.

When Gabriel experienced his vision the day before, he called John immediately, just as planned. Given the resources available to him through Worldspan, John could get the message to millions in a matter of minutes. He had agreed without hesitation months ago and they had practiced the drill many times, going through all of the motions except the file load. But this was not practice. This time their dire warning would reach millions of eyes and ears and John Wallace felt the full weight of that responsibility upon him. He closed his eyes to steel himself and pray for the strength to see this through. It was God's will, and it had to be done.

Five minutes to go.

Now he would find out along with the rest of the world what the message meant. He had faith, but soon he would have knowledge. John reached into his pants pocket and touched the USB drive inside. It was hard to believe such a tiny device would soon bring such panic to so many. Millions would deplore him for what he was about to do, but it was necessary. There was no other way to get their collective attention.

And with sixty seconds to go, John got out of his chair and stretched his legs. He removed his iPC and opened his server monitoring application. As the clock struck 8:00 AM, John scanned the traffic server to record the bandwidth. Then he went to the

application server to record average response time. When he came to the data server, he took a deep breath and reached into his pocket again.

The moment was now.

He plugged the USB key into the server port and waited. The Internet worm was programmed to auto-load after fifteen seconds of port connectivity. John took his time checking other system performance metrics and allowed a few extra seconds before removing the USB key and shoving it back into his pocket. The deed was done in less than thirty seconds, and no one noticed a thing.

With his final measurements recorded, John returned to his desk and docked his iPC again. After a few minutes, his iPC beeped and he spoke into the headset.

“Yes? What? Okay, I’ll be right there.” John stuck the iPC in his pocket, grabbed his briefcase, and got up to leave.

Natalia, his cubicle neighbor, was standing in his doorway. “Is everything alright?”

“That was my wife. My son was in a car accident. I have to go to the hospital.”

“Oh my God...”

“He’s fine. They’re just examining him as a precaution. Still, I need to go. Will you let Carter know?”

“Of course. Get out of here.”

And with that, John left Worldspan Communications for the last time.

Traveling I-10 toward his home in Tempe, John was extra careful to follow the speed limit. The traffic going out of the city was sparse this time of morning, and the last

thing he needed was a run-in with the police. His mission accomplished, he was anxious to get home as quickly as possible and get his family out of the house. He hoped it would be days before the Feds tracked him down, but he knew it would more likely be just a few hours. Going to prison would be a small price to pay for what needed to be done, but he wanted his family as far away as possible when it happened.

He thought about calling Shannon but decided against it. The minute she knew he had left work, she would think something was wrong, and John did not want her to worry a moment longer than necessary. So he drove all the way to his house off the Rio Salado parkway, pulled into his driveway, and walked through his front door.

The Wallace home was a gorgeous brown stucco two-story decked out in American Indian décor. John took his shoes off as he stepped on their hand woven mesa-colored rug.

He stopped in his tracks when he entered the family room. Shannon was in the adjacent sunroom doing yoga. Her beautiful blonde hair was pulled into a ponytail to show her long, regal neck and muscular shoulders. Her eyes were closed and she breathed deep, steady breaths as her face pointed toward the ceiling. John could not bear to interrupt her, so he just stood and watched until she finished her exercise. He realized this may be the last time he would see the love of his life in her natural, relaxed state, and he wanted to take it in for as long as possible.

In between routines, Shannon noticed John and gasped.

“You scared the hell out of me. What are you doing home?”

“Shannon, there’s something we need to talk about.”

“What is it? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” John said. “Come in here and have a seat.”

They sat on their suede couch together. John took her hand in both of his and kissed it gently. “I don’t want you to panic, but I need you to pick Brennan up from school and go to your mother’s house.”

“Why? What’s going on?”

“It has to do with something at work. I’ve gotten...threats.”

“What kind of threats?”

“I don’t want you to worry about it. Please, just do as I ask.”

“You don’t just come home and tell me to pick up our son and go to Mom’s, then not tell me why. What the hell is going on?”

“There’s this guy I had to fire a couple of months ago. I told you about him.”

“That guy Peter?”

“That’s him. He’s been threatening me. He called this morning, and I immediately called the police. I’m sure it will blow over soon, but I need you and Brennan to go somewhere safe, just in case.”

