

GOD AND COUNTRY



A True Story of My Journey through Indoctrination, Violence, and Jihad

WILL PRENTISS

Table of Contents

[God and Country: A True Story of My Journey Through Indoctrination, Violence, and Jihad](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1 Days of Innocence](#)

[Chapter 2 Black Days](#)

[Chapter 3 Mad at the World](#)

[Chapter 4 Spiritual Authority](#)

[Chapter 5 Spiritual Boot Camp](#)

[Chapter 6 Relentless Abuse](#)

[Chapter 7 Fear and Courage](#)

[Chapter 8 Love and Marriage](#)

[Chapter 9 A New Adventure](#)

[Chapter 10 New Year's Resolution](#)

[Chapter 11 Man's Islamic Duty](#)

[Chapter 12 The Ground Shifts](#)

[Chapter 13 Radical Road](#)

[Chapter 14 The Plot](#)

[Chapter 15 Codename Is Edinburgh](#)

[Chapter 16 The Jamaat](#)

[Chapter 17 Jihad Camp](#)

[Chapter 18 The New Guys](#)

[Chapter 19 Training Days](#)

[Chapter 20 Botched Extraction](#)

[Chapter 21 The Trials](#)

[Chapter 22 Exile](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[About The Author](#)

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Indoctrination, Violence, and Jihad

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*I know where I'm going and I know the truth, and I don't have to be what you want me
to be. I'm free to be what I want.*
—Muhammad Ali

PROLOGUE

I awoke to a balmy Alabama morning, the promise of heat already in the air. As I dragged myself out of the sleeper bed in back of my eighteen-wheeler big rig and into the driver's seat, my eyes struggled to adjust to the brightness of the sun. It peered over the nearby trees, filling my cab with warm, soft light.

My hay fever was the worst it had been in a long time. My eyes and throat were itching and burning. I shielded my watering eyes and opened the driver's side door. The air smelled fresh and the trees swayed gently in a mild, cool breeze, which felt crisp on my skin. On any other day, it would have given me a feeling of exhilaration, but this day felt like awakening from death.

It was 8:15 am, and I had slept straight through my fajr (pre-dawn) prayer time that morning. I had a strong feeling of guilt, but thought that surely Allah would forgive my rare indiscretion. I was normally very disciplined. I am a devout Muslim, but you wouldn't guess it from looking at me. Regardless of the circumstances, if I had to stop on the side of the road, I would never miss a chance to connect to Allah at prayer time.

Two days earlier, the company that loaded my truck was late and I was struggling to make up the time. I had picked up a load just north of Washington, DC, and after passing through heavy traffic I made best speed down Interstate 85, through Atlanta, and on through Interstate 65, before pulling into this truck stop in Montgomery, Alabama in the early-morning hours. I just needed to catch six hours of sleep and get back on the road again. That way I'd make the delivery in Pensacola, Florida and secure a final load back to Stockton, Texas.

I had given my final notice to my company. It was my last tour of the United States. Every job took me away from home, three weeks at a time, and I had been on the road for more than two weeks. I missed my wife and two stepdaughters. I was elated to start a new life closer to her and the girls and work locally in Stockton. It was also a perfect opportunity to come closer to my religious community. The people there were eager for me to grow more involved.

I couldn't wait to hit the open road, but first I took out my prayer mat and made up my missed prayer right there beside my truck. I grabbed the essential cup of coffee, turned on my radio, and headed south on Interstate 65.

Oh, yes! I thought to myself. I love the open road!

I knew I would miss being a long haul truck driver. Driving gave me a sense of peace and a chance to gather my thoughts on the stresses of life. The job paid well, and I would take a steep pay cut to work locally. Still, I had other goals. This move would be a much-needed change for better quality of life. For some people, that freedom on the open road is enough, and although it offered me a chance to reflect and gain a sense of purpose, at the same time, being away so much made it harder for me to act on it.

I'm no stranger to life-altering moves. I was born a Roman Catholic into an American family of English and Italian heritage. Just a few years prior, I had converted to Islam and found a

sense of peace that I had not experienced before. It was a life-changing decision that inspired me to become an activist for the Muslim community. I enjoyed working with outreach (Da'wah) programs in my local mosque. On my long haul tours of the United States, I promoted Islamic educational topics on my website, *Islamcentral*. I was never without something purposeful to do, and the work was increasing. Now that I was going to work local, hope ran high that I would finally be able to grow in my Islamic religious studies and be more involved in community activities.

As I made my way southbound on Interstate 65, the road was wide open, hardly a car in sight. *Awesome*, I thought to myself. *I can make up some good time!* I had a sip of coffee and turned on the radio. Morning news and music always kept me alert on the road and were part of the fun of driving. A news break came on and I initially ignored it, finding it irritating they were interrupting my program. I continued to flip through the channels, only to find the same news bulletin being repeated on other channels.

As I finally paid attention to the news channel, I could hear a number of conflicting reports. The reporter breathlessly said that there was a fire and perhaps an explosion in New York City. I still didn't understand what was going on, until after an ad break. Speculation began to grow that it was some kind of accident, or potentially terrorism. My ears perked up. Theories were being discussed, and I struggled to make sense of them, but they all sounded like conjecture.

I needed to talk to someone and find out what on earth was going on. Muhammed Jazeel was an American-Pakistani 'liberal' Muslim who ran his own consulting firm. He was one of my closest friends with whom I worked on Republican and Democrat political election campaigns whenever I was in town. I pulled over, picked up my mobile, and dialed his number.

"Have you heard the news?" I asked.

At first there was a strange silence.

I continued, "What's going on? The news is speculating a big terrorist attack and they think it was Muslims?"

He answered, "I think there has been an accident. A lot of people are dead."

As I spoke to him I realized he was crying. My heart sank, and I got a burning feeling in the pit of my stomach. I'd never heard him so distressed. Muhammed had family and friends all over the world, and I silently wondered if he had lost someone, perhaps a family member in New York.

Muhammed was clearly distraught and so I hung up. I set myself on a course to find the nearest truck stop and turn on the news.

A couple of minutes later I saw a sign up ahead, "Creek Travel Plaza - Exit 54," on Interstate 65 at Atmore, Alabama. The truck stop was owned by The Poarch Creek Indians, a native American Indian tribe in Alabama. *Perfect*, I thought as I pulled in, *now I'll have a chance to catch the TV news and figure out what's going on*. I geared down and my engine revved high as I pulled up to park. There were few other trucks, and I had the pick of the lot, so I pulled

as close to the building as I could. I quickly came to a stop, popped my air brakes, and rushed inside to find a television.

I entered the convenience store. It was loaded with all of the things I was familiar with at other stops that catered to travelers, the typical food and drinks, clothes, and toy teddy bears. Yet it appeared deserted. I panned the store, looking left to right, at the clerk's counter. Still there was no one. *Odd*, I thought to myself. *Is the place being robbed? Where is everyone?* Not a soul was in sight and, stranger still, there was not a sound. I cautiously approached the rear of the store where a small corridor led to an entertainment room. As I approached, I saw it was a small, dimly lit room with six brown vinyl comfy chairs facing the wall-mounted big screen television. There were five people gathered around the television, watching intently. My voice seemed to cut an ominous silence.

"Howdy," I said in a typical southern fashion.

No one said anything. They were fixated on the television. My head turned towards the television, and there it was. I could not believe my eyes. New York, the skyline unmistakable, was dominated by a huge ball of flames and billow of smoke atop a tall silver tower against a perfect blue sky. The news voiceover confirmed that scores of people were dead or dying. Tears began to well up in my eyes as I saw the bodies fall from the windows of the tower and the desperation of the victims to escape the fire became clear. The gravity of the situation hit me. Stunned, I turned my head to the others in the room who were frozen like statues. Then it got worse. As we watched, we saw another plane fly into the shot and curve around straight into the next tower. People in the room and watching on the screen cried out in shock and disbelief. My knees went weak.

Torn between fury that someone would dare to attack America so cruelly and kill so many innocent people, and shock at the sheer unreality of the situation, I felt almost frozen in place as I watched first one and then the other tower fall in an avalanche of noise and dust. *Oh my God*, I thought. *Police and firefighters are still in there.* The images on the TV screen were almost apocalyptic. Time became meaningless as the room watched in silence other than the sound of weeping and gasps of horror. Now we knew it was a deliberate attack and the most likely suspects were Muslim terrorists.

I struggled to comprehend the sheer scale of what had happened and lowered my head as my heart wept for the victims and the devastation this would cause to so many families.

"Fucking Muslims," said one of the watchers in the room. "We're gonna get them for this."

I turned to stare at him blankly. At the same time, a small part of my mind processed the images on the screen and his words and understood that this day would have a profound effect on the trajectory of my life.

Fighting my horror at what had happened to my country, and fear for my family, trying not to shake from the shock of it all, I jumped into my truck and hit the road. I had a long way to Pensacola before I could get back to my family in Stockton. That was the only place I needed to be right now.

CHAPTER ONE

Days of Innocence

AT A LOCAL Starbucks coffee shop, by the foot of the Tower Bridge, on the south side of the Thames river in central London, I sip on a cup of Chinese green tea. It is September 2006 and the sun is shining with a cool steady breeze that sweeps across my skin. The air smells of freedom to me, and of the bakery making fresh bread at the street corner nearby. Outside, office workers and tourists mingle on the cobbled streets of the old docks, between old, thick-walled spice warehouses, now converted to high-end apartments, shopping, dining and taking photos together.

It had been many years since I'd lived in the United Kingdom. I took a deep breath and briefly wondered if I had what it would take to live here again. In the early 1990s, I worked as a civilian with the United States Air force at RAF Alconbury, which is near the small village of Huntingdon, nearly a two-hour drive north of London. Huntingdon in the quiet countryside was a complete contrast to the bustling city. I listen on my iPod to the ambient sound of Jonathan Goldman's album *Peace Trance*, to calm my sense of anxiety.

I'm surrounded by people, but I feel insecure and alone.

From the outside I look like a regular guy in blue jeans and a hoodie, laptop and earbuds chilling out like a typical hipster. But inside it seems that every breath I take is a cry for inner peace and an end to the pain burning in my soul. Every sip of green tea reminds me of my new reality as it jolts my stomach with pain from the stubborn ulcer induced by the stress of the last couple of years. I replay images of my life in America, the country I love and that I left behind. *It will get better*, I tell myself. I'm getting remarried and starting a new life in a new country. I'm opening a new chapter but it is all happening at once. I'm starting with a clean slate. In almost all the negative feelings about recent events, there's also a spark of excitement. I am excited to embark on a new life in the United Kingdom.

My mind raced as I tried to make some sense of my life and find a new sense of purpose. I thought about having kids again. I always wanted more, but the prospect was worrisome for me. Raising children in the world today seemed more dangerous. The war on terror was supposed to make the world more of a safe place to live, but it hadn't seemed so. The world was a more complex and dangerous place than before, and the threat of terrorism seemed to test the thin veneer of civilized Western society. It wasn't just the terrorists I had to worry about now, it was society turning on itself. As a Muslim, I was now a target for would-be extremists of my own faith and right wing extremists who opposed my faith. I've found that my decision to become a Muslim has landed me into a precarious situation between these two extremes. I'm not alone in this, I know that.

My Islamic education provides me a moral compass that gives me a standard modern Islamic outlook. I feel it is imperative for us to learn about other faiths in the times and culture we live in. It's not enough to merely tolerate each other. We should respect each other and seek to live in peace in our societies. I would raise a child believing in Islam but encourage them to learn about other faiths and work within the system to make the world a better place.

Unfortunately, extremists of all stripes don't share these views. Often, I think back to the simpler days when I was young and had no doubts or questions about my faith.

I grew up in a small town called Lockport, which was an hour-and-a-half drive south of Chicago, Illinois. The town was incorporated in 1853 and still has many of the original buildings from that era. It has the feel of old town America.

Sometimes I think back to my first day in the second grade at Catholic school. I woke up to Mom calling me in for breakfast. The sun beamed into my room. It was a beautiful day. Waking up to bacon, eggs and toast and the smell of Mom's coffee brewing is such a wonderful feeling. I look back on it and think how me and my three siblings took the security of a two-parent household for granted. I would often wake up to the sound of Mom making breakfast or working in the kitchen, shuffling dishes, and it always made me feel happy inside. My mom was a busy bee on that day, handling all of us kids.

"Will," she called out, "it's time to get your uniform on."

I reluctantly went to my dresser drawer, to be confronted with multiple pairs of navy blue trousers and socks, all neatly folded, just how Mom put them there, in preparation for this day.

"Mom, why do we have to wear the same thing all of the time?" I asked with annoyance.

"That's your school uniform," she replied.

Despite many protests, Mom was clearly going to get her way, so I put on my school uniform.

After getting ready, she drove me to the school for my first day at second grade. It seemed like such a big undertaking for this quiet young boy. As we drove up close I could see the tall steeple of the church which was attached to my school. It looked like a traditional English-styled church made of limestone bricks and stained glassed with a sign, "St. Joseph's Church," at the entrance. Around the back of the church was the paved playground and school.

After that first day, a feeling of dread came over me every time I saw that steeple and realized we were about to arrive at school. Thinking back on it now, I humor myself with the imagery of the movie, "The Omen," but it wasn't religion that brought on this feeling. I really did like the school, teachers, and church priest. At that time, the only thing I knew of religion was memorizing the Hail Mary or Our Father. Perhaps the problem was the representation of rigidity, discipline and structure. My early memories were of old nuns carrying a very harsh ruler that exacted pain on one's knuckles if we stepped out of line or failed to memorize our assigned prayers. I rarely got the ruler, but feared it just the same. Even more of a practical reason was that I had an ominous feeling in my soul that I would continue to be picked on by the school bullies.

I remembered Mark Muller, from a year earlier, in the first grade. Mark and another boy named Paul in my class would constantly revile me and call me weak and easy to beat up. It seemed to be their favorite pastime, to beat on me during recess, or trip me in class and laugh that I didn't defend myself.

My father would ask me, "Why don't you defend yourself?"

I would reply, "Because we will get into trouble for fighting."

At the same time, I would think to myself, *I don't want to fight. I didn't do anything to anyone. I just want to be left alone while I'm at school.* I certainly didn't want to be called to the office and receive a ruler on my knuckles!

I became frustrated with the teachers. *I am obeying the rules. Why aren't the teachers helping me?* I thought to myself. *Maybe it will be better this time.*

Now, the closer we came to the school the greater the sinking feeling in my stomach would grow. *How will I go on?* I questioned myself. A sense of anxiety gripped me as I wondered if I would make new friends and if things would be different.

Finally, the moment of truth was here, as we pulled up into the parking lot just outside the playground. I exited our old, blue 1963 Buick. I sucked it in, put my chin up, jumped out of the car and said goodbye to my mom. I gathered my school backpack and lunch and headed towards the other kids.

In a moment, which didn't seem to take too long, I heard a dreadful voice calling out my name.

"Hey, Prentiss!"

I looked to my right and saw Mark Muller. My stomach dropped.

"You're here again, Prentiss?" he said.

"Yeah," I replied.

"I hope you're not in my class," said Mark.

"Same here," I replied.

Then the school bell rang. Out came the teachers to line us up into our class lines. As the teachers called out names, one by one, and placed the children in their lines according to whose class they would be in for that year, mine was one of the last to be called. This seemed to be a common theme through my school days, from class assignment to being picked to occupy a position playing sports in physical education class. To my dismay, I and my arch nemesis, Mark, as well as Paul, ended up in the same class again.

Catholic school now seemed like such innocent times. Yes, it had its trials, but naturally a child's problems seem to pale in significance compared to the ones we face as adults. Responsibility for food, clothing, shelter, and decisions was on the backs of my parents. As a child my only care was mustering up the nerve to face the bullies in school.

If only life were as simple as facing a bully at school. Thinking back on it now was oddly comforting, to have one focus, one goal, one easy problem and one solution. Perhaps it was to knock his lights out and accept the subsequent wrath of the nun with the ruler.

Life wasn't all bullies at school, though. Sometimes, interesting, temporary alliances between me and the bullies would present themselves. One such instance landed me the ultimate punishment: the ruler.

I was around six or seven years of age at that time. We had new seating arrangements and our teacher had arranged our desks in a circle around the classroom with boys and girls sitting in every other seat.

Mark and Paul were standing next to me in line and we were plotting various tricks we could play on the other kids in our class. It was in the morning hours as we were entering the school and we were just about to start class. We devised a plan and I committed to executing the mission.

I was one of the first into the class and had to walk around the desks to get to my seat. My target of opportunity was selected at random. I quickly located a tack from my desk and strategically placed it on the seat of a girl sitting three seats away from me and sat back down with an innocent look on my face. The plan worked like a charm, as the girl sat on it and then jumped and screamed! Soon an investigation ensued, as the teacher interrogated each of us individually. Since Mark, Paul, and I began laughing we were quickly deemed the likely suspects and sent to the office, to see Sister Mary, the principal. We were sent into her office one by one. Sister Mary towered over me in her long, midnight gown and nun's habit, looking incredibly disappointed and stern.

"Will, did you do this?" she said in a stern voice.

I looked down at the ruler in her hand, gulped and forced the words out of my mouth.

"Yes, ma'am," I admitted. I was trembling.

"You know this is unacceptable behavior," she exclaimed. "I have no choice but to punish you and tell your parents. Put your hands on the desk!"

I hesitated and reluctantly put them on the front of her desk and began to cry. Then to my horror, I heard a *whoosh* and *crack*. Pain shot through my hand, one side to the other. I screamed in agony. It was a feeling worse than any time Mark and Paul ever held my arm and twisted it so hard that I thought it would break. Getting ideas from them was a bad idea! I'd rather deal with being the pincushion of the bullies than the back end of Sister Mary's ruler.

The punishment wasn't over, though. I still had to face my mom and dad once I got home and they learned of my mischief at school. My father wasn't so bad. Whenever I got in trouble, he would just talk to me and I would cry and apologize to him. I'd promise never to do it again. My mom, on the other hand, would have me pick switches from the field nearby to reinforce discipline.

With schoolwork, my mom was good at helping. After school, each day she would sit with me and help with improving my math skills and helping me memorize my prayers. Mom was always patient and would show me a number of apples and take some away and ask me how many there were left. When I got confused she would start the process all over again. My father, on the other hand, would get frustrated at my ignorance and start shouting, to the point that I wouldn't even approach him for help.

My father insisted on me attending a good Catholic school and going to church. Sunday school was important, too. He never attended mass, or involved himself in the church much. I don't recall him ever attending the church on Sunday. It was my mother who engaged herself and assisted me in Sunday school, helped me in my confirmation, and took me to church for mass and confession.

I used to enjoy talking to the priest during confession, and reluctantly admitted my sins, one by one. There was absolution for this mischievous young boy in saying six Hail Marys and three Our Fathers.

It seemed senseless to me. I wondered to myself how repeating them from memory over and over again could actually get me forgiven for my sins. I wasn't praying to God but repeating a script. I walked out of confession and knelt in the pew and recited. As I grew older, I was willing to question what I was being taught.

Reflecting back on this, I call those my "days of innocence," the innocence of my young childhood. Some call this time in a child's life their "grounding." It was a simple time with fewer variables. But as I struggled to overcome the insecurities of my occupation as a bully's pincushion, and wrangle with the rigidity of the religious teaching, I did not realize something terrifying was about to change my young life.

CHAPTER TWO

Black Days

ONE MORNING, WHEN I was seven years old, I woke up from a good, deep sleep, rubbed the sleep out of my eyes, and peered out of my window to find a beautiful sunny day. *Great*, I thought. *Now I can go out and play in the yard, making mud pies by the creek or capturing some unsuspecting crawdads. Even better, I can hunt snakes to put in my live snake collection.* It consisted of a bucket, a board to hold them in, and a stone to put on the board so the snakes couldn't weasel their way out and escape.

Every day, when I woke up, I would peer out of my window by my bed and check the weather, sometimes seeing huge snowdrifts and ice sickles hanging from the rooftop in the wintertime, or the colorful autumn leaves falling from the trees. This day was even better because it was summer break. My second year was finished and school was out. It was time to play!

I stumbled out of bed and opened the bedroom door. It was surprisingly quiet as I walked down the hall towards the kitchen. *Where is everyone?* I thought.

As I approached the entry to the kitchen, I stared in confusion. Dad was buckled over on the ground, on his knees. He was clutching his stomach and writhing in pain. Towering over him was Mom, just staring intently at him. Dad struggled to catch a breath.

My father was from English heritage, about five feet nine inches tall. He was somewhat thin but strong. Years before, he was in the military, and worked as a local trucker, which was also physically demanding at times. According to stories told over the years amongst my extended family, he could hold himself in a fight against anyone.

Mom was from an Italian family, about five feet five inches tall, dark hair and fair skin. She was smaller than he was. I couldn't believe what I was seeing. Apparently, she could handle herself in a fight, too.

What is going on? I asked myself with wide eyes. *Why is he like that?* I hadn't realized that just prior to my waking up, my mother had just punched my father in the stomach, completely immobilizing him. As my father caught his breath he began swearing at my mom, calling her names that I didn't understand at the time. My other siblings began to hear the noise and filter in next to me at the entry to the kitchen. Dad got to his feet. Suddenly, he punched our mom in the stomach just as she had to him. She cried out in pain and wailed as she buckled over onto the floor.

"Stop, stop!" All of the kids began to cry and shout.

To this day, my eyes well up, thinking about that moment. I had never realized that there was a problem between my mother and father until then. It is as vivid in my mind today as it

was then. None of the kids could make sense of what happened, but it was the first of numerous violent outbursts between the two of them thereafter.

Late one evening, not long afterwards, there was a really intense fight between the two of them. It started suddenly, or so it appeared to me. My brother and sisters were crying, and my father told me to get in the car. There was a firmness in his voice and I proceeded to the car. When I left the house, my mother yelled at me. She told me to stay put. Dad ordered me again, "Keep walking." Mom was enraged. She stormed towards me and grabbed my arm tightly. My father then physically pulled me by the arm, pushed her away, put me in the car, and slammed the door shut. Mom began to curse and push him around as he then quickly jumped in the driver's seat and slammed his door shut, nearly catching her arm. She then ran to my side, opened the door, and pulled my arm to get me out. My father grabbed my other arm to keep me in. There was a tug-of-war with me in the middle!

I was frightened to the core and completely confused.

Who do I listen to? Flashed through my little mind. Their grip on my little arms hurt, and I was in so much shock that I wanted to cry but couldn't.

When my mom couldn't get me out without hurting me more, she ran in the house. My father fastened my seatbelt to keep me in place. Just when I thought it was over she emerged from the house with a large, cast iron pan. Those pans are solid as hell. I couldn't fathom what she was about to do next.

As my father started the car to leave, Mom ran out from the house smashed the pan onto the windshield. The force of the pan and the way the windshield shattered propelled glass everywhere. Thousands of pieces were on my face, in my hair, and all over my body.

I was covered with glass, petrified, and began to weep. I felt sick. It wasn't over. Dad started the car and started to back out of the drive. Still wielding the pan, Mom ran in front of the car, toward the driver's side. Dad quickly shifted the car from reverse into drive and hit the gas. She was hit hard and I heard the thump against the front of the car. She screamed in pain. I was in shock. *What have I just seen?* I thought. I was frozen in fear and confusion. My dad realized what he had done. He called my grandmother (his mother) to look after us kids while he took her to the hospital, where she was examined. She had three broken ribs, some bruises, and scratches. I and my siblings were dazed, confused, and terrified.

Alcohol was a serious problem for both my mother and my father. My father liked to drink, but was always sober for work. He was a functioning alcoholic. My mother, on the other hand, was a stay-at-home parent who not only drank heavily but could not control it. It couldn't go on much longer.

I was eight years old when they divorced. The courts in that time arbitrarily granted custody of the children to the mother, regardless of the circumstances. We ended up living with our mother. There was little debate on the topic.

Mom refused to let Dad see us kids for a time, but we could talk to him on the phone. We were given strict instructions not to talk to him about what her activities were. She began drinking a lot more, and hanging out with the guys at the local bar downtown. She would drag us kids with her. When Dad found out about this one evening, talking with me on the

phone, he was livid. He took her to court and tried to be granted full custody of us, but the courts refused. After a while, she followed the court order and allowed visits. It seemed to have suited her drinking habits to have us kids gone for the weekend.

Dad was responsible and paid her child support and the mortgage on the house, but my mother had problems holding a job. Her drinking was taking over, and it wasn't long before she began to need money. She took me out of private Catholic school and enrolled me in the third grade at Walsh Elementary, a local public school. Soon after, she agreed to let my father take us kids to his apartment to live. The apartment was nice, carpeted and furnished with some basic items. One of the items he had was a vinyl record turntable that he let us kids listen to.

I will never forget a song that was my father's favorite at that time, which reminds me of that small apartment of his: "In the Year 2525," by Zager & Evans. Every time I hear that song, I remember his apartment and that difficult time in our lives, wondering why I no longer had a family, and dreading getting up at 5:30 am to be dropped off at a babysitter's house so my father could go to work.

My father and I were close. He would often take me to work with him and talk to me during our drives. A few weeks after we moved to his apartment, I was shocked to hear his next question.

"Will, how do you feel about moving with me back to our old house?" he said.

"I would like that" I replied, "but how? Mom lives there."

"Well, son, your mother agreed to sign over custody of you, your brother, and sisters to me. She agreed to give us back the house," he said.

"Why would she do that?" I asked.

"Well, I had to take out a loan from the bank. She wanted \$5,000 dollars to sign over custody of you kids. She will also let us take the house in the agreement."

It didn't register with me, the gravity of what had just transpired. After all, I was just eight years old. Many years later, I came to realize that my mother's drinking problem had so financially bankrupted her that she sold us kids. My dad was forced to take out a loan from the bank and he made the exchange. Before long, we moved back into the house, and she moved out.

My mother continued drinking heavily, unburdened by a sense of guilt or responsibility for what had happened to her kids. She moved to Joliet, Illinois, in a condemned, run down and rat-infested apartment along the train tracks near Joliet Correctional Center. It's the same prison where the Blues Brothers movie was filmed. My father would still allow her visitation, provided she didn't go to the bar, but she would do so anyway.

She lived with a steady boyfriend and a black-colored pit bull named Rocky. The dog was mean as hell to anyone who would come by, but not to me. One woman came to knock on the door and the dog somehow forced its way through the screen of the door and bit her arm. Blood was everywhere, and she ended up in the hospital, getting stitches. The dog never showed me aggression though. It was a dangerous neighborhood. I would walk the dog, and people in that neighborhood would steer clear. Some would cross the street, to keep a safe

distance as Rocky would stare at them intently and begin pulling me along with the leash. I felt a little safer having Rocky by my side.

In this neighborhood, people didn't seem to have real names. They were known by nicknames, like my mom's boyfriend, "Wolf." "Frenchie" was another of her friends. My mom took on the name "Cotton."

Wolf was grubby. He had dark, wiry hair with an unkempt, Balbo-style beard, jeans, and a grubby t-shirt. He drank Pabst Blue Ribbon beer all of the time. He and Mom would take me fishing in the local I&M canal and try to pressure me to drink it. I hated the taste of beer and often pretended I was taking sips when they handed it to me. He was very abusive to her, if the fading bruises were any indication, but never in my sight.

I remember a couple times when my father had to pick her up from the hospital after her boyfriend Wolf beat her senseless. On one occasion, we picked her up from the hospital, and it was hard for me to understand at the time, but I looked and saw bruises all over her body. She was on and off with this boyfriend—off when she got beaten up and put in the hospital, and on when she was all healed up and had nowhere to go. Wolf was never violent toward me.

My father was never the punishing or abusive type, but I feared him just the same. After work we would go to the shop in Orland Park, Illinois, to park the truck where he would spend hours talking to my uncles, his brother and brother-in-law, and their relatives. He and his family were mostly truck drivers or mechanics and owned their own businesses. He owned his own dump truck and used to haul gravel, dirt, and asphalt in the Chicago area.

I was my father's favorite, because I was his firstborn son after trying to have kids for three years. Often he would take me to work and I would help him by pulling the right lever to start dumping dirt or gravel during his pickup or delivery.

One time we had picked up a load of dirt and he met my uncle at a site. He got out to talk with him. I saw them talking at the back of the truck and was bored. I glanced around the truck for something to keep me occupied, and saw the air release lever on the dash, which allows the back flap of the dump to open, allowing the contents to fall through and out of the container. I began flipping switches. I hit that switch and heard the loud hissing sound of the air release and immediately switched it back. I pretended I didn't do anything. Dad came back to the truck.

"Will, what did you do?" he asked.

I was scared.

"You won't be in trouble. Just tell me the truth," he said. "If you lie to me, we will have a problem."

I confessed as tears welled up in my eyes. He explained to me that what I had done released the load in his truck right where all of the men were talking and someone could have gotten hurt.

"I'm sorry Dad," I said. "I won't do that again."

"Good enough, son," he replied.

I used to love going to work with him, but not so much after we headed home. On our way home, he would often stop at the bar to have a few drinks. The bar was on Archer Avenue in Lockport, Illinois, and happened to be midway from the shop to our house. I dreaded when he stopped at the bar. It was such a boring place for a boy my age. I was tired and just wanted to go home. My many requests to leave were refused, so I sat there watching people drink their lives away, complain about the events of their day, and listen to country music that did the same. I learned to despise country music, as I associated it with a bunch of drunken “My wife left me, I’m gonna drink my life away” complainers.

Dad was an alcoholic, but he never neglected us kids financially, or in our other basic needs. After the divorce, he began working sixteen hours a day to provide for us. We only saw him to any significant degree on the weekends, when he would sleep until noon. When he awoke he would watch television until evening, or shop for food for the week. Dad was always tired, and we kids quickly learned that we had to make food for ourselves.

After a number of fights, my father stopped allowing us to visit our mother anymore. In fact, we were completely forbidden contact with her for the foreseeable future.

“I don’t want you kids in a drinking environment with men who would abuse your mother,” he explained. “One day, Wolf may turn it on you kids.”

She would still stop by our house to visit. She would bring us presents for the holidays. Her visits were often characterized by my father and her arguing, a violent fight, and a subsequent police visit.

My third year of school was hard. I began doing poorly and wasn’t focused. Many parent-teacher conferences brought my father down hard on me to get my grades back up. I just wanted my family to be whole again, or at least not to have to deal with the fighting.

At about midyear, my arch-nemesis Mark Muller, the bully from Catholic school, also made the switch to my public school and ended up in my class. Just my luck. Mark also felt insecure in that situation, and we eventually became friends.

I was making new friends but still had the occasional bully pay attention to me. Timothy Robinson was a one of my good school friends. We would hang out together at recess. Tim was easy to get along with, and lived at the end of the road from me in a newly built house. The two previous years, I was into wrestling but not doing it, because of my parents’ marital problems. I became very passive due to the problems at home and often wouldn’t be interested in trying to defend myself from bullies anymore. I internalized the problems rather than lashing out. Tim was also into wrestling, and would come to my aid when I needed it.

I did have chances to get in trouble in school. In those days, once the bell sounded, you had one minute to line up and get in class, or you faced a wooden paddle on the backside. It wasn’t just a wooden plank. It was huge, with holes drilled into it for a more shocking, painful effect. Anytime we saw it, our hearts went cold because someone was about to get it.

One day, Tim, another boy named Brian, and I, were talking at recess. We all decided to hang out and keep talking outside, despite many requests by our teacher to come inside.

After five minutes or so we ran back into class and sat down. It wasn't long before the principal came.

Mr. Wilson was a towering, almost burly man. To us kids, he was huge, with dark hair, slightly balding. Usually, he was incredibly kind to the kids, but if anyone broke the rules there was a reckoning coming.

The door opened and he peered into the classroom.

"Who are the boys who came in late from recess?" he asked the class.

All of the kids looked around the classroom and some began to point towards the suspects.

"Okay, Tim and Brian, you boys come out here," he said.

"Will, you were out there too," the teacher said.

"Will, come out here please," the principal said.

As I exited the classroom into the hall, I saw that big, wooden paddle in his hands and my heart dropped! He proceeded to shout at us.

"You know the rules!" He shouted "When that bell rings, you be in the classroom on time!"

Brian began to cry.

"Turn around and put our hands against the wall," he said.

I heard the first *whop*. Then the second! And then it was like slow motion and I heard the third *whop* as my backside was pushed forward. A stinging sensation went right through my body. Tim and Brian returned to the class, crying, but I stubbornly held my fortitude and crept back into class. Strangely, this action earned the respect of some other bullies in class who had received the same punishment on other occasions. Among some of the kids, respect had been earned.

CHAPTER THREE

Mad at the World

IT WAS 1981, the year for me to join a high school. I dreaded the idea of going to the high school in Lockport, as it had a reputation for being a rough school. I wanted to go to the school my father and his brother went to, in Orland Park, Illinois: Carl Sandburg High School. It was the same school my cousins went to, so I thought I would do better there.

My Aunt Margaret and Uncle Ben were instrumental in showing me a good example of a two-parent household. They would take me for long periods of time over the years and I spent most summers with them. Aunt Margaret was a stay-at-home mom, and a good one at that. We would always do crafts with her and she was a great cook. Uncle Ben was a large, burly man who owned his own dump truck and worked incredibly hard. He would drive home, park his truck on the driveway in front of the house, and let us kids help him clean it each day.

Thomas was the youngest of their four children and just a year younger than me. We were the best of friends and always loved playing together. It was a great time to have a close friend. So, Dad agreed I would live with my Aunt and Uncle in Palos Park. They lived right on the town border and it was within walking distance of Carl Sandburg High School. That same year, my grandmother had sold her gas station business and retired to live with my aunt and uncle.

To my dismay, no thanks to my aunt and grandmother, my high school year there ended up worse than any of my school days, with regard to bullies. That summer, prior to the start of school, it seemed to me as if they were on a mission so sabotage my image during freshman year at the new school. It became apparent whenever they took me clothes shopping. My cousins all had all the latest school fashions. I was given no choice. The fashion of choice for me was bell bottom jeans and paisley or flowered shirts. I bitterly protested this, and explained that I would be ridiculed beyond belief with a look like that. They tried fruitlessly to convince me that I looked fine and my clothes wouldn't be an issue to the other kids. I could curse every day that they made me wear those clothes.

It wasn't long before I was berated by everyone in school, as none of the other kids wore such clothes. It was an early seventies disco look. I loathed going to school each day, knowing I'd have to face the physical and verbal threats that would be leveled at me by my classmates.

"Hey, Prentiss!" I often heard. "Are you a faggot? Why do you dress like that?"

I was often accosted in the hallway at my locker. One time a group of three beat on me with their fists and attempted to push me into the locker. I punched and kicked my way through

and succeeded in running away. The teachers were not much help. Since they didn't see it, they wouldn't do anything about the treatment.

I became fearful at school and my grades bottomed out. The only class I enjoyed was Algebra, and that was because I became so good at it the teacher put me in charge of grading the papers some of the bullies, which kept some of them at bay for a semester.

Dad had recently purchased a new home in Glendale Heights, Illinois. I had mixed feelings about selling the house I had grown up in, but thought this might be a good change. The house was larger than our single story home in Lockport. It was a two-level home with a basement converted into living space, with partial brick and white siding exterior.

