

God's Army

By Michael Hawkins

Part 3 of 3

It was ten AM when John Wallace's iPC rang. He scrambled to view the call information and was disappointed to see Shannon's number. Gabriel should have called by now.

"Hi, honey, is everything OK?" John struggled to sound more concerned than annoyed. Why hadn't Gabriel called?

"Everything is fine, but I'm worried about you," Shannon said. "I don't understand why you rushed me out of the house and are just sitting there by yourself. Are you waiting for this freak to attack you or something?"

"Of course not."

"Then what is going on? I feel like there is something you are not telling me."

John was silent for several moments. "I didn't want to worry you about this, but you have a right to know. The police are setting a trap for Peter, and they had to use me as bait."

"What?"

"Please, don't overreact..."

"Overreact! Are you out of your mind? They're trying to get this guy to come to our house?"

"That's why I had to get you and Brennan out of here."

"How long have you known about this?"

"Just a couple of days..."

"A couple of days! I can't believe..."

John's phone beeped. Gabriel's number on the caller ID. "Honey, I have to take this call. It's the police..."

Shannon was silent for a long moment as she stared through the screen at her husband. "I just want you to know that I love you and your son loves you. You are a wonderful husband and father. But if this little stunt gets you killed, that is all on you." And with that, she hung up the phone.

John clicked over to the other line, his heart thumping. "Gabriel?"

"You have done well," Gabriel said. "The news is all over the Internet and our second message is bound to be aired on television any time now. All we can do now is wait."

When the alarm screamed at noon, Hunter Caldwell rolled out of bed with one thought on his mind.

I wonder if Stephanie saw me last night.

While he had never been a man ashamed to date two women at once, Hunter had truly thought it was over with Andrea Cook. After three passionate months of dating, she had become distant and aloof when they were together. Their dates went from fabulous restaurants and late nights to casual early dinners devoid of passion or stimulating conversation, much less intimacy. When Andrea stopped calling altogether, Hunter assumed she had lost interest and although he could not figure out why, he accepted it and moved on. His years had taught him that life was too short for peculiar women.

Moving on meant Stephanie Winters, who happened to be his new administrative assistant. Hunter had a long-standing rule against dating women from work, but his attraction to Stephanie could not be denied. Her magnetic personality, quick wit, and stunning beauty had inspired him to hire her several months back, but he quickly found that she stirred something within him that demanded something far more than casual workplace interaction. He asked her out less than a week removed from his last date with Andrea, and to his delight, she had said yes.

Their first date was an amazing dinner at the Four Seasons, and Hunter had wanted the evening to go on forever. Conversation came easy, and his fixation with her seemed to grow with each passing minute. He felt like he was reconnecting with a long lost soul mate, and Andrea Cook became a distant memory.

That is, until two days ago when Andrea called Hunter out of the blue. She said she had been a fool to let him go and wanted a second chance, but Hunter told her it was too late. He had moved on and was happy. After a few moments of quiet sobbing, Andrea begged him to at least have dinner with her. If it did not rekindle his interest, at least they could have closure. Happy though he was with Stephanie, Hunter had trouble saying no to a beautiful woman, especially one with whom he once shared such passion.

He met Andrea for dinner at their favorite Italian bistro, but the attraction he had once felt had deteriorated into nothing more than comfortable familiarity. Her company was pleasant but not passionate. When the waiter offered desert, Hunter was more than happy to share a final crème Brule with her, but a quick glance to his left gave him a reason to exit the restaurant as fast as possible.

Stephanie Winters was sitting at the bar, a glass of wine in hand, talking with a girlfriend. Hunter told the waiter he needed to pay the bill, awkwardly fished a few hundred from his wallet, and told Andrea he had to run. He slipped out of the restaurant, leaving Andrea sitting alone, confused and broken. He had no indication Stephanie Winters ever spotted him.

After a quick shower, Hunter picked up his iPC and touched the power button. Checking his messages, Hunter saw that Stephanie's name was not in his inbox. After breathing a sigh of relief, he turned a curious eye to a message from an auto mailer titled, "A Warning from God's Army." He clicked it and instantly his iPC monitor displayed a thin, saintly-looking bearded man dressed in all white. Hunter was drawn to the man's words and calm manner of speaking. But as he began to absorb what the man was

saying, he felt his blood run cold. Hunter had never been a religious man himself, but he knew enough of them to realize that this message could incite widespread panic.

When the message repeated, Hunter realized his iPC had been hijacked and ran to the kitchen to call the office from his landline. Reluctantly, he dialed Stephanie's number. If she had seen him with Andrea, better to know now. After a couple of rings, she answered.

"Why are you calling from your landline?"

"Good morning to you, too."

"You don't get good mornings from me any more. You just get briefed. Got it?"

"You saw me last night."

"Damn right I did. You're a dirty pig, Hunter. It's no wonder you can't keep an assistant, much less a girlfriend. I'll certainly be moving on as soon as possible."

"Is that a resignation, Miss Winters?"