“Just in case what? What did this guy say he was going to do?”

“He didn’t. He just said it was going to happen soon. The police will be here in an hour, but I want you out of here by then. I don’t want you involved in this at all.”

Shannon dutifully turned off the monitor and toweled off as she walked upstairs. Twenty minutes later, she returned to the family room dressed in jeans and a black blouse, a suitcase in her hand.

“Go upstairs and get Brennan’s bag,” she told John.

John got the bag and carried it out to her SUV. “I hate that we have to do this, but I can’t risk anything happening to either of you.”

Shannon put her arms around John and kissed him deeply. “You call me and Brennan as soon as you can. And whatever you do, stay away from this maniac.”

“You’ll both be able to come home soon. I promise.”

And with that, Shannon left to get her son and hide from someone who did not even exist. John went back inside, closed the door and leaned his back against it, taking deep breaths to stave off his rising nausea. Warning millions of Americans of a coming attack was unnerving, but lying to his wife was even worse.

After his stomach settled, John went back to the suede couch and flipped on the monitor. Fox News, ABC, and CNN were already reporting breaking news, that a strange video message was propagating itself all over the Internet. It was causing temporary disruptions to iPCs and other handheld devices. Business systems, including banks and other financial institutions, were also affected. The five-minute message took control of every workstation it reached, playing three times before surrendering control back to the user. The extent of the damage was not yet known, but stay tuned as we track this breaking news.

John picked up his iPC and selected the third number in his contacts.

“Gabriel? It’s John. Are you watching the news? It has begun.”

Arch Bailey never thought his marriage would come to this.

Less than two years ago, he and Abby, his wife of twenty years, sat among hundreds of other parents in the newly revitalized Anacostia Park to watch their son receive his high school diploma. It was a magical day for them. Just as their beloved Jacob began a new chapter in his life, Arch was set to take early retirement from the Department of Homeland Security. After twenty-five years of government service that felt like voluntary slavery, he was ready to spend his remaining productive years working in the private sector on his terms so he and Abby could begin what they called their “second honeymoon.” Unfortunately, the bliss they felt that day was not destined to last.

With two weeks remaining until his retirement, a scandal erupted that rocked DHS to its very core. The agency discovered a network of terrorist cells in five major metropolitan cities. To make things worse, each of these cells included naturalized citizens and legal immigrants. These terrorists had not snuck across borders and hidden in safe houses. They were legal residents and sworn enemies of the state. This discovery highlighted the scope of the terrorist threat and the weaknesses in enforcement at multiple levels. The American people were so mortified it cost the President reelection. They demanded that newly elected President Marcus Solis prove that the nation was once again secure. In the absence of evidence, Solis found a scapegoat. With their heightened role in immigration enforcement and anti-terrorism oversight, DHS was an easy target. The Secretary and all of his Under Secretaries were forced to resign. While this appeased the

American people's call for action, it drastically changed Arch Bailey's outlook for the next ten years.

Arch had agreed to postpone his retirement for ninety days under the circumstances. A month before his new retirement date, newly appointed Secretary David Mitchell called him into his office, but not to discuss transition planning as Arch expected. Mitchell offered him the position of Deputy Secretary, a two-level promotion from his position as Operations Director.

"With all due respect sir, I must decline," Arch had said. "Although I am humbled by your trust and confidence."

"Arch, I need you, and your country needs you," Mitchell replied. "All I am asking is that you serve out the rest of this administration. After that, I will accept your resignation without question. Please just take a few days to think it over."

He discussed the situation with Abby and to his surprise, she encouraged him to stay on, saying he would always regret retiring when his country needed him the most. Despite his misgivings, Arch called David Mitchell the next day to accept the Deputy Secretary position.

The strain that his new responsibilities at DHS placed on his marriage paled in comparison to the letter they received a few months later. It was a cryptic note written in their son's distinctively poor penmanship that read:

I am going to London with Len Bonham for a month. I'll call you when I arrive.

Jacob.

No call ever came, and as far as they knew, Jacob still had not returned from Europe. About once every month or two he would send an email to Arch describing the

odd jobs he was working and the sights he was seeing, always saying he was getting along fine. But he never called and rarely responded to Arch's emails. He made no effort to communicate to his mother. Both Arch and Abby frequently tried to call, but they always reached his voicemail.