Dad decided not to send me back to Carl Sandburg High School. Against my protest, he enrolled me in a tougher school, Glenbard North High School. It was rough and tough. It was overcrowded, and had a drug and bully problem. The teachers had problems controlling the kids at times. I faced a daunting reality that I would have to constantly defend myself from the aggression of other kids at school. My grades continued to suffer and, as a result, so did my relationship with my father. Asking my father for help with homework was a losing proposition. It always ended up with him shouting at me, and calling me stupid and other things. I eventually stopped asking him to help altogether and gave up on school. The prospect of giving up on life was all that remained. *This cannot continue*, I thought to myself. *I needed a change. I needed something more. But what?*

My friend Darrel had similar problems. He became one of my best friends, and we would sit together on the bus after school. Darrel was tall and thin with blond hair. He typically wore jeans and a white, button-up, long-sleeved shirt that was never tucked in. Like me, he was from a broken family. His father worked a lot and was almost never home.

It was a beautiful, sunny, eighty-degree day. We were hanging out by the local library, where we used to go to rent music cassette tapes and practice coding programs on the Apple III computer. We began talking about our family and their problems.

"Why don't we just run away from it all?" he said.

"Where would we go?"

"New Orleans, where it is warm and we can make it on our own."

"How would we survive?"

"All we need to do is walk by people's cars, and if we see change we just take it. You would be surprised at what people leave in their cars."

"You think that will be enough?"

"People leave money all of the time. We can get enough from that and maybe doing some other things. It will be no problem."

"Well, when do we go?"

He said, "We will go tonight. Just go back home and see if you can get some of your dad's cigarettes to bring with us. Don't bother with clothes, the forecast will be good. We can get that when we get there."

"Let's do it," I said as a sense of empowerment and freedom began to come over me.

Just before evening, Darrel waited for me at the corner near my home. We began wandering the streets together. A couple hours later, we were only five miles from our homes and close to our school when an intense storm rolled into the area. It began with loud cracks of thunder and lightning. As heavy rain began to pour down, we ran to a nearby wooden area for shelter. We were soaked to our underpants and getting cold. Darrel and I were shaking uncontrollably as we struggled to stay warm in the cold and wet. The temperature plummeted to thirty degrees, and neither of us got any sleep that night.

Cold and wet, early the next morning, we set off near our homes, to see if our friends would help us with some dry clothes. My father had already been in contact with Darrel's father, and they had both filed a missing person report with the local police department. The entire neighborhood was looking for us. When we found two of our friends, Leila and her brother Alex, they encouraged us to go back home. Darrel refused, but after a lot of convincing I decided to go back. Regardless of the punishment, at least I would be dry, warm, and fed. Darrel pleaded with me not to tell anyone where he was, but after I went home to my father he began interrogating me. Dad relayed the information to the police, and they picked Darrel up and brought him home. I found out a week later that his dad had beaten him senseless. It was a common occurrence in his family. My father was angry, but made a deal with me that if I didn't do it again he wouldn't have the police charge me as a "runaway." I apologized and agreed.

I don't recall my father ever asking why I ran away. He just went on working, drinking in his time off work, and keeping to himself. I felt neglected. I couldn't get a handle on my spiraling social or academic life.

He had a pattern after that, of waking me up at two o'clock in the morning and lecturing me for hours on school nights about my grades, my personality, my insufficient ability to deal with bullies at school, and whatever else was on his mind at the time. It was all a vulgar tirade. He called me all kinds of vulgar names. Arguments ensued, as I defended myself, and tried to reason or explain. He would threaten to "kick my ass."

It was wintertime when in English class we were assigned to find a topic at the library to research and write an essay. The teacher gave us the freedom to select our topic. I thumbed through the school library books and began reading. After reviewing a few books, I found just the thing. My topic was going to be on the occult.

My teacher didn't like it. In fact, she strongly opposed it and encouraged me to find another topic. I looked around the library a bit and found nothing I was interested in as much as the occult.

What am I supposed to write about? I thought to myself. *I hate school, I hate my life, I am angry with the world, angry at God for my life.* My mother had left me, the kids at school despised me for no apparent reason and wouldn't let up. Worse was that the one person I felt close to, my father, had turned on me. My whole life was upside-down. I had nothing to lose.

I needed something to change, something to change it. I needed revenge against all of those idiots who picked on me. *If they don't respect me, I thought, I will frighten the hell out of them.*

I visited the library regularly, from that time forward. I checked out books on the occult and Satanism.

My thirst for knowledge of the dark arts increased. I began to practice the things I read and began creating my own rituals based on the rituals I read about. I wondered how I could harness the power of the occult and use it to my advantage.

Our house in Glendale Heights had three levels, a basement, ground floor, and upstairs floor. I slept in the basement, which had a large walk-in closet. It was dark, dusty, and creepy. It was perfect for carrying out my rituals without being detected.

I entered the walk-in closet and drew a pentagram on the black-tiled floor. I lit a single candle and got on my knees and, in anger towards God, I cried, "You have abandoned me, you allowed all of this pain, you have stood by and done nothing. I hate you, and now it's time for a change!"

Just then, I heard a crackle of thunder. It scared the hell out of me at the time. It was winter and snowing outside. I never realized thunder can happen when it is snowing.

Oh, yes, I had faith in God. I had enough to tell him what I felt about Him. The thought never occurred to me that there is no God. I always believed in God, from the day I could think for myself. Even in the darkest moments of my life, I knew there was a God. I just couldn't understand that if He was so righteous and great, why couldn't He give me just a little freakin' help? Was it too much to ask for someone who created the world? If He couldn't help someone like me, maybe someone else could.

As I had set out to gain some power in my life, the kids at school would gather in a circle around me and ask all sorts of questions about the occult. I began preaching the occult in school. It served its purpose. People no longer messed with me, and I had a curious audience to talk to.

My friend Darrel had heard of my interest in the occult and told me how his mother was a priestess in the occult arts back in New Orleans. He wanted to join me and could teach me some ways to contact the dead. We began holding regular séances, in my room in the basement. We darkened the room and lit a candle. Darrel would lie down and I would practice putting him into a trance, by rubbing the sides of his temples in a circular motion with my index finger, and talking him back into his early childhood.

My friends Leila and Alex grew interested. Leila was my first-ever girlfriend. She had an outspoken sort of personality, thin with blond hair. Alex was her brother. He was stocky and strong. Often, he would intimidate me for no reason other than to put me on notice, since I was dating his sister. However, eventually, we became good friends.

Over the course of the next six months, my friends and I would get together regularly in the basement of my house. We would practice putting each other in hypnotic trances and calling up spirits. On one occasion, I was convinced I was speaking to my dead grandfather. On each occasion, the only message we received was not to meddle. We began to become frightened, as strange noises and bumps in the basement occurred even when we were not practicing our new hobby.

On one occasion, I put Alex into a trance and could not wake him up. I panicked to the extent that I called a local church minister for help. The only thing he could advise me was to call an ambulance. That was a defining moment for me, when I knew I had to break off my relationship with the occult. It had endangered me and my friends.

It didn't stop there. Every bump and strange noise in the house frightened my siblings, who reported to my dad everything I had been up to.

One day after school my sister Christi said she began hearing strange voices in her room.

That night, while Dad was at work, we were all watching television in the living room, which was at ground level in the house. We heard a voice, sounding like it was right downstairs, but couldn't hear what it was saying. It was loud enough to hear it, but not loud enough to understand. My brother and sisters looked at me, and I at them, with shock and bewilderment in our eyes.

We heard a loud crash from downstairs. We felt the floor as if something had hit the bottom underneath us. My sisters started screaming and running around the room.

"My God!" they screamed at me. "You haunted the house. What are we going to do?"

It was an uneasy night. My brother and I hardly got a wink of sleep, knowing we had to sleep in the basement bedroom, next to where all of this was going on.

My father was none too happy with the situation either. The situation was spiraling out of control.

"You are frightening the kids to death," he shouted angrily. "I want you to see a priest."

A couple more weeks passed and my father was increasingly frustrated with my teenage rebellion and involvement in the occult. He stepped up his efforts to force change. The early morning lectures on how worthless I was increased in frequency.

One early morning, I awoke to him yelling at me.

"Will, get your ass out of bed!" he shouted. "I will kick your ass, you punk!"

Dazed from sleep and confused, I mustered up my anger over these ongoing early morning sessions.

"Go ahead, you've been wanting to do it for a long time," I said. "I am sick of you waking me up at two o'clock every morning for this."

I stood up to him, face to face. He stared at me with hatred in his eyes. Inside, my heart was breaking. I remembered the days of my early childhood. Dad was a man who once treated me like his prized possession. We did everything together. He treated me better than the rest, because I was his firstborn son. The words spoken in these sessions struck deep in my heart with an everlasting, devastating effect, as he berated me with threats of violence.

"Go ahead," I challenged him.

He tightened his fist and, in an instant, drew back and punched me in the face. My stomach began to burn with hatred. I grabbed a wooden broom handle nearby and readied myself to hit back, but restrained myself.

It wasn't that I was afraid to hit him. Instead, my life flashed before me as I thought of all of the good times we'd had, up until his divorce. I couldn't bring myself to hit him in retaliation, though I burned inside to wallop him for what he had just done.

"You going to hit me with that?" he shouted. "Or just stand there like a wimp?"

I stared at him with both hatred and sadness in my eyes. My body relaxed and I began to turn and back down. Suddenly, he threw a second punch that landed on my jaw. The hatred turned into a deeper sense of sadness and I felt like crying, but couldn't bring myself to show such weakness to him.

His punches didn't hurt physically so much as they did emotionally. We stood for a moment and stared at each other in a state of emptiness.

Something needed to change. The occult was taking its toll on my life. I felt trapped, afraid and helpless. One night, I walked to a local park where there was a baseball diamond, and sat with my legs crossed on the ground behind home plate. I began praying to God for help. I had a deep sense of regret for my activities in the occult. I needed a way out. I begged for forgiveness and help. I poured my heart out to God that night, and asked Him to guide me. *What do I do? How can I escape this life of fear?*

In an instant, an overwhelming sense of peace came over me, like a sheet falling from the sky. A plan came to me, as if it were revealed from heaven itself, of what I must do to escape.

It all became clear now. I would be living with my mother the next day. Could it be that God had finally noticed me and answered my prayers? It was an impossible idea. It was many years since I had seen her and her living situation was not good. She was an alcoholic, living in a condemned house in Joliet. My father vowed never to let us see her, let alone live with her.

Questions raced through my mind. How was I going to live with her? How was I to get there? Where was she? Would she even take me in? What was her living situation? Still, I felt that as long as I put faith in God, everything would be okay.

Then it was like something was speaking to me, giving me instructions. It seemed like a voice inside told me I was to go home, avoid contact with my father that night, not say a word to my brother and sisters, and the next day I would be with my mother. *This is an absurd idea*, I thought to myself. However, I pushed all doubt out of my head and said to God, "It will happen if it is your will."

I stood with a feeling of elation, as if adrenaline were rushing through my body. It was a beautiful, clear night, around seventy-eight degrees. There was ambient light from the city and a cool, gentle breeze. I began to walk home in silent reflection.

By the time I got home that night, it was about 10:30. I walked through the front door and my dad was passed out on the sofa. I quietly walked passed him and went downstairs to my room. It was a school night. The other kids were in bed already. I lay down and fell to sleep.

The following morning, at five, I was awakened by my sister, Christi.

"Will, Dad says he wants to speak with you," she said.

I was skeptical of my experience the previous night, and put it out of my mind. Talking to my father at these early hours meant only one thing and I dreaded it.

"Okay, be there in a second," I said.

I got dressed and made my way to the top of the stairs. He was on the sofa in the same place where he'd been passed out, the previous night. There was no apology, no mention of the blows he had inflicted on me.

"You're going to live with your mother," was all he said.

CHAPTER FOUR

Spiritual Authority

IT WAS THE week before my fifteenth birthday, in 1983, when I packed my bags. My heart was bombarded with conflicting emotions. Part of me was deeply saddened that it had come to this, and I was scared of what I might find when I arrived in the great unknown of my mother's turbulent life. I hadn't been a part of it for such a long time, but I remembered the chaos of it.

My sister Christi seemed happy that she was finally getting rid of me. My brother, Danny, was perplexed, and my youngest sister, Brenda, was baffled and didn't show any emotion.

"Get on the phone and find a ticket!" Dad ordered me.

I searched the phone book and called United Airlines. After listening to me try to explain my predicament to the airline, and offering a few of his favorite obscenities, Dad managed to pull himself out of the depths of the sofa, and came to the phone in the kitchen. He snatched the phone out of my hand and dealt with the agent to make the reservation the same day. The other kids left the house, and went to the bus stop to go to school. Dad drove me to the airport. Not a word was spoken between my father and me from that moment until we reached Chicago's O'Hare airport.

When we got to the airport, he marched me to the ticketing counter, to collect the ticket and escort me to security.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" he asked.

I paused a moment as I fought back tears.

"Yes," I replied.

Tears welled up in his eyes. He gave me a long hug. It truly broke my heart, but I thought to myself, *Nothing will change if I stay.*

I proceeded through security. On the other side, I could no longer contain my emotion. I began to cry, feeling lost and alone. I'm not sure how I made it to the gate and boarded that plane.

I landed at St. Louis Airport in St. Louis, Missouri, later that same afternoon. Prior to leaving Chicago, my father had handed me a piece of paper with my mother's address and phone number on it. My mother lived in Carbon Hill, Illinois, about twenty-eight miles Northeast of downtown St. Louis. I called her from the airport as soon as I landed. She told me she would pay my cab fare, that I should take a cab. I flagged down the nearest one and was on my way to Carbon Hill to start a new life.

It was very hot in St. Louis, in the upper nineties that day, sunny and very humid. After about an hour in the scorching heat and rush hour traffic, I arrived at Mom's home. It was a

large, white, two-story house, somewhat in need of a new paint job. It had three old-looking, sun-faded cars on a loose gravel drive, which led up to the entrance on the right side of the house.

My first impression was that it was a bit of a step down from the suburban life I was used to in the Chicago suburbs. Still, I was excited at the uncharted road ahead, and to finally see my mom. As a young boy, I was always taught that big boys didn't cry. Whatever the problem was, I needed to suck it up and be a man, but for the second time in a day I couldn't help it.

Mom had seen me through the front window and come out to pay the cabby. The pain of separation overwhelmed me, and my eyes welled up in tears. I missed her. I exited the taxi, quickly gave her a hug, and told her I missed her. Mom hugged me back and said she was happy to see me. As we walked up the gravel driveway, to the entrance on the side of the house, with my bags in tow, two other women who lived at the home with Mom, and their two black Great Danes, met me. They welcomed me.

I did not know it then, but the house was one of a number of properties owned by Anointed of God Ministries, based in Carbon Hill, Illinois. Anointed of God Ministries was a highly authoritarian, born-again, spirit-filled, baptized-in-fire, evangelical Christian commune, founded out of the Jesus movement social revolution of the sixties.

The group owned three properties and rented a fourth. One was the house where I met my mother, which housed the women of the group. The main property was called The Parsonage. It was the home where the leader, his wife, and one other man lived on the corner of South Kensington drive and East Mayfair Street, and it included a separate church building. The home was a genteel-looking, white, two-story house with a loft conversion, a green roof, and gravel drive with left side access. The property (including the church) was surrounded by green hedges, with one large pine tree and a large maple tree. The hedges made it difficult to see into the front yard, which was often patrolled by a large, grey Great Dane. Across the street was the back of a large grocery store with two huge garbage bins.

A separate, rented apartment was where they housed the men of the group. It was a few blocks away from the leader's house. The apartment complex had only a few units, and they just rented a single unit with two bedrooms. The men, about three at the time, had double bunks in the rooms, and a foldout bed in the living room.

The third property they owned was north of Alton, Illinois, an eighty-acre farm that was not occupied, except on weekends, when they planned trips there. Access was a couple of miles from the main highway, on a local gravel road, passing a number of other farms. It was purchased for its remote location.

Mom listened intently as I explained what had happened with my father. I didn't tell her much about the occult, but did clue her in that I felt like I was meant to be there with her. As evening came, she took me to the home on S. Kensington, to meet Simon Paige, the Apostle of the group. I was greeted by a grey Great Dane and a German Short-hair Pointer. They were the friendliest animals. I fell instantly in love with them.

I waited in the kitchen for thirty minutes, and then Simon made it down from upstairs. Simon was as tall as me, at five feet nine inches, with dark hair, and a ducktail-style beard.

He walked in, seemingly confident in his authority as an Apostle of Christ, and gazed at me intently.

"Hi, there," he said with a slight smile. "My name is Simon. I understand that you are here to live with your mother."

"Yes," I replied.

"Well, let me tell you about our group. We are born-again Christians, and live our lives for Christ. I understand from your mother that you felt that you were meant to come here?"

"Yes," I replied. "My father and I have had some problems over recent years. I became involved in the occult, but have left it now."

"How did you leave? What happened?" he asked.

I told him of my strange experiences in the occult and of my experience in the baseball diamond.

"It seemed as if I was meant to be here, to escape my involvement in the occult," I said.

"Well, it sounds like you had a vision from God. He did answer your prayers. You've come to the right place," he reassured me. "The first step is to accept Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Savior. Are you willing to do that?"

His words gave me a feeling of belonging and finally being accepted.

"Absolutely," I replied.

He led me in the prayer to become a born-again Christian at that moment. I felt refreshed and excited. I had given up my life in the occult and no longer had to live in fear of the dark arts. I could move forward and begin to rebuild my life.

"Praise God," Simon said as he was beaming from ear to ear. "We have a place for you to stay."

Simon then introduced me to Adam and Andrew, who I would be staying with. I left for the men's apartment. Adam was a tall, medium-built man with thinning, blond hair. Andrew was a bit chubby with dark hair and owned a green pickup truck with a camper shell fixed to the bed.

As I entered the apartment, I was nervous about living with grown men. The situation seemed unnatural at the time. *What am I getting myself into?* I thought. I swallowed my nerve and grilled them for guidance on the spiritual understandings, rules and expectations of the group.

The group had a rigid hierarchy. There were just seventeen people in it, including an Apostle, a Prophet, two female prophetic advisors, a secretary, and some elders who were responsible for the spiritual upbringing of all of its members.

The purpose of the group's existence was to act as a 'spiritual boot camp.' It was a non-profit organization devoted to extreme, right wing political views, strong community ties, and the cultivating of Pentecostal Christian beliefs. According to the Apostle, God had placed him in authority over the members, and it was God's *perfect will* that they were all led to his ministry, to become true believers. He asserted that if any of the members ever left the group they would not be in God's *perfect will* any longer. They would subsequently be subject to the wrath of God. As it was explained to me, God was sheltering the believers from all the evil

deeds of Satan, and blessed them as favored people, faithful to God, by obeying *His perfect will*. It was explained to me that obeying God's *perfect will* ultimately meant obeying God's Apostle in the group. If we wanted to avoid the Wrath of God, leaving was not an option.

I fell asleep, hopeful for a new beginning, being in God's favor again, completely unaware that this group planned to implement God's will on me by means of torture and brutality.

I slept until one the following afternoon. When I woke up, one of the men, Adam, took me to the parsonage, where everyone was loading Andrew's pickup truck and another car with supplies headed for the farm. Simon came down and told me I should go. So, off I headed, with the women and men of the group, including my mother. Simon, his wife, and a young girl named Audrey, Simon's eight year old niece, did not go. Finally, I felt a complete sense of belonging. I was now a part of something special.

It took about two hours to drive up Route 143 into Alton, and then along Route 100 along the Mississippi river, just past Grafton, Illinois. Turning off the main road was a long, gravel farm road. After about two or three miles of gravel dust streaming into our vehicle, we approached the farm.

Leading onto the farm property was a long, muddy drive that led up past a domed house on the right, a sheep pasture on the left, chicken and rabbit coops, and a grain silo. The main drive ended at a large, grey, double-story, partially rusted tin roof, open barn, loaded with items they had salvaged from various things. They salvaged and stored everything from building materials to spare mechanical and electrical parts. On top of the barn was a canvas yurt they had built to house people for an overnight stay.

I was given a tour of the property, which had roughly five buildings. On the right side of the main barn was a smaller access road that led behind to a pole barn, where they did outdoor work in bad weather. It also housed a natural spring that people could drink from.

Beyond the pole barn was a concrete drive-in workshop, packed with tools and spare parts. Inside the workshop, past the mechanic's bay, there were two more spare rooms with miscellaneous things strewn about, and finally another hidden room, behind some grey, metal locker units. Inside this room was where they stored containers of nitrogen-sealed food, medical supplies (gleaned from a hospital where two of the women worked as nurses), and at one time, before I came to the group, guns that Simon had owned.

Finally, behind the workshop, I was shown a large, wooded area where we could hunt, log the hills, or pull tractors through to till the cornfield at the very back of the property.

We stayed the weekend, did some work at the farm, and headed back to Carbon Hill.

According to the group, these things were necessary to survive *The End of the World*, before the return of Jesus, when law and order collapses and the reign of the Anti-Christ is upon us.

"Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom... And there will be famines, pestilences, and earthquakes..." (NKJV)

Simon showed me how I could see Bible prophecy coming true each day. It all rang true in Bible study. There was a sense of urgency to their teachings. The great Day of Tribulation, just before the Earth would end, was very close. It could happen any day! It gave me a sense of exhilaration, expectation, and fright. It was a binary battle, between the dark forces of

Satan, against the light of God's heavenly army, playing out before my very eyes. I soon counted myself grateful to be a part of God's chosen people to survive such horrors to be inflicted on the earth.

One evening, Simon held a Bible study at the parsonage. We gathered together and sat in the living room, in a circle, and each of us took turns reading various passages about The End Times from the Bible. After a few of us had our turns, Simon sat up in his seat and began to preach to us.

"The Bible clearly states, whoever curses Israel, God will curse, and whoever blesses Israel will receive His blessing," he proclaimed. "The Lord also foretold in the Book of Zechariah, 'I will make Jerusalem a cup of drunkenness to all the surrounding peoples, when they lay siege against Judah and Jerusalem... it shall happen in that day that I will make Jerusalem a very heavy stone for all peoples; all who would heave it away will surely be cut in pieces...' (NKJV) That means the Muslim nations. The nation of Israel is surrounded by the dark forces of Satan who seek to destroy it."

He continued with hardly a breath. Andrew and a few others nodded and said, "Amen, praise Jesus."

"But, it's not only them, but all of the unbelievers who wage war against the true believers in Christ. Christians are under assault in societies that are becoming more permissive to sinful acts of homosexuality and abortion. They will bring about the system of the Anti-Christ, wage total war against Israel, and ultimately Armageddon. Jesus promised his second coming, and the book of Revelation says Christ will return to wage war against God's enemies and establish the Kingdom of God on earth. He will come like a thief in the night. We must be prepared!"

A chorus of "Hallelujah, Hallelujah," erupted in the room.

It was a frightening prospect to be on the wrong side of God like the unbelievers and people deceived by that Satanic religion, Islam. I counted my blessings that I was on the right side and Simon and his followers were showing me the way.

I was chosen by God.

The following Friday, we ended up at the farm once again for a weekend of work. The first night was peaceful. I sat in the opening of the main barn, at the top of the stairs, as the others had gone to sleep. Looking up, I could see all of the stars, stars I never knew existed. It was such a dark, clear, calm and cool night. I began reflecting on the last few weeks' events.

I heard a voice behind me.

"Hi, Will."

I looked over my shoulder. It was Adele. Adele was in her early twenties, with dishwater-blond hair. She was rather plain-looking, with fair skin. She had a nice demeanor. She was quite a few years older than me, but I liked her. I didn't let on that I did, since I was not sure how it would be taken by Simon.

"Hi," I said.

"I am Adele. Do you mind if I sit?" she asked.

"Sure."

Adele spoke to me for a half hour and then asked me about my experiences in the occult and how I came to the group.

"Would you like to go for a walk?" I asked.

"Sure, I'd like that," she said.

As we walked in the dark, down the dirt driveway, towards the Dome House, and gazed at the stars, she began to tell me about how she came to the group.

"In St. Louis, I was part of a witch's coven," she said. "I escaped with my life. They are still searching for me. Once you are part of such a thing, they don't leave you to go without a price. One girl that I knew, they tracked her down and performed a ritual on her, burying stones in her flesh."

My experiences were but a wisp in comparison. *She was seriously steeped in Satanism*, I thought to myself. *She is such a brave girl*.

We headed to the Dome House and sat inside. The front of the Dome House was a small, extended area with a flat glass wall and flat roof. We talked for a couple hours, watching the stars. We looked into each other's eyes. I wanted to kiss her and sensed that she felt the same. My heart pounded and a rush of heat came over me. Something stopped me. I regained my senses and thought how it might be frowned upon by Simon. Kissing her would undoubtedly be seen by the group as sinful. We both recognized it and talked about it a while. We walked back to the yurt and turned in for the night.

I had taken a bottom bunk on the men's side of the yurt. That night I had a dream. I saw a figure dressed in black from head to toe as if in a hooded robe. I recognized it as a man, but his face could not be seen. In the background, surrounding him, was nothing but a fine mist or fog. Staring at him was like staring into eternity.

"This is where you are to stay," he said.

I woke up in a cold sweat and knew immediately what the figure was talking about. It meant that I was to stay with the group.

I told Simon of the dream and he smiled.

"This is proof that this is God's Perfect Will," he said.

A couple of weeks passed. Simon gave me some books to read and work responsibilities. In fact, my workload increased dramatically overnight. Simon had placed me on a rigid schedule so that I might *grow spiritually*. I was to wake up at 5:30 for the morning prayer meeting every day. After morning prayer, I was to pray one hour minimum and then spend an hour reading the Bible. He put me on a rigorous physical training program that included a four-mile run, fifty sit-ups, and fifty push-ups, before I started my daily chores. If the workload was too much and I missed physical training, it was no excuse. He gave me no option but to make them up, even if it meant doing them late at night.

Daily chores often included dumpster diving in the bins at the grocery store across the street for food, and sorting out the rubbish collected by Andrew, who visited other locations to scavenge. Simon often added to my chores with whatever came to mind at the time. Chopping large piles of wood collected from the farm was one of his favorites. I was free labor.

"If you disobey me, you are disobeying God's chosen authority over you," he stated. "As the Apostle of this church, I am your authority."

He gave me a book to read, *Spiritual Authority* by Watchman Nee.

"Satan hates this book, second to the Bible," said Simon.

Watchman Nee is a Chinese Christian convert who wrote many books. His book on spiritual authority was almost equal to the Bible, in Simon's mind, as it explained the importance of obeying God's delegated authority on earth, i.e. the leaders of the church. Watchman Nee taught in his book, "If God dares to entrust His authority to man, then we can dare to obey. Whether the one in authority is right or wrong does not concern us. The obedient one needs only to obey. The Lord will not hold us responsible for any mistaken obedience, rather He will hold the delegated authority responsible for his erroneous act."

Nee also states in his book, "Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God. Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves." And also, "We do not obey man but God's authority in that man."

Thus, if the word comes down from Simon, my spiritual authority, it is as if God Himself said it. It was a terrifying notion to me. In Simon's teaching, I was in their group because it was God's *perfect will*. I could be in God's will elsewhere but never in God's *perfect will*, away from Simon and his church. I would still be counted as disobedient to God and subject to His wrath in the end.

Simon had brainwashed me so extensively that I felt that God would literally consume me in fire from the sky if I thought about leaving the church.

Having friends outside of the church was not acceptable, either. One weekend, Andrew met a family a few miles away from the farm while picking up supplies. He invited them over for lunch, and they came over to the farm. I made friends with their daughter. We found we had some things in common. We were not that popular in school, and had similar problems getting along with our parents. There were no other kids my age at the church, and it was refreshing to have someone to talk to, but there was nothing romantic between us. It wasn't long before Simon found out and put a stop to it. I argued with him, but he began to glow red with rage and accused me of wanting to have sex with her. He began quoting me the Bible.

"For the lips of an immoral woman drip honey and her mouth is smoother than oil. But in the end she is bitter as wormwood and sharp as a two-edged sword. Her feet go down to death. Her steps lay hold of hell." (NKJV)

Soon after, the chores were piled on, even more than before.

Running four miles each day made me very fit. I was trying for a local fastest mile record and would run everywhere. If I went between church properties, to the store or downtown Carbon Hill, I would run in addition to my daily four miles. I enjoyed running. It gave me few moments of freedom to clear my mind.

Simon also demanded that I get a job mowing lawns. Anything I made had to be handed over to the church. Simon would see to that. He would stand over me until I emptied my

pockets. It wasn't fair, but I accepted it as part of God's plan, when I simply didn't have a choice.

My chores were mounting and the cracks were beginning to show. Dozing off while studying the Bible was a serious issue. Too many chores meant that, as time went by, I began to miss some of my scheduled tasks, be late, or doze off due to fatigue. This was unacceptable in Simon's eyes. He had moved me in with his family at the parsonage on Kensington Street so he could keep a closer watch on my spiritual growth. I shared the room with Joel, the Prophet of the group, and they piled even more onto my schedule. I was now working almost around the clock, allowed only two or three hours of sleep each day.

One morning the alarm went off and I didn't wake up for prayer. Five minutes went by, then ten, and I was still exhausted. Simon was furious and instructed his sister-in-law Lynette in just the right course of action. Lynette entered my room and dumped a glass of ice water on my head. Shocked, I jumped up, wide awake, and ran to the church next to the house.

The following day was the same. The third day I missed the alarm, they dumped a large 32-ounce glass of ice water on me, and I slept through it. The sheer exhaustion was incredible. When I finally awoke, Simon and a room full of people were there, standing over me. Some of the members grew concerned that they couldn't wake me, but not Simon. His anger flared.

"The only way I'm going to help you now is if you sign a contract with me, right now," he yelled. "From this day forward, I will act as your parent. You can either accept that or get out!"

He went to his office and emerged a short time later with a handwritten contract. He instructed me to sign it. I was only fifteen at the time. *Where would I go?* I thought.

Wanting to be obedient to God, I did so. Then came the real nightmare.

CHAPTER FIVE

Spiritual Boot Camp

SIMON STOOD AT the top of the stairs, a large, wooden paddle in his hand. Simon's eight-year-old niece did get spanked sometimes, but I hadn't yet witnessed it. *Did Audrey get spanked with that?* I wondered. Audrey was nowhere to be seen and I didn't hear her. In fact, the parsonage was eerily quiet that morning. He stood at the top of the stairs and called me to his office on the second floor. It seems like, an instant upon entering the room, he shoved me against the wall. I had been five minutes late for prayer that morning, and one of the church members had reported me. My heart raced with fear. What was he going to do? I began to stand back up as he worked up his rage at my indiscretion.

"Turn around! Turn around!" he shouted. "Don't look at me."

I was in shock and forced to face the wall. Suddenly, I heard the whoosh of the paddle through the air and *whop!* My backside went numb. I held my fortitude and began to turn to block him.

He wrestled me, face down, onto the sofa.

"If you block it I am going to give you more!" he screamed.

He began to strike me from my back to my legs and everything in between.

"What are you doing?" I cried and began to turn to block him again.

"Stay still!" he shouted.

He began striking my feet and I began to scream in unfathomable pain. The pain was excruciating and my body was going numb. I lost control of my bowels, but that wouldn't stop Simon. He continued to satisfy his rage until he was sweating and exhausted. I lay on the sofa in his office, unable to move, my body limp. It was a savage beating I could have never imagined just a few days before.

"Don't be late, and do all of your chores without fail, or there will be more of this," he said.

In the days that followed, I found it difficult to move. I stared in the bathroom mirror and examined all of the black and blue marks and remembered the horror. My mind was still numb and in shock, and my personality became subdued.

A few weeks later, Simon's niece, Audrey, explained to me that the paddle wasn't the only thing he used on her. Next to the chimney mantle, behind a wood burning stove, was a round oak sofa leg. She called it the "bonker," and it was used on her many times. Audrey was a thin, eight-year-old girl with very long, straight, blond hair and blue eyes. She was a sweet little girl and very well behaved. It was unfathomable that she would get such treatment as I did. I'd never heard it, but now I believed everything she told me about Simon's cruelty.

I was in my room, one evening, getting ready for bed.

“Will!” Simon called. “Why didn’t you finish chopping the wood?”

“I just don’t have time,” I replied.

Simon grabbed the bonker and rapped me on the head, over and over, until I passed out on the floor. As I came back to consciousness he was already trying to stand me up.

“You are faking passing out just to get out of being punished! You’re going to get bonked some more!”

Raising his arm above his head, our Apostle and the man that set himself up as my father figure rained down ferocious punishment on my skull at least four more times until I hit the floor again, unable to move. Satisfied, he left the room. A trickle of blood and painful knots formed on every side of my head.

It became common practice that whenever I failed to do something on my schedule he would call me over and make me stand in front of him. He would grab the bonker and rap me on the head numerous times, all while I couldn’t move, or he would increase the abuse.

I was on a tightrope, now. Sleep deprivation was now routine practice. I was allowed only three hours of sleep maximum. If I got all of my responsibilities done, I was instructed to walk around the block and pray as much as it took to stay awake until 2:30 am. I still had to be up at 5:30 for the prayer meeting, or there would be hell to pay, and I now knew what Simon was capable of. It was relentless, and many times I remember beginning to walk and pray and falling asleep while walking. It was the strangest feeling, as I walked on the sidewalk, and woke up standing in place on someone’s porch. I was like a zombie.

No matter how ridiculous, any decision that the Apostle of the group came to, “the Lord had told him.” It was clear that my mistreatment and torture fell into that category. He began giving me regular beatings for what he said were “white lies.”

One of the beatings I received defied logic. Rob was an African-American man and new to the group. He was a US Army veteran, about twenty-seven years old. One evening Rob came back to the parsonage drunk, aggressive, and spoiling for a fight. Simon wasn’t home. Rob slapped me on the shoulder. I hadn’t thought much of the matter at the time, but the incident was soon reported to Simon by a member of the church.

Simon took the bonker to my head.

“Don’t be a wimp and don’t come back next time without beating on him!” he shouted.

Rob was ten years older than me, and a former US Army soldier. *How would I overpower him?* I thought to myself. *I will get myself killed!*

What about the Bible? Doesn’t it say, “The soul of the unfaithful feeds on violence?”

Simon tried to deal with the wayward brother’s drinking problem for some time, but he kept straying. One day, Rob came to the parsonage after one of his days at the bar, and told Joel and me that he was leaving the group. Joel sent me in to talk him out of it. I reluctantly did my duty.

“The only way to solve your drinking problem is if you stay,” I said.

“I know you don’t mean that,” he said. “I see how they treat you.”

I approached him as he was entering the bathroom. After talking to him a while he became aggressive and slapped me on my shoulder again. My heart sank as I knew I would have to

hit him, or I would suffer serious consequences from Simon. In an instant, I punched him in the mouth and he spat blood into the sink. He was in shock and grabbed his jaw and examined the blood dripping from his mouth. Pain began to shoot up my hand. I lifted it to look and realized that I cut it open on his teeth. It began to drip blood. He was silent and paused for a while. Then, as I began to walk away, he came at me and punched me in the jaw.

I began to defend myself when Andrew happened by and jumped him. He forced him back into the bathroom against the sink. Just when I thought it was over, he reached down towards the sink, picked up an aerosol can, and propelled it at me. I didn't see the can until after it had carved a huge gash into my forehead. A warm sensation began to flow down my forehead. Blood from the wound began to stream down my face and onto the carpet.

Soon afterward, Rob left the house.