"You're not getting rid of me that easily. Think of it as unspecified notice. I'll work for you as long as I want, and not one day longer. I have nothing more to say to you personally, but in the spirit of doing my job, you need to get in here as soon as possible. There's a viral Internet video from a group called God's Army that's got everybody riled up."

"That's what hijacked my iPC."

"It plays three times and then stops. Just long enough to make sure they get their point across."

"I'll be there in an hour," Hunter said. "And when I get a chance, I'll explain what you saw last night."

Stephanie hung up the phone without saying another word.

By the time Hunter reached CNN's New York newsroom on Columbus Circle, the news director and other anchors were in the taping room huddled around a blank monitor. Larry, the burly, bearded video technician that had been at CNN for as long as Hunter could remember, appeared to be leading the discussion. He had probably analyzed the video before contacting the news director. When Hunter entered the taping room, everyone looked at him with the somber faces of funeral patrons.

"So what's the story with this Internet video?" Hunter asked the silent crowd.

"The man on the video says he is part of a group called God's Army." Larry said. "He doesn't say much about who they are, but their message is pretty grim."

"It's also pretty vague," Hunter replied. "He says God's enemies are mounting an attack and we need to be ready. That's not much to go on. He might as well be warning the California coast that the big one is coming."

Larry squinted at Hunter. "Obviously you haven't heard about the second video message."

Hunter never thought he would be scooped by Larry the Recording Guy. "No."

"God's Army just sent it to all the major networks and the White House simultaneously."

"Where has it aired?"

"Nowhere yet. Everyone in the briefing room in five minutes."

The briefing room was filled wall to wall with every CNN anchor and correspondent on site. Hunter and Larry squeezed into the back corner just as the production manager addressed the crowd.

“What you are about to see is highly confidential,” he said. “The White House has asked all of the networks to sit on this until we know more. They think this is a hoax and do not want to panic the American people without cause. They also believe they can track down this Gabriel Stone, possibly in a matter of hours.”

“You mean to tell me the Government is prohibiting us from releasing this information?” Hunter interrupted. He could feel his blood pressure rising. The Federal Government made up more than 60% of American GDP, which gave them de facto ownership of virtually every major industry, including the broadcast media. Free press died so long ago most living people had never experienced it.

“I believe ‘strongly encouraged’ were the words they used,” Larry replied.

“If there is something to this, we could have a major national security crisis on our hands. The American people have a right to decide for themselves whether to take this seriously!”

“Before you get on your soapbox, Hunter, I don’t like the Government’s tactics either, but I agree with them on this one. When people see this, they’re going to freak.”

“Why?”

“See for yourself. Larry, please start the video.”

Like the Internet video, Gabriel Stone wore all white, but this time he sat on a plum couch with a large, pearl-laced cross on the wall behind him. He spoke calmly and evenly, but with a firm sense of urgency.

“By now millions have seen the message we sent via the Internet this morning. Please understand its intent is not to frighten, but to warn. Some of you will not be directly affected by this coming attack, but many will. The Lord has chosen to speak in generalities rather than specifics. I do not know why. Perhaps the nature of the threat is too complex, or something we are not capable of understanding. It may be concentrated to one area, or in many areas. I can only tell you that the danger is imminent.

I implore all Americans to ready yourselves. Gather a supply of non-perishable food, clean water, and power generators. Organize civilian security to protect your families. The Bible says, ‘Watch thee and pray, for ye know not when the end comes.’ Be mindful of yourselves and your neighbors in the coming days. If you see anything suspicious, please notify authorities. Most importantly, be prepared to protect and defend your loved ones and your property, for you may not be able to count on the Government or local law enforcement to help you. Their forces are likely inadequate to address this threat. Our enemies surround us, and we must be prepared to protect what is ours. God bless you all.”

The message was no more than a minute long, but in that short time Gabriel Stone conveyed a warning that would no doubt generate a range of strong reactions from the American people. The majority would write him off as a brainwashed religious fanatic,

but a significant minority would take the warning at face value and potentially incite a nationwide panic. Hunter had covered plenty of cults and Christian whackos that claimed the end was near, but he could not recall one so vague yet sincere. But this didn't make Hunter more afraid. Instead he thought Gabriel Stone and God's Army (if indeed there was an army) were even crazier than all of the other religious fanatics he had ever encountered.

One thing was certain. Hunter Caldwell was no longer angry because the White House "discouraged" the release of the video. Given that millions had already seen the Internet message, the last thing the nation needed was to see the follow-up aired all over television. Since the fall of Damascus, Syria two years before, the world had experienced unprecedented peace. The radical insurgency that had spread across the earth like a cancer for years came to a grinding halt. Terrorism was effectively dead in the public's eyes. Any claim of a threat to the America must be met with the utmost scrutiny, otherwise unnecessary panic would certainly ensue.

Just before two P.M., DHS phoned CNN New York. They were making an announcement to all of the major networks in ten minutes. The staff piled into the executive conference room to hear the message together.