These months of separation from their son had taken an immeasurable toll on Arch and Abby's marriage. The two of them had spent most of their time blaming each other for their son's sudden departure, but Arch still felt that given time they could work out their issues on their own. He thought counseling was unnecessary, but Abby insisted. She even threatened to leave him if he refused. To salvage what was still left of their marriage, Arch succumbed to her wishes. Sitting in an overly comfortable leather chair at their first therapy session, smiling anxiously at Dr. Elaine Nathan on the other side of her grand oak desk, Arch told himself that if he wanted to save his marriage, he had to suffer through this.

Dr. Nathan, the couples therapist recommended by Abby's best friend, was a handsome woman in her fifties. Arch might have thought of her as attractive or even pretty, but the doctor had rid herself of any feminine traits she may have once had. She had short, spiked gray hair and wore little makeup. She dressed in a black power suit with no jewelry except two small silver hoop earrings. Age had deteriorated her curves, if they ever existed in the first place. This was a woman that at a glance could easily be referred to as 'sir.' Arch did not see how a woman so lacking in the fruits of her gender could be effective as a couple's therapist.

If you want to save your marriage, suck it up. Arch crossed his legs and unfolded his arms, trying to prevent his body language from giving away how much he resented being there.

“So Abby,” Dr. Nathan said, “you said on the phone that you feel abandoned, that Arch takes no time to focus on your relationship.”

“Yes. Sometimes as much as a week goes by and I hardly see him.”

Arch rubbed his temples. “You know the demands of my job. Being the Deputy Secretary for Homeland Security doesn’t get done from nine-to-five. What do you want me to do?”

“I want you to make time for me. For us.”

“Where do you expect that time to come from? I’ve asked the President to add a twenty-fifth hour to the day, but he says his hands are tied.”

“Don’t you dare make light of this, Arch.”

“That’s not what I’m trying to do. I’m trying to understand how you expect me to cut corners at work so we can have more quality time.”

“I’m not asking you to cut corners. You have always found time for me, even if its just a few minutes a day. The last year, I feel like we’ve completely grown apart.”

“Do you really feel that way, or is it because Jacob writes me and not you?”

“Don’t you dare make this about him! This is about us!”

“I wish I had more time to give,” Arch said to Dr. Nathan, “but I just don’t. My job takes a hundred percent of my time and energy, and sometimes more.”

“You’re not the first couple that’s had a demanding career interfere with their marriage,” Dr. Nathan replied. “But especially considering the situation with Jacob, you

absolutely need to communicate your feelings openly, no matter how hard it is. You have to make time for this, even if it's just a few minutes a day. Arch, let's talk about how you spend your days. Perhaps we can find some window of opportunity in there."

Just as Arch slumped into the black leather chair to break down a typical day in his life, which was by no means typical, his phone rang. He jerked to his feet at the sound of the national emergency ring tone.

"Let's start with handling unexpected crises," Arch said. "Excuse me, I have to take this."

As Arch was walking out the door of Dr. Nathan's office, he heard Abby say to her, "You see? He is a slave to the Government. I feel like a widow."

Once outside, Arch answered the phone. "What is it?"

"Mr. Bailey. It's Elliot." Elliot Rose was the Cyber-security Czar for the Department of Homeland Security. He and his staff spent their lives investigating every virus, hacker, and cyber terror group that crossed their desks and followed up on the handful that posed a real threat. Arch had little knowledge of cyber terror, so he relied heavily on Elliot's expertise. "Have you seen the news in the last hour?"

"No, I've been...tied up," Arch replied. "What's going on?"

"A video message began circulating on the Internet early this morning. Its impact was limited to handheld personal devices at first, but it has spread exponentially over the past hour. Millions of personal and business computers have been temporarily disabled by the video."

"Temporarily disabled?"

“Yes sir. The message repeats three times, and then stops hijacking the workstation.”

“Why is this a matter of homeland security?”

“It’s what the message says, sir. I really don’t want to go into it over the phone. When will you be in the office?”

Arch checked his watch. They were only halfway through their session with Dr. Nathan, and Arch knew leaving early would be one more nail in the coffin of his marriage.

“About an hour,” he said.