Simon heard the commotion from in his loft room where he slept and came downstairs. He asked what had happened, and Andrew filled him in with the facts. He sent me to the women's house to get stitched up. Two of the girls there were nurses, and Kelly was home from work that day and began to stitch me up. She had stitching needles and thread from the hospital where she worked, but had no anesthetic to give me. She sat me on the kitchen table and proceeded to sew up my hand, lip, and forehead. Strangely, I didn't even feel the pain. It was a surreal moment as I pondered that Simon, God's apostle, was actually proud of me for what I had done.

Simon always boasted of having some kind of "Green Beret" military training, though I've never seen any evidence of it, pictures or otherwise. The strange thing is, he never really talked about it. We never heard a single story about his supposed time in the armed services.

Part of my training in this spiritual boot camp was learning how to camp and hunt. Everyday routine included practice hitting a target by aiming and shooting a rifle on instinct rather than aiming and shooting. I would have to practice different positions, shooting over or around rocks and trees. On our hunting expeditions, it became my responsibility to break down and clean all of the weapons. I enjoyed it, and seemed to be more proficient than many of the members, so they relied on me a lot during hunting season.

Outdoor activities were seen as a spiritual experience, and there were numerous trips with various members of the group. One was a deer hunting trip in Adams county, on the Mississippi river. We went out in freezing temperatures, and this particular year there was an ice storm. The ice storm was a wondrous sight to see, with everything crystalline as the morning sun rose. We set up two shooters in the trees, at the one end of the Island, and the remaining shooters, four or five of them, went to the other end to push the deer out of their hiding spots. If the deer weren't caught in our dragnet of hunters pushing the Island then they typically ran to the other end of the Island and would be picked off by the shooters stationed in the trees. This practice is not allowed by the Illinois Department of Natural Resources, but they didn't seem to care. We filled our deer tags this way.

It was my responsibility, and the other men's, to dress the deer after dragging them back to camp. The meat was pooled and given to Simon. We had the meat made into venison steaks and smoked sausages, and sometimes traded the meat outside of the church with one of

Simon's friends. The hides were usually tanned by one of the women or myself. Any money we made went into Simon's pocket. Hunting was seen as good training for the end of the world, if society broke down and we needed to defend ourselves.

On one particular hunting trip, along the Mississippi River, there was heavy rain and the temperature was almost freezing. A large camp with many groups of hunters were on the bank of the river itself. We just got to the camp and it was soon surrounded by water. That year, there was a major flood, and on this day the river was overflowing the banks and rising fast. The access road to and from the camp was overrun by water and continuing to rise. We began warning the other campers to leave while they could. One by one, people tried to flee, driving through the freezing water, and soon people began to get stuck in the middle. The current was ferocious, and it appeared to show no signs of getting better. Simon took charge, and ordered us to use his johnboat to ferry people from the campsite to safety, and from the vehicles drowning in the middle of the river overflow stream. A tow truck came to help rescue people at their vehicles, and we ferried the cable to drivers who were stuck. By now, the river was chest-high and very powerful. A black 4x4 pickup truck had gotten stuck in the current, and the driver couldn't escape. He stood helplessly on the front of his truck, in the hope of securing the tow truck cable to the front of his grill guard. The current became too much for the johnboat and it began to be swept towards a thick forest of trees. We couldn't get the cable to the man, and he was about to be swept away with his submerged pickup. Simon came up with a plan.

"Will," he said, "get out there and take this tow cable to him."

"Are you kidding?" I said.

He didn't give me a chance to question further.

"My son will walk the cable out to him," he said to the tow truck driver and handed me the cable.

"Now get out there!"

He gave me no choice. I took the cable and walked to the edge of the stream and paused.

"Get out there now!" he demanded.

The powerful current swept through my legs and began to sweep my feet from under me. I quickly wrapped the cable around my waist and inched my way toward the middle of the stream. The water was freezing, and my legs went numb. Walking in the chest-high current proved near-impossible, and my feet began to give way. I was almost at the submerged 4x4, and the man knelt on the hood and looked at me with worry and hope in his eyes. I began to stumble. I thought, *This is it, help me, Lord*. After regaining my balance, I finally made it. My hands and body numb from the cold, we hooked the cable to the truck. I was so cold that I could hardly move, and couldn't leverage myself out of the current and get onto the truck. The tow truck driver tightened the cable, and motioned for me to make my way back to shore.

By that time, the current had become so strong that my feet would no longer stay on the ground. My frozen hands trying to grip the cable, I inched my way back, fighting the current to keep from being swept away. My body was exhausted. If I had let go, that would have been

the end. The wrecker driver helped me by inching in the cable at the same time as I was inching my way back.

It was painful to put my hands by the heater in our vehicle. My hands were so cold I could hardly move them. I put them out in front of me and tried not to move. My body was shivering uncontrollably. Simon didn't say a word. He was nowhere to be found when I returned to the bank of the river. The tow driver came to my door, draped me in a blanket, and offered me some food.

"You are a brave young man," he said.

As if I had a choice.

CHAPTER SIX

Relentless Abuse

OVER THE NEXT year, torture and abuse were meted out on me on an almost daily basis. Being at the farm was hard work, but I loved it. I loved being with the animals and taking walks in the woods nearby. It gave me an escape from Simon's relentless abuse, and I loved breathing a deep breath of fresh air. Simon realized that I loved going to the farm. So, he banned me from it.

One week was different. It was in the beginning of January, which was an incredibly cold month, and we had no firewood. Simon had ordered the group to work at the farm logging and splitting wood for the remainder of winter. It was exhausting work that included cutting down and cutting up the trees, and forming a line down the hillside, where we would hand off or throw each log down the chain until they reached a pile at the bottom. Simon never attended work-related activities, and though they needed all the help they could get, this was no exception. However, he made an exception for me. I would join the members in their activities.

All of the tools that we needed were already at the farm. At the parsonage, we loaded up a 1962 Chevy and a station wagon full of supplies for the weekend, and headed out to the farm late that night.

I was exhausted and worn down from the constant beatings and sleep deprivation, and fell asleep in the back of the car almost as soon as we started moving. Mom, Joel, and a three-year-old toddler were also in the backseat of the Chevy. Simon's sister-in-law, Lynette, was driving, and the toddler's two parents were in the front. Janice, the church secretary, and Jacki were in the station wagon, following close behind us.

We had travelled most of the way to the farm, and were nearly to the last stretch of road on Route 100, at the Calhoun and Madison County line, when a drunken driver in an oncoming vehicle crossed the center line and struck our car head-on.

I woke up to a grim silence. It was pitch dark. A dull pain like I had slept in a very bad position began to shoot up my back as I try to reposition myself. Confused and in pain, I noticed I was lying across the floor, with my head resting against the inside of the door. I heard the door open. A frigid breeze swept over my face, and as my head began to drop, it was gently held up by someone's hands.

"Will, wake up," I heard.

I was motionless and confused, trying to make sense of how I had slept so badly and ended up on the floor.

"Will, wake up." The voice said again, louder this time, and I realized it was Jacki, one of the girls in the station wagon behind us.

"What's going on?" I asked, "I think I slept wrong."

She began to cry, and said, "Will, you were in an accident. Please, don't move."

I tried to process the information. Something very serious had just happened, but it didn't seem real. As I tried to look up, I saw the rear seat had been ripped from the frame of the car. It had spun around, forcing me to the floor, and rested over my body as if I were in a small tent. Janice arrived, and the three-year-old toddler, amazingly, crawled out over the top of the seat into her arms. I was startled by a gust of frigid winter wind. It was bitter cold that night, around two degrees below, Fahrenheit. It was a rural road, pitch black, and just after midnight, January 2, 1984.

I began to hear the sirens in the distance. I lifted my head again to look in the front and saw Rhoda, the toddler's mother. The front of the car had been hit so hard that the hood of the car was compacted to about a foot and a half from its original size. The engine was mostly in the front seat. Rhoda's face had been rammed into the dashboard. She was still alive and barely moving. Her nose was badly broken, and I saw the bone sticking out of her face. The blood from her nose was flowing onto her winter coat and freezing in a mound on her chest. Larry, the toddler's father, had gotten out of the car and walked to the side of the road even though he was seriously injured and bleeding profusely. I couldn't see Lynette or my mother.

Paramedics arrived and began extricating them from the car. A medic flashed his light in the back of the car when I peered up over the seat tented over me. I couldn't see my mother in the back, and I looked over me and saw Joel. At the start of the trip I was seated in the middle, between Mom and Joel. The force of the impact put Joel in the center, pinned between the rear seat and the front seat. I couldn't see Mom, but Joel was in very bad shape. He had a blank stare, as if staring into nothingness. He was alive and moaning slightly. His face was so badly disfigured, I could hardly recognize him. Blood was running out of every orifice and all over his face. He had broken every bone in his face, among other injuries. It was like waking up in a horror flick.

The EMT pulled me out of the car and wheeled me into the ambulance. Shortly afterwards, Joel was loaded into the same ambulance, and we sped off to the nearest hospital. After being checked and running x-rays, the doctor said I was, amazingly, uninjured, and released. I asked about my mom, but no one would give me information.

At 5:30 am, Jacki came to talk to me and take me home from the hospital. As soon as I stood, a rush of heat and pain jolted through my body, from head to toe. Every fiber of my body was in utter agony, and I instantly fell to the ground. The nurses helped me into a wheelchair and wheeled me out to the station wagon.

Jacki drove me back to the scene of the crash to find any remaining belongings. As we drove, the winding dark road gave way to the light of dawn.

"Jacki, what did you see when we crashed?" I asked.

"Oh, Will," she replied. "It was an eerie sight. We were traveling around 55 mph. We followed behind you about 100 yards. You went around a bend and up a slight incline. In an

instant we saw an oncoming car then all of the lights just went dark. Janice immediately stopped the car and our jaws dropped. I thought you were dead. You weren't moving."

In all, five of us in the car were in serious or critical condition. The three-year-old toddler and myself walked away bruised but otherwise okay. The driver of a 1979 Chrysler was both drunk and on drugs, according to an investigation by police who were at the scene. The driver of the Chrysler died instantly.

Every muscle in my body was in pain. I couldn't walk for two weeks after the crash. Members of the group carried me everywhere, even to the bathroom. They never had me examined for a concussion or anything else, even though I was disabled for a while. As a concession, Simon placed a moratorium on my discipline during this time.

Lynette was never the same after that. She had sustained the most injuries and broken almost every bone in her body. She was a healthy and lively girl, very pretty, but after the accident she never regained her glow. She looked like a completely different person, rather frail and weak. Joel returned to normal after some time, but for a long time had to puree his meals and drink them. Mom sustained multiple broken bones and had to have metal pins placed in her back. She eventually was released from the hospital and took some time to recover.

The chores began to pile up and Simon couldn't wait to get me back to work. There was no way he would do them. Just three weeks after the accident, when I could walk for short distances, I was ordered back on my regular schedule again. Pain began to shoot through my legs if I stood on them too long, but it was no excuse. Simon accused me of faking the pain to get out of chopping the firewood, which was in a huge stack at the side of the parsonage. It was the end of January, and the temperatures were minus twenty degrees Fahrenheit, with powdery snow covering the ground and blowing in the wind.

"Don't come back inside until that entire stack is split," he demanded.

"It's too cold. I can't stand that long and that is a lot of wood," I protested.

Simon went red in the face with anger.

"Get out there!" he yelled.

There was no choice. I had to chop wood, or face another brutal thrashing. From eight in the morning to six that evening, I chopped wood in sub-zero temperatures. It was brutal work as the biting cold of the temperature, wind, and snow overcame the body heat generated from the exercise. My hands began to freeze first and then my feet. I tried to ignore the excruciating pain in my legs from the accident. When I finished, I could no longer feel my legs and feet. As I put the axe down, my fingers were still frozen in place, barely able to move. I hobbled back to the house and began an attempt to take off my work boots, only to find that my feet were frozen inside of them. Fumbling through the kitchen, I located a bowl and filled it with ice cold tap water, to begin to thaw my hands. Submerging my hands in it felt like I had put my hands in a boiling pot as the needling sensation of heat sank into them and my hands began to thaw. My toes did not recover for about two years after that. The tips were frozen so badly they were numb, and it took time for the nerves to correct themselves.

Simon's beatings were relentless. One evening, I walked into the living room where Audrey was being bonked in front of me. It was a rare moment, since Simon didn't like punishing her in front of other people. His punishments were brutal, and she was a young child, much smaller than me. She screamed in pain from being hit on the head, and begged him to stop, but he wouldn't. I couldn't help myself. I had to put a stop to it.

"You're not going to touch her anymore!" I shouted as I lunged at him and grabbed the bonker in his hand.

"Do you think you are tough now, huh?" he shouted.

He began to strike me over the head, each stinging blow creating huge knots on my skull. Suddenly he stopped and left the room. As I began to feel the knots on my head he re-emerged from the kitchen with a thick, wooden broom handle. He relentlessly pounded me on the head, back, and legs, until he was sweating with exhaustion. I fell to the floor and curled up into a ball with blood trickling from my head, waiting for him to get too tired and stop.

"Let this be a lesson," he said as he threw the broom at me and left the room.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Fear and Courage

MY MOM HAD been an alcoholic almost all of her life, though you would not guess it from looking at her. Most of my childhood memories are of her getting drunk, being drunk, or recovering from being drunk. She gave up alcohol and reformed herself using the ideas and teachings of this group. One day, about a year after I had been with the group, there was a strange calm among the group members. Mom had become hard to talk to, and she wouldn't look at me much, but it didn't take long for me to find out what was happening.

Mom had expressed to Simon her desire to leave the group, but not because of how I was treated. Simon had demanded she give him her settlement money from the accident, which amounted to about \$125,000 after lawyers' fees. She refused. Simon was furious. He began an intense series of intervention sessions, to prevent her from leaving, which amounted to her being "re-educated" in the idea that she would incur God's Wrath by leaving God's perfect will for her to be there. I never witnessed violent outbursts at her, but Simon was red hot in the face just the same. His sessions failed. She was bent on leaving, so he ordered me to try to entice her to stay. Reluctant and under pressure, I agreed. I caught her in her room as she was packing a few belongings.

"Mom, are you really leaving?" I asked. "Why?"

"Simon and I have our differences. He is trying to monopolize my money from the accident."

"I can't believe that," I said.

"Well, it's true, and there are issues you can't see."

"Like what? If you leave, you will be out of God's will. You have done so well here and should stay," I pleaded.

"I can't tell you what. I don't expect you to understand."

Truthfully, I wasn't committed to trying to convince her to stay. I knew what this group was capable of and, deep down, I wanted to go with her. Yet I was young and brainwashed into believing that my mom would die after leaving the group because she rebelled against God's authority. She would be outside the umbrella of protection against Satan. She would incur God's wrath, and God is not someone you want to challenge. My mom didn't play much of an active role in the group, with regard to me, not even to protect me from Simon's near-daily beatings. Still, at least I had some comfort, knowing she was there with me. I hugged my mom, not wanting to let go, but she left me there with the group that day.

I felt completely alone.

A month later, I received a phone call from my father. It was refreshing to finally hear his voice after so long. He had gotten an assignment from his job in Chicago to drive a truck down to Collinsville, Illinois, which was right outside Carbon Hill. He wanted to visit me.

I asked Simon if I could visit him. Reluctantly, he agreed, but under the strict instructions that I spend no more than two hours each day with my dad during the weekend he was set to be in town.

I visited him in his motel the first night. I took one of the cars, drove there, and knocked on his door. My nerves began to overtake me as he opened the door and tears welled up in my eyes. Immediately I hugged him.

He took me out to dinner and we had small talk. It was obvious he had something on his mind, but he didn't want to push it. Then I realized what time it was. I was late getting back.

"Stay the night here," he said.

"I can't," I replied, and made an excuse. "I need to get back. I have a lot of chores I need to do."

"I understand," he said.

I came back a half-hour late, to find Simon waiting at the door for me. I knew this was a serious offense, but Simon didn't say a word. Instead he was strangely reserved. Suspicious, I entered and went to bed.

The next day, my father took me to K-Mart and purchased me a Remington 870 pump-action shotgun, to use when I went hunting. It was a gift I treasured. I would hold it and clean it with pride. In the evening, my father picked me up and took me out to eat one last time before he headed back to Chicago. Going out to eat would exceed the time Simon allowed me to stay out. *I haven't seen my father in so long, surely he would understand*, I thought. Dad dropped me off at the parsonage.

"Will," he said "come back home with me."

"I can't," I said with a conflicted heart.

I couldn't break the hold Anointed of God Ministries had on me. I would be in rebellion against God's authority and subject to the wrath of God.

He hugged me and I went back in to the house, an hour later than the appointed time. Simon was furious at my blatant disregard for the rules. Still, to my amazement, Simon restrained himself.

If I thought Simon was turning over a new leaf, I had another thing coming. The silence seemed different. It was more sinister, and afterward, the beatings became more regular, vengeful, and severe.

I was already on my old schedule again. I began to doze off during Bible-reading time, out of sheer exhaustion from getting only a few hours' sleep every night. Even when they forced me to read standing up, I would sleep standing until a slow descent towards the ground awoke me.

One member of the group walked in and saw me doze off for a second and reported it to Simon. That evening, he took a rubber automobile hose and whipped me head to toe. Looking

in the mirror, I could see the striped bruises all down my back, buttocks, and legs. I began to accept daily beatings as a fact of life in this group, and started to fear that I wouldn't survive.

One evening, as the women were preparing dinner in the kitchen at the parsonage, Simon came down from upstairs. Janice had seen me doze off.

"Will dozed off again during bible reading," she said as he walked into the kitchen.

I was angry at Janice. How could she betray me like this? She was one of the few who I often confided in and understood the abuse I had endured. Janice was a tall, thin woman in her late twenties with long, blond hair. She was always very nice to me. We would often chat in her office at the church, and the conversations always remained discreet. In an environment like this, it must have been a deep sense of self-preservation that caused her to do this to me. Everyone in the group was under strict instructions to keep close watch over me, and report everything I did to Simon. The little sense of security I still had in the group had vanished.

An incredible rage enveloped Simon and he spun around and headed back into the living room, where I was. Anger and darkness came over his face and he began swearing. He grabbed his broom handle and began pounding me with it, but I snapped and ran away from him into the kitchen. The broom handle made a *whoosh* sound as he swung at me over the table, but missed. I came unglued.

"I'm sick of this," I screamed. "You're not going to fucking hit me anymore!"

The rage came over him and he chased me into an adjacent greenhouse, which was attached to the house through the kitchen. Andrew was coming in the back door, returning with some food he had collected from the local Hardee's burger restaurant dumpster.

"Grab him!" Simon yelled to Andrew.

I ran for the door behind Andrew, but he blocked my path. Simon leapt on me and wrestled me to the ground.

"Get the fuck off of me!" I screamed.

A dark cloud descended over him and his eyes blazed with fire. I had never seen Simon so angry. Andrew held me down while Simon beat me as best he could with his bare hands. He was at his wit's end, sweating with rage and exhaustion. Simon often justified his abuse right from the Bible: "Blows that hurt cleanse away evil, As do stripes the inner depths of the heart." (NKJV) But it wasn't curing me. His fists pounded on my head, back, and ribs, but they didn't seem to hurt anymore. Andrew eventually persuaded him to stop and he wandered upstairs to his room. I stood up in shock at the vicious attack, my body shaking.

I always had huge, painful knots on my skull. I still had stitches on the top of my head from the last time he'd rapped me over the head with his wife's hard-soled shoe. I had been on the stairs leading to his loft room when he had interrogated me, thinking I was telling him a "white lie." In another flash of anger, he picked up the shoe and began to hit me on the head repeatedly. I felt a trickle of blood go down the side of my scalp and down the side of my cheek. I felt for the blood, to wipe it off, but he hadn't seen it, and accused me again of faking it and continued to hit me. When his rage was quenched, and I was told to leave, blood began to drip onto the stairs beneath me. Only then did he realized that I was bleeding and called one of the nurses over to the house to sew me up, again without anesthetic.

Simon was a firm believer in the Bible, particularly verses like Proverbs 13:24: "He who spares his rod hates his son, But he who loves him disciplines him promptly." (NKJV) It was clear to me that he had no qualms about not sparing me or Audrey. I had not imagined him trying that out on an adult, but one day I was shocked as he took the abuse to another level.

Adam lay on the floor in front of me as I walked into the parsonage. Simon was pounding on him with his fists, just as he had done to me. When he finished and left, Adam stood up with tears streaming down his face.

"I'm done," he said. "I don't care if I'm going to hell."

It began to hit me. *Is this really what God wants? Does God want us to be abused this way?* I thought. *Doesn't the Bible say, "And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you?"* (NKJV) I pushed the thoughts out of my mind as quickly as they came in.

In the Bible I found a powerful message, and it wasn't one of torture or vengeance. I awoke, one day, five minutes before the morning prayer session at 5:30, and rushed to the church. The morning was crisp and cool. My handwritten daily chore schedule was in my pocket, and I was ready to begin my day. After prayer, I hurried back to the parsonage, pulled out my Bible, and assumed my assigned reading spot, standing up at the kitchen table. As I stood reading, the words began to blur into one another. Suddenly, an electric shock jolted my eyes back open. *Oh, my God*, I thought to myself. *I fell asleep standing again.* Worried that I had been seen again, and that the information would be relayed to Simon, I turned my head to look around. Thanking God, I saw no one there.

A sudden rush of thoughts raced through my mind. *Why am I doing this? What if Simon finds out?* I found my hand feeling the stinging and burning sensations that I had all over my legs and back from the last session. *If he asks, I will just lie to him. I can't take any more beatings*, I told myself. Just as quickly as the thoughts came, I remembered the judgment of God for my evil doubts. I might be able to deceive Simon, but not God. Quickly, I pushed them out of my mind and set myself back to reading.

Proverbs 29:11: "A fool vents all his feelings, But a wise man holds them back." (NKJV) It seemed to speak right to Simon. My fingers began flipping through the Bible at random, to stay awake. As I read more, the words began to morph into the white of the page. A sudden rush of burning fear coursed through me from head to toe. *Oh no!* I thought. *It happened again! I can't stop it no matter how hard I try!*

My mind went blank. I stood, as if in meditation, for a moment.

A wave of indescribable desperation hit me. My mind began to fill with thoughts, and images of torture began rushing through my mind. Then another wave of doubt about leaving began to overtake me. I couldn't push it away anymore, and I grew certain I would die here. *Is this God's will, that I be punished like this?* He surely had helped me escape from the occult, I believed. *Is God that unjust, that he wills for believers to be tortured in this manner for dozing off while reading the Bible? Why do I fear this man, the apostle? Shouldn't I only fear God? What if I left?* Then the image and memory of my dream flashed in front of me, the figure in dark clothes telling me that this was where I was to stay.

Surely, I would incur the wrath of God. I would die from being out of God's perfect will and umbrella of protection. Satan would have a free-for-all with me.

Mentally conflicted, and in a state of seeming paralysis, I stood motionless at the table as this drama unfolded in my mind. I prayed in the tongues of angels and of men, as I had been taught, hoping that God would deliver me from these evil thoughts.

Speaking in tongues (or Glossolalia) is something based in Acts 2:1-31, in which modern Evangelical Pentecostal Christians believe that the Holy Spirit gives you a gift by praying for the Baptism in the Holy Spirit. This is done after one has already accepted Jesus as their Savior, been baptized in water, and become a Christian. It is a language supposedly not understood by humans, not even the speaker, but understood by the angels and God. It is basically a learned set of speech-like syllables that people pick up from other people who are around them, speaking the same gibberish, and often built upon by people who are well-practiced at it. Interestingly, but not surprisingly, it is also practiced by non-Christian religions, such as some Paganism and Shamanism groups.

I became resolute.

No, God's will was not for me to be tortured. God may punish sins like adultery, murder, and other very serious sins, but He doesn't punish people for being late to a prayer meeting or dozing off reading the bible. At that moment, I came to realize that God wanted what is best for his people, and the Bible was not a guidebook detailing every judgment for every minor failing of human life. It was a general guide. Simon was not teaching the Bible, but a grotesquely distorted version of it.

In my quest for God, I had only the best of intentions. We all have natural human failings, but God is loving. He cares for everything in His creation, even *me*. I never experienced love from Simon, only rage. God was forgiving, but Simon was vindictive and vengeful. God blessed those who loved Him, but Simon's ideology gave torture and abuse. I began to believe that their Christianity was not Christ-like. According to Christianity, Satan is the one who accuses and harms believers, not God. *So, I thought, who are they really following?*

But how could I leave? I had no money, and if I was caught, Simon would surely kill me. I was in a catch-22: if I didn't leave, he would probably beat me to death, and if I did escape him, I would die from the wrath of God. I could not hide from God. My mind raced and my heart sank. *I am dead no matter what I do.* Then another rush of heat enveloped me and the ultimate thought came to me: *I would rather die and go to hell than die trying to serve God under this false apostle.* God claims to be just and forgiving. If that was true, I would take my chance with God.

I nervously pulled my schedule out of my pocket, in a desperate attempt to figure out a plan to get out of the house undetected. My schedule required that I leave the house at 8:10, to go across the street to collect food from the garbage bin at the grocery store. It was a regular occurrence, and ordinarily it would have been easy, but by this time Simon had been watching me closely, or had spies watching me. It was light out, now, and I didn't have the advantage of darkness for cover. There was a good chance I would be spotted making my daring escape. Often Simon would spot-check me, by sneaking up behind me and watching

what I was doing. If I wasn't doing my duties on time or correctly, he would emerge to pounce on me.

Regardless of the doubts on the success of my plan, I closed my eyes, took a deep breath, and released it, trying to find an inner calm. I committed myself to the plan. I would walk toward the bin like I normally did, and simply walk past it. After that I would improvise as I went. The great escape was on!

My momentary calm evaporated and heart began to race as Joel, the prophet of the group, emerged from the bedroom we shared and checked on me just before heading out to work. Had I betrayed myself? Had God told him my plan? I pretended to carry on a semblance of normalcy. A sighed with relief only as soon as I heard the front door shut behind him.

Closing my Bible, I walked through the living room to my bedroom and lay it on the dresser where I normally kept it. I looked at the clock on my nightstand. It was 8:00, but I had to wait. It was important that nothing look out of place, and I obey my ordinary chore patterns, or they would be clued in that something was amiss and the jig would be up. Waiting for exactly 8:10 was imperative.

Then I remembered my father's gift, the 870 pump-action shotgun. I didn't know what to expect. *Would I be discovered and confronted with another brutal punishment? How violent might Simon be if I'm caught?* I certainly wasn't going to leave it behind. I had my gun and wasn't afraid to use it if needed. I pulled the weapon out of the cloth case I made for it, and picked up some shells. My hands shook as I loaded three shells into the gun. After stuffing it back in the case, I peered over my shoulder and saw the clock. It was time.

The morning light was getting bright and the house was very quiet. Every movement seemed louder than normal, but I dared not tiptoe and arouse suspicion. Lowering the gun vertically, I snuggled it close to my leg so it would be harder to see if I was spotted walking to the bins. I walked to the door and opened it. As the door made a loud creaking sound my heart began to pound and a wave of heat swept my body. It was the moment of truth, a baptism in courage. Raising my right foot, I stepped across the threshold and through the door. It was like slow motion as I released the door and began walking, then a loud *bang*. The door had slammed shut, as it had done every time I'd left the parsonage at 8:10 in the morning. A deep breath of fresh air and courage filled my lungs. I walked toward the bins, expecting with each step to hear the hair-raising, angry voice of Simon appearing out of nowhere, saying, "Will! What the hell are you doing?" The big, green, metal dumpsters got bigger and bigger as I walked closer to them. As I reached them, I peered over my shoulder to examine the windows to see if I was being watched. *Whew! I made it this far.* I was frightened and stopped at the side of the bins to catch a few frantic breaths and calm my nerves. If I made it this far and Simon or his spies didn't see me by now, I was in the clear.

There was no turning back.

As I walked on around to the front of the store, my heart continued to pound out of my chest. My pace picked up speed with every step.

I slung my gun over my shoulder and continued to walk across the parking lot, across the street, and towards downtown Carbon Hill. It was nerve-wracking, walking the streets with

a gun, but I was desperate and in danger. If the police were to stop me and pick me up, at least I would be safe from Simon. Walking into downtown Carbon Hill, I charted a course to the police station. As I arrived, I knelt by some nearby bushes, unloaded the firearm and disassembled it, then entered the building.

"I would like to speak to an officer," I said to the officer on duty and handed over my disassembled weapon.

"What for?" he asked.

"I'd rather not say, but I'm scared and need to find out how to get back home to my father's house," I replied.

After he pressed more, I kept telling him that I'd rather not talk about it until I had an interview with an officer on duty. *If I told the receptionist everything that happened with Anointed of God Ministries, they would think I am crazy*, I thought. Eventually, he sat me in an interrogation room, and an officer came in.

Officer O'Reilly had just arrived at work that day, and came to talk to me.

"What seems to be the problem?" Officer O'Reilly asked.

"I need to get back to my father's house in Chicago. Can you contact him for me? I'm not sure he will take me but I need to leave here."

"Where are you staying now?" he asked.

"I was staying at Anointed of God Ministries on South Kensington with my mom, sir."

"Where is your mom now?"

"She left a few months ago. I don't know where she went," I replied.

"And you have been staying with friends there?"

"The group is a church community and they board people there. Sometimes people come temporarily to live, but there are permanent residents."

Officer O'Reilly pressed, "Why do you want to leave?"

Reluctant to answer, I looked down at the table.

"Why won't you tell me what is going on there?" he asked.

"I'd rather not get anyone into trouble. I just want to go home to my father's house," I said as tears welled in my eyes.

He took my father's telephone number and, seeing as I wasn't giving up any information, he excused himself for a moment.

He came back in the room.

"Okay, we contacted your father. He is sending you some money to get a bus back to Glendale Heights," he said. "We ran a check on your shotgun, and it's come up clean. You are free to go."

"I cannot go into town. The church people would no doubt see me, and I don't want to go back there," I said.

Unknown to me, my mother had informed my father of what was going on in the church group, and my father had relayed that to the officer in their conversation.

"Okay. I will take you there," He said.

I hopped into the front seat of his cruiser, and we set off for the Western Union, to retrieve the money my father had sent.

I was unaware that as we drove to the Western Union, Andrew saw me in the front seat of the police cruiser. He immediately reported it to Simon.

After a visit to the Western Union, Officer O'Reilly put me on the bus to St. Louis, where I was to go to the Greyhound bus depot and get my ticket back to Chicago. He gave me his phone number and told me to call him when I had safely arrived at my home in Chicago.

"Yes, sir. I will."

On the bus, I remember how fearful I was that I was putting everyone in danger. After all, God had surely by now cursed me and was about to kill me. No one can escape God's wrath, and I thought fire would come out of the sky and consume us all. I could hardly bear the thought of being responsible for the deaths of all those people because I was now out of God's perfect will. *How selfish of me*, I thought. The feeling was so strong that I needed to get my mind off it and I began to speak to the bus driver about my experiences. He was a member of another Evangelical group called the Assemblies of God. He reassured me and told me that what they were teaching me was not correct and I would be fine.

We had a short stop in Springfield, Illinois, which was about halfway to Chicago. A ticket agent called me off the bus and directed me to the ticket cage, where I had a telephone call.

"Hello?" I said.

There was silence for a moment.

"Will. What, what are you doing?" a female voice said with a gasp.

A dull burning sensation sank into my stomach. They had found me.

"Janice?" I asked.

"Yes, you have to come back," she said, "What you are doing is evil. You have to repent and come back."

"I can't go back now. I won't!"

Simon took the phone.

"How did you find me?" I asked.

"Andrew saw you in a police car downtown. When I looked in your room I noticed that your shotgun was gone. Then, I knew you had left us," he said.

He began to cry.

"I promise that if you come back, I won't punish you anymore. Please, listen to me," he pleaded. "It was fair that you be punished for what you've done wrong, but if you return there will be no more punishments."

I listened to him crying and begging. It sounded pathetic. The few minutes he rambled on, I remained silent. My heart tore at what could have been if the Apostle had an ounce of empathy for his victims. Without my saying a word, he rambled on and I handed the phone back to the receptionist. As if facing into a strong wind, I turned around and forced myself to walk back to the bus, to take my seat.

As the bus drove into the night, toward Chicago, I couldn't bear to think of the dangers I was putting everyone in by being on that bus. I still believed God was going to consume us

all in a ball of fire. I needed to talk. As I made conversation with the bus driver, I found it was a good distraction and source of comfort. He helped me enormously, making sense of reality. When we arrived in Chicago, he took me to a local restaurant and bought me dinner, then drove me to my father's house. I will never forget his help, nor that of the police officer in Carbon Hill. When I arrived at my home in Glendale Heights that night, Dad gave me a warm hug and seemed so happy to see me. We talked about some of what was happening at Anointed of God Ministries, but still I was ashamed to tell him the extent of the abuse I had suffered. I apologized to him, and hoped things would get better between us.

The next day I picked up the phone and called officer O'Reilly.

"Now that you are safe at home, can you tell me about what was happening to you?" he asked.

I told him many things about the abuse and that Audrey was still there, being treated the same way. A great burden was released and I was free, but I don't know why, for some reason, I was still reluctant to divulge everything about Anointed of God Ministries.

"I knew there was a lot going on in that church," he said. "I am very glad that you made it home safe."

I couldn't thank Officer O'Reilly enough. If it wasn't for him taking me seriously, I may never have made it out of there alive.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Love and Marriage

AS I LAY on my bed, safe at my father's home, I stared at the fissured foam ceiling tiles, reflecting on what I had been through. Never had I imagined such extremism could masquerade as Christianity. Even though my mom had turned a blind eye to what Simon had done to me, I didn't blame her. She had her own demons to deal with.

Simon had established himself as a very powerful figure in the group. I understood the sense of control he exerted. To argue with him was to argue with God, who spoke through him. It was a powerful learning experience in the art of brainwashing and victimization.

It starts with ideas you are open to accepting, and then incrementally pushes the boundaries of what is acceptable behavior, until you realize that you are no longer free and so deeply entangled there is no chance of escape. People do things they would not otherwise do. It is the power of religion as a unifying force for good or evil, and it relies on the pillars of a core few who claim ultimate authority through God. Once you relinquish your will to a person, as if it were God's voice speaking through them to interpret scripture, your will is no longer your own. You can argue with the man, but who can argue with God?

Lying on my bed, I determined myself to subject leaders of any religion I encountered to a high level of scrutiny. No longer would someone be allowed to establish that level of control over me again. I would not reject faith in God, but I would not follow an ideology that would instruct people to control and abuse others in the name of God or scriptures. Such is a false ideology and the defining characteristics of all brands of religious extremism.

I fled the Christian group to my father's house in Glendale Heights in the summer of 1986. I still slept in the room downstairs, where I had done my occult rituals. It was quite frightening, as I felt my head spinning whenever I slept down in that room. I thought maybe there were some residual spirits there, but I ignored them as best as I could.

Nearly a year later, the phone rang as I was entering my house. It was Janice, the secretary of Anointed of God Ministries. My stomach sank and I became nervous. How did she get my number?

"Will," she said, "I know it's probably not enough, but I want to apologize to you for my role in the way you were treated."

I listened in silence as she went on.

"I've left the group and live in Indiana, now. The way Simon treated you really had affected me, and that is why I left. I hope you can find a way to forgive me."

I was stunned.

"Of...of course, Janice," I said, struggling to find words, "I understand and forgive you."