"This is Arch Bailey from DHS. We are asking you to refrain from broadcasting the God's Army video. The Government's investigation shows no evidence to support their claims of an attack on America. We also ask that you ready yourselves for a breaking story. Gabriel Stone and an accomplice suspected of releasing the God's Army virus have been located. We expect them to be apprehended within the hour. Anyone with additional information regarding God's Army is asked to come forward."

“Who are these people?” Hunter spoke into the Polycom. “And what makes you so certain that this is a hoax?”

“As I have told you,” Arch said, “They are being apprehended as we speak. Once we have them in custody, the truth will be known, and you will be the first to know.”

Earlier this morning, at approximately ten-thirty, a third of U.S residents were suddenly unable to access their Internet accounts. Handheld devices and desktop computers were compromised, bringing communication to a grinding halt. For many, landlines, which are now only found in 20% of American homes, were the only means of contact. Bank tellers and ATMs were the only ways to access funds, causing horrendous and panicked crowds at banks from coast to coast. The World Bank was unable to process electronic transactions, therefore impacting international accounts as well.

These are the results of the now-famous God's Army Virus, which we have come to learn is not actually a virus, just a message. It plays three times and stops unless initiated again by the recipient. According to Worldspan Communications CEO Mark Cross, the message has shown no long-term effects on any systems thus far.

The interruption was brief, yet deep and widespread. Estimates are that it could take weeks to verify all scheduled financial transactions between 10:30 AM and just past noon. As of now, over 90% of systems have been fully restored. The American people are trying to determine which is more disturbing: the contents of the message, or the means in which it was delivered. It is clear to see why the Government has chosen to classify this incident as cyber-terrorism.

For Fox News, this is Amanda James.

John Wallace sat in his leather recliner watching the report. He was now desensitized to the fact that he was responsible for this worldwide panic. He had spent the last two days trying to get his head around the melee his actions would cause, all the while knowing it was absolutely necessary. Public attention was essential, and it called for extreme measures.

If the situation were not so dire, he may have gotten off on the fact that he had single-handedly thrust a thorn into the side of modern civilization, even just for a few hours. The carefree, tech-savvy society that took gadgets and instant information for granted suddenly found itself scrambling to communicate, access funds, and do business. Society was so lost without these tools. They never fathomed such a massive failure of their precious electronic infrastructure, however brief it was. On channel after channel, students, professionals, and retirees all sounded like whining children when interviewed by reporters about the experience. It was amazing to see so many people previously confident in their gadgets suddenly become so helpless. Cyberspace, commerce's greatest frontier, had briefly lunged backward in time, and John Wallace was the man responsible.

But he didn't want to think about that. He did what had to be done. People's lives had to be disrupted so God's Army's message would be heard.

John looked at his watch and saw that it was past eleven A.M. pacific time. Why hadn't the God's Army's video been shown on television yet? John picked up the phone and dialed Gabriel's number.

He picked up on the first ring. "John." Gabriel's voice was calm, almost soothing, despite the situation.

“What is taking so long?” John asked.

“Be patient. It must happen soon. The Media will not sit on this for long.”

“I can’t just sit here doing nothing for much longer. Shannon is already suspicious, and if she brings Brennan back here...”

“Just stick to our plan. There is no need to be concerned.”

And with that, the phone went dead.

Joshua Bradley stood at the customs desk at Reagan International Airport, watching a frumpy, middle-aged agent peruse his paperwork. She asked him the normal battery of questions, all of which he answered to her satisfaction. Joshua took his passport and flight information, picked up his carry-on, and began making his way through the terminal.

Along the way, Joshua's eyes fixated on a monitor in the concourse. A CNN reporter named Hunter Caldwell described an electronic disruption that had occurred earlier in the day. Although in a hurry, Joshua came to a complete stop amid the hundreds of bustling travelers around him. He stepped closer to the monitor to read the closed caption. When excerpts of the message distributed via the Internet that morning flashed on the screen, Joshua felt his breath catch in his throat. He immediately scrambled for his iPC and dialed Alim.

He answered after two rings but Joshua did not allow him time to speak.

“What the hell is happening? You told me no one would have any idea about this!”

“What are you talking about?”

“Have you seen the American news today?”

“Are you talking about that God's Army nonsense?”

“Nonsense! How can you call it that? They must know what we have planned.”

“Have you seen the online video?”

“No,” Joshua replied. “It never came to my phone, and according to the news the American Government has eradicated it from cyberspace.”

“Then why are you so concerned?”

“Alim, this cannot be a coincidence. They are warning of an imminent attack!”

“That is impossible. Only a select few know of our plans. There is no way this could have been leaked.”

“I don’t like this,” Joshua said. “They call themselves God’s Army! We need to stand down for a while.”

Alim paused and then spoke calmly. “We will do no such thing. You will execute this plan precisely as we have discussed. Be confident. You have God on your side.”

And with that, Joshua’s iPC went blank as Alim ended the call.