“Is there any way you can get here sooner? I hate to pull you away from what you’re doing, but this is serious, Mr. Bailey.”

Arch grumbled. “I’ll see what I can do,” he said, and hung up the phone.

Moments later, Arch opened door to Dr. Nathan’s office. Abby was sulking in her leather chair, dabbing her eyes with a tissue. At fifty-three, he didn’t think she had ever looked more beautiful. Her brown eyes glowed with life. Her dark brown hair flowed like silk over her shoulders. This woman he married so many years ago had cheated time, and also managed to keep her vibrant spirit all these years. It was not until their son Jacob left for Europe that Abby’s spirit was broken.

“I’m sorry, but I have to go,” Arch announced. “There’s a situation at the office I must attend to.”

Dr. Nathan took notes and glared at Arch with contempt.

“We have another half hour,” Abby said.

“I’m sorry, but I have to leave right now. Do you want a ride home?”

“I don’t want to hold you up,” Abby said with disdain. “I’ll get a cab. Just go.”

Reluctantly, Arch left the office. He could hear Abby’s sobs as he waited for the elevator.

No matter how much Abby denied it, Arch was convinced that their marital problems had more to do with Jacob than anything else.

The tension between Abby and her son began during his junior year of high school, two years before his sudden departure to Europe. That year he met a young cheerleader named Jennifer Pena, a tall, dark-haired beauty that had moved to the District the prior summer. She was as sweet as could be and genuinely cared for Jacob, but she lived in a poor neighborhood and tended to show off more skin than Abby thought appropriate. From day one, Abby disapproved of Jacob’s relationship with her, saying she would eventually lead him to trouble. This decision eroded their once healthy relationship to a point Abby never thought possible.

During this tumultuous time in their family, Arch had attempted to play the peacekeeper. He had numerous sit-downs with Jacob where he explained Abby’s feelings, always careful to never portray them as his own. He personally liked Jennifer and was not concerned with her family’s social status. Arch also tried to convince Abby that Jacob was responsible enough to decide who he wanted to date. She would invariably agree and promise to back off, then turn around and pepper Jennifer with dirty looks and insulting comments the next time she came to their home.

This cycle repeated for several months until Jennifer decided she had had enough. She told Jacob she loved him but did not think she would ever win the approval of his mother. Jacob was convinced that she was the love of his life and blamed his mother for ruining his chance at true happiness. He spent his entire senior year barely acknowledging Abby's existence.

Through all of this, Arch and Jacob grew closer than ever before. Jacob compensated for the lost interaction with his mother by seeking more from his father. The two of them made all decisions about college; the school he would attend, his major, even the dorm where he would live. Not being involved in this critical time in her only son's life drove Abby mad, and Arch understood that. What Arch did not understand was why, after all this time, she was still taking her frustrations out on him.

As he approached the DHS complex on that chilly, overcast morning, Arch took a deep breath and tried to clear his mind to make room for the problem at hand. Eliot had never been unwilling to share information over the phone before, so he knew this must be serious. Arch scanned his ID badge at the security station and after an approving nod from the guard on duty, entered the complex. As he made his way inside, everyone scurried about at a fever pitch. Dark suits yelled into their cell phones. Tech guys hopped from workstation to workstation like grasshoppers. Whatever this message was, it had sent DHS into a frenzy.

Eliot Rose met him in the atrium. Agent Len Shapiro was at his side.

"Gentlemen," Arch said, "can you please tell me what the hell is going on?"

"Early this morning, a message was sent to thousands of Worldspan Communications' customer e-mail accounts," Shapiro replied. "The title of the message

is 'God's Army Warning to America.' It contains a link to a video message, but when clicked the video completely takes over the user's computer. The video message cannot be closed or stopped in any way. It repeats three times, a total of about twelve minutes, and then stops, returning the user's computer to its normal state. Also, the e-mail spreads like a worm, sending itself to everyone in the user's address book once opened. The hijacking of computers has caused quite a few hiccups for several corporate and government information systems this morning, but the biggest concern is what the message says."

"What does it say?"