I enrolled myself back into high school. Glenbard North high school was a rougher, tougher crowd than I had previously experienced. The kids in class were unruly and the teachers could hardly control them. One day, in physical education class, I was playing basketball, when one guy checked me in the mouth and broke two of my teeth.

"Prentiss, you suck," he said as he walked away.

The teachers did nothing. Physical education was the main class where kids thought they could bully me. Preoccupied by my recent past, I became withdrawn and didn't put up much in the way of competing in sport. One day I discovered there was one sport I was better than all of them at: running. After warmup exercises, the coach decided we would spend the remainder of the period running the track. I looked down at the ground and walked out to the quarter-mile gravel track and began my jog alongside one other boy named Matt. The group of boys who pushed me around on the basketball court ran a couple laps around us.

"Prentiss, you suck," one of them said. "You can't even run."

"Why do you let them talk to you like that?" Matt said.

"I don't have time to mess with them," I replied. "I've got too much on my mind."

At the next lap, the boys came back around for another lap, and one of them tried to trip me.

"Come on, Prentiss," he said. "Get out of my way."

Looking at the snarl on their smug faces angered me. Who were they to push me around and tell me I sucked at anything?

"Watch this!" I said to Matt.

My training in the Christian group turned out to benefit me, as I leapt forward and ran around the track. I ran one lap, two laps, and then three around the bullies. Struggling and out of breath, they bent over, grabbing their knees, unable to catch up. I was running close to six-minute miles by the time I left the group, and on the last quarter-mile on the school track I sprinted as fast as I could. The jaws dropped on the faces of Matt and the rest of the class. My teacher was amazed, and began to harass me to join his track team. I'm certain that, in the shape I was in, I would have been a good asset.

My grades were not very good, though, as I had too much on my mind. I declined the team not only because I hated the arrogance of the jocks. They repulsed me. I was no longer afraid of them, since my experience in the Christian group had made me capable of taking and meting out punishment. I simply didn't see the point of beating someone up, if you didn't want to finish the job and stop them from getting up again. It was something I learned from Simon, and it frightened me to have that idea in my head. These people were immature and didn't deserve an atom of my attention.

After the first semester of school, I began attending the youth group at the Assemblies of God Church in Wheaton, Illinois. It may seem strange that I joined another church, but I felt confident in myself enough to not allow church leaders to brainwash or torture me again. The bus driver who helped me on my escape from Anointed of God Ministries left a lasting impression on me that Christianity is not all bad. Already I had a feeling that I did not blame God or Christianity but rather evil people masquerading as good Christians. I had decided to

give Christianity a second chance, and see if I could find those good Christians who would welcome me with the kindness and true spirit of the religion. Since my bus driver hero was from the Assemblies of God Church, I decided to give them a try at a branch in my local area.

The youth group was called FANTAZ. They were very good at establishing activities for youth and would meet every Wednesday in the evening. FANTAZ is where I met a good friend named Jacob Henning. We became best friends almost immediately.

Two girls I met at youth group had previously dropped out of high school and were already studying for their General Educational Development exams. I was not in school while I was at the Christian group in Carbon Hill, and I was behind academically. Now staying in high school for two extra years was going to prevent me from moving on with my life. I began to feel that I needed to start thinking about my future, and perhaps finding work, but I still wanted to finish with a diploma, so I decided to join them.

When I dropped out of high school to study for the exam, my relationship with my father began to deteriorate again. Having me finish high school and going on to a technical college was important to my dad. He didn't understand that I was dealing with a lot of issues from my experiences and it was always a struggle to try to explain them to him.

Meredith Henning, the mother of my good friend Jacob, offered to give me a room in her home while I studied for my exams. I received my GED high school equivalency diploma a couple months later, and began working as a carpenter for a local businessman and good friend of their family.

College was on my mind, but I had no direction, and didn't know how or what to study. I thought perhaps I could work my job in the summer and continue higher education in the fall. The pastor at our church and Jacob's mother suggested I attend North Central Bible College in Minneapolis, Minnesota, where I knew many of the people from the church had gone. At least, I could get some base credits while I decided what to do with my life. I began to feel pressure from people in the church to act on my interest in college.

"I think it is God's will for you to go," the pastor said.

I had heard this song before, and wasn't entirely on the same page about God's will as the pastor. His job was to recommend the college as God's will for everyone. I wasn't about to let someone dictate to me God's will. Still, many of my friends were going, and I could take basic courses at the college and transfer later if I wanted. I applied to North Central Bible College and was accepted to attend that fall.

It was a sunny summer day when I met Laura Jones at a Christian rock concert. I was there with Jacob, and remember sitting with him under the shade of a tree, waiting for his mother to pick us up, when Laura passed by. She gazed gently at me and we locked eyes. My heart pounded, and I couldn't keep my eyes off of this beautiful, olive-skinned, dark-eyed brunette with an absolutely perfect figure staring at me.

My heart stopped.

I tried to say something but the words wouldn't come out. I questioned myself. Was she staring at me? Of course she was staring at me. I always second-guess myself when it comes to girls.

As I struggled to find the words to impress her, she said, "Hi, I'm Laura."

"Hi, I'm Will, and this is my friend, Jacob," I replied.

As we began to talk about the concert, Jacob's mother pulled up. I was smitten and disappointed that we didn't have more time. I may never see her again.

"Will I be able to speak to you again sometime?" I asked.

"Absolutely, I'd like that," she replied.

We exchanged phone numbers and addresses. It was love at first sight with Laura.

Laura and I wrote back and forth and talked on the phone for hours at a time. She invited me to meet her for the weekend at the Cornerstone music festival, that summer. I planned to join a church camping trip to the festival. Laura came with her church group and they, too, set up camp.

The weather was gorgeous that weekend, and we enjoyed a lot of great food and music together. We held hands and talked, then lay on the grass, watching the stage performances. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed someone snapping a picture of us with his camera. He approached us, told us he was a photographer, and asked if he could use the photo in his magazine. Of course Laura and I were excited and welcomed the idea.

She was so beautiful I could hardly contain myself. She had long, flowing, dark hair, brown, lustrous eyes with a hint of deviousness, and long lashes. Her skin was perfect, soft, and smooth, with deep red, inviting lips. My heart raced as we had our first kiss, and then another.

We kept in contact the rest of the summer, and I would sometimes travel the eighty miles to her house in Dixon, Illinois, where her parents welcomed me with open arms. I fell in love with Laura. I'd had girlfriends before, but none had captured my heart like she did. I knew we were too young for marriage at that time, but I wanted to marry her someday nonetheless.

That fall, in 1987, I began Bible college. I began attending classes, but found that I was outcast yet again, for very different reasons. I had become more outgoing in college and made many friends. However, this time I had serious theological and ideological issues with my peers. I always disliked hypocrisy, and saw much of this in the people at the college, in the church back home, and in some of the college staff. I saw their education as something with little or no value. I ran into some who believed that since God works through them, in their actions, it was therefore God himself that did the act. It was a belief I was familiar with from the Christian group in Carbon Hill. If they beat on a drum "in the name of the Lord" to make music in worship, it was God Himself doing it. I found this to be a very dangerous ideology.

The mailroom was our hangout. Saul Peterson had become one of my best friends at college, and later he would be the best man at my wedding. He was tall and lanky, with dark hair, pale, spotty skin, and a moustache. We would hang out there and talk and make fun of the hypocrisy of various preachers like Oral Roberts, Jimmy Swaggart, James Bakker, and others. Many of the other students accused us of blasphemy against God's delegated authority and God himself. Saul did an excellent impression of an evangelical preacher.

He would preach, “And you, ah. Yes, you woman in that miniskirt, ah. Don’t you know that dress is sinful, ah? You just take that off and leave it right here at the altar, ah. Let me free you from that burden of sin, ah. Just take that off and repent before the Lord your God.”

He would go on, “Yes, our ministry needs your money, ah. I need a private jet to deliver the gospel and need your money, ah. Just open your wallet and give me that Ulysses S. Grant. You just lay it right here on the altar of God, ah. And yes, you heard, ah. My dog is suffering, ah. He is in danger, ah. In danger of getting heat stroke, ah. I neeeeed your money, ah. To get him a new dog house, ah. But not just any dog house, ah. He neeeeds air conditioning, ah. So, he doesn’t get heat stroke, ah. You know what I mean, ah. If you want me to carry the message of God, ah. I need an air conditioned dog house, ah. So just open your wallets, ah. And you guessed it, ah. Ulysses S. Grant is what I like, ah.”

Oh, Saul was hilarious. We would preach this all night long and laugh and laugh, making fun of the hypocrisy of people in our faith. It is ironic and heartbreaking that, many years later, he abandoned our friendship on the basis that I had become a Muslim.

The hypocrisy of many Christian evangelicals at the time was underscored that particular year, as James Bakker and Jimmy Swaggart, two evangelical preachers whom many at the school admired, were caught engaging in scandalous activities. James Bakker was a popular televangelist who was caught in a sex scandal and subsequent accounting fraud that sent him to prison. The height of the drama involved Jimmy Swaggart, who had kept a close watch on his rival, televangelist Rev. Marvin Gorman, the year prior. He had invited Rev. Gorman to his mansion and accused the preacher of having an adulterous affair. As a result, Rev. Gorman was defrocked from the Assemblies of God church. In retaliation, Rev. Gorman hired his son, Randy Gorman, and son-in-law, Garland Bilbo to stake out a Travel Inn motel in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. His son and brother-in-law captured photos of Rev. Swaggart with a local prostitute, Debra Murphee. He was caught red-handed and forced to confess to his congregation.

Onstage, Rev. Swaggart gave a tearful speech, pleading forgiveness from his congregants. It was a song I had heard many times before, and I had a feeling there was an expectation among many Christians at the college that there should be no consequence once a preacher asked for forgiveness for his sins. Thankfully, he was eventually defrocked. It was this kind of Christianity that didn’t appeal to me. It’s shallow and comes packaged in easy-to-swallow slogans to appeal to the masses. One can sin and repent, only to rinse and repeat with the expectation of little to no consequence. I call it “fast food religion,” or sometimes “insurance policy religion.”

In November, I received a letter from Laura, explaining that she was dating someone else. The distance from Minneapolis to where I was attending college to Illinois was too much for her. It was as if the air was sucked out of my lungs. I was heartbroken, but understood we were still quite young. There was nothing I could do to be closer to her. If she couldn’t wait for me, perhaps she wasn’t right for me. The heartbreak had a devastating effect on my grades for the remainder of the year.

It was a cold January evening that I met another girl, Melissa Clark, who was invited to visit the college by my friend, Armando Rodriguez. Saul and I took our booth in the center of the mailroom as usual, and began our comedy routine. We noticed a very pretty and elegant blond-haired girl with hazel eyes, sitting in a booth behind us, alone. We didn't recognize her, and she had been there on her own for about an hour with no one visiting her. We were curious, so I approached her, introduced myself, and asked why she was there alone. Armando and his friend ended up leaving her alone in the mailroom as they went to downtown Minneapolis, to have a good time. She looked bored, sitting by herself, so Saul and I ordered her a pizza and sat next to her.

It was getting a little late, and Saul had decided to go to bed. Melissa and I went outside for a walk in the snow to talk. Melissa had just lost her brother in a tragic sports accident at school. Her brother, Calvin, was a gymnast, and was practicing on the high bars when he fell and fractured his skull on the hard gymnasium floor. The school gymnasium had no safety mat to prevent such accidents from taking place if someone fell. My heart felt for her and I reached out to comfort her. I consoled her as she cried profusely on my shoulder. As she calmed down, I was disappointed to hear she would be leaving the next day. I asked if we could write each other, to keep in touch.

Our relationship seemed to intensify with each letter. I saw a good Christian girl who had a great tragedy happen to her. Melissa and I began writing profound feelings of love in our letters and every time I received a letter from her my heart fluttered and I felt like I was walking on air.

I was nineteen at the time, and couldn't help but think about Melissa all of the time.

I no longer was interested in Bible college. My grades had already suffered, and I saw no future in pursuing an education there. I began to wonder what it would be like to start a new life with Melissa and start a family.

Melissa came to visit me in early May of 1988, for two weeks. I proposed marriage to her, and she accepted. I talked to her father and asked his permission. He gave it. We set a date and were married in August.

My father and mother were very happy for me. My father met and loved Melissa dearly, however he refused to be at the wedding if my mother was going to be invited. I told him that I invited both him and my mother. My mother came and he didn't show up.

We moved to the Chicago suburbs where I resumed a job as a carpenter, and Melissa gained employment at a Christian bookstore called Scripture Press in Wheaton, Illinois.

CHAPTER NINE

A New Adventure

CHICAGO IS A wonderful city, but it can be an expensive place to live. We had a car that constantly broke down and eventually stopped working. I had hefty student loans to pay from my year in Bible college, and we could only afford a tiny studio apartment, which we rented in Lombard, Illinois. After all of our other expenses, we could barely eat more than macaroni and cheese.

Married life was a lot more difficult than I had imagined. We began dumpster diving, as I had done during my time with the Christian church in Carbon Hill, years earlier, for extra food items, like fruits and anything else that was good.

One evening, the phone rang. It was Melissa's father and he had a great idea. Her father was in the Nebraska National Guard, and suggested that we look into joining the military full-time. We talked about it, and after a few days walked into the US Air Force recruiting office, then next door to the US Army recruiting office. It was an exciting prospect that offered to help us get out of extreme poverty living conditions. We both scheduled ASVAB tests for entry into the armed services, the Air Force for her and the Army for me, and passed, but there was a rub. We could not be assured that we would be stationed together, not even if both of us entered the same branch of service. After talking with her family, we decided that Melissa had a better chance at getting good placement in a technical school, following basic training, because of her grades in school. She would join and I would gain civil employment at her military post after she completed tech school.

After graduating with honor from basic training, Melissa was assigned to tech school at Lawry Air Force base in Aurora, Colorado, where I joined her during her studies. It was late 1989 when we watched with intrigue at the fall of the Berlin wall. We also found out that she was pregnant with our first child. Both of us were elated.

After tech school, she received her first assignment as a Graphics Specialist at Offutt Air Force base in Bellevue, Nebraska. It was the first time we really felt secure, and despite the working poor wage of an E-2 it was enough to get us by in Bellevue. We were able to buy a new car and have a better apartment than we had in Chicago, and we didn't have to dumpster dive for food. I began working part-time at a local McDonald's and joined the Bellevue volunteer fire department.

The fire department was a tremendous source of pride. I was doing something good for the community, felt a great deal of comradery, and made a lot of friends, which I desperately needed.

On Independence Day, 1990, my first child, Aaron was born. It was the happiest day of my life. It was in the early morning hours that I rushed Melissa to the hospital. The doctors had other women giving birth and they examined her and felt it best to care for the other patients first. Then, suddenly, her contractions became much more frequent and severe. The doctors were shocked at how rapidly she was dilating; it was much faster than they anticipated. She ended up giving birth a few hours later. The birth tore her cervix and she had to get stitched up. Still, we were beaming and shed tears of joy. I had a son and now felt a great deal more responsibility than just making do with what we had for the two of us.

It wasn't long before her commanding officer handed Melissa orders to RAF Alconbury, and we were off to the United Kingdom. It was heartbreaking and exciting at the same time, but I knew this was part of the deal. Giving up my work at the fire department meant I had to drop my studies, which were paid for by the department. It was a great career opportunity lost. I must admit that for a fleeting moment I thought I should stay and put myself through the rest of the courses I wanted and then join her, but now I had to care for my son. I was now a stay-at-home husband as my wife took on a full-time job by virtue of her commitment to the USAF. On the flip side, I was to embark on an adventure to another country. Once I reconciled the new reality, it became exciting.

We made friends the moment we arrived at RAF Alconbury.

Jack and Linda were also new. They had just arrived from their station at Incirlik Air Force base in Turkey. Jack and I had a lot in common. We were roughly the same age, had wives in the Air Force, and each had a son. We eventually were assigned housing next door to each other on RAF Wyton and became close friends. We would often get together for drinks, barbecues, video games, and kids' play dates.

RAF Alconbury was an American A-10 base converted to a C-130 and Blackhawk helicopter base after Operation Desert Shield in Iraq. It had several satellite bases, one of which included the base where Melissa worked, RAF Molesworth. Molesworth was an old nuclear missile base converted into a US all-branches intelligence base.

One afternoon, Jack and I took the kids to the BX exchange department store on RAF Alconbury. We were looking for new games to play during our free time and some clothes to accommodate the UK climate. I was shocked when I saw Jack lift a game from the store. He had tried to get me to take it, but I refused. We walked out without anyone noticing...or so we thought.

A couple days later, I was asked to visit the military police station. I was curious why they had wanted to talk to me, but I had some idea. After entering the building, I was led upstairs to an interrogation room, where I was questioned by plainclothes agents. It seemed curious to me that they were not regular military police officers, but rather Office of Special Investigations agents (OSI). I was curious as to why they were interested in a shoplifter. Before they began to question me, I had already resigned myself to telling them the truth, as I believed myself to be a devout Christian and thought it was the right thing to do. After explaining to them my involvement and what happened, they left the room and came back fifteen minutes later. The agents were impressed with my honesty and had a proposal for

me. I would be their “eyes and ears” into anything happening on the base. Well, it sounded interesting. They were not interested in Jack’s shoplifting, though his situation was handled by the regular uniformed military police. They needed to tackle drug problems on the base, and Jack’s situation was used to recruit me into their Drug Enforcement team.

Drugs had become an issue with the servicemen. Many of them began using drugs after returning from the Iraq War, and local British suppliers had begun selling to military personnel on the base. The agents processed me to become a confidential source, to provide any information on drug-related crimes that I saw among the service members. I raised my right hand. The agents led me in a pledge to be truthful and protect the national interests of my country. I signed an agreement with them to that effect.

I gained employment as a bartender on RAF Alconbury for Moral Welfare and Recreation services (MWR). I uncovered a lot of drug use among the soldiers and others on the base. The OSI had placed me on their Joint Drug Enforcement Team (JDET) and given me some training in recognizing drugs, smells, and local costs. I met with their counterparts in Scotland Yard when local nationals were involved, on occasion. My work eventually led to local pubs being cleaned up and the arrest and conviction of three soldiers. One of the soldiers, who was in the US Navy, became a very close friend of mine when I was working with the OSI. I was heartbroken for him, and wished so many times that he was not involved. He approached me in the storage room of the bar and I spoke to him after his arrest. Oddly, he had a positive outlook on it, and said that he was looking to get out of the service anyhow. They were going to give him an administrative discharge. At the time, I was against any form of drug use, especially where people were controlling aircraft. An accident involving US servicemen in a foreign country involving drugs would be a serious international incident. I came to view this work as a patriotic duty to protect US national interests. A fourth friend of mine and Melissa’s was given an administrative discharge.

Working for JDET meant that I was constantly on the go. It also meant I had to keep one eye over my shoulder. People on the base knew the OSI had spies everywhere. Whether I was in my bar on the base, or out in local pubs in London, Cambridge, Peterborough, and the Huntingdon areas, the agents warned me to stay sharp and look for trouble. Working and socializing at the bar was very fruitful. A lot of information came my way, keeping me relevant to the OSI. Unfortunately, all of my undercover activities began to take their toll on my marriage. I was out all of the time, at pubs and parties, or the club on base, where I bartended. Melissa began to get jealous at the places I would go. She was convinced I was partying nonstop.

I explained to her that I wasn’t there to party and had to keep my wits about me, never be too drunk, and watch my back. I was also concerned for her if someone found out the work I was doing out in the streets and pubs. She knew what I was doing and the dangers involved, but she wanted to go out to the clubs, too. I didn’t want her mixing with the people I was mixing with, because they were bad news, but she didn’t see it that way. She saw it as a night out to have fun.

I must admit responsibility for failing her. The bar provided us with much-needed income, but my work with JDET was exhilarating. I felt like I was doing something good for my country and I did enjoy it, but it was not a paid job. If I had to do it all over again, I would readjust my priorities sooner.

One evening, I phoned my father to try to re-establish my relationship with him, and he dropped a bombshell on me. Dad had developed cancer. I was devastated and at a loss for words as tears began to stream down my face. The possibility of Dad dying—I had never thought of it before. He was a permanent fixture to me, one I thought would always be there to a ripe old age. However, Dad had smoked heavily since he was a teenager, and it was only a matter of time before smoking caught up with him. He had developed his cancer at the base of his tongue and neck. Immediately, I flew out to see him at the hospital, just before his operation. When I walked into the hospital, my Aunt Margaret, Uncle Ben, and my grandmother were sitting in the lounge, and Dad had just been admitted, so it was too late to visit him. After he had the procedure the next day, things were looking well for him. After a two-week visit, I hugged him, told him how much I missed him and loved him. Then I boarded a plane back to the United Kingdom.

It put perspective on life and made me think of the direction I wanted to take. *Should I continue to allow my family to go down a path that would tear us apart, or try harder to improve our lives?* I thought to myself.

I had one year and six months to go on our three-year tour in the United Kingdom. As I began to reassess the direction I had taken my marriage, I stopped working for JDET and began to devote that time to my faith and my family, in the hope of saving my marriage. Since my experiences in the Christian church in Carbon Hill, Illinois, I had wanted to take the time to embark on a journey of self-discovery, to sort out many things that did not make sense to me, regarding the Christian religion. I felt I had begun this process in the Assemblies of God church and Bible college, but it did not afford me the freedom to figure it all out. Rather, it seemed to replace one indoctrination with another, as the ideologies tried to keep my mind contained in a box that was not conducive to allowing me to expand my discovery. The time spent away from JDET afforded me a perfect time to devote my energies toward the aim of figuring it all out.

I guess since my childhood, I have always felt a personal connection with God, even when I was angry with Him for this burning sensation inside of my soul as a result of my childhood struggles. I loved the church that I belonged to in Wheaton, and I learned a lot from the people there, but I needed to be solid in my foundational belief system. I needed to resolve what I believe, and I could not do that without satisfying my intense need to find the right path for me. If that meant being in the church, at least I would be a better and stronger Christian. I still had a lot of questions about contradictions that I could not resolve. I needed a foundation and some sense of stability. Regardless of which path to God I chose, I committed myself to be the best, and that meant embarking on this journey.

I never considered atheism as a possibility. I had a natural belief in God and chose to continue on that basis. This resulted in a lot of work for me ahead.

I realized that my experiences were very small in comparison to the vast world of other religions, and there was much more out there I needed to learn about, even if I didn't agree with them. People in all faiths go their lives convincing themselves without questioning their beliefs. It kept me in the Christian church in Carbon Hill. If I had not so easily surrendered my will and questioned what I was being taught, perhaps I wouldn't have stayed long enough to be brainwashed and abused. I've come to believe that if we don't seize opportunities to challenge our most deeply held beliefs and question others, we do an injustice to ourselves and the world. We all will stay in our boxed-in, safe area, and lose out on something that might be better for us or lose out on learning about and understanding more fully the world we live in. It's a principle that I live by today and apply to more things than just religion. So, for the remaining year-and-a-half in the United Kingdom, I devoted almost all of my spare time studying the roots, origins, and core theologies of Christianity.

Unfortunately, it was hard to run back the ramifications of my involvement with JDET that took a toll on my marriage. Melissa and I argued about her being out at the clubs on country and western night with drinking friends.

"Why is it that you get to go out and have fun and I don't?" she asked.

"I wasn't having fun. It was a lot of work," I replied. "One of these guys is an air traffic controller, and he is trying to buy cocaine. It's an accident waiting to happen."

"But, you get to go out to the clubs. I want to go out, too. I see nothing wrong with that."

"I'm not going to clubs anymore. You see me sitting here and trying to clean up my act and pay off our debts," I explained. "Wouldn't you like to go back home debt-free?"

She would get silent. I would give in and cede the point. After all, working with JDET did give me a social life and friends. I could see why she would want that, too. Even beyond the social or financial issues, we now had a son to care for, and he needed both of us to create a stable home environment. I felt that if she wasn't going to be as committed to the same page as I was, to stay away from the clubs, drinking, and socializing, I wouldn't try to force her. I will go it alone. Perhaps, eventually, she would follow suit.

By the time we left the United Kingdom, at the end of our tour in 1993, my family was not under threat from alcohol, debt, or lack of structure. At the end of her tour, Melissa was discharged from the USAF and now working as a secretary for a law firm. I began work as an Associate for an OfficeMax retail store, and we began to feel the financial burden of living in the Chicago area once again. Then we received a huge blow when she was suddenly fired from her job. The bills began to pile on more, and it put a lot of strain on our marriage.

Our marriage began to fracture after I was promoted to management at my retail job and started working fourteen to sixteen hours a day, six days per week. After a long stretch of unemployment, Melissa got lucky and happened across a job working part time, late night, as a waitress at a local country and western restaurant and bar. I was not happy about it, but I was working too much to do anything but be grateful she had a job and money coming in.

"You are out much later than your shift with guys who drink," I protested. "I work fourteen-hour shifts to try and float this family, and this doesn't help us get back out of debt."

I didn't receive much sympathy or response.

I continued in my spare time to research religion. As I got more deeply invested in learning about the origins of Christianity and the Bible, the less I believed I could ever resolve some of my questions, particularly about the Trinity and ascribed authors of the books. I began to delve into Jesus's life as a Jew, practicing Jewish customs in accordance with Jewish law.

It was around this time that I realized that I was no longer a Christian, in the traditional sense. Though I believed he was the Messiah of Israel and the Son of God, I came to realize that these phrases in Jesus's doctrine as a Jew did not carry the meaning that Christians attached to it, that such a figure is God or divine.

Eventually, my research led me to an Orthodox synagogue, to attend conversion classes in order to learn more about Judaism. I attended shul (synagogue) on Saturdays, and began practicing as if I were an Orthodox Jew at home and in my life in general. I considered full conversion to Orthodox Judaism, but a prerequisite to convert required that I resolve my belief that Jesus was important historical figure in history. Orthodox Jews do not accept that he was.

It was around this time that my father passed away from recurring cancer. His initial operation was successful, and he appeared to be in remission, but some months after he developed another tumor, which began to spread throughout his body. He fought it for nearly two years, but eventually the fight was too much for his frail body.

It was a cold January night, and large flakes of snow blanketed the ground, making the night glow white in the ambient light of the city landscape. I had just arrived home from work. The phone rang. It was my aunt Margaret.

"Will, you need to come to the hospital right away," she said with a tone of urgency.

"What's happened?" I asked.

"Your dad began spitting up blood," she said, "and I had to rush him to the hospital. He might not make it."

I was devastated as I lay the phone down gently to hang up. I held my head in my hands and broke down in tears. After I composed myself, Melissa and I got in the car quickly and set off in a blizzard to head down to the hospital. We took a quick detour to pick up one of my sisters and brother, so they could see him before he died. While driving, I dialed my aunt on my cell phone, to let her know I had just picked up the last of my siblings and was on my way.

"Will, don't come," she said. "Your father just passed away."

I was silent for a moment and tears began to stream down my cheeks.

"Your uncle Ben and I were in the room when he died," she continued. "We heard him take a last deep breath and exhale. He is gone."

I felt lost, once again. It was as if someone had just ripped a huge hole out of my heart.

CHAPTER TEN

New Year's Resolution

THE DEATH OF my dad highlighted the shortcomings in my marriage to Melissa. I felt that Melissa was largely absent and partying. She didn't give me the empathy and support that I needed to deal with the loss. For a brief time, I again resorted to drinking. I would go to parties after work to numb the pain. My mind grew clouded as I spun my wheels, trying to get her to find a better job, and wondered if I would forever be working to pay off debt. *Why, I wondered, am I spending so much energy trying to get her to stop staying late drinking with friends at the country and western club?* I knew that perhaps the hours I devoted to work were too much. Maybe I'd been pushing my religious studies too far for her to accept them. I now had these issues, too, that I needed to deal with, but we were growing farther apart. I came to realize that to move forward perhaps we should split up. Perhaps we married too young. We didn't know what it took to make a successful marriage. In my case, that certainly may have been true, having grown up in a broken home. The mounting financial burden was more than I could bear.

"Why are you still with her if she isn't going to follow the same path?" one of my Jewish friends asked.

It was a good question, but I still loved her, and for the sake of my son, Aaron, I wanted to try one more time.

So I quit my job and got another job working as a Shift Supervisor on the graveyard shift at the Kohl's department store in Mt. Prospect, Illinois. I also gave my religious studies and activities a six-month break, to see if this would have a positive effect on the marriage.

She seemed uninterested, and the changes didn't have much of an effect on the trajectory of our relationship. I eventually gave up and began to seek a way out. It was an incredibly sad realization, because I knew that, as the only one with a stable job, she would have custody of my son, and I would be apart from him. Aaron was my life. We did everything together when I was home. He was five-and-a-half years old at the time. Often, I would come home from work and we would walk to a nearby 7-Eleven and purchase a bottle of iced tea. He would hold my hand and chat away as we walked back to our apartment and sat on the porch to drink. It was our father and son ritual. He enjoyed running around the apartment and being tickled. I miss those tender moments.

In late 1995, we agreed to break off the marriage, and I began the process of picking up the pieces of my life. My sister, Christi, was living in a large doublewide trailer in Justice, Illinois. It had previously belonged to my father, and she offered for me to stay there while I got back

on my feet. I was heavily in debt after my divorce, and needed all the help I could get. Picking up my Tanakh (Jewish scriptures), I began to look to religion again for some stability.

In my studies I had touched on other religions, but not as intensively, since I believed that praying or venerating statues or saints limited God's existence to earthly qualities. I had become a strict monotheist, which was what attracted me to Judaism. I even saw it in the words of Jesus when I read the New Testament, when he told us what was the greatest commandment of all.

"Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength." (NKJV)

Due to the things I was taught about Islam in the church, I initially assumed it was not an Abrahamic faith, but after talking to some of my Muslim employees at the OfficeMax where I was a manager, prior to working at Kohl's, I became intrigued. My friends gave me a copy of the Qur'an in English, and explained to me that it was written as a first person conversation in the context of the Prophet Muhammad's life. It was very unlike the Bible, which was written in the third person as a set of stories or narratives, told much later than the events happened.

My Muslim friends were good people. I gave them private time for their prayers in my office. Their devotion certainly spoke to me. It was an admirable quality. One quiet afternoon, I picked up the copy of the Qur'an and began to read. I haven't stopped since.

When I first began to study Islam, I was shocked at the similarities to Judaism's concept of the Oneness of God. I discovered that I already agreed with much of it, based on my Christian and Jewish studies. It was an Abrahamic religion through the line of Abraham and Ishmael, his firstborn son, whereas the Judeo-Christian religions were from the line of Abraham and Isaac, his second born son.

The Bible taught that God would bless Abraham's son, Ishmael, so he surely taught both his sons that God is One, and this was a very important thing for me. I had read about other religions, but I felt drawn to Abrahamic monotheism, in that ultimately there is only one God, who is unique and not part of the creation, or bound by space and time. I found beauty in the verses of the Qur'an and the concept of Tawheed (The Oneness of God). I became more deeply involved in resolving some nagging notions that I had been taught in the Christian churches, like, what does Islam say about Jesus? Do Muslims really believe in killing nonbelievers? Did Islam teach to destroy Israel? Does Islam teach to kill apostates?

If I converted and found that Islam wasn't for me, I certainly didn't want to put myself into that position. How did Muhammad receive his message, from Satan? Was Allah really the moon god of ancient Arabia? These were things I'd been told over many years of involvement in Christian churches. I had a lot of church indoctrination to overcome, but I had an open, enquiring mind, and was making some progress.

Beyond the basic teachings of morality and uniqueness of God, I came to feel that the Qur'an was more authentic than the Bible, because of its history, and I put them both under the same scrutiny. As I learned more, I found that Islam even gave me an assurance of accountability I had not seen in Christianity. Islam offered no 'get out of hell free' cards, so that people could

do horrible things to each other and simply pray and repent and be assured that all would be forgiven without consequence.

There is no insurance policy against sin, not even for so-called martyrs. Islam makes us all responsible directly to God for our actions. No one can take our blame, no one is an intermediary to intercede for us, to absolve our sins, and no one can act as God's mouthpiece. That spoke to my sense of justice.

Even people who falsely claim martyrdom are accountable. Islam teaches that the first to be judged on the Day of Judgement will be those who died claiming martyrdom. Many of them will be sent straight to hell. One of the authenticated hadiths (sayings) of Muhammad speaks to this, and is in line with what I had learned in the Qur'an.

"He will say: 'I fought for You until I died as a martyr.' Allah will say: 'You have told a lie. You fought that you might be called a brave warrior. And you were called so.' Then orders will be passed against him and he will be dragged with his face downward and cast into Hell."

I needed to know more. In December of 1996, I set out to resolve all of my personal issues on the Qur'an and Islam. The Internet was a relatively new phenomenon. So I dialed into American Online (AOL) on my incredibly slow modem and hit the Islamic chatroom.

The tone of the Muslims answering questions in the chatroom was unlike anything I had seen in the churches. In many church studies I attended, it seemed that to question aspects of my faith was tantamount to abandoning it. People got very hostile. Here I was, talking to Muslims online, and they seemed happy to help me understand. Most of them were knowledgeable and seemed like genuinely nice people, even when I challenged them on killing unbelievers.

In particular, I met two Muslim women in the chatroom who were incredibly helpful. They showed me verses from the Qur'an and explained Islamic beliefs to me without any of the background noise or political taint. Killing of nonbelievers and apostates was not permitted. One cannot be put on trial by a court of Shari'ah in a Muslim country and sentenced to death by the state simply for leaving Islam. Muslims in different countries or more extreme groups have merged tribalism, culture, and national values with Islam, even contrary to the rules of Islam. I'm not saying this has not been done contrary to the laws of Islam, however; apostasy in Islam is much more than simply leaving the faith. It also includes actively working to destroy an Islamic government, or treason, a crime that in the US could have gotten you the death penalty just fifty years ago. The death penalty for treason is still a penalty in some modern Western nations. One would be hard pressed to find a reputable mainstream Islamic scholar to say that people who simply leave the faith should be killed. Such a penalty is not written in the Qur'an.

I also learned that the Qur'an was very clear about religion not being forced on people.

"Let there be no compulsion in religion," it states, and, "Say, 'Disbelievers, I worship not that which ye worship. Nor will ye worship that which I worship. And I will not worship that which ye have been wont to worship. Nor will ye worship that which I worship. To you be your Way, and to me mine.'" These are some of the reassuring words of the Qur'an that I found so beautiful.

Though political issues regarding Israel exist—rooted in British partition and needing urgently to be resolved—Islam doesn't teach destruction of Israel. I discovered that Muslims believe in Jesus as the Messiah of Israel, but that he was mortal and not the offspring of God or in some way divine.

I was embarrassed as it was explained to me that Allah was not the moon god, as I had been told so many times in the church. As I chatted, the text of the Qur'an set me straight: "Do not prostrate to the sun and the moon, but prostrate to Allah, Who created them..."

I was amazed at the amount of disinformation I had been fed that kept me from learning about this wonderful faith. I couldn't get enough. I had to visit a mosque and ask a scholar in person to see if it was true.

I determined myself to visit a mosque. The words of the Qur'an struck a chord with me, but I had to be reassured of the authenticity of the Qur'an. Could I trust that the Prophet Muhammad saw and authorized the version we see today?

I was at a loss to find a Mosque. I had never seen one. Did they even exist in my area? But I couldn't stop now. I asked the women in the chatroom where to go, and to my surprise they found one within a half-mile of my home. I had never seen it there before. How could I have missed it? I must have driven right by it many times.

I was scared, but mostly because of my prior conditioning about Islam in the church. Would I be whisked away to Saudi Arabia, never to be seen again?

"Do you want to go tonight?" one of the women asked me.

I paused and typed, "Yes! I am scared because I don't know what to expect!"

"If you go," she typed, "I will meet you there and introduce you."

I rushed out of the house, nervous and excited at the same time, and met the two women at the Abdul Rahman Mosque in Bridgeview, Illinois, about thirty minutes before maghrib salat (dusk prayer). The mosque was a traditional-looking, large, beige brick building with a huge, green dome. In the parking lot, they were sitting in their car, and I approached cautiously, unsure what to expect, now that I was there. One of them told me they had organized a meeting for me with the Sheikh, the scholar of the Mosque, named Jawad Ahmed. They handed me a gift of a Qur'an and a prayer rug, and explained where to go in the men's area.

I had one last question for them that I was concerned about before talking to the Sheikh. Was this a Shi'a or Sunni Mosque? I didn't know the difference yet. The woman answered me, "We attend and teach here and are Shi'a and this is a Sunni mosque. The most important thing is that you are Muslim. You can discover the differences later." It is perhaps the one moment that cemented my outlook on Muslim unity to this day.

As I entered the Mosque, I became incredibly nervous. I waited outside the office of Sheikh Jawad Ahmed. I was greeted by curious attendees coming for prayer, and told them why I was there. As I talked to the men at the door of the office, everyone began to look toward the entrance of the mosque. A medium-height, hefty Arab man with an open, pleasant face and a long, thick, black beard entered. He was wearing traditional Arab clothing and white kufi (Islamic skullcap). I quickly grew aware that this man was someone important in the

mosque, because when he entered, everyone paid attention and greeted him. He walked toward his office, where I was standing.

When the Sheikh arrived, I was introduced and brought into his office. Then the adhan (call to prayer) sounded for maghrib salat (dusk prayer). It was perhaps the most beautiful, awe-inspiring sound I had ever heard. The Sheikh asked if I wanted to watch the prayer, but I was so nervous of doing something wrong, I stayed in his office until they were finished. He was a well-spoken man with good English.

Sheikh Jawad came back with one of the mosque board members to have a chat with me. I told him my history, that I was a Christian since birth, but that over many years of study in the faith I no longer considered myself Christian. I explained to him that I had studied Judaism in the synagogue, but still believed that Jesus was the Messiah. I explained to him what I'd learned about Islam thus far, but had one main question about the authenticity of the Qur'an.

"Can you tell me about how Muhammad received the Qur'an?" I asked.

"Prophet Muhammad went to a cave on Mount Hira, where he meditated in isolation. Suddenly, he was startled by the Angel Gabriel. Gabriel is the Angel in charge of relaying God's revelations, just like the original Torah and Gospel of Jesus. The angel told him to 'read,'" he explained. "The Prophet said, 'I am unable to read,' but the angel demanded that he read two more times. Then the angel grabbed him with incredible force and released him and the Prophet began to recite the Qur'anic revelation."

Then the Sheikh recited the verse in Arabic. It was a beautiful recitation.

"Proclaim! In the name of thy Lord and Cherisher, Who created. Created man, out of a mere clot of congealed blood. Proclaim! And thy Lord is Most Bountiful, He Who taught the use of the pen, taught man that which he knew not."

He continued to lay out the history of the Prophet Muhammad and how he received revelation through the angel Gabriel, and immediately went to his wife, Khadijah, who believed in him and told him he had indeed received a message from God. She took him to her cousin, a Christian monk, Waraqa ibn Naufal, who authenticated his message. I still wasn't at ease with the authenticity of the Qur'an, and continued to question the origins of the Qur'an we see today. I had put the Bible through this scrutiny, and wanted the Qur'an to go through it just the same.

The Sheikh was happy to explain that the verses of the Qur'an were memorized during the life of the Prophet and, at the time of his death, steps were taken to preserve the Qur'an. After the death of the Prophet in 632 CE, Abu Bakr became the first Caliph (leader) of the Islamic Republic, and took immediate steps to preserve it so that it didn't suffer the same fate as the Jewish and Christian Scriptures. He ordered that all of those who memorized the Qur'an from the Prophet be tested for accuracy, and they recited the entire Qur'an. He ordered Muhammad's formal secretary, Zaid Ibn Thabet, to collect all the writings. All current writings that did not match the words of the Qur'an exactly were gathered up and destroyed. All of those who recited the Qur'an without flaw worked on putting the Qur'an in compiled written form, for the purpose of spreading the faith. Caliph 'Uthman established the final

version around 650 CE. The whole process from start (the Prophet's death) to finish (the final copy) took about eighteen years to complete. Many early manuscripts exist, with partial copies in the United Kingdom carbon dating to the time of the Prophet, and a full-copy Uthmani script Qur'an held in Telyashayakh Mosque, Uzbekistan. Another is in the Topkapi Museum in Turkey. All Qur'ans today can be crosschecked and matched for authenticity, and I can be assured that they contain the same verses revealed to the Prophet Muhammad.

By this time, I was convinced I was a Muslim.

On a brown leather sofa, at a right angle to the Sheikh's desk, I sat listening eagerly and wanting to hear more. It was a cozy office, suitable for study, and the wall behind him was saturated with books. The voice of Sheikh Jawad was reassuring, and it set me at ease as he sat back in his chair, behind the desk, and probed my beliefs and whether I was really ready to commit to becoming Muslim. He was well-studied and had good explanations for all of my questions. He wanted to make sure I knew what I was committing to before I made the leap into a new life. My life as a Muslim would fundamentally change my lifestyle. I would give up drinking, pork, and girlfriends. At the same time, he said that God is most forgiving, and he reassured me that God didn't expect me to be a super-Muslim overnight. It took time, he said, and I could ease into it.

"If you are considering being a Muslim," he said, "you must be made clear on what Muslims believe and if you believe these things too, then you can become a Muslim."

"I believe that I am already there, but I'd be happy to discuss those things with you, Sheikh," I replied.

"Okay, but it is important that you are certain," he said, "We have already discussed some of the beliefs, but basically there are six in total that Muslims subscribe to."

The Sheikh continued as I listen intently.

"Oneness of God, this is the core principle of Islam. The unseen real such as God's Angels. All of the Prophets and Messengers of God, from Adam to Muhammad, including Jesus Christ. All of the revealed holy books, such as the Torah, the Gospel of Jesus, and the Qur'an. We believe in the Day of Judgment, when God will raise us up to judge our good and our evil deeds. Lastly, we believe in Al-Qadr, which is the Foreknowledge of God. Basically, what that means is that God knows everything, what will happen or has happened. He has recorded all that will happen and has happened. Whatever God wills to happen, happens. God is the Creator of everything. Do you have any questions on any of these points?"

"No, sir," I said. "These are things I learned about from the sisters in the chatroom. I agree on all of them."

The Sheikh smiled at me softly.

"Subhanallah (Glory to God), that is good," he said. "So, since you agree to that, I will continue."

"Please," I said.

"Belief is important, but what is required of a Muslim is found in the five pillars of Islam. The first one is what you'd recite in order to become a Muslim. It is called 'Shahaddah.' It is being able to recite that there is no other god but God, and Muhammad is the Messenger of

God. The second is salat (regular prayer) five times a day at the prescribed times. It is required of men to be in the mosque, if possible, during these times. Zakat is a mandatory two-and-a-half percent tax of our residual wealth that goes directly to the poor. It cannot be given to the mosque for administration and maintenance, but must go to the poor. The fourth is that we fast food, drink, and even marital relations, from sunrise to sunset, for thirty days every Ramadan. Finally, the last pillar is the Hajj, where we are to make a pilgrimage to Makkah at least once in a lifetime."

I listened to him as he spoke to me in a gentle voice, and the more he said, the more excited I became to start my new life. It was what I felt like I needed to establish some structure in my life. It was a sound foundation of morality, and a code of life I could build upon.

"So, you agree with the six basic beliefs, do you think that you can commit to the five pillars? Do you want to become a Muslim?" he asked.

"Yes," I answered eagerly.

The Sheikh was beaming.

"Then, I will lead you in the Shahaddah," he said.

Sheikh Jawad called in two prominent members of the community as witnesses to my Shahaddah recitation. He then led me in reciting the Shahaddah in Arabic.

"Congratulations!" he exclaimed. "You are now a Muslim."

A sense of euphoria came over me. I had just begun my new life as a Muslim, and a profound feeling washed over me, as if I had finally come home.

That night was December 31, 1996. As I said the Shahaddah, the adhan sounded for 'isha prayer (nighttime prayer). Sheikh Jawad invited me to prayer and instructed me to just follow along, because I was new and wasn't expected to know everything in a night.

I reverted (converted) to Islam and made my first salat on New Year's Eve. After salat, the Sheikh told the congregation that he had a special treat for them. He announced that I walked into the masjid that evening and became a Muslim. He joked to them that it was my New Year's Eve resolution, and the entire mosque laughed. As I was being congratulated, someone shouted, "Takbir" (God is most great)!

The voices echoed so loud that I could feel them in my chest, as the entire congregation shouted back, "Allahu Akbar" (God is great)!

"Takbir!"

"Allahu Akbar!"

"Takbir!"

"Allahu Akbar!"

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Man's Islamic Duty

I HAD BEEN divorced from Melissa nearly a year, and had quit drinking and dating. I completely devoted my life to living according to Islamic standards. No pork, alcohol, or sex. I know it seems kind of unnatural, to most western men, to give up beer, bacon, and girls. I began to pray five times a day and, two weeks after my conversion, started the fast of thirty days of Ramadan. Nothing seemed too difficult for me, but as in the quiet times I was missing something still. I needed companionship, someone I could talk to, share my new life with, and grow with. I needed a soulmate.

There was an upcoming coming Islamic convention in Chicago, and the Sheikh suggested I attend. It was a great opportunity to connect with the greater Chicago area Muslims. A few of my new Muslim friends would be there, and it would be a learning experience, as I heard differing opinions on a number of issues relating to the faith. As I entered the convention center, I saw thousands of people there. Each seminar had about 200 people seated with others, standing against the back wall. After the seminars had finished that evening, five of us retreated to a hotel room that one of my friends had rented for the night. We sat in a circle, eating cheese pizza and talking about what we had heard that day. I didn't know any of the men except my friend, Nafees.

Nafees was my very first Muslim friend at the mosque. He was a short and thin Bangladeshi guy who had a thin shaggy long beard and, aside from his Bangladeshi flag kufi, he wore Western clothes.

"What do you think about the Palestinian-Israeli conflict?" one man asked me.

"Well, I really don't want to mix religion with politics at this point," I explained. "I don't know much about it, beyond what I was taught in the church. I can't give you an educated response."

It was a true answer. I was also trying to be diplomatic, as I still had some very good Jewish friends.

"Of course," Nafees said to me.

He then turned to the man.

"A lot of people who revert to Islam have this response," he explained. (Muslims believe that everyone is born a Muslim and when people accept the faith they are reverting back to Islam). "They usually revert after learning about the religion, rather than politics."

Everyone agreed. The talk then took on a more personal bent. My new friends were curious.

"Are you single, brother?" the man asked.

"Yes, I am divorced," I replied.

“Have you thought about getting remarried?”

I thought for a moment and responded, “Yeah, but I don’t know how to find someone without dating. I’m trying not to date.”

“Oh brother, we will have to find you a wife,” he said. “The Prophet said that half of your deen (religion) is marriage.”

That was it, then. The challenge was on, to find me a wife. I wish I’d laid down some markers and minimum standards, but I was completely new to the arranged thing.

Word spread in the community, and the pressure to get married from my peers was mounting. A number of people told me that I needed to protect my religion from the temptations of fornication. They knew that I had dated after I divorced, and their reasoning was rational if I wanted to keep to the Islamic lifestyle. I didn’t mind, because I really wanted to meet someone I could share my life as a Muslim with. Hopefully, I could find a good wife who would teach me more about Islam, and maybe I could learn Arabic from her.

Sheikh Jawad initially thought that it was too soon for people to be thinking about finding a wife for me.

“It’s important that two people are properly matched,” he said. “To live a harmonious life you have to be on the same page.”

I nodded in agreement.

“It is important that you are both attracted to her and you have things in common,” he continued. “Otherwise, you can’t be just to her.”

As I had no clue how marriage was handled in Islam, nor how to meet someone according to the rules, I felt a bit overwhelmed, and relied on fellow Muslims to help guide me. One evening, after work, I logged on to AOL, hit an Islamic chatroom, and asked people for more details.

A couple weeks later, the Sheikh received a call from Aminah Jakar, to inquire about who I was. She had been lurking in the Islamic chatroom online, and had noticed me talking about my conversion, the mosque I was attending, and that I was divorced. Aminah was also recently divorced and had two girls, ages two and four. She lived in Texas, and she was soon to visit a friend in the Chicago suburbs, close to me.

Sheikh Jawad asked me to come into his office.

“I received a call from a sister who is looking for a husband,” he said. “Like yourself, she is recently divorced and has two young children. You may know her from the online chat but by an alias. Would you be interested to meet her?”

“Yes, I would,” I said eagerly, pleased that things were finally moving. I didn’t need to think hard about my answer. I had seen many sisters at the convention and the mosque, but had no idea how to approach them in the proper setting.

“Great, she will be in town for a week and you two can talk,” he said.

While she was in Chicago, one of her friends acted as a chaperone, and we consulted with the Sheikh about what we were looking for in a partner. We had our first meeting at the mosque after maghrib salat (dusk prayers). Despite initial reservations, due to what a young Muslim I was, the Sheikh seemed keen to make this happen. I felt he genuinely wanted us

both to be happy. After introducing us, he walked out of the room, to give us some brief moments to talk. We made plans to meet each other every day she was in town, to talk more before I left for my night shift at work, sometimes at a local Arabic-style tea and sweets shop.

Aminah was of Indian descent, from Trinidad and Tobago. She had an incredibly nice, dark skin tone. She wore full hijab (headscarf) and Arab-style abaya (gown), often multicolored or with patterns. She was born into a Hindu family, but converted to Islam in her early twenties when she went to college in New York.

I found Aminah attractive, but appearance wasn't what I was interested in. I was more interested in her as a person. Upon speaking with her, I was intrigued by her mild English accent. I'd never heard someone of Indian descent speak with such an accent. In fact, I hadn't heard many English people speak with such an accent. Her father was the principal at a good school in Trinidad and Tobago, and had given her a good education. It was obvious in her manner and the way she spoke. She sounded classy and intelligent, and had a cracking sense of humor. I found myself falling in love with her almost instantly.

When her week in Chicago came to an end, and she went back to Texas, we committed to keeping in touch and exchanged phone numbers. It wasn't long before we were confessing our love for each other on the phone, and started talking about marriage. We made plans for her to come to Chicago and, through mediators, set up our nikkah (Islamic marriage) at a small mosque in south Chicago where she knew the local imam. The south side of Chicago was a poor side of town, but still very busy with local businesses and preachers on the street corner trying to spread the Gospel. I parked nearby, along the street, and walked down the broken concrete sidewalk and past a number of dilapidated buildings. The mosque was converted from an old commercial building nestled in between a church and empty building. We met at the mosque. She was wearing a long, black hijab (head scarf) draped over her head with golden embroidery lining the edges, and a matching, long, black abaya. The Arabic kohl eyeliner made her eyes stand out. She looked stunning.

It was a considerable risk, marrying this way. I put a lot of faith in intermediaries who spoke with both of us. We had seemed to have so much in common.

Boy, was I wrong. It turned out to be nine months of living hell!

By this time, my sister, Christi, had moved out of the trailer home, and the bills were again mounting as I began paying her half of everything. When we were married, I had moved Aminah and the girls into the trailer home with me. Aminah's ex-husband, Kevin Williams, who was also a revert to Islam, and who prided himself on living a devout lifestyle, was not—much to my surprise and annoyance—paying any child support. It meant that I had taken on the responsibility of providing for three kids, my child support for my son Aaron, and now Aminah and her two daughters. Aminah wasn't interested in working, not even from home, and had no plans to sue the girl's father for support.

I was still working at Kohl's department store's graveyard shift, and it wasn't enough to support the family, again. I was coming up short and Aminah did not like it.

"It is your duty as a Muslim man to provide for me," she demanded, with anger in her eyes.

I eventually juggled my jobs around, and landed better job at an OfficeMax store in Woodridge, Illinois as a Receiving Manager Trainer for the district, and transferred my Kohl's department store graveyard shift to a location near the OfficeMax location in Woodridge, Illinois. Just like my father did to survive, I began working two jobs. I was still coming up short. The stress of this kind of life was pushing me to the brink. I would visit the restroom twice a day to vomit from the incredible pressure I was under to provide. Still, Aminah wanted more.

"Aminah," I protested, "I am already working two jobs. What more do you want?"

"I don't care. It is your Islamic duty to provide for us even if it means getting another job," she replied.

I was beside myself at the audacity of her making such a suggestion. A third job? Did she expect me to invent a day with an extra eight hours in it?

"If you don't like the fact that we are coming up short," I retorted, "get a babysitter and get a job yourself."

"And, what about that child support from Kevin?" I continued. "He's employed, calls the kids often, and seems to want to be an active part of the kids' lives. So, why is he not taking responsibility in all of this for his kids?"

That triggered a storm from Aminah. She seemed to lose all of her mind and go crazy, turning my home upside-down. She ran into the bedroom and threw everything onto the floor. There was nothing she didn't turn over. My dresser drawer contents were strewn onto the floor. There was a loud crash as she tipped over my bookshelf. She went from room to room, tearing the house apart, turning over shelves and tables. Nothing was spared. Her young children began to cry, and I picked up the youngest and held her in my arms to comfort and shield her. I was astonished. I had no idea that someone would behave like that over money.

Over the course of the nine months, we argued constantly about money. I was not performing my duty as a Muslim man, according to Aminah. In the back of my mind, I wondered if she was bipolar. One moment, she would be happy as sunshine, and the next she would descend into the abyss of doom, always with the end result of emasculating my manhood because I could not provide.

Finally, after the third time she turned my home upside down, I conceded defeat. She had to go.

After the last outburst, I picked up the phone and called Kevin and told him to come to Chicago and pick Aminah and the girls up. The girls were his responsibility, after all, and I could not support them anymore. I told him everything that had happened. I'm not sure what I expected from him, but he seemed to understand and sympathize with me. He agreed to rent a U-Haul moving van and pick them up.

When he arrived, it was night time, and a particularly cold late November. We packed everything and he stayed with us for the night. They left the next day.

It was a sunny and warm morning, a somber occasion. Surprisingly, Aminah accepted that she was the cause of some of the problems, and explained to Kevin that I had done nothing wrong. She just wanted to get it over with and get back to Texas.

I had a dreadful feeling of defeat, embarrassment, and shame looming over failing at a second marriage. I felt bad for the girls and was very sad as I said goodbye to them. I figured they would be okay, though, they were aged two and four, and would probably not remember what went on during that time in their lives. Ultimately, she and her ex-husband who had to take care of this situation. I hugged them and said goodbye.

Since Aminah and I had argued so much about supporting the family, I had already decided to take an interview for a long haul trucking job, to try to provide for her and the kids. Schneider National Carriers had just hired me, and were sending me to the company's truck driving school in Green Bay, Wisconsin. I quit both of my retail jobs and filed bankruptcy on all of my debt. Now that she was gone, I felt free of family burden and could focus on my career. I was getting proper sleep again, making enough money to survive, and very happily practicing my new faith. I had a complete sense of freedom on the open road.

I had spent two months free from the insanity of Aminah's turbulent behavior in Chicago, and was back on an even keel. It was now February 1998, and I was travelling back from the east coast on the Pennsylvania Turnpike when I received a call on my mobile. It was Aminah and she wanted to talk. Even though we'd split, I still had feelings for her, and I wanted to give her a chance to speak and hear what she had to say. I hung up and pulled into the nearest truck stop to call her back.

She explained to me the problems associated with her first divorce and how she dealt with them. I felt a sense of compassion and empathy, since I, too, had gone through a divorce with a child involved. It was even more of a burden on her because she had taken little time for herself to heal and had to care for her two children. We agreed that it was a tremendously stressful time, and that it could be dealt with through marriage counselling and her children's father following through on child support payments. With these two promises, I decided it was the right thing to do, to remain with her and move to Stockton, Texas. If we followed the plan, I felt the relationship has good potential, and I loved her kids.

I was excited to move down to Stockton and instantly felt that Texas was my home. My job sent me all over the country. I felt I could manage visits to my son in Chicago and domicile myself in Stockton. I would swing by every two or three weeks for leave, and I found myself driving through the I-90 corridor to Chicago often enough to make periodic visits. Unfortunately, my ex-wife, Melissa, took the opportunity of my domicile in Stockton to move to Nebraska, closer to her family, a move that made it incredibly difficult for me to follow through on frequent visits to my son. Getting a load that would route me through Nebraska was nearly impossible. Instead, I would be forced to settle for weekly to bi-weekly phone calls and fly him to Stockton once a year for visitation.

In the beginning, my relationship with Melissa after the divorce was amicable, for the most part. After she remarried my old friend Armando, from Bible college, it seemed like I spoke to Aaron less and less. I lay awake many nights with incredible sadness tearing a hole in my

heart, whenever I was told my son was too busy to talk to me. One year, when Aaron was eight years old, I arranged for an all-expenses-paid trip for Armando and Melissa to drive him down to Stockton. He was visiting with me for two weeks. I was so happy I could hardly contain myself. It turned out to be a bittersweet week, as I found his mind was being filled with things a child his age shouldn't have to think about. Aaron told me he saw Muslims burning Christians alive on television, and watched another movie called *Not Without My Daughter*, about a father who convinces his wife to come to Iran with their child for a visit. Despite her reservations over the treatment of women in the Islamic country, she agrees to go. When she gets there, her husband decides he plans to stay, and he will not let them return the United States.

"Dad, are you going to hell?" he asked me.

"What?" I said. "Why would you ask that?"

"Well, Armando was talking to me and he said that since you rejected Christ you will go to hell."

I was livid and called Melissa. I couldn't believe she would allow this, so I asked her to explain.

"I would never tell him that," she said. "Armando did have a discussion with him, but I didn't know that was what he said."

"Do you see how this poisons a child against his father?" I asked. "I want him to grow up learning and respecting other religions. What about the movies you let him watch?"

"They are true stories," she replied.

"I have no problem with watching true stories, but he is too young to understand the dynamics and context of them," I explained. "It just poisons his mind against Muslims and his father is a Muslim. Muslims don't teach to do these things and that isn't what I'm about."

She was dismissive, but I had to accept that I was not in control.

Melissa also wanted to take him out of public school, which I thought was not a good idea. Again, I had to accept that they had already done so. When I contacted the Nebraska Board of Education, they simply said they could do nothing, and that I should file a court case. I just didn't have the money or ability to take the time off work to see a court. Paying child support was a priority for me, and I was not going to cheat my son out of that. On one occasion, I accidentally sent the check to her former address, and the people cashed my check. It didn't matter. Not only did I think it was the right thing to do, but I believed it was my duty to pay double that month, to ensure she received the money she needed for my son.

Now he wasn't getting a proper education, even with the child support. One lawyer told me it could take as much as \$10,000 to see it through. The last thing that topped the cake for me, though, was a punch in the gut. I called to talk to Aaron one weekend, and was waiting with her on the phone while he came back from his friend's house.

"How would you feel if Armando adopted Aaron?" she asked. "Then you wouldn't have to pay child support."

I was stunned.

“What?” I asked, “What makes you think I would do that? I wouldn’t get to see him anymore. Armando cannot replace his father.”

“You would still be allowed to see him,” she reasoned.

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. It was a knockout punch. My stomach burned with anger for months after, as I realized they were trying to write me out of Aaron’s life. *In their minds*, I thought, *I rejected Christ by becoming Muslim and don’t deserve to be his father.*

Truly helpless and alone, I was unable to handle the situation. After that last conversation, my ability to reach my son was blocked over time, until I finally lost contact with him.

What else could I do? As the non-custodial parent, I was powerless. It was a hopeless situation, one that cut me every time I thought of my boy.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The Ground Shifts

I FOUNDED A website called *Islamcentral*, and began promoting mutual understanding and discussing Islamic religious topics. It was my way of contributing to the monumental task of making the world a more tolerant place, by explaining the religion from the perspective I learned during my personal study. The website was designed to bridge the gap in religious understanding between people of different faiths, but I soon found that discussing the politics of today's world became unavoidable. It was a real passion of mine, because I felt that finally here was a way I could make a really positive contribution. I found that I was not alone, and there were lots of people online working towards similar goals. I was a part of something.

In my view, there is a huge misrepresentation of Islam in Western society, and a robust for-profit industry profits from keeping misinformation and stereotypes alive. Stereotypes often lead to hatred, and it is blinding. Injustice leads to more injustice and resentment, and I wanted to begin to break the cycle. That starts with dialogue and educating each other. It was personally important to me that I promote mutual understanding and peace.

I was regularly attending the Jamiyya Mosque in Stockton during my free time. The mosque was one of the largest in Stockton and part of the Stockton League of Mosques (SLM), a majority Pakistani umbrella organization for many Stockton-area mosques. The Jamiyya Mosque scholar at the time was Sheikh Gamal El Masry, a native of Cairo, Egypt who had spent time in Pakistan before coming to America. Coincidentally, he was also to become the father-in-law of Kevin Williams, Aminah's ex-husband.

When Kevin married the Sheikh's daughter, Ayah, she became pregnant almost immediately, and he once again stopped paying child support for his two daughters. Kevin prided himself on being a pillar of the community, but immediately after his marriage to the Sheikh's daughter, to my intense irritation, he completely failed in his responsibility to his first two children. As I began to pick up the extra burden, it created real financial hardship and arguments between me and Aminah. Soon my marriage began to suffer in the same way that it had when we lived in Chicago.

Perhaps I was having too many stints on the road. My job took me out of town for two or three weeks at a time, and Aminah seemed to want to salvage the marriage. Maybe she needed me to be closer. Then I could also encourage Kevin to stay focused on his responsibilities to the girls. As much as I enjoyed the freedom of long haul driving, I gave it up and got a local truck driving job. The job meant a pay cut, because it was local work, as opposed to long haul incentives for being away for many weeks at a time. I thought I could

balance the expenses and perhaps get a second job to make up the difference. The job was a lot less exciting, since I would no longer be traveling the country. Travel always made me happy, and gave me time to ponder life, but I felt the sacrifice was necessary for the wellbeing of my family.

Once again, we found ourselves barely able to make ends meet. My new job required that I work twelve-hour days, and I couldn't swing another job. I eventually began coming up short every month and accumulating debt just to survive. Aminah finally began working as a third grade teacher for a local Islamic grammar school. The pay wasn't much, and I never saw anything in the way of help supporting the family.

We were back where we started, and Aminah was using the fundamental teachings of Islam to manipulate me to get another job.

"We are coming up short every month," I said. "What's happening with child support?" I had tasked her with lighting the fire under her ex-husband.

"Kevin says he doesn't have the money because he is having another baby," she said.

"How is that my fault? And, what's happening to the money from your teaching job?"

"That is my money," she shot back angrily wagging her finger in my face. "You don't get to touch my money. Islamically, your money is mine, and my money is mine, so you need to get another job."

"But, Aminah," I protested. "Surely that doesn't mean you don't file a child support order against Kevin and you allow our family to sink under a mountain of debt?"

"Sorry, brother," she said. "Be a man!"

It is true that according to the most fundamental Islamic teaching, it is the man's duty to provide for the wife and family. A man's money is the family's money, and the woman's money is hers alone. I fundamentally agreed with such a notion, but my issue was that it wasn't my duty to provide for her kids, even though I was willing to do it. Where was Kevin's responsibility in supporting his children? Just because he was reproducing again, did that mean I had to pick up his slack?

The injustice of it made me angry. Not only do state laws govern this, but it is also a basic tenet of Islam.

The uncompromising lectures and daily religious manipulation in my relationship with Aminah were causing me to have flashbacks of my days in the Anointed of God Ministries church. After consulting many Islamic scholars, and dragging her in to see them, I began to believe she was extreme in her views. I saw her behavior as illogical and irrational. She used religion to beat me intellectually and spiritually. I actually spent a lot of time doing research on Islam just to defend myself from her daily dose of vitriol. I reminded her of our agreement to see a marriage counsellor, but she made only two visits. I felt like I was being used and spinning my wheels.

She became increasingly more contemptuous of me. She openly mocked me. Money was one of the big issues, but it soon began to encompass little issues, like going to the mosque to pray. Sometimes, after working a twelve-hour day, at a very physical job, I was tired. I wanted to pray at home and go to bed. In Islam, we are strongly encouraged to pray with the

community at the mosque, but I was too tired to make the drive to the mosque and fight for parking. It was commonplace to have hordes of friends wanting to chat all evening afterwards, and some days I just didn't have the energy. Time and again, we would end up fighting about my duty as a Muslim man to go to the mosque to pray.

"I'd love to go to the mosque," I protested, "but I just got home after a twelve-hour shift. I haven't eaten or showered yet. I'm tired. I'll try to go tomorrow."

"No excuses," she screamed. "Not once. If I can't get you to go, talk to the Sheikh and see what he says."

I dug my heels in.

"I already spoke to him about it, and he said that praying at the mosque was important," I explained. "He said that I should go, but as I work very hard Allah understands our circumstances."

She went nuts, screaming at me, demanding to know how I could discuss family matters with other people without her being present. I wanted her to be happy, but I didn't want to be manipulated. So I spent a lot of time with the Sheikh and others to educate myself. Clearly, she wasn't happy, regardless of what I did, but I loved her and tried hard to stay committed.

Feeling subdued, in the winter of 2000, I began working long haul truck driving again to make more money, and in back of my mind I hoped the distance would be a buffer from her aggressive behavior toward me. I could use the silence of the road to gather my thoughts and recharge. Every two weeks, I would head back home to see her, but unfortunately nothing changed. I began to focus what little free time that I had on Islamic community work, just to be away from her. Islamic activism gave me a sense of purpose. It was the one part of my life that I felt had stability.

Little did I know monumental changes were about to take place in all of our lives. On September 11, 2001, as the planes hit the Twin Towers in New York, the ground shifted not only under me and my community, but under all of America.

That day in the Creek Travel Plaza will live with me forever.

Everyone knows where they were and what they were doing on that day. I recall sitting in the lounge of the truck stop as the second plane crashed into the South Tower. As billows of smoke rise from the towers and came crashing to the ground. As the North Tower fell and a gaping hole filled with a cloud of ash in the New York city skyline grew apparent, I remembered my family in Stockton. There was no reason to believe this was an air traffic control accident. It was deliberate. The air was sucked out of my lungs, and an intense, sick feeling in the pit of my stomach came over me. We all watched in horror at what seemed to be the makings of a world war with religion at the heart of it. I needed to get home to my family.

Two days later, I arrived in Stockton from my final long haul delivery from Pensacola, Florida. It was my last with that company, before I was to start working locally for the second time. The Islamic community was mobilizing in preparation for the inevitable backlash over what seemed like an attack by terrorists. Many community members gathered for a news conference hosted after maghrib (dusk) prayers in the backyard of a prominent community

member. Following the media event was a social gathering, to discuss ways we could tackle issues of anti-Islam hate crimes that were already happening. 9/11 took everyone by surprise, and ordinary, peaceful Muslims were no exception. Some members in the community were in fear for their families, due to the backlash over something that they had no association with. I wouldn't say I was in fear, but I was worried that, if we didn't take this opportunity to act as a community, life in America would be more difficult as a result of the backlash. 9/11 had struck at the heart of America, there was no way there would not be aftershocks.

I was invited to attend the gathering after the news conference by Kevin Williams, and he introduced me to many people, including some leaders in the community. It was an evening barbecue in the back of a single-story house, designed to foster relationships among active community members.

One of the people I met was a Pakistani national named Ibrihim Bhutt. Ibrihim was tall and fair-skinned, with salt and pepper hair and beard. He wore glasses and typically a button-up, short sleeve shirt and khakis. Very modern preppy. Ibrihim was working in Stockton for a large oil company. He was also the IslamAnswers campaign director in the Stockton area, for the Islamic Fellowship of North America (IFNA). He held high status among both local and national IFNA leaders. Many people wanted him to be the President of IFNA's Stockton chapter, but he had aspirations of getting involved in national leadership roles. He was adept at recognizing people's strengths and putting together teams that would achieve things. Ibrihim approached me and began to discuss my website *Islamcentral*. He talked to me about how I embraced Islam, and what I thought of events happening in the news. After some time, he told me he had a camera crew at the event, and they were doing a recording for a project they were working on for the *IslamAnswers* outreach campaign.

He asked me to be interviewed. At first, I was reluctant, as I had never been on camera before, and was nervous, to say the least. But he was persuasive and complimentary, and I eventually agreed to tell my story on camera. He introduced me to his *IslamAnswers* Stockton media director, Kurt Bennett, cameraman Mohammed Farouk and their assistant, Khalil Islam. Kurt and Khalil were African-American Muslims born in the US. Kurt was born into a Muslim family but, like me, Khalil was a revert to Islam. Kurt worked as a computer networking consultant at a local university, and was highly motivated to get things done. Mohammed, a tall, dark, curly-haired fellow with scraggly, short beard, was an Egyptian-American Muslim, born in the US. He worked for a Stockton television channel. Mohammed was married to a Christian girl from Barcelona. Khalil was born in America, former US Army, and didn't work. We sometimes joked and called him the "marrying man" because he cycled out wives. He frequently divorced, then we wouldn't see him for a short time, and then he'd turn up with a new wife.

Ibrihim would become my mentor, and all of them, over the next few years, would become some of my closest friends.

Ibrihim wanted me to join the Pakistani Society of Greater Stockton, as part of the board of an ad hoc organization formed in response to anti-Islam hate crimes in the aftermath of 9/11.

It was called the Alliance for Justice and Peace (AJP). Abdul Jamil Siddiqui was a prominent Muslim in the Stockton League of Mosques (SLM) who would later become a city council member. He chaired the organization. He was a well-spoken and stately sort of guy who could command the room when he spoke.

The AJP was an organization formed from leaders from many religions, including Christian, Jewish, Sikh, Hindu, and Buddhist leaders. They collectively issued statements to the press, speaking out against terrorism and, of course, hate crimes. I was asked to be the official media representative, and I took it as a great honor. The organization eventually faded away, about a year after 9/11, as it became too difficult to manage such a large group of people from different backgrounds and with differing opinions. But it did create a lot of relationships and catapulted me to greater leadership roles within the Islamic community.

In October 2001, Kurt and I were invited by Ibrihim to the home of an IFNA board member for dinner and we held discussions on how to get more involved in community work. Unknown to me, Ibrihim and Kurt had already discussed the agenda, which was to pitch to me membership in IFNA, and, more specifically, to eventually make me the director of IslamAnswers-Stockton in place of Ibrihim, who wanted to focus on his aspirations for IFNA national leadership roles. After dinner and a discussion on IslamAnswers and IFNA membership requirements, I was convinced to be a part of it. After all, IslamAnswers had the same purpose as my website, *Islamcentral*. It seemed a natural fit. We were singing the same song, so to speak, preaching the same message. IslamAnswers ran as a nationwide Da'wah (outreach), with a toll-free phone hotline for questions on Islam. It would guide and mentor people who wished to revert to Islam.

After a few months in my new role, I soon found myself representing IFNA and IslamAnswers on local radio and television programs, and in newspapers.

One day, Ibrihim received a call on the IslamAnswers hotline from the officer-in-charge, Officer Philip Wright of the Stockton Police Academy. Officer Wright had worked with the Jewish Holocaust Museum, to develop an anti-hate crime program, which focused on hate crimes against Jews. The program was an elective but academy-accredited program for officers to assist in career growth. He saw the toll-free hotline, and since it was a huge success with the Jewish community, he thought, *Why not give it a try with the Muslim community?*

Ibrihim approached me as the prime candidate to develop and manage the program. He said that it would be a great opportunity to prove myself to the IFNA board. It would show that I could manage and expand the IslamAnswers-Stockton group and activities. I was excited at the prospects. I agreed that it was a great opportunity. I would be doing something good for Muslims and bridging the gap between us and our fellow Stocktonians.

The Jewish community's police officer anti-hate crimes class was closed to the public, but Officer Wright asked me to attend, with the permission of the class organizers. I attended the Jewish community's program and liaised with the people who organized it in the development of the program for Muslims. The people were absolutely wonderful to work with and very helpful. I devoted huge amounts of time, over the coming Christmas holiday season, to putting together a comprehensive hate crimes and diversity presentation. The

program's design and content had to run a pilot course, pass approval by the Stockton Police Department and the Academy, and be approved by Muslim community leaders and religious scholars throughout the Stockton area.

By 2002, we had secured the approval of Hamza Obileye to run the program in the Islamic Outreach Association (IOA), which the basketball star had founded from an old historical building that used to be a bank. Hamza is a Nigerian-born Muslim who made it big as a Stockton basketball star and wanted to give back to his community, both Muslim and non-Muslim.

I recruited Ibrihim, my wife Aminah, and her friend Gabrielle (another revert to Islam) to assist me in presenting portions of the program, based on their areas of expertise. I thought it a good idea to have women presenting about women's issues, especially Gabrielle, since she was highly educated and wore a niqab (full face veil). Sheikh Khalid, who was the scholar at the IOA, initially opposed me using her. He was afraid the veil would scare the officers, thinking it was too extreme, considering the new anti-Islam climate of the country after the 9/11 attacks. I thought it would help dispel some of the myths around Islam and women. The very reason for developing to program was to overcome stereotypes and deal with hate crimes against people like Gabrielle. I used her intelligent presentation skills anyway, and it turned out to be a good decision that made a difference in how the officers viewed Muslim women.

Umar Jalali, whom I met through Ibrihim, organized refreshments and maintained the projector equipment. Umar was a Pakistani Muslim from Kuwait, who arrived in the US on a student visa and worked off the books for a Muslim businessman who owned a number of Shell gasoline franchises. Umar was shy at first, but assertive when he needed to be. Short and solid, he sported a short, dark beard, and with his small glasses and formal dress looked like an old college professor. From time to time, he loved to mix it up and wear an Afghan-style Pakul, which is the iconic Afghan hat.

At the pilot program, Hamza Obileye greeted officers and community leaders, and held a press event to publicize the program. The subsequent monthly programs were hugely successful over the course of the next two years that I ran them. In addition to the Stockton police programs, I began to teach also it at Stockton's Police Constables Precinct 1, and adaptations of it were presented at various Texas universities. Thousands of officers passed through the program, including some members of the FBI, military, and Justice Department.

We began the class by breaking the ice for ten minutes, as we asked officers what their perceptions of Muslims were. What is it like in Muslim countries? we would ask. How do you picture them? Often, they would answer with imagery of deserts and camels, but rarely a modern city. So we showed them what life is like in parts of the Muslim world. They saw modern cities, women working, modern clothing. Of course, there are parts of the Muslim world that resemble what they imagined, but most of the Muslim world is not like that. Those perceptions are often based on stereotypes perpetuated by the media or people they trust. Then, during our course, we educated them on basic history and what Muslims believe. We pointed to areas where they were similar in their religious beliefs. We tried to build on

common ground, to bridge a gap of familiarity, trust, and even the building blocks of forming relationships with Muslims. In the last half of our course, we sought to learn from each other as to the best way to handle encounters in investigations, or just visiting a friend without causing mutual misunderstandings.

“We know you have a job to do and your safety is paramount,” I concluded. “But we only hope that we can make your job easier by what you learn today.”

The floor was always open for questions. We encouraged them to ask any question, regardless of how offensive they thought it might be, and we answered all of them as openly as we could.

The success of this program secured my position in IFNA as the IslamAnswers-Stockton director as well as the added positions of the IFNA-Stockton and IFNA-National Public Relations representative. Saleem Qureshi, President of the Stockton League of Mosques (SLM), became my friend in the months following, and made me the Public Relations representative for SLM, along with prominent community member Abdul Jamil Siddiqui.

My profile in the community was increasing, and I felt happy that I was a part of something important and positive. Bridging the gap between non-Muslims and Muslims was important to maintaining peace. I believed that it began here and would branch out to other cities and even countries. The key to peace, in my view, was mutual understanding and respect. It came through learning about each other, empathizing with each other, and meeting someplace in the middle.

One evening, at one of our regular Wednesday meetings, Ibrihim had something on his mind.

“What do you think about taking my position and being the head of IslamAnswers-Stockton?” he asked.

I was stunned.

“Wow,” I said. “That is an incredible responsibility.”

“You’ve done very well in these classes,” he said. “I’ve talked to the board of IFNA, and they think you would be the best person.”

The credit wasn’t mine alone. My IslamAnswers team supported me through everything I did—Ibrihim, Kurt, Umar, Mohammed, Khalil, and many more. Every Wednesday, we held a planning meeting and created programs that made us recognized nationwide in IFNA as the most progressive, proactive, and successful group in IslamAnswers. People in IFNA and IslamAnswers looked up to us and learned from us. It was a good feeling and gave us purpose. Never was it more satisfying than when people walked out of my classes with happy faces, leaving behind outstanding positive feedback. Just a few months prior, I would have never thought it possible, after the horror of 9/11.

We often debated world events and chatted well into the night and early hours of the morning. Kurt was involved with two groups of people other than IFNA-IslamAnswers. He was always interested in the Salafi movement, a Saudi based movement in Islam, and Freedom Now. Freedom Now is a nationally syndicated alternative news outlet, patronized by a loosely connected group of leftist and even communist fans, who held group events and

often used this news source as a footing for their anti-government conspiracy theories. Kurt was heavily involved in a number of their events and groups, and his wife worked for them in some capacity.

I was often concerned about Kurt's involvement in these two groups, but I kept an open mind. His activity made for lively discussions and debate on current world events, politics, and religion, after our Wednesday IslamAnswers planning meetings.

He taught us about the Salafi movement as one that, in the mid-eighteenth century, was based on the teachings of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab. It started as a non-violent revivalist (evangelical) response to the decaying morals and Islamic practice in the Arabian Peninsula. They were mainly concerned with issues of shirk and modern Western innovative influence (bid'ah) among Arab Muslims (Shirk is an Arabic word for associating partners to God or worshipping other gods in violation of strict monotheism. For example, Jews and Muslims are strict monotheists. Christians, on the other hand, ascribe Jesus and the Holy Spirit as partners with God. Polytheists worship an assortment of other gods.). In 1744, Muhammad ibn Saud and Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab officially allied and began a campaign of state-sanctioned enforcement, or religious violence, which Kurt believed was justified. In my own study of the movement, I have come to believe that this is the point in history where the two Salafi philosophies began to develop into being political pacifists and polar opposite political extremist sub-movements (which groups like Al-Qaida and ISIS are based on today). Or maybe it's a simple result of the Saudi Kingdom's totalitarian enforcement over hundreds of years.

Kurt was taking religious courses from a rising star religious scholar named Asif Khan, who at the time was just becoming well-known in the US community. Asif is from a Pakistani family, who lived in Saudi Arabia starting when he was five and into his teen years. His Saudi influence comes out in his teaching, but is more moderate within Salafi scholarship. Often, Kurt would remark to Umar and me about how he had asked questions on religion and the current political situation involving Muslims in Asif's class. He felt his classmates viewed him as somewhat more extreme, and indeed his religious and conspiracy views seemed to grow more extreme each day.

Most American Muslims joined their fellow countrymen as George W. Bush launched Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan in 2001. We were angry at the 9/11 attack on our country, especially since it was done misusing our religion as justification. Kurt and a few others were not so easily drawn to war. They were angry that the US was waging a war on yet another Muslim country without proof. It was made more suspect when our government rejected as non-negotiable an offer by the Taliban to turn over Osama Bin Laden to a neutral country if the US stopped bombing Afghanistan. The *Washington Post* reported that the Taliban was desperate for a way out of the war, and their third most powerful public figure, Deputy Prime Minister Haji Abdul Kabir, made a public statement.

"If America were to step back from the current policy, then we could negotiate," he said. "Then we could discuss which third country."

It became clear to Kurt that the Bush administration was engaged in a conspiracy to use the 9/11 attacks as a pretext to invade Muslim countries, perhaps to invade Iraq, to finish the job that George Bush, Sr. hadn't. It was a conspiracy confirmed for many by the Bush administration's launch of Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003.

We all wanted whoever perpetuated 9/11 to be brought to justice. Some felt it was Western leaders who were responsible, some believed Israel was somehow involved—but most knew it was Al-Qaida, and hoped that the Taliban would hand over Osama bin Laden, rather than drag the country into total destruction in a war with the United States.

Conspiracies that Israelis were the real perpetrators, wanting to draw the US into war against Muslims, were frequently voiced in both the Muslim community and the extreme political left-wing in Stockton. I must admit that, for a fleeting moment, I even wondered if a state actor was behind the tragedy. It certainly fit the conspiracy, to think that the 9/11 attack would benefit Israel by destroying the Palestinian cause once and for all.

Some thought it was the Bush-Cheney duo who wanted to fatten their pockets with oil and defense money. Private contractors were cleaning up in Iraq. It was KBR, a subsidiary of Halliburton (Cheney's former company) that was given priority to receive reconstruction and defense contracts.

Adding fuel to the fire, the anti-Islam hate industry was ramping up propaganda assaults to warn everyone how bad Muslims were. We watched tearfully as peaceful Muslims were lumped into the same basket as terrorists. We were branded as sleepers with no minds of our own, beholden to a James Bond-style mastermind villain who could flip a switch and activate any one of us anonymous henchmen at will. Your ordinary, peace-loving Muslim neighbor next door was now viewed with extreme suspicion. Topping the cake were prominent Christian leaders like Franklin Graham, who declared Islam "a very evil and wicked religion." Here I was in support of going after Osama bin Laden, standing against the terrorists misusing my faith, and even I was being branded as part of evil by people who claimed to be the spiritual and moral compass of America. I was disgusted.

The public backlash and the proposed Patriot Act reinforced a Western Christian conspiracy against Muslims at home and abroad. To question Bush administration policies in those days was tantamount to being a terrorist sympathizer, and people were branded as such. It seemed that national checks and balances in Congress were suspended, and the administration could push through any agenda with little resistance.

Muslims in America were now in a bind. We were rallying with our fellow Americans to defend our country against terrorists, who misused our religion to attack us, and yet many of the people we hoped would rally with us were branding us as evil sleepers who were incompatible with democracy. Bush administration policy seemed like it was directly opposed to the administration rhetoric that this was not a war against Muslims. The hostility toward us intensified.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Radical Road

AS THE US began its invasion of Iraq, Franklin Graham's Southern Baptist Convention was clamoring to ride the backs of the US military, as it announced that its International Mission Board would send missionaries, food, medicine, and Bibles so that Iraqis would have true freedom in Jesus Christ. The Bush White House inclusion of the likes of John Ashcroft, an evangelical Christian from the Assemblies of God church—which is known for its outspoken intolerance towards Islam—and Donald Rumsfeld made it even more apparent that Muslims were under assault by the Christian West. President Bush talked of a “crusade,” and quoting Bible verses became commonplace in his speeches. He would go on to claim that he based his decision to invade Iraq and Afghanistan on some messianic vision that God told him to invade and bring peace to the Middle East. It was worrying and apparent to many Muslims (including some in the IslamAnswers-Stockton group) and others around the world that this was becoming a Christian holy war. Kurt dubbed it “Bush’s Crusade.”

The Islamic Fellowship of North America, and particularly the IslamAnswers-Stockton team, took the Iraq War very seriously. Kurt was most vocal. We debated what was really happening, and since the earliest days of the invasion of Afghanistan and Kurt always relied on a certain set of hadith, referencing the End Times, to justify his views. The hadith are the secondary source, after the Qur’an, to which Muslims refer in order to supplement their faith, or to form opinions on interpretation of our religion. They are a collection of writings either of events from the Prophet’s life or his sayings that were passed down, person to person, by word of mouth, over 200 or 300 years, until they were compiled and written into central books by the scholars who collected them. They are a collection of sayings about things that the Prophet Muhammad approved or disapproved of and, unlike the Qur’an, are not infallible. Some even contain contradictions.

“The mainstream religious establishment has gone astray,” he said. “They have traded knowledge in their religion for peaceful lives and luxuries of the west. While our brothers in Muslim countries suffer at the hands of Western imperialism, scholars here live in the safety of non-Muslim lands and forget about the tragedies back in Muslim countries.”

Kurt derided the traditional religious establishment by quoting hadith:

In the End of Days religious ignorance will be rampant, especially among the traditional religious scholars. Allah will not deprive you of knowledge after he has given it to you, but it will be taken away through the death of the religious learned men with their knowledge. Then there will remain ignorant people who, when consulted,

will give verdicts according to their opinions whereby they will mislead others and go astray.

“Muslims were oppressed and killed in droves by the imperialist west because they had abandon religious knowledge,” he continued. “Us Muslims in the West must recognize our duty to make hijra (immigration) to Muslim lands to defend our brothers. Muslims have no business in the West except for Da’wah,” meaning, trying to convert people.

Umar would back up Kurt with references of End Times hadith. “Near the establishment of the hour there will be days during which religious ignorance will spread, knowledge will be taken away and there will be much killing.”

“The only people in Afghanistan who were fighting to establish Islam in the land and educate people on Islam was the Taliban,” Kurt explained to me.

“The evidence is to the contrary,” I replied. “The Taliban has brought the country backwards by a century. They live in a constant state of war inside bombed-out buildings.”

Kurt and Umar stared in silence as I continued.

“Although, they started off as a unifying force against brutal warlords and made educating in their style of Islamic ideology paramount,” I said. “Look at the condition of the country while they controlled it, and what they have done to their people.”

The Taliban’s brutal rule was often marred by tribal culture reinterpreted as Islamic Law rather than Islam. I asked Kurt to look at what the Taliban had done to their people. One of the most renowned examples that gained international attention was a woman by the name of Zameena, who was accused of murdering her husband and who was shot in the head in Ghazi stadium. The stadium was also used as a place where amputations took place for a myriad of other alleged crimes.

“They were executing women in public in Ghazi Stadium,” I said, “an AK-47 round to the head. I remember seeing an exclusive rare interview with Taliban leadership inside of a government building. It was inside a bombed-out building with a gaping hole in the wall that they had not bothered to fix since 1996. There was no effort to build infrastructure, practice Islam differently from their brand, or establish justice among them. It was brutal repression. Surely that is not Islamic.”

“You are watching Western propaganda,” Kurt and Umar said in unison.

“They had not had the time to establish justice or build infrastructure,” Kurt said. “The West wouldn’t allow it. The West is against Islam and would do anything to stop the establishment of a true Islamic State, or the Caliphate, for that matter.”

“Change in society takes time and is slow. The Taliban were fighting a war against the Northern Alliance,” Umar added.

“Yeah, had they been given more time to end the war and govern, they would have done so,” Kurt said.

Kurt and Umar were united against my onslaught of examples explaining that the Taliban were backwards in their ideology and bad for Afghanistan. They saw everything tying neatly together under foretold events of End Times hadith. Kurt justified his ideology and support of the Taliban against foreign invaders with a hadith, saying, “Black banners will come from

Khorasan (Afghanistan,) nothing shall turn them back until they are planted in Jerusalem...When you see them, then pledge your allegiance to them even if you have to crawl over the snow, for that is the caliph of Allah.”

Kurt and Umar theorized that the Taliban represented a precursor to the End of Days. There was lots of killing and injustice. According to them, the Taliban were the only ones who could unify Afghanistan and establish justice, if they only had the time. Their banner was the Black Banner (Taliban flag) of the Khorasan (Afghanistan). The Khorasan is an Army that is said to emerge from Afghanistan victorious against their enemies, and march into Syria, to be joined and led by Al Mahdi (an ordinary man foretold to come and lead Muslims) who rules as Caliph in the End of Days. Al Mahdi will lead an unsuccessful fight against ad-Dajjal (the one-eyed Anti-Christ, who leads a large army of Jewish soldiers from Persia). He will be joined by ‘Isa (Jesus Christ) upon his Second Coming. Al Mahdi steps down so that ‘Isa can rule as Caliph, who goes on to defeat ad-Dajjal, ushering in an age of peace and justice on earth. Umar backed it up with hadith:

The Dajjal would be followed by seventy thousand Jews of Isfahan (Persia) wearing Persian shawls.

It will be at this very time that Allah will send ‘Isa (Jesus), son of Maryam (Mary) who will descend at the white minaret in the eastern side of Damascus, wearing two garments lightly dyed and placing his hands on the wings of two angels. When he will lower his head, there would fall drops of water from his head, and when he will raise it up, drops like pearls would scatter from it. Every disbeliever who will find his (i.e., ‘Isa’s) scent will die and his scent will reach as far as he will be able to see. He will then search for Dajjal until he will catch hold of him at the gate of Ludd (village near Jerusalem), and will kill him. Then the people, whom Allah will have protected, will come to ‘Isa son of Maryam, and he will wipe their faces and will inform them of their ranks in Jannah (heaven).

“I’d love to be a part of that army!” said Kurt dreamily. “We are in a time when we we’re seeing the rise of the black banner and have a religious duty to support them. They will at first be unjust to their own people, but when they are successful and are joined by Al Mahdi, then justice will prevail. The world will enjoy spiritual enlightenment and a one world religious system.”

Umar nodded his agreement, quoting another hadith, to support his friend in their double act:

The Prophet said: It will turn out that you will be armed troops, one is Syria, one in the Yemen and one in Iraq...Go to Syria, for it is Allah’s chosen land, to which his best servants will be gathered, but if you are unwilling, go to Yemen, and draw water from your tanks, for Allah has on my account taken special charge of Syria and its people.

Umar justified his position stating, “Syria and Yemen were not at war, but there are Mujahadin in Yemen, and a war is now raging in Iraq.”

There was a sense of urgency to both of them. I could feel it vibrating off them and it worried me. Something had to be done. The prophecies of Islam were coming true in our lifetime. We talked about the state of Muslim power in modern times: our community is weak, and Muslims are being killed.

“We can’t sit by idly,” Kurt said.

He went on to justify the urgency to act with another quotation of hadith:

The Prophet said: The people will soon summon one another to attack you as people when eating invite others to share their dish. Someone asked: “Will that be because of our small numbers at that time?” He replied: “No, you will be numerous at that time: but you will be scum and rubbish like that carried down by a torrent, and Allah will take fear of you from the breasts of your enemy and cast wahn into your hearts.” Someone asked: “What is al-wahn (the weakening of strength) Messenger of Allah?” He replied, “Love of the world and dislike of death.”

The global stage was being set. It all made sense to Kurt and Umar. It was all interconnected with a grand spiritual drama being played out in real-time.

It was clear, according to my friends, and I had to admit that some of it I could not argue against. Muslim countries appeared weak, and innocent Muslims were being caught up in conflict and killed all around the world.

Muslims in the early Islamic Empire, ruled by a Caliph in the many centuries after the death of the Prophet, were once a dynamic, great nation. They had great military strength, wealth, and cultural diversity, and they were world-renowned for their scientific reasoning. Now, though, we are enormous in number, we are broken up into many countries, and most of us are controlled by brutal, puppet dictatorships whose strings are tied to the west. Muslim countries are feeling the long-term effects as developing nations after the end of colonial rule, often poor, uneducated, and sorely lacking basic literacy, let alone religious knowledge.

I got anxious, thinking about how they had come to their eloquent conclusions. I lay awake, many nights, thinking about their powerful arguments.

Since having spent a great deal of time in the authoritarian Anointed of God Ministries, and other evangelical churches, I felt I had been around this block before, and was familiar with such apocalyptic reasoning on the End Times. It never ended well, in a debate with the cryptic words of religious writings, and the vast numbers of interpretations applied to them.

Saviors come and go, never to be heard from again. The rapture described in the Bible never happens when it is predicted to. Y2K and Judgment Day predictions pass without so much as a hiccup, and the world keeps turning. Marshall Applewhite types, who are so firm in their belief that they commit suicide, come and go, and the earth hasn’t been recycled yet. The Christian churches I had attended believed in the same grand spiritual battle, and that the re-establishment of the 1948 Israeli state was a precursor to the End of Days. It was common teaching in the church that this would usher in the second coming of Jesus, and the destruction of the Arabs who threatened it, as well as all who don’t follow Christianity.

Whatever religion we subscribe to, we are still here, waiting for our favorite End Times drama to unfold. This was also the favorite narrative of people like Kurt and Umar.

I, too, couldn't help but wonder if the West was collectively punishing Muslims in Iraq for the actions of a brutal dictator who was propped up by the United States until Desert Storm. Sanctions on Iraq churned on for twelve years, and claimed the lives of millions of innocent people, but did Saddam Hussein suffer? His people suffered. Collective punishment, whether it be by war or sanctions, is an incredible injustice, in my eyes. Innocent people were suffering again because of the lies of the Bush administration claiming that if the world, more particularly the US, didn't intervene, there would be mushroom clouds over American cities.

Having family members who served in the US armed forces, I was conflicted. On the one hand, I had enormous sympathy and respect for US soldiers just doing their jobs, and wanting to come home to their families, but on the other hand I had sympathy for the Iraqi people who, after twelve years of US sanctions, were transformed from a middle-class society to desperation as a result of an illegal war.

As Dick Cheney was saying US soldiers would be greeted as liberators by Shi'a crowds, followed by images of their kids showering US soldiers with candies, I already anticipated what was coming. The insurgency kicked in, and it was due to a blunder on an epic proportion. The US went in with a gross lack of preparation for the economic and human cost of occupation. We had completely dismantled the security and controlling apparatus of the country, the Iraq military and police. Overnight, there was chaos without constraint.

It was the siege of Fallujah in 2004 that seemed to tip the scales for the IslamAnswers-Stockton group. The US occupiers had installed a puppet regime that released plans for a new flag that looked strikingly like it was designed by an Israeli. It was a white flag with a blue crescent, and two blue stripes on the bottom, with a yellow stripe between the blue. It was striking, even to me, to see such a dramatic change in a national symbol such as a flag. It was very poorly thought out.

Saddam's Sunni population, feeling marginalized by the process, was in revolt against the new Shi'a dominated government. Fallujah was likened to the Final Battle (Armageddon) in the End Times, as Sunnis held their traditional Iraqi flag high in defiance, and holed up in the city to prepare for a ground assault. The amount of carnage involved, with stories of US soldiers shooting at everything that moved, even animals, was astounding. Our hearts went out to the innocent people caught in the crossfire. Kurt and Umar's anger at our government burned brightly. I must admit that I, too, was angry that my government could inflict so much suffering with the support of its people, in the name of 9/11 and mythical WMDs. I wasn't fooled for a second by Bush administration propaganda. Unfortunately, it was an anger that Kurt and Umar could not compartmentalize. Something needed to be done.

My anger was channeled through my political activism. My Jihad (struggle) was carried out through peaceful means. I, too, justified my worldview in light of more authentic hadith that said, of the three types of Jihad, "The best jihad in the path of Allah is to speak a word of justice to an oppressive ruler."

I believed in using the existing systems of government, provided to US citizens, to change policies. I held and attended peaceful antiwar protests, where I spoke to the media. I educated my friends and co-workers. More importantly, I exercised my right to vote. The only way to change the injustice of our system of government was from within, and I posed that idea to the IslamAnswers group at our social talks after our weekly meetings. I explained to them that, barring revolution, which is often violent and destructive to more innocent people than not, there is no possibility of change without engaging the system through legal means.

There are three kinds of people: those who work to change the system for the better, those who try to usurp it, and those who turn a blind eye. My belief, based on my Islamic teaching, is that we have to work peacefully within the system to effect change. The alternative (as proven in recent history in the Middle East Arab Uprisings) is a lot more chaos, pain, and death. I believe that Islam is a social justice movement and that it is very much concerned with the concept of justice. Given a choice between two paths, it's our Islamic duty to choose the better one that causes the least pain and suffering. Also, abiding by oaths is a core tenet of the Qur'an. Mainstream scholars agree, as do I, that we have an Islamic duty to abide by our oaths of citizenship that we assume by birth, or take upon naturalization in a country, or upon entry to a country on a visa. That entails working within the system, according to its laws. We cannot try to subvert, usurp, or attack it. We have to affect change within the systems of the countries where we live, through every available legal means.

Kurt and Umar agreed that voting and doing outreach were ways to affect change, but they claimed it was imperative that we do something more. I hung my head after yet another heated debate, as the two told me that we had a religious duty to assist the Mujahadin.

Fundamentally, I agreed. We do have a religious duty to help the people of war-torn countries, but vigilante justice through violent jihad is not the answer, and is forbidden in Islam, in my view. The concept of jihad in Islam isn't different from how our military is constitutionally established. A legitimate Islamic Army, for over 1,400 years, was always accompanied by a well-regulated military, controlled by a diplomatic apparatus. Vigilante hordes of ad hoc wannabe soldiers, who form their own groups and claim religious legitimacy, are dangerous to Muslims, the Islamic faith, and the world. We have seen this in Libya and Syria. I tried to reason with them that it was fundamentally against what I believe that Islam and Islamic history taught us.

It became a futile, circular debate, but it was one conversation I thought would pass in time. I listened and posed questions to make them think, from time to time. Instead, I focused on staying on message by helping Kurt with the IslamAnswers-Stockton public access television program, The Islamic Outlook, which was doing quite well at countering misinformation.

The Islamic Outlook was a mainstream, middle of the road program, which had a regular host and took calls from the general public about topics relating to Islam. It was Kurt's primary project, for which he secured our host, production, and airing. One evening, it took a dark turn, with an explosive political video that flabbergasted me. The video Kurt created was aired during our program break, and was called "Bush's War."

The most powerful-sounding antiwar voiceover music I have ever heard began playing over the air. It was "Twisted Sense Of God," by Finearts Militia, featuring Chuck D, former member of Public Enemy. It was a shocking video, with images Kurt had scraped from various websites. The first half showed triumphant Iraqi mujahidin, and a lot of dead American soldiers coming home in US flag-draped coffins. It showed their families crying at funerals, and US military vehicles blown up with scorched bodies that lay on the ground. The second half featured a tribute to the late Sheikh Yasin, the spiritual leader of Hamas, who had just been killed by Israel, that year, in 2004. Gangs of armed men, dressed in black, faces covered, holding AK-47s, posed triumphantly for the camera. The voiceover was a recitation of Qur'anic surah (chapter) Al-Yasin, and as it faded in and out I saw photos of armed fighters, portraits of Sheikh Yasin, his funeral procession, and girls holding up the Qur'an at the camera, as if it were a weapon to be feared.

I was stunned at first, but perhaps due to denial or wishful thinking, I thought it wasn't such a big deal. After all, the media was rife with news of soldier deaths, but refused to show images that were already posted on the Internet. Kurt said he was simply trying to show the public what the mainstream media wouldn't. It was war, and people needed to see the effects of the policies they supported that cost our soldiers their lives.

The segment on Sheikh Yasin was even more shocking. The imagery and use of Islam as a weapon made me sick to my stomach. Kurt wore an expression of pride, and seemed to draw strength from airing the video, finally making his opinion heard on air.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The Plot

THE INTERNET WAS crucial to Kurt's indoctrination, and he downloaded a lot of 9/11 conspiracy theory and Iraq war videos to show us. He was on a mission to find out what really happened on that fateful day.

One of the videos claimed to show how the US government could have orchestrated the attacks in New York and on the Pentagon. The video appeared to show something that the narrator claimed was a tomahawk missile hitting the Pentagon. It went on to show the flashpoints on the burning parts of the twin towers, and claimed that demolition crews intentionally collapsed the towers. The so-called documentary discussed the five Israelis in New Jersey who were arrested on 9/11, after celebrating the tragedy, and the Jews who worked at the towers being told not to go into work that day, suggesting an Israeli connection to the terror attack. If there was a conspiracy out there that showed 9/11 wasn't orchestrated by Osama bin Laden, but was the subject of a government cover-up, Kurt found it and shared it with us.

In July 2004, I finally took a vacation, and planned a trip to Big Bend National Park in west Texas. It was a trip I'd been wanting to do for a long time, as I had not done it since my days in the Christian cult. Primitive camping was something I missed doing. I had previously mentioned to the IslamAnswers-Stockton team that I wanted to go on a recreational camping trip, but this one was different. It was primitive camping, meaning there would be nothing there, no toilet, no water, no food, except what we brought with us. There was only a searing hot plot of land for us to pitch a tent, make camp, and explore the vast desert. I was incredibly stressed, due to marital problems and increasing community work responsibilities. I needed some serious time away to catch up with my thoughts.

Kurt wanted to join me, and Umar expressed a desire, too, but Kurt and Umar kept talking about the glories of the jihad campaigns of history, and how the mujahidin had to tough out the elements on the way to victory. They thought this was a great opportunity to experience what it's like to tough it out. The point of my trip was solitude but, in the end, I thought, *Surely experiencing real roughing it will make them think twice about how glorious it out would be to tough it out.* So, after some time, I reluctantly invited the entire group—Kurt, Umar, our cameraman, Mohammed Farouk, and anyone else who wanted to come. I knew what it would be like, from my days in the cult, but they were soft. That they thought the trip would be glorious showed that they were romanticizing these stories way too much.

About a week prior to leaving on the trip, Kurt asked if there was a shooting range nearby. There was one within driving distance, past a park ranger security checkpoint. They asked if

they could bring their firearms, to hit a few targets. Although I had a permit to legally carry my 9 mm Glock-17, loaded firearms were not allowed in federal recreation areas. I had already researched the federal guidelines and planned on keeping my weapon unloaded and packed away. But the guidelines weren't the only issue, I told them. I advised against taking the rifles because of how it might look if someone were to see a group of Muslims, including a Pakistani and an Arab, in a remote area, firing weapons.

On the day of our camping trip, Mohammed and Umar cancelled. Umar had some IFNA Relief work dropped in his lap, and Mohammed had some things going on with family. It was like Mohammed to drop out of things, but, *I knew it*, I thought, *Umar is soft, and couldn't possibly be serious about all of this grandiose rhetoric of the lifestyle of the mujahidin*. So Kurt and I set out for Big Bend.

Kurt picked me up in his grey Nissan pickup truck. As we drove down the road, he mentioned that he'd brought his .30-06 rifle and some ammunition. It was behind his seat. I was a bit concerned and angry at him for putting us in that position, after I had told him it wasn't a good idea, but we were too far out, now, to turn back. I told him we wouldn't be using them on the trip, but he was more hopeful.

Kurt had a lead foot, and was always getting speeding tickets. On the second day of our trip, he got stopped by the park ranger for going 10 mph over the 50 mph limit. As the law requires, when we were stopped I had to declare that I had a firearm and a legal permit to carry a concealed handgun. I abided by park rules that it be unloaded while in the park. The officer asked if we had any other firearms, and Kurt declared his rifle. The park ranger ran the rifle's numbers, took our information, gave Kurt a ticket, and let us go on our way. We were not off to a good start. I was annoyed at this, but didn't let on about it, as it would make for an awkward situation, and I wanted to enjoy the trip. After our experience with the park ranger, I had finally convinced Kurt to leave his weapon unloaded and packed away in the truck.

We went on camping and hiking in the foothills, and rested in the rocky ruins of an old cinnabar mine, Mariscal Mine, located in a scorched, barren wasteland. We rested on top of a hill, which was the only place where we could catch a cool breeze in the desert sun. There were no sights or sounds of birds or insects, just the steady wind. It was incredibly peaceful and surprisingly cool, given the incredible heat on the desert floor. Under the intense heat of the sun, every sip of water was like drinking boiled water, yet it was strangely refreshing in that dry place.

When our trip ended, we checked out at the front entrance and headed north on US-385, out of the park. Just north of there is a border patrol checkpoint, where they routinely stop travelers to check for drugs and illegal immigrants. We approached the checkpoint and stopped where a uniformed border patrol officer greeted us.

"Are you American citizens?" the officer asked.

"Yes," we responded in unison.

He turned his attention to the Qur'an Kurt had left on his dashboard.

"Why are you down in this area?" he asked.

"We were on a camping trip," Kurt said.

He turned his attention to the supplies that we had, a few jugs of water and backpacks in the back of the Kurt's pickup.

"Are you survivalists?" he asked.

"No, sir," I said. "We spent a week in the desert, primitive camping, and needed to be prepared for the stay."

"Are you Muslims?" he asked.

We both said yes. I thanked my lucky stars that Umar and Mohammed were not with us at that point. He motioned and told us to pull over to the side, so they could look through the pickup. We had no problem and were compliant, but I wondered if Kurt's Qur'an had made him suspicious. When I exited the vehicle, and the officer was taking our details, I declared to him that I had a concealed carry permit.

"Do you have your firearm on you now?" he asked.

"Yes, sir."

He asked where and I pointed to my belt in front of my body. He asked to see it and I lifted my shirt.

"Would you like to take it?" I asked.

"Uh, no. I don't think I need to do that," he replied.

He looked over his shoulder to the outpost where other officers were inside, running the vehicle tags. Then, for some reason, he changed his mind and decided to ask me to remove it, which I did, and gave it to him.

The officer was very professional, and questioned us for about thirty minutes about our citizenship, our activities in Big Bend, and about the Qur'an on Kurt's dashboard. As he looked through the vehicle, his colleagues ran all of their computer checks and the numbers on Kurt's rifle and my handgun. He returned my firearm, and we had a friendly chat about camping and the heat before he told us we were free to go. I thought that was the last of it, but I had another thing coming.

About a week or so later, I got an urgent phone call at work. It was my wife and she sounded frightened.

"Will, someone is pounding on our door," she said. "They are shouting 'Will Prentiss, FBI.' Why is the FBI looking for you?"

She refused to open the door for them, because there were a number of recent home invasions where people masqueraded as police officers to gain entry and rob residents.

"He isn't here, he is at work," she said through the door.

"When will he be home?" they asked. "We need to talk to him."

My wife, speaking through the door to them, with me on the phone, arranged for me to meet them at the dispatch office location at the Stockton Chronicle transportation department where I worked.

I was nervous, and didn't know what to expect, given the post-9/11 anti-Muslim climate at the time. Why were they so interested in me, to the extent that they would beat on my door in such a dramatic fashion? Surely they could have visited me at work, or at my law

enforcement classes, without having to go to that extreme. I had a fleeting thought that it must be about my Big Bend trip. It was the only thing standing out from my ordinary, mundane, everyday life.

The two FBI agents were at my place of work within an hour. I was nervous but eager to clear this up. I directed them to a nearby conference room, where we could talk more privately. They introduced themselves as Helen and Tom, and we sat at the conference table with one agent to my left and another across from me. Tom was the primary interviewer, with Helen sitting on the side, quietly writing notes as we talked.

"We are here to follow up on information passed on by US Customs and Border Patrol. So, tell us about Big Bend," Tom said.

Yes, I was right, I thought.

"What do you want to know about it? I was on a camping holiday for a week, recently," I replied calmly.

"On holiday with guns?" he said, raising his eyebrows.

"Yes, I had a firearm that I am legally allowed to carry."

I pulled out my wallet and took out my firearms concealed carry permit, then handed it to him. He handed it to Helen. She jotted down all of the information, and handed it back to me.

Tom continued, "Were there any other firearms there?"

He was asking questions he already knew the answers to, so I wasn't about to leave anything out.

"Yes, Kurt had a .30-06 rifle that he kept in the back of his pickup while we were there."

"Did you guys use them?" he asked me.

"Of course not. Park rules say that we cannot have our weapons loaded while on federal property."

"So, you did not do any training?"

"Training for what?"

Although it was a cordial conversation, on the surface, I knew I had to be careful of what I was saying. I was beginning to see where they were going with the conversation, and needed to be as truthful as I could. Helen stopped writing for a minute to chime in.

"We're sorry to have to press you on this, but we have to ask these questions. After the 9/11 attacks, we have to follow every lead, no matter how small. The Border Patrol cleared your weapons and wrote their report clearing you, but new regulations say we need to verify these details."

"I absolutely understand, and have no problem cooperating," I said. "I don't want another attack, and I'm totally against violence and religious extremism. Countering Muslim extremism is exactly why I teach about Islam to local Stockton law enforcement officers. Extremist violence puts ordinary Muslims under undue scrutiny and isn't part of what we believe as Muslims. It was only a primitive camping holiday, and I had asked Kurt not to take his firearm, but he did anyhow. We didn't use the weapons. We mainly hiked and camped at the sites designated for camping."

"Well, we thank you for your time," Helen said. "We're happy you are willing to cooperate with this, and see no problem with you in this interview. But we are having some problems with Kurt."

I was stunned.

"Really? Why is that?" I asked.

"Kurt's wife slammed the door in our face and Kurt lawyered up immediately," Tom said.

"What? I have no idea why he would do that. I can talk to him if you like," I offered.

"If you would do that, and encourage him to cooperate, that would be great. Him doing this just looks bad on the both of you," Tom said, nodding.

"I agree. I'll be sure to call him right away and get back to you," I said.

Tom and Helen gave me their business cards, shook my hand, and went on their way.

It was a complete shock to me. I could not imagine why Kurt and his wife would be so uncooperative about the trip. They had always had a deep-seated distrust of the government. *Perhaps it is that?* I thought. Maybe it was the airing of the Bush's War propaganda video.

Nothing I could think of made sense. As far as the camping trip, we were in the clear, so long as he was as cooperative and truthful as I had been.

After the agents left, I immediately called Kurt, to find out what the hell was going on.

"The government can't be trusted and is targeting us because we were Muslims," Kurt said in a stern voice. "No matter what we say, they will misconstrue our words to manufacture evidence against us."

"Kurt, listen," I reasoned. "We were not in the wrong. We were doing nothing more than anyone else has done, so why not cooperate? All you need to do is tell them the truth. What is so hard about that?"

As we talked, it was clear that he wasn't concerned at the hardship it was causing me and Aminah, and the amount of suspicion it created when he fought an interview. My interview had lasted about thirty minutes, and the agents dealt with the issue very professionally. Surely Kurt could afford them thirty minutes of his time, and that would be the end of it. Kurt's uncooperative reaction caused considerable pain to my family as suspicion mounted. I was furious, after the call.

It cost Kurt a day off from work and a week of stress before he finally met with the agents, with his lawyer present, after which the FBI cleared both of us, regarding our activities on the trip that week in Big Bend.

Thanks to his actions, we were now on the FBI's radar, and I avoided contact with him for a couple weeks because I was so angry. I remembered all of Kurt's talk about the mujahidin and began to wonder if there was more to it than I was willing to admit. It was the reason I was trying to discourage him, and steer him away from his extreme views, but perhaps Kurt was looking at the trip as an opportunity to train for something more.

After that, the FBI began periodically showing up at the Police Department classes I taught. The agents now knew my stance on Islam, the relationships I had with the Stockton Police Department, and the purpose of my police programs. On occasion, they would sit during portions of my classes, and afterwards ask me questions based on intelligence they had

received from other agencies, wondering if I had heard anything out of place in the community. Clearly, they were looking to find out any plots before they took place.

I got on particularly well with one agent, Angela Smith, was very friendly with me. We became friends. Angela was a lawyer, prior to joining the FBI. Her late husband was a Stockton Police officer who died in the line of duty. I saw her and her partner regularly at the Islamic Outreach Association, after my classes, where she knew she could talk to me freely and not be a burden to my place of employment. She was not judgmental or hostile about Islam, by any stretch, and seemed to take people at face value. She had one goal: to prevent bad things happening to innocent people. I liked that about her. We would sometimes catch up after my seminars.

In December 2004, Kurt called and told me that he wanted to speak with me after our IslamAnswers planning meeting. Since there was just me and him that night, we decided to have the meeting at one of our favorite Starbucks locations on the west side of Stockton. I settled down with my triple shot grande cappuccino and we got to it.

We discussed the usual topic of the IslamAnswers campaign, as we had done ever since the months after the 9/11 attacks, when the group was formed. We then began to talk about unrelated and more personal topics. Kurt took the conversation into a whole new direction.

He spoke to me in a low, urgent voice, his eyes bright with enthusiasm, impressing upon me that he had devised a plan to go to Iraq to join insurgents in the fight against US and coalition forces. He said he felt this was part of his Islamic duty to defend Muslims from US aggression.

There it is, I thought to myself. *Is he really serious?*

He knew that we were probably on a no-fly list after the Big Ben incident. It was highly likely that we were being monitored. He said it would be too suspicious, to try to fly direct to the Middle East, so he planned to test the system by flying to Canada. He said that he was looking into immigrating to Canada, so a short trip wouldn't seem suspicious. He had contacts there.

"Who?" I asked.

"Brother Irfan."

Irfan was a Pakistani-Canadian who held a position in one of the Islamic Fellowship of North America's Canadian chapters in Toronto. He had visited us in Stockton to talk about our Da'wah programs.

"What about your wife?" I asked. "Are you sure you want to do this?"

He said his wife supported the idea. Kurt's wife was a journalist with the Freedom Now news organization, and a relatively new revert to Islam. Even prior to reverting to Islam, she held anti-government views.

This weighed heavily on my mind, as I drove home that night. *What do I do with that information?* I thought over and over. *Is he serious?* Kurt had so much going for him, with Islamic work in Stockton, and a nice job at the local college. Why would he give up all of that?

Still, he had not acted out yet. He didn't have tickets and didn't seem to be a danger at home. I figured he would likely get busy with family and the Islamic community activism he enjoyed

so much, and forget about the grandiose plan. He was still one of my closest friends, and I gave him the benefit of the doubt that it would pass.

At another IslamAnswers meeting, a week later, Umar Jalali was there, too, but this time concerned me when they both brought up the topic. I realized they had spoken privately amongst themselves, and the plan had developed further. Kurt had asked Umar for help in making contact with Irfan in Canada. Prior to traveling to the Middle East, Irfan would offer a place to stay in Toronto, and possibly tell him whom to meet and how to train. The stopover in Canada was meant to help avoid travel suspicions by US authorities. Umar suggested an additional cover to the plan, which was to use the IFNA Relief charity as a ruse to travel on business. Umar had control of relief work with IFNA relief in Stockton, and had been sending relief supplies overseas. Those supplies were all legitimate, so far as I knew.

I had a gut-wrenching feeling in my stomach as I drove home that night. These were my friends, my best friends, and I loved them as brothers. What if it was all just hot air? I had a family to think about. So did they, for that matter. If it wasn't hot air, I'd be committing a federal crime if I ignored it. I could be charged as an accomplice. It began to weigh heavy on my heart. Now everything was at stake: my Islamic work, my job, my freedom, and my family.

I had to unload on the person closest to me. Aminah listened intently as I told her how serious the conversations with Kurt had become. The implications of ignoring it were staggering, not just for our family, but for IFNA, IFNA Relief, and IslamAnswers. A government shutdown of the organizations we had worked so hard for, to achieve so much progress, was becoming a real possibility. If it came to light that this was done using IFNA via IFNA-Relief as a cover, and IslamAnswers, too, since they were using these weekly meetings to hatch their plan, they would be ended altogether. Groups like Holy Land Foundation and others had been shut down for alleged financial links to terror groups, even though the allegations seemed convoluted at the time. In fact, this would jeopardize the plight of all Muslims in the greater Stockton area, and possibly the nation. I had worked very hard to defend and advocate for these organizations in the media, when difficult times came as a result of extremist Muslims actions (such as Al-Qaida and the Taliban) worldwide. All of this was now in jeopardy.

As we talked, we grew concerned that, if they succeeded in getting to Iraq or Afghanistan, they would attack our country and our soldiers. It was treason, in my view. They would no doubt have also been drawn into the conflicts that were flaring up there and ultimately killing fellow Muslims or other innocent people. If they survived, who was to say they would not return and attack the United States?

Sleep was hard to come by, that night. I lay awake, thinking of the actions Kurt and Umar were contemplating, and the possibility that I would have to take the difficult step of talking to law enforcement. I wrestled with my conscience, and tried to convince myself that, as with rhetoric in the past, this would pass. Surely it was all talk, and they hadn't really acted on it. They kept me in the loop, so I gave it time, as I figured out what to do.

At one point, I considered going to the IFNA leadership with my concerns, but dismissed the idea, based on my previous experiences with them. They were not capable of handling

the issue objectively. It would simply cause the activity to go further underground, and if they were serious we would all be blind to their plans.

I was reminded of an earlier occasion, when I had organized an event on behalf of IFNA Relief-Stockton and IslamAnswers-Stockton, to raise funds for a joint project to purchase property in a poor neighborhood in the city. The property was to double as a soup kitchen for IFNA Relief-Stockton and IslamAnswers da'wah activities. It would also build and house a large IslamAnswers campaign billboard, visible from the highway. At the fundraiser, Imam Rasheed Muhammad, a prominent African-American Imam, was brought in to support the event that would be a grand effort to help local non-Muslims as well as the local Islamic community. The event raised roughly \$67,000 from local Muslims.

Soon afterward, the money disappeared, and the organizers learned that the person handling finances, Mustafa Bhatti, had stolen the money and sent it to one of his businesses in Pakistan. After many months, I had pushed the IFNA Stockton chapter leadership to take the matter to the police. The President of IFNA Stockton, Abu Musa 'Isa Brown, asked me to accompany him to the local FBI office, to discuss how to proceed with such a case. After our meeting, the IFNA-Stockton Board of Directors ruled that the President of IFNA Stockton would not press criminal charges and involve the authorities. Instead, they would try to beg Mustafa for the money back.

I was livid at the decision. It was gross mishandling of a crime in which community funds given to a charity were stolen. After some months, Mustafa agreed to pay it back, but rather than take the money out of Pakistan, he used IFNA's name, without authorization, to go to many Stockton League of Mosques communities and raise money. He raised the entire amount from the community to pay for his theft, under false pretense, claiming it was for a new IFNA Relief project.

The community had ended up paying double. It shattered my trust in the organization. They were not capable of handling the criminal behavior of their members, and the community paid the price. I felt that Kurt's plot would be no exception to this.

For the next two months, I wrestled with Kurt mentioning his intention to go to Iraq and Umar's involvement. Kurt and Umar were two of my best friends, and we worked closely on everything related to Islamic work. We also shared Iftar (breaking fast) together during Ramadan, and shared many other meals together just to socialize. I began to ponder my justifications for approaching the FBI with the plot, and tried to find some other way to deal with the issue, but came to the conclusion that it wouldn't go away without external help. I felt that it wasn't just my duty to safeguard my country. I had to protect my community. They were my friends, but I could not stand by and be idle.

"O ye who believe! stand out firmly for justice, as witnesses to Allah, even as against yourselves, or your parents, or your kin, and whether it be against rich or poor..."

Aminah and I decided that I would talk to my friend, agent Angela Smith. I could trust Angela. She was particularly approachable.

There was a deep distrust of the federal authorities in the Muslim community, particularly with the FBI, but I had a good relationship with both and was successful at working out my

previous problems with them, stemming from Big Bend. I was concerned, though. Talking with the FBI would not cast me in the best light, in the community.

Earlier in the year, I attended a seminar at the Department of Justice (DOJ) with a friend. At the time, I was heavily involved with IFNA, who supported my activist work, putting on antiwar and pro-Palestine protests, defending the Muslim community in the media, and holding seminars. I met my first Muslim FBI agent and I perked up in intrigue. I sat next to him, and after I introduced myself, he went on to explain that he was a Muslim. My heart sank, as if I was talking to Satan himself. It came time for prayer, so I reluctantly made *thuhr salat* (afternoon prayer) with him and then began to talk to him again afterwards. As we talked more, he explained that his motivation was to help the Muslim community fight against terrorism. But most of his Muslim friends, and even some of his family, had disowned him when he'd told them he was going to be an FBI agent. I walked away with sadness, dismay, intrigue, confusion, and a lasting question as to why and how a Muslim could become an FBI agent. I had come a long way from that, now, and wish I could have been more understanding.

I had a lot to think about. I came to realize that we cannot afford to pay lip service to extremism by condemning it, only to turn a blind eye when it presents itself to us.

One morning, I picked up the phone and started to punch in the numbers, but a wave of nervousness and heat swept through my body. I was about to inform on my best friends, my Muslim brothers. I stood there, with the phone in my hand, staring into space for what seemed like an eternity. I took a deep breath, held it, and let it out. I mustered the courage and hit the call button.

"Hi, Angela," I said. "We need to talk."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Codename is Edinburgh

I'D JUST FINISHED my shift when the phone rang.

"Hi Will, it's Angela Smith. Can you meet me?"

"Of course, Angela," I said. "I'm a coffee lover, how about Starbucks in the East Central part of Stockton at three?"

"Sure, I'll see you then," she replied.

After thuhr (afternoon prayer), I drove to the Starbucks and ordered a triple shot grande cappuccino and sat myself on a table outside the coffee shop. It was a cool, crisp, sunny day, and the sun felt warm. A black sedan soon pulled up. A tall African-American man, smartly dressed in black pants, white striped shirt, striped red tie, and slightly unzipped black jacket, exited the vehicle, accompanied by a tall, blond woman in blue jeans, white sweater top, and brown jacket. It was Special Agent Smith and her partner, Jamal.

"Hi Will," she said. "It's good to see you."

"You too, Angela."

I felt nervous as I shook hands with them. They sat at my table.

"So, you sounded like you had something on your mind the last time we talked," Angela began, once everyone was seated with their coffees.

"Yeah, Angela," I said. "Honestly, I don't know if this is anything, but I think I need to tell you something...something about Kurt."

I was sure she could hear the nervousness in my voice.

"You know you can tell me, Will," she said. "I won't make any judgments."

As I sat at the table, I explained the events concerning Kurt and Umar's plan to go to Iraq, to join the mujahidin and fight against our country. Jamal and Angela sat up in their seats with looks of concern. They paid close attention as I spoke.

"Angela, I thought the talk was a lot of bluster," I said, "and I waited a long time to tell you. I didn't want to get them into trouble for nothing. But Kurt has acted on it, now, and just last week purchased tickets to Canada. Umar has already made arrangements for him in Canada."

"No. You're kidding!" she exclaimed. "When are they leaving?"

"In just one week," I said.

"Oh, my God," she said. "Hold on, Will. I need to make a phone call."

"Will, why are you so nervous?" Jamal asked.

"Jamal, my Islamic work has made me quite well known throughout the Stockton community," I answered. "People will not look very well at me turning in my friends. If this becomes known, it will destroy a lot of good that I have done."

"You are doing the right thing, Will," Jamal reassured me. "You are not only helping protect your country, but keeping this from harming your community. The FBI wants intelligence on illegal behavior that could lead to attacks on America, not to prevent people from practicing their faith."

Angela finished her call and put her phone down.

"I need to ask you something, and it may be hard, but I want you to consider it," she said.

"Sure, what is it?" I gave her a smile.

She looked right into my eyes.

"I had to phone the office," she said. "We can't get anyone in place, straight away, to make sure we can monitor this. We were wondering if you would help us until we get an undercover officer in place?"

My eyebrows raised and my eyes flew wide open. *Oh, no*, I thought. *This is getting complicated.*

"Help how?"

"My boss said it could be months before we had anyone able to investigate and see what these guys are up to. We need you to monitor this for us until then."

In deep thought, I looked at the table for a moment, to buy time, and raised my head back up. I was thinking, *This is the FBI. How can they not have agents at their fingertips for this kind of thing? I've done my bit, been a good citizen.*

"Will, you know that I wouldn't put you in this situation if I didn't really need to, but these guys have plans to act very soon. It's happening faster than we can respond."

Once again, I thought, *the FBI can't respond fast?* She was myth-busting on an unheard of scale.

I covered my face with my hands for a moment, then looked at them both and sighed.

"What would you need me to do?" I asked. I hadn't made a decision yet.

"Well, just go about your regular day and let us know what is going on. But it seems that most of their planning is happening during your IslamAnswers meetings. Can you wear a wire for us?"

My jaw dropped. This was way beyond what I had bargained for, territory I had not planned to enter.

"A wire?"

"Yes, we would make sure that it wasn't able to be seen," she assured me. "You would meet us before the meeting and after for a debrief."

"I can't," I said. "It's not that I don't want to help, but these guys are my best friends. We pal around a lot. They will definitely notice a wire."

"I know it's a risk, Will," she said, "but, look. We don't have any other options at the moment. We will be close by, to protect you, if anything should go wrong. We need your help. Please consider it for me. No one will know it was you who helped us."

I sat and thought hard, feeling as if I were balancing on a knife edge. My love for country, my family, my friends, and the hard work I had put into building my foundation in the community were all at risk.

And what of my friends? They weren't bad guys. They weren't the type of Muslims who would berate women for not wearing hijab (headscarf), and they were involved in local humanitarian work. They were just caught up in fighting against a perceived injustice against our people. They did it wrongly, in my opinion, but what would happen to them if I did this? What did my faith tell me? What would the FBI do to me, if I refused to help them? Could I even trust them?

I realized Agent Smith was intelligent. She knew that because I was well-known and active in the Muslim community, and well-educated in the faith, I could be an invaluable tool to them. That is why she visited me regularly in the Mosque during my law enforcement classes. It was a way of handling extremism, from a law enforcement perspective, without causing more harm or suspicion among the general Muslim community. It was something I taught the officers.

"Okay, Angela," I said. "I trust you. Tell me what you need from me."

A silver Ford extended cab pickup with blacked out windows pulled up, and Angela walked over and had a brief chat with an agent through the window. She walked back to the table.

"We need you to come to the office," she said. "Can you meet me there tomorrow?"

I agreed, as I had a day off work between two long shifts.

She gave me her card, and we arranged a time just before noon. I would call her when I arrived.

The following day, we met in the parking lot at the FBI office on the north side of the city. Angela met me as I pulled into the parking lot of the large, blue, glass building. Angela knew I carried a concealed firearm sometimes, so she asked me to leave it with her before we went inside. As we walked up to the doors, we were met by a security officer and scanned through metal detectors.

Inside I did not find what I expected of a typical office building. It was dark and ominous. It reminded me of Hollywood movie depictions of dark rooms in which huddled CIA agents commanded covert operations, via satellite, against enemies around the world. We passed through security, and Angela directed me to the right, down the dark hall, to a room on the right where Jamal was waiting.

I sat in the room at a dark wood conference table. Angela sat at the head of the table. There was a full-length window to the outside, but it didn't let light in. The room was kept dimly lit, and the window was darkly tinted. I was nervous. *I am in the belly of the beast, now*, I thought. *The heart of where it all happens*. There was no turning back.

Angela and I talked, for about an hour, about what to expect. She assured me that my identity would be kept secret, with Jamal making periodic appearances, typically with a refill of coffee.

"Will, this operation could last months," she continued. "I've been authorized to reimburse you for your expenses. Usually, when people do something like this, we can give them some money each month to help in the investigation. You won't be working for us in an official capacity, but just assisting."

“Angela, I don’t want money,” I said. “I will do it because it’s the right thing to do. But I have a job and family to support. I can’t give up work—besides, that would look strange.”

“There will be expenses, and you should be compensated,” Jamal said. “We don’t want to cause you financial hardship, and we need good eyes on the inside.”

“That’s right. We don’t want to cause you hardship, Will,” Angela said. “And if you don’t want to do this, we aren’t going to force you, but until we can get a man on the inside we really do need you.”

Despite her prior words, Angela reminded me of the potential consequences if something happened because of the delay in coming to them. I already knew this, but there was something in her voice about the consequences. Reading between the lines, I felt an implicit warning about not lending my full cooperation. I had waited some time to bring this to their attention. Under new anti-terror laws enacted in the days after the tragedy on 9/11, if I had knowledge of acts of terrorism, or support for terrorism, and Kurt did something, I could have been charged with a crime. The FBI couldn’t get an agent on the inside for some time, to investigate and keep tabs on the group. I had intimate knowledge of the group’s ideology and planning.

Life was not easy, and I struggled, living paycheck to paycheck, but I didn’t need to be paid to help. I wasn’t doing this for money.

“I know, Angela,” I said. “Payment isn’t necessary. It’s my responsibility as a citizen and as a Muslim.”

I agreed, that day, to go undercover for the FBI. My assigned codename was *Edinburgh*.

“Will, you cannot tell anyone about this investigation,” Angela said. “We won’t discuss this even with other law enforcement agencies. The people who know who you are will only know you by this codename.”

At least my identity would remain protected—or so I thought.

Angela left the office, to retrieve some paperwork, and I sat there in silence, sipping from my Styrofoam coffee cup. I thought to myself, *Will, you’re in the shit now. There is definitely no going back.* A wave rushed over me as I felt sorrow, anger, anxiety, and fear, followed by relief that it was all off my chest. This was not what I envisaged, but Kurt had put me into this position. I had tried so often to reason with him, and dissuade him, to no avail. Now I felt that the stakes were raised, and now I had to put myself in danger.

I whispered under my breath.

“Ya Allah, I hope I am doing the right thing.”

It is a sentiment I express to this day. The implications of this for me, my family, my friends, and the community, were huge. I had hope the FBI was good as their word, because if people found out what was done here I would be accused of being an FBI plant from the day I reverted to Islam. The Muslim community was suspicious of white Americans to begin with. It wouldn’t be the first time I was excluded from a group of Muslims because of my race. There were already murmurs of jealousy in IFNA, behind my back, and I’d been told by my Pakistani friends in IFNA leadership that it was as a result of my incredible successes in the mostly Pakistani organization. Surely this would be good confirmation bias ammunition for

them. Many Pakistanis in the organization also held negative views of African-Americans, and surely Kurt's involvement would not go unnoticed because of his race. Kurt and I shared the burden of being suspect to a group of them, ever since becoming involved in the organization. It was a cultural aspect of the organization that Ibrihim had hoped to change by bringing us into IFNA.

Late on the following Wednesday evening, I prepared for my first undercover operation. The stars were out, and a cool breeze blew through my open window, as I sat in a dark, vacant parking lot, across the freeway from the Starbucks, on the west side of the city. Kurt, Umar, and I agreed to meet there and hold our regular IslamAnswers meeting. I looked in my mirror as the lights of a car emerged and came in my direction. I didn't recognize it at first. It was a blue, four-door Chevrolet, and it slowly rolled up and parked next to me. It was Angela and Jamal, meeting me for my pre-operation briefing.

"Hi, Will," Angela said through the passenger window. "Get in."

I exited my car and walked to the back of their car and got in.

"How are you?" she said. "Are you nervous?"

"Very."

"Don't worry. We are right here, if anything should happen," she assured me. *What are they expecting to happen?* I thought to myself.

"Here is the wire," Jamal said. "It's nothing to worry about, and we can plant the recording device anywhere on your body, so it's hidden.

"You're kidding me. That looks hard to hide."

The transmitter/recorder had attached to it what seemed like a mile of coiled wire, attached to a mic.

"Can't you make that smaller, reduce the amount of wire on that thing?" I said.

"No, this is all we could get. It will have to make do," Angela said. My opinion of the FBI technology sank even further.

"I may as well hold the mic up to their mouth and ask them to speak into it," I joked.

She shook her head.

"Don't worry about that, we will do a good job hiding it," she said. "And we can hear everything that's going on, so you will be safe."

"Your safety is important," Jamal said. "You don't know who else these guys might be talking to, so if anything should happen, if you need help, we will hear it and be able to come."

"Uh, okay. Thanks."

The agents wanted to reassure me, but also give me no illusions as to the possible dangers. I knew Kurt and Umar had firearms, and was well aware of other Muslims, their friends and family, who carried handguns and rifles. Some were very proficient at shooting, since they went to the range regularly. Many talked about it as ordinarily as any other non-Muslim enjoying a day out at the range. Kevin, my wife's ex-husband, was in the military, and very proficient at combat tactics and firearms.

I wasn't aware of whom Kurt was talking to that led him to become radicalized. It could be that a network in Stockton was behind it, or a foreign actor on the Internet. Umar had boasted

of having contacts to Al-Qaida insurgents in Iraq, through his brother, who lived in Kuwait, but no one knew for sure. It was the reason for the investigation. It was serious business.

The agents helped me rig myself with the wire and I tested it.

"Act normal. Don't do anything out of the ordinary, and don't ask too many questions," said Angela.

"Just let them talk," Jamal said, "but see if you can find out more about their plans for Canada."

Angela sent me on my way. As I opened my car door to get in, Angela opened her window.

"Good luck, and meet us back here afterwards, so we can debrief."

"Yes, ma'am." I smiled nervously.

I turned on the radio and took a deep breath for some courage, then drove across the street to the Starbucks, where Kurt and Umar were already waiting.

The operation was fairly easy, because Kurt and Umar were giddy as school boys. They had a lot to talk about, and I didn't have to say much. We claimed a quiet corner and began the minutes for the meeting discussing the status of IslamAnswers programs. Then Kurt began talking to Umar about the pending trip to Canada. There was no doubt they were ready for it. Pressure points of the Palestinian conflict, war in Afghanistan, and the Iraq war were mounting for Kurt and Umar, as they talked about the atrocities committed by US forces against Muslims. The Abu Ghraib prison torture, and abuse at the hands of US soldiers, fed their anger, while the aftermath of Fallujah and Kandahar inspired them. They said the mujahedeen needed our help.

I sat back and listened, nodding occasionally. I didn't need to speak or ask many questions. I was thinking to myself that this is way too easy. They did most of the talking, except an occasional question directed towards me. By the end of the evening, they disclosed that they had purchased Kurt's ticket for Canada, and Umar had made arrangements with Irfan to put Kurt up for the weekend.

Kurt told us the date and flight details, bragging all the while about their plan. He would test how easy passing through Canadian immigration was, and hook up with Irfan to spend a few days with him. He wasn't too concerned with American immigration, since their real plan was to eventually take a one-way trip to Iraq. The meeting ended, and a few minutes after the others departed, I met the agents back in the parking lot across the street for a debrief, and to hand over the wire. I was relieved it was over. My knees felt weak.

Angela was more than pleased with my performance. She congratulated me, and said there was nothing else to do until Kurt returned from Canada. He would be followed and monitored wherever possible. Kurt was happy to talk about his ideology almost anywhere, in Starbucks, in their houses, and in the street. It was only a matter of time before they were discovered, hopefully before he acted on his plan. As a result of what I was doing, I knew he could be heading to jail, and Umar, too, if he continued to help or join Kurt on this path.

That didn't sit well with me, but I reassured myself that it was better than any of my friends dying in some war-torn city in Iraq, or left to the vultures, injured, or maimed in the Arabian Desert. Or worse, killing innocent people and being recruited as Al-Qaida sleeper agents,

bent on returning home to attack the United States. They would likely curse me until the day they died, but I knew I was doing the right thing, and I could live with it.

Or so I thought at the time.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The Jamaat

WHEN KURT RETURNED from Canada, he was so excited he almost bounced into our next meeting. He wore a huge grin. I sat back and listened to him tell us about his journey, offering an occasional probing question, but nothing more. Upon Kurt's arrival in Canada, the border agents had questioned him, but asked nothing too difficult for him to answer. Soon he was in Canada, and he hooked up with Irfan for the weekend. Little had he known that the FBI had already been working with Canadian officials based on my lead, and the border agent was reporting everything back to them. The FBI were very happy with our progress.

I felt sorry for them, and realized how easy it was for my friends to become indoctrinated by religious zealots into doing something they might have never otherwise thought of doing. There were times I wished I could tell them everything, but was bound not to endanger the investigation. It wasn't something I could deal with in the mosque either. Kurt's indoctrination had not taken place in the mosque; his indoctrination had happened online, via the Internet. It was an indoctrination of his choice, and that made it all the more upsetting for me. In fact, the Mosques would teach such a watered-down version of Islam, we used to call the sermons "Flowers in Heaven" speeches, because they no longer dealt with any of life's relevant issues. People were too scared of having their mosque or scholars branded as extreme to talk about anything that would benefit our lives. Relevance to current events was taken out of the Mosque and relegated to the responsibility of individuals and movements, like the Islamic Fellowship of North America, and other, similar organizations.

Since the 9/11 tragedy, Kurt would spend hours of his spare time scanning for any information he could find about it on the Internet—information on events leading up to the attack, conspiracies, and anti-Muslim and Muslim opinion posts or articles. He sought out religious justifications for Osama bin Laden and Al-Qaida attacking innocent civilians. He quickly honed in on Osama bin Laden's "Letter to America," which appeared as an online document and video on Nov 24, 2002. It made perfect sense to him, and was phrased in such a way that even I could understand wanting justice and freedom from US-supported dictatorships. He cited the Iraq War—Desert Storm—and twelve years of sanctions on its people, and the support of the humanitarian disaster created by the State of Israel.

I admit that I saw the logic, but that logic stopped at the point where the killing of innocent civilians and "martyrdom" operations were being justified. It was squarely against Islamic teaching, in my opinion, and I had a strong objection to that. Kurt seemed to seek the justification rather than to think critically of such ideologies. It wasn't long after that that he began turning up with underground recordings he had downloaded from the Internet. He

stored them on his mp3 player, and began listening to them regularly. It had a marked impact on him. His thinking began to change. It wasn't an overnight change, but a progressive change, incrementally over time. He began to debate justifications for extremist acts, when I challenged his ideas based on common sense, the Qur'an, and even scholarly opinions I had gleaned elsewhere.

It was as if he were seeking justification for extremism, rather than trying to confront it. People like myself and some others were obstacles to that. On one occasion, he and the very successful host of our Islamic Outlook public access television program had such an ideological debate.

"Respectfully, brother, the hadith you are referencing are often not reliable, and we shouldn't follow them," the host said. "We must view the hadith as subordinate to the Qur'an, because they were written hundreds of years later. In my view, I only follow the hadith that can be directly referenced in the Qur'an, like prayer, for example."

"We can't ignore any hadith," Kurt said. "The Qur'an says we have to obey both Allah and the Prophet."

He continued.

"The words of the Prophet are in the hadith. Even the weak ones have some value, and you can see the things happening in the world that were foretold in those hadith that you say are weak."

Kurt was steaming mad, later that evening. He convened an emergency meeting with the rest of the IslamAnswers team.

"Anyone who denies hadith are not true Muslims," he said. "We cannot have this on our show. He will promote disobedience to the Prophet."

"Kurt," I said, "The brother hasn't said anything wrong. He is an excellent host. Cut him some slack."

There was no talking reason with Kurt. The next week, he fired him from the set, and replaced him with another, less capable host, who had similar extreme views to his own.

Over the next couple of months, whenever we had a meeting involving Kurt and Umar, I made recordings. Kurt and Umar would talk amongst themselves, and I often queried their intentions.

"How will your wife handle you being in Iraq?" I asked.

"She would be honored that I was fighting for a good cause," Kurt said.

"Umar, what would your family say if you were there fighting?"

"My family thinks that I am the black sheep anyhow," he replied. "It wouldn't surprise them."

The pressure of my undercover work, on top of my ordinary job, and of all of my responsibilities with IFNA, became overwhelming. I was responsible for overseeing projects in IFNA-Stockton, IFNA-national, and IslamAnswers, during the time of the investigation. I was betraying my friends, for a good reason, I believed, but it wasn't my intention to betray my community. I wanted to protect them from the fallout if Kurt succeeded in going to Iraq and fighting Americans. Wrestling with those emotions was beginning to weigh heavily on

me. Incredible sadness would come over me, keeping me awake at night. One evening, I sat myself down at the computer, and typed my letter of resignation, to hand into IFNA.

The IFNA President, 'Isa Brown, refused to accept my resignation. According to 'Isa, I was doing outstanding work and the programs could only be held together if I did the job. No one was in the position to take my place. Reluctantly, I recanted my resignation but somehow, I don't think I had a choice.

Soon after Kurt returned from Canada, he decided it would be better to go to Iraq with some basic firearm training. At the IslamAnswers meeting, he enthusiastically floated the idea to me and Umar that we set up an official jamaat (group) to train.

"I've been listening to a speech that said that Muslims must be prepared for any eventuality," he said. "What do you guys think of forming a jamaat?"

"A jamaat?" I asked. "Why do we need a jamaat?"

"Well, if we are going to go there to fight," he explained, "it would be good to be prepared before we get there."

Umar jumped at the idea.

"I think it's a great idea. We need to be prepared for the inevitable."

I nodded in partial agreement, but tried to discourage them. The conversation was going where I had predicted it might, and deep down I didn't want them digging a deeper hole for themselves.

"Yeah, people should be prepared, but a jamaat isn't such a good idea. It may put you on the radar. I'm not sure you should do that."

"Will, you had firearms training when you were in that cult, right?" Kurt asked.

"Not formal training, but they did teach me how to use firearms, since we used them to hunt."

"Well, you know more than we do, and you go to the firing range with your AR-15. Why not teach us?"

"I really don't want to do that."

"Well, just think about it. We really need someone with some expertise."

Unfortunately for me, the FBI also thought it was a great idea, and the following week, when Kurt and Umar asked me again, I knew I would have to agree to be their trainer.

"Have you thought about it at all, Will?" Kurt asked in a low voice.

"Yeah, Kurt," I replied. "Look, if I do this, you have to be tightlipped about it. I don't want to get busted."

Kurt smiled and reassured me.

"That's no problem, brother," he said. "It will be just us."

"Good. Where did you guys want to do this training?"

Umar tapped his finger on his chin as he thought for a moment.

"I know where we could do it. There are hunting grounds in the area that we can do it to avoid suspicion. People fire weapons there, and some of them are not used much."

"That's great, Umar," Kurt said. "It will give us a cover story if anyone asks questions. We can just say we are hunting."

Kurt thought for a moment, then looked up at Umar and me.

"So, how do you feel about the jamaat starting with the three of us?"

"Yes, I'm in," said Umar.

"Will?" Kurt asked. "How about you?"

I sighed.

"I'm in."

A big grin came over Kurt's face, then he assigned me and Umar with the task of finding a suitable hunting grounds.

I have to admit that my heart was not in it. Giving these guys firearms training, so that they could go out and kill people, was against every fiber of my being. I began to drag my feet and avoid contact with them, but it only lasted a couple weeks before I could no longer avoid Umar's phone calls. He caught me on the phone, driving home, just after my shift ended at work that day. I also had the FBI waiting on me.

"Will," he said, "why haven't you answered my calls? Are you all right?"

"Yeah, I'm fine, Umar," I replied. "I've just been too busy, lately."

If I had said anything to jeopardize this investigation, I knew the FBI would be none too happy, and I certainly didn't want to be charged with obstruction or even conspiracy along with my friends.

"Are you free right now?"

"Uh, yeah, I suppose I am," I said. "I'm just driving home from work at the moment."

"Why not go out now?" he asked. "I need you to come with, because you can tell me if these places I found are suitable."

"Uh, fine. I'll come," I answered. I felt like I had swallowed a pint of lead. This was really happening.

"Great. I'll pick you up from your house."

We visited a couple sites that day. Umar was convinced they were too far out. We needed more than a couple hours to train before heading back home. He returned home discouraged, and I was happy with that. Unfortunately, it didn't take long for him to make contact with Kurt and come up with an alternative plan.

At the next IslamAnswers meeting, Kurt and Umar sat down.

"We need to set up a training camp. We could do some target practice at a local firing range," Kurt said, "but that would be too risky. We needed freedom to grow as a jamaat in comradery and religious understanding."

Then he looked at me.

"Will, I need you to find us a public shooting range nearby. But it must be isolated, because we don't want to be seen training with weapons. I will put you in charge of organizing the camp."

"Umar and I looked at hunting grounds, and found nothing close by," I said.

"The Texas Parks and Wildlife has shooting ranges also," he replied. "Perhaps there is one closer. Please check it out."

"I can look, but can't guarantee anything. The Texas Parks and Wildlife ranges are open to the general public. Anyone can drive in."

"Don't worry about that," he replied. "We will be practice firing like anyone else, and they won't know better anyhow. We just want to reduce the chances that people will see us and think something is up."

"I'm counting on you to find us a campsite, also. It would be good if we could spend more than a few hours training, if the range is too far out."

Kurt not only looked to me to establish the camp. He expected it. I was the one who had the basic firearms skills. By the next meeting, I had found a shooting range straight north with easy access to and from the city. It was the only site I could find that was close and was rarely used during that time of year. It was a forty-minute drive, and had a firing range but no camping grounds nearby. I printed off the details and presented them to the jamaat.

"We would need to be able to spend a weekend there, to have any decent amount of time," Kurt said.

Umar nodded in agreement.

"Well, how do we find a camping ground close enough to that site?" I asked.

"I have an idea, but I have to check with someone first," Umar said. "There is a property nearby, maybe a five- or ten-minute drive to that range. It's owned by the Stockton League of Mosques (SLM). The only problem is that we need to get approval from the person in charge to camp there."

We knew they wouldn't approve weapons training on the property, and it was a risk telling them what we were doing there, but Kurt approached the person under the guise of letting us camp on the site. To my dismay, the approval was granted, and the two were jubilant. We now had a jamaat, a place to camp for a few days, and a place for firearms training.

Kurt was now pulling regular videos from the *Jihadunspun* website, and scouring the Internet for more information on jihad and the mujahidin in various countries. *Jihadunspun*, he said, was part of the underground. They had uncensored information from the mujahidin that you couldn't find in the mainstream media. *Jihadunspun* was a Canadian-owned website launched in 2002, and a news source for several insurgency groups all across the world, but had most of its information from the Middle East and South Asia. Kurt paid for a subscription to hidden content, and was presenting us regularly with new video of behind-the-scenes footage of what they claimed was really going on in the war on terror. The footage showed American atrocities, insurgents victories, dead American soldiers, and how to make and use an improvised explosive device (IED).

The FBI asked me to infiltrate the site, to download anything Kurt was showing us, so they could review it, and I did. After IslamAnswers meetings, and later at the jihad training camps, he would pull out his laptop and load the infamous Baghdad Sniper videos, and we would watch. Juba the Baghdad Sniper was both infamous and famous—infamous among Americans, because of his high success killing American soldiers, and famous among Iraqi insurgent groups for the same reason. He was also said to be an Olympic sportsman who used his skills in the insurgency against the United States forces. He was a feared and revered

sniper with the Islamic Army in Iraq, a Sunni insurgency group. Some claimed he was a mythical sniper, written about by Chris Kyle, the real-life American hero who served four tours in Iraq as a sniper. Chris Kyle is best known for the movie *American Sniper*, which was released after he was shot and killed in a shooting range in Erath County, Texas by an Iraq War veteran he was trying to help. I don't believe the so-called legend of Juba was a myth; we had the videos, and watched them over and over. Kurt and Umar were jubilant as the Baghdad sniper would speak in Arabic and show us his rifle, then his intended target, then put a single bullet into the chamber and set up his camera to video the event. He steadied his gun, looking through his scope at an unsuspecting US soldier, in full gear, holding a weapon and guarding a building. There was a pause.

You would hear the *pop* and see smoke. In the distance, the soldier hit would stumble back and forth as if in a state of confusion, wondering what had happened. Within a second he would fall to the ground, dead.

Even thinking back on it now, I feel sick. I felt sick then and feel sick now.

But this was the tip of the iceberg. When Umar saw the video of the insurgents in Afghanistan making an IED, a smile crept across his face.

"I want to learn how to do that," he said.

Kurt nodded in agreement.

"Me too."

Many videos circulated of troops hitting IEDs. One particular one I remember was a Humvee patrol headed along a stretch of road, with soldiers walking on the side. In an instant the air was thick with white smoke, the Humvee a flaming wreck, and when the smoke had cleared the soldiers were gone, vaporized so rapidly it didn't even register what had just happened. Kurt and Umar shouted with glee. They laughed and commented on the sheer power of such a device. With a blank stare on my face, they turned to me. I forced a smile before they realized the serious conflict I concealed inside me.

Inside, I was angry at my government for putting our troops in harm's way as a result of the lie of mushroom clouds over US cities and the mythical weapons of mass destruction. I was even more angry that these guys were joyful over the deaths of US troops, who were just fulfilling their duty to our country.

After watching all this carnage, I dragged my feet and didn't call Kurt back for a while. The entire plot was making me ill, on so many levels, just to think about it. It tore me to pieces. I was a devout Muslim, an American patriot, an activist for peace and justice, and a father. That hit me hard, because someone's child was now shot dead. Someone's spouse had been killed, and the brutality of war hit me like a ton of bricks. It had such a profound effect on me, with a wide range of thoughts and emotions I still find hard to describe. It brought tears to my eyes. There is so much pain humans can inflict on each other.

The phone rang for weeks. I didn't answer, or call them back. I focused on work and family. The IslamAnswers meetings were last on my list of things to do. I began to drag my feet and hold out as long as I could. There was no desire in my heart to look at them. I guess, after

seeing the video footage, it really hit home what the end result of this would be in Iraq, if the FBI was not involved. The friends I once loved so much became repulsive to me.

My FBI handlers, too, began to wonder why I was dragging my feet. I hadn't made contact with the jamaat, and it was a huge blind spot in their surveillance efforts.

When I finally began making contact again, I made the excuse to both the jamaat and the FBI that I was too busy with work.

I was under pressure by Kurt and Umar to set up the jihad camp, and by the FBI to get back into the game before something bad happened. It was a precarious situation, as I was taking calls from the two sides. I would cautiously answer the phone to make sure I didn't mix up the two and blow my cover and the investigation.

Finally, I caved. I met Kurt and Umar at our usual location for the IslamAnswers meetup, and formalized the dates for the first training camp.

In pre-Islamic history, there was a brilliant military strategist named Khalid bin Waleed. He lived during the time of the Prophet Muhammad, and was well-known to Muslims, because of his fight against them during the Battle of Uhud. He fought valiantly against the Prophet Muhammad, wounded him, and caused a lot of casualties among the Muslim army. Afterwards, he sat on a hill, pondering, and saying to himself, "The message (of Islam) is spreading fast and the man (Muhammad) is certainly a Messenger of God. What am I waiting for to convert to Islam?" After his conversion, he joined the camp of the Muslims and added military genius to their military might. Kurt idolized him, and it was an obvious choice for Kurt. Kurt named our jihad camp the Khalid bin Waleed training camp.

His face beamed with delight.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Jihad Camp

THE RACE WAS on, for the FBI to form a counterterrorism surveillance team for the Khalid bin Waleed camp.

In the meantime, Kurt wanted a list of supplies and activities, and made it my responsibility to come up with a comprehensive list of the items we would need to supply the camp. Kurt assigned Umar to provide food supplies and discreetly take note of any friends or relatives who might want to join us. If he found anyone, we would discuss it at the next meeting.

"We all should bring our weapons," Kurt said. "I especially want to learn how to shoot your AR-15, Will."

"Yeah, definitely," Umar agreed.

I admit that I was a bit of a gun buff, and loved going to the firing range on my own to relax on weekends. I owned five firearms, a 9 mm Glock and 35 mm ankle backup piece for legal permit concealed carry self-defense, an AR-15 assault rifle, Savage 110LE2 .308 sniper rifle, and a 12-gauge shotgun. Kurt had a .03-06 rifle and a Mossberg assault shotgun. Umar had a 12-gauge shotgun.

With the date set on a Friday, I was going to arrive first at the site to drop supplies for the first Khalid bin Waleed training camp. Kurt and Umar would meet me there later, after work that evening, and spend the weekend firearms training. The shooting range was just about to be closed that weekend, but the jihad group did not know that. I had organized for a Texas Parks and Wildlife official to leave the gate to the property unlocked, so that we could get in to use the firing range. The official was also working with the FBI to provide space for the investigation, so organizing it wasn't a problem. During that time of year, it was unlikely that anyone else would use the site. On that day, Angela instructed me to verify that it was open, and told me to call her to meet me on location when it was confirmed open and clear.

I woke up early that morning with a profound anxiety. Sleep evaded me, the night before, as I thought about my friends, how deeply they were committed, and how I was betraying them. My resolve was fortified with the knowledge that I was still doing the right thing.

It was a hot, sunny morning, but with a cool breeze from time to time. I loaded my car with supplies and headed north, out of the city, to the campsite.

The firing range was about a five-minute drive from the campsite, and another five-minute drive on a winding, red dirt and gravel road that led through trees of a thick forest. At the end was a gravel clearing for parking, and a two-hundred-yard-long clearing for the firing range.

When I made the call to Angela, I heard the sound of vehicles in the distance. I soon saw clouds of dust coming from behind the trees toward the entrance gate of the property. A number of shiny black pickups with tinted windows rolled up. I then heard the surveillance plane above my head.

Angela jumped out of her vehicle and greeted me.

"Hi, Will," she said. "Listen, I just want to thank you for all of your hard work. I know this is difficult for you."

"Yes, it is," I replied. "I woke up incredibly nervous this morning. I wish there was another way."

The rest of the counterterrorism team arrived and exited their vehicles, to survey the area. The agents approached me and Angela, expecting to see an Arab or some foreigner. One of them said, "Where is the source?"

"Right here. Meet Will. He is our source. He has been very cooperative, and put a lot of effort into this operation."

The agent was taken aback.

"Are you a Muslim?"

"Yes," I said.

"Wow. Well, what you have done is the right thing, and I want you to know you are in safe hands. We have a good view of this location, and you can't see them, but we have snipers if anything goes wrong."

Wow, I thought to myself, eyes in the sky and snipers. I'm impressed. Finally, the FBI has pulled out all the stops.

Yes, I was impressed, but scared as hell. It was serious stuff. I was about to give these guys firearms training, and there was no telling what could happen. A sniper couldn't stop them from shooting me in the back first, nor did I want to see my friends shot dead in front of me.

Just then I noticed the constant noise of the surveillance plane buzzing in circles above us. It was causing me serious concern, as it was an attention-getter.

"Angela, can you tell them to back off with that plane?" I said. "That noise will blow the investigation and my cover."

"Good idea," she said. She made the call.

Soon after, the noise faded.

I was briefed about what to expect from the teams, made small talk for a few minutes, and then went back to camp and waited.

Kurt and Umar barreled into camp that evening, smiling from ear to ear. Umar had brought a cousin, Ayden, another Pakistani national attending college on a student visa who was visiting him from Austin, Texas. The SLM property was densely wooded, and had a nice lake, so we broke out some fishing poles and caught a few fish to have with dinner.

In the evening, we gathered around the fire. The smell of smoke lingered in the cool evening air of the forest. We talked about mujahidin and the hardships they had to endure in the harshest environments. It was a stark contrast to the seventy-degree day we had in Texas, and the comfort and safety of our homes in America.

Kurt mentioned the famous Chechen mujahid Shamil Basayev (aka Amir Abdallah Shamil Abu Idris) and his fight against the Russians. During his years as a mujahid, he endured bitter winters, fighting the Russians, and held out valiantly (according to Kurt) against them. Basayev was known for commanding a guerrilla campaign against Russian violence and their occupation of the Republic of Chechnya. He was also well-known around the world for the infamous Moscow Theatre hostage attack, in which up to fifty armed Chechens stormed the Dubrovka Theater, taking 850 people hostage. 130 hostages died, including nine foreigners, and he soon became one of the most wanted terrorists in the world. He was killed in a controversial explosion on July 10, 2006, which some claim was a Russian assassination. According to Kurt, he was a martyr.

Kurt seemed to know a lot about Basayev. He explained to us that he was a threat to the Russians, and through sheer determination had waged armed jihad for the Cause of Allah. We toasted his life and martyrdom with cups of tea by the fire.

The following day we awoke at 5:30 for fajr (pre-dawn prayer) and prayed, talked, and had breakfast on an open fire. I was wearing the wire all of the time. We sat in a circle around the fire, as Umar passed around cups of tea. I can't function without coffee but, annoyingly enough, didn't bring any, even though I was in charge of the list. I had to settle for tea and hope for the best. We then gathered our weapons, ammunition, and water, and headed for firearms training at the range.

It was a cool, crisp morning, as the sun rose and rays of light shone through the trees. But by the time we left camp and headed to the firing range, the sun was beating down on us. It was going to be a scorching day. Kurt and I were dressed in khaki fatigues. Umar and his cousin wore jeans and t-shirts. We set up our targets, life-sized blue human silhouettes Kurt had brought along, and set them downrange at about 100 yards. Kurt couldn't seem to hold back. We hardly had time to get organized when he broke out his rifle, lay down, and started firing downrange at the targets. His rifle was a bolt action and he was making some good hits.

Kurt and Umar took turns on Kurt's rifle. Ayden wanted to fire my 110LE2, so I instructed him on how to load it, and he pounded rounds into a target. I grabbed my AR-15, went prone, and emptied my thirty-round clip into a target. All of their eyes turned to me. Kurt and Umar asked me to teach them how to use it. It seemed Ayden was impressed enough just to hold it and look cool. They were green, so I needed to teach them the very basics of safety. I most certainly didn't want anyone getting shot accidentally from my weapon. I took the old clip out, put on the safety, and held the gun facing to the ground. As they gathered around, I explained it to them.

"This is not a toy, and needs to be treated with respect. As soon as you treat a gun with lack of respect, someone gets shot."

They watched and listened intently. I showed them the safety feature, how to load a fresh clip and chamber a round. Then I instructed them to keep it pointed downrange and not pointed in the air. For heaven's sake, I didn't want the surveillance plane to take in a round and have the whole operation go south.

They each took turns using the safety feature, loading a clip, chambering a round, and pointing the rifle downrange to blast the blue human targets. Afterwards, everyone lined up to practice on their own targets with different weapons. Like a drill sergeant, I walked up and down the line, making sure they were safe, answering questions, and instructing them.

I paused for a moment to wonder how in the world I ended up becoming a firearms trainer at a Jihad camp. What my friends were doing was everything I tried to avoid. It was diametrically opposed to my Islamic worldview.

Half way into the training, that damn surveillance plane again. We all heard the plane buzzing around and looked up into the blue sky. It was a stressful moment, as I thought my cover was surely blown. But the group just joked about it.

“Probably the government spying on us,” Kurt joked.

Little do you guys know, I thought to myself.

The group was laughing about it, and I was terrified but dared not show it. We then moved on to the Savage 110LE2 sniper rifle. The group was keen to learn this rifle. The Savage 110LE2 is a law enforcement rifle, incredibly accurate and useful. I had it refitted with a tactical style stock for increased accuracy. I loved sharp shooting more than just unloading rounds at a range, because it challenged me to achieve a greater degree of skill. That’s why I had the rifle. Kurt and Umar were keen to learn it after watching the Baghdad Sniper videos. Again, I explained that using this rifle was not like watching a video on the Internet. It was powerful, and they would feel the recoil and know that it was serious business. At every opportunity, I reminded them of what a serious thing it is to use a weapon. Instead of being cowed by the subtle warnings, they seemed to be inspired by the power.

When we were done for the day, Kurt asked to take pictures posing with the weapons. Kurt wanted his first, and we all took turns posing with the AR-15. We took a final timed picture with all of us together holding the weapons as a jamaat.

It was all a great laugh to them. I’m sure the FBI got plenty of video of the camp, but taking those photographs was just about the craziest thing they could have done. We all packed up and headed back to camp.

Later that evening, I slipped away and quickly called Angela, to tell her the plane had to move off and give us space. The guys were getting suspicious. She apologized and assured me it wouldn’t happen again.

The sun was down, and the forest black with night. The only light was from our campfire. We were all tired from the day of training, and gathered around the fire for dinner. We talked about the training day. Everyone thought it was a huge success. They were happy to learn about firearms, and Kurt had an insatiable desire to learn more. He asked me if I know anyone with the skills to teach some formations. I told him there were a couple of people I knew, one being Kevin Williams, my wife’s ex-husband. He was ex-military, but he had a family and would not want to jeopardize that. I told him I may know someone else, but I would have to check to see if he would be interested.

Actually, I didn't know anyone else, but knew the FBI were keen to get another agent into the jamaat. Agent Smith could work on this in the background, if Kurt really expressed intent to introduce more people to the camp.

"Good. Well, feel him out and see if he is interested. We could use someone who can give us some combat skills."

Our first jihad training camp was not to be held in some distant and foreign country, but right here in America and the heart of Texas.

I knew I was in deep. The group was looking to expand and the plans were getting more serious and sophisticated. I knew the brothers were self-radicalizing online, and began to wonder if Kurt and Umar were now being directed by someone else—perhaps a foreign agent or group. Kurt was becoming more dangerous by the day, but it worked in our favor that he wanted to bring in more people, because now we could insert an agent. I had done my patriotic duty, and began to think that maybe it would ease the burden on me and I could reduce my role in the jamaat.

Shortly after our next IslamAnswers meeting with the group, later in the week, I met again with Agent Smith. This time we met at another favorite French café of mine, La Madeleine. There was little chance the brothers would go there, as it was on the more expensive side of town. The café was cozy, had a fireplace in the center, was nicely lit, and served a great cup of coffee. It was the perfect place to wind down after a hard week of honest work and jihad training. I was now finding myself putting almost every waking hour into my double life, and there was little time for myself. The stress was taking a toll. It was a nice break to sit and talk with her for a debrief. We ordered breakfast and made small talk for a while.

After breakfast, she pulled out her notepad and we began our weekly debriefing. I handed her the audio from the jihad camp.

"How are you doing with this?" she asked.

"It is stressful," I replied. "I'm really heartbroken that they have done this and put everyone at risk. Now they are more serious about bringing their plans to fruition at home, and I feel nervous for my security."

Agent Smith reassured me.

"We are here to help you, Will. You have nothing to worry about. We have many people in the Muslim community like you that are giving us information. Some have even mentioned you guys planning these operations. If anything happens, we will know about it in advance."

She always had a way of making me feel good about myself, saying that what I was doing was the right thing to do and, more importantly, safe. I had no idea that other people in the community were talking to the FBI, certainly not about Kurt and Umar. It reassured me that I was not alone.

"How was the IslamAnswers meeting this week? What did you guys do?"

"We finished our meeting, and began talking about the great success at camp. Kurt is really keen on bringing in someone with combat knowledge, like formations and stuff."

"Yes, we heard that from the surveillance at the jihad camp and are working on that," she said. "We have someone who we can get into place but it may take some time to get him here."

His name is Hakeem Mohammed, and is an African-American. In the meantime, think up a plausible story that would insert him into the group without raising suspicion."

I knew that I was up to my neck in the investigation. Kurt was serious about training, prior to heading off to Iraq, and Umar was keen to join him. Part of me still wanted to believe it was all hot air, that they were just blowing off steam. Looking back at it, I was right to know better. The steady pace of progression was a recipe for disaster. The stress began to make me sick to my stomach, and I began to lose weight. I just wanted an end to this investigation. It was high time to introduce the FBI's Hakeem Mohammed, to infiltrate the group and relieve some of the pressure on me.

The following week, Kurt and Umar asked me at a IslamAnswers meeting if I had contacted the guy I knew about combat training.

"Yes," I said. "I spoke to him and he actually will be in town soon. He said he wants to meet the group before making any commitments, and was cautious to speak about it until then."

"How do you know him?" Kurt asked.

I had already thought about this after my last debrief with Angela.

"He was a long haul driver like me, and we became good friends. His name is Hakeem Mohammed. I met him outside of Kansas City, when I was driving long haul across the country. We were both involved in an accident and eventually became good friends. He was US Army and an African-American Muslim. He was due to move to Stockton and recently made contact with me, hoping to have a friend to hook up with when he comes."

Kurt and Umar were excited. I could not believe it was that easy. Kurt asked me to invite him to our IslamAnswers meeting when he came to town, so they could get to know him.

"We need to meet him, to see if we can trust him," Kurt said.

I felt that Kurt would especially identify with him, since they both were African-American Muslims. When he met Hakeem, it turned out to be an accurate assessment.

It was a superb fit.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The New Guys

AT OUR NEXT training camp, in July 2005, the public range was closed for the summer so we couldn't use it. The Stockton League of Mosques (SLM) property had a hired resident keeper who took care of the property, who told us we could use the area that he used as a practice range, located on the property. The FBI, unknown to everyone but me, was also in contact with the resident keeper. We were still in business. Kurt decided that we would use the property as our official private jihad training camp. It was perfect.

Umar had successfully recruited another member, Reza Kundi. Reza was a cousin of Umar and followed the Salafi movement very closely. Typically, he had a long, scraggly beard, a soft body and wore his pants too short, in accordance to a teaching they have regarding male modesty. According to the Salafis, to drag your clothes on the ground is a sign of pompousness and arrogance. He held extremist views and wanted to train, but wasn't planning to go to Iraq with Kurt. Having a plan to train and go to Iraq to join insurgents was bad, but without a plan other than to stay in the United States, what was the point?

What exactly is he going to do with this combat training? I asked myself. Suddenly, I recalled the FBI being concerned about sleeper agents in the US, and it made sense. Agent Smith sometimes would ask me if I thought that any of these brothers would take this training and attempt to attack their own country. I didn't believe that of Kurt and Umar, but Reza made me think about it. Umar thought it would be useful for him to train, so I agreed to send him details on the camp requirements, and he attended.

Umar was our camp chef. He was pretty good at it, too. He had a lot of experience helping with food for the poor programs in IFNA-Relief, and was in charge of the local Stockton chapter. After morning prayer, he made tea and coffee, then started breakfast, kebabs and eggs over the fire. We then headed out for a two-mile run and back to camp for pushups, sit-ups, and other exercises. He set up a makeshift rotisserie around the fire on a collection of bricks he found strewn about the property, and an old motor and skewer he brought from home. Bungee cords held everything together. This from a guy who wanted to make IEDs for the mujahedeen. When it was all set up, dinner cooked all day, and we began firearms training again.

Reza and I set up the firing range and unloaded all of the firearms onto a picnic bench at the head of the range. Umar set up an independent scope on the bench, so we could see where on the human silhouettes our rounds were hitting. There was all of our arsenal, spread eagle on the table. It looked like we had unpacked a crate of weapons and were ready to go to war.

After unloading hundreds of rounds into the chests of our targets, we went back for more religious discussion, followed by dinner.

Kurt asked if any religious scholars we knew could join the camp. Umar had some ideas, and Reza gave a few opinions, but nothing definitive. It was a risky proposition, because most every scholar that I knew, and I knew all of them, were very much opposed to violent jihadi groups. To approach one of them and be discovered would blow the entire thing wide open. But it was important to Kurt to have religious direction on jihad at the camp. It wasn't so much for justification for jihad as it was a part of creating a close sense of brotherhood, so he instructed us to brainstorm.

Agent Smith was very interested in this. It was a huge development. Had we an organizational connection to this plot? Were there people in the community who would support this on an organizational level?

"Will, you must follow this up. Do you think any scholars would go along with this?" she asked.

"I honestly don't believe so. I can't think of one," I replied.

"Keep a close eye on it. If they find anyone, I want to know immediately."

Hakeem Mohammed, the FBI's undercover agent, had arrived in town, and we briefly met at La Madeleine. I briefed him on Kurt's background, the development of the jihadi group and camps, their goals, my story about how we met and became friends, and the best way to approach them to be accepted into the jihad group.

"Kurt's family has a strong history in the black American civil rights movement of the 1960s. He often identifies with this movement. Your best approach is to identify on these sentiments," I said.

"Should be easy to do," said Hakeem.

"Good. We have been invited to Kurt's home so you can meet the group."

A week later, we had dinner at Kurt's apartment. His wife cooked a nice dinner and the four of us, Kurt, Umar, Hakeem, and myself sat and chatted.

"So, Hakeem, Will was telling us that you two met after crashing into each other," Kurt said.

"No, we actually got tangled up with a car but no one was hurt. While we were exchanging details, Will told me he was a Muslim. We got to talking and just have been friends since," Hakeem replied.

"And you just decided to move down here from where, Kansas?"

"Yeah, well, I have work here, and just moved with my wife. I thought Will could show me around, so I shot him a message."

"How long have you been a Muslim?" Kurt asked.

"All my life. My parents were Muslims from back in the day."

"Oh, really?" Kurt said. "My parents are Muslim as well, they were part of the civil rights movement."

The conversation between those two went back and forth for nearly an hour. Kurt and Hakeem really hit it off so well that Umar and I began talking amongst ourselves. Then I overheard Kurt ask Hakeem what he thought of the events going on in the world, the war in

Iraq specifically. Hakeem told them about how Bush-Cheney lies are killing innocent people. He recounted propaganda pieces put out by the Bush, Sr. administration, claiming that Saddam had removed 312 babies from incubators, leaving them in the cold to die. The propaganda piece was proven to be false testimony by a fifteen-year-old girl named Nayirah, given before the Congressional Human Rights Caucus, as justification to go to war in Desert Storm.

"It had a profound effect on America's support for the war, and now that George Bush, Jr. is in office, he is just finishing the job his father failed to complete. The Bush administration are liars and only in this for the greed of private contracts, oil, and defense stock investments," Kurt said.

"If that isn't evil, tell me what is!" Hakeem exclaimed.

Kurt's eyes lit up, and he smiled as if finally someone understood what was really happening in American politics. He shook his head in agreement.

"Has Will told you about our plan to go to Iraq and fight with the mujahideen?"

"Yes, some, but I just wanted to meet you first," Hakeem said.

"You are welcome to join us. We can fill you in shortly, because we actually wanted to hold a planning meeting this evening, anyhow," Kurt said.

Kurt turned to me and smiled and then addressed everyone.

"Okay, brothers, now that we have gotten everyone together for this training camp planning meeting, we can start. It's good to have another member."

Kurt distributed a book he had downloaded from the Internet, *A Book of a Mujahadin*, by Shamil Basayev. It was study material that he suggested anyone going to Iraq would need to learn. After the First Chechen War, Basayev wrote the book. It is a rewrite of another book, *The Manual of the Warrior of Light*, by Paulo Coelho. Basayev wanted the book to bring the Chechen mujahideen many benefits, including guerrilla tactics of war.

Kurt explained the book to us and said, "Hakeem, Will said that you have military experience."

"Yes, I was in the Army infantry for four years."

Kurt smiled.

"So, you could teach us some combat formations and stuff?" Kurt asked.

"Yeah, I could. It just happens that I have an Army M-16 rifle, but don't ask me where I got it," Hakeem joked.

Since the beginning, it was clear that Kurt and Umar wanted to head off to Iraq, to fight in the jihad. I was merely a tool to train them and those in the jamaat, and now Hakeem was an extension of that training. But Kurt went out on a limb, after meeting his new comrade Hakeem, and took it a step further.

A serious look came over his face. He paused as if considering something. He then looked at Hakeem and me.

"How do you guys feel about joining us in going to Iraq?"

We both paused a moment, as if to consider the feasibility of leaving to join the cause.

"Uh, yeah," said Hakeem. "But I want to make sure my family is set up here first."

“Don’t worry about that, brother,” Kurt said. “We still have some time before we are ready.” Kurt turned to me.

“What about you, Will? What would your wife think if you joined us?”

“I think she would be supportive, if I fought for justice,” I replied, looking him in the eyes, even though I really wanted to look away. “And if I died as a martyr, she would be honored.”

Kurt beamed.

“Excellent.”

We then discussed the possibility of when we would be ready, and which groups to join when we got there. Al-Qaida Iraq (AQI) was top in their minds as the best group to link up with, because of their ideology and successes. AQI were making significant gains in the Iraqi insurgency, and were one of the most violent Sunni insurgent groups in Iraq, despite exhortations by Osama bin Laden’s central leadership in Afghanistan to tone it down.

AQI’s Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi wrote in his letter to his leader in Al-Qaida, Osama Bin Laden, “If we succeed in dragging them into the arena of sectarian war, it will become possible to awaken the inattentive Sunnis as they feel imminent danger and annihilating death...”

Imagine, for a moment, Osama bin Laden being the man responsible for the deaths of 3,000 innocent Americans, thinking that the group Kurt wanted us to join was too extreme. Al-Qaida Iraq was first known as Tanzim Qaidat al-Jihad fi Bilad al-Rafidayn (Organization of Jihad’s Base in Mesopotamia), also known as Al-Qaida in Mesopotamia, under the leadership of Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi. As a teenager, Zarqawi was a thug, heavy drinker, and bootlegger. He participated in a robbery that left two of his own family members dead. He dropped out of school, and at the age of twenty-three and embraced a militant interpretation of Islam then travelled to Afghanistan to fight in Russian-contested areas with the mujahedeen. He did two stints in Afghanistan, and due to American aggression in Iraq he returned to found Al-Qaida in Iraq. Zarqawi’s group became so violent that Al-Qaida international eventually disavowed them. It is the group that eventually would come to form the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), known also as Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Years after the end of my story, on June 29, 2014, under the leadership of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the group declared him the “Caliph,” and renamed itself the “Islamic State,” or IS.

Kurt was so happy by the end of the meeting that he could hardly contain himself. He wanted to expand the group, but cautioned us against inviting just anyone.

“Umar, I’ll put you in charge of recruitment,” he said. “Everyone needs to be cautious and should refer names to you. Can you also use the IslamAnswers Da’wah (outreach) hotline to evaluate potential recruits?”

“I can do that,” Umar replied.

Using the toll-free outreach hotline was an outrage to me. The reason for the hotline was to dispel the fears of the American people by answering questions about Islam and representing a message of peace. Kurt and Umar were now trying to turn it into a potential terrorist recruiting tool. I had no choice but to play along.

It became clear that Kurt was in charge. Hakeem and I took a backseat. I didn’t mind, because that was how it had been at every step of the investigation, since the beginning, and

entrapment was avoided at all costs. Entrapment happens when law enforcement uses coercion and other tactics to induce someone into committing a crime. It would jeopardize the investigation and trials if Hakeem or I took charge.

Umar continued recruiting from among the people he knew to join the Jihad group. One person he recruited was Emad Bhutt. Emad was a young Pakistani who lived in America and spoke perfect English. His father was Ibrihim Bhutt, the original IslamAnswers Director who put our group together for outreach purposes. Ibrihim and his family were now living in Kuala Lumpur, because of his business interests. Emad was back in the US on a student VISA and attending University. Most importantly, Ibrihim was a mentor and good friend to me. I absolutely did not want his son Emad drawn into this mess.

When I heard Umar had invited him, I was not pleased.

"I'm not happy about this," I said. "He is too young. What would his mother think, what would his father think?"

Umar didn't care one bit. "He is nineteen he can do what he likes," he shrugged.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Training Days

BY SEPTEMBER 2005, we had already begun holding full training camps on the SLM property itself, unknown to the organization leadership, of course. I had, by now, successfully inserted the undercover FBI agent, Hakeem Mohammed, into the group, who brought with him his M-16 assault rifle. Our combat training became more structured. Kurt and Umar were deeply committed to fighting abroad, and did not show any signs of changing their minds. Hakeem was now fully inserted into the group, but as much as I would have liked to walk away at this point, I was not able to do so. Firstly, I was too deeply embedded in the jamaat's activities, and it would have looked strange, to leave so soon after a new member I introduced had joined. Secondly, I still wasn't fully comfortable that the FBI wouldn't mishandle the investigation and would in some way punish my friends for things they hadn't done.

Hakeem and I met at jihad camp early Friday afternoon and began to set up camp. It was Hakeem's first camp, so I gave him the tour and a briefing on what the structure and activities were. Kurt and Umar arrived later that evening, and had small talk around the fire. The following day we were down to business again.

After physical fitness training, I began to teach them training with martial arts. I had some experience in the past and taught them a few self-defense moves, and then we had breakfast.

We set up our human silhouette targets and watermelons on poles above the targets. Kurt was interested in seeing what the velocity of a bullet from his .30-06 rifle could do to a human head. The watermelons served as the test, and he drew random smiley faces on them. He chambered a round and went to the picnic table at the head of the range. He aimed down his scope and fired. A miss. He wasn't a great sniper, but at least he tried. It was more like him to grab the AR-15 and lay down a hail of bullets, but he was keen to improve his sniper skills. He tried again, focusing, this time more steady, and fired. It was a direct hit as the watermelon vaporized.

"Oh my God!" Kurt laughed out loud. "Did you see that?"

"Yeah, that was awesome," I said. "The velocity just made it vaporize."

Umar was rolling on the ground, laughing. He couldn't get up at first. As he struggled to get his laughter under control, at the exploding of a fictitious head of a human being, he took his turn, as did Hakeem and I.

Hakeem took control of the rest of the training as Kurt and Umar were intent on learning some more combat basics. So he started us out slow. We did some small training drills. First it was simple: leave the M-16 and a loaded clip next to each other on the ground 100 yards from the human targets. On command we would run fifty yards and grab the weapon and

clip. Then, as fast as we could, load the clip and chamber a round, aim at the blue human silhouette and tap it five times as fast as possible. We had to be accurate. Hakeem was a true-to-form drill sergeant and didn't tolerate failure or lack of safety. Kurt and Umar reveled in the demands for excellence. Their skills were improving as mujahidin. In another drill, Umar unloaded his thirty-round clip as accurately as possible into the target. Kurt would run up behind him, kneel down, place one hand on his shoulder, and ready the next clip for him to slap in as quickly as possible, after he ejected the previous spent clip. We finished with an hour to spare before dusk with the distinct scent of gun smoke filling the forest air.

Umar seemed to be more focused on training than his duty to provide the food for dinner that evening. He brought dinner but forgot to thaw it before coming to camp. We had a large whole chicken that was frozen hard as a rock and