Eliot and Len exchanged a glance. "Come with me and see for yourself," Eliot said, and led Arch to Amad's workstation. Shapiro clicked a hyperlink and instantly his screen was consumed by a thin, bearded, long-haired man that looked like a cross between Jesus and John Lennon. He was dressed in a white suit, Tom Wolfe style. Around his neck he wore a gold cross, studded with pearls all around. He stood in front of a grand, modern church on a sunny day. The camera shot him from an upward angle, making him seem larger than life. He spoke in a soft but stern manner.

My name is Gabriel Stone. I am the leader of a group called God's Army. What I am about to tell you will frighten you greatly, as well it should. You will not want to believe me, and the media will portray me as a radical Christian fear-monger. I'll likely be labeled a terrorist simply for broadcasting this message. Knowing this does not deter me; it only makes me more determined to tell you the truth. I pray you will not be

seduced by the media and focus only on my words, then search your heart and decide for yourself whether or not they are true.

One year ago I awoke in the Arizona desert with no knowledge of who I was or from where I came. Walking through the desert that morning, I witnessed a bright light and heard a voice that could have only come from the Holy Spirit. The voice told me I was to warn America of a coming invasion by her enemies. I was not given details, but was told the fate of America depended on me sharing this warning with as many people as possible. I was told that day that I would be visited again when the time had come to deliver the message. That visit occurred today.

In between these incidents, no recollection of my former life has returned. While I am certainly curious to discover the truth about my past, I realize God has chosen to release me of my burdens so I can focus solely on my calling, which is to warn the people of this great nation of coming danger. Please understand that this is not my message; it is a message from God. He has chosen to deliver it to you through me. I do not know why I was chosen, but I accept this great responsibility with the utmost humility and determination.

The enemies of God's people are preparing an attack that will change this nation forever. They have the means to unleash terror unlike anything we have experienced in our lifetimes. We must stand unified against this great evil. I do not know when, where, or how we will be attacked, only that it will be soon, and it will be widespread. When it comes, you will know. Wherever you live, be prepared to defend your life and the lives of those you love, for this threat is imminent.

I realize there is no evidence to substantiate this claim. Many will think me insane, but if you ignore this message from God, you do so at your own peril. May God bless you all.

Immediately, the message repeated itself. Arch, Eliot and Shapiro watched it again in silence. Halfway through the third repetition of Gabriel Stone's message, Arch walked away from the computer and began pacing, his arms folded behind him.

"Do we know anything about this man or God's Army?"

"We verified that there is no record of Gabriel Stone's existence prior to this year," Eliot replied. "As far as God's Army goes, there was a Mormon film produced years ago with that title, and there are various international groups with that name, but we cannot link Gabriel Stone to any of them. We've run a thorough check on him with NSA, CIA, and FBI and turned up nothing suspicious. We're checking local databases now, but I don't expect to find anything there either."

"Do we know where this message originated?" Arch asked.

"Indications are that it came from inside Worldspan Communication's data center in Phoenix," Amad replied. "It reached ten million accounts almost instantly. All Worldspan customers."

"Any connection between Worldspan and Gabriel Stone?"

"None that we have found, but we are still checking."

"I'm assuming the media will be looking for a statement any time now," Arch said. "When they do, we need to be ready."

“Mr. Bailey,” Eliot said, “I recommend elevating the terror threat level to red. Under the circumstances, it’s the most prudent action.”

The threat level had not been red since the Damascus Operation more than a decade before. During that time, the volume of online terrorist “chatter” rose to unprecedented levels. DHS hired half of the hackers in Federal prison to help analyze it all. It had been the most stressful time in Arch’s career, and the current frenzy at DHS headquarters was bringing those memories back.

Arch paced the aisle floor near Amad’s workstation as he glared at Eliot. “You’re telling me to recommend to the Secretary of Homeland Security that we elevate the terrorist threat from blue to red? That’s a four-level jump based on one event.”

“Yes, sir,” Eliot replied. “If there is any truth to what this man says, we need to be at the highest level of preparedness.”

“I will recommend elevating the threat level to yellow while we dig deeper into this,” Arch said. “But until proven otherwise, I consider this man a dangerous nutjob and nothing more. Most rational people will agree with me and completely blow this off, but there are far too many that will panic, and that is precisely what we don’t want.”

Arch turned to Len Shapiro. “Get this Gabriel Stone in custody as fast as you can. Terrorism has been dead for years. He doesn’t get to bring it back to life over something like this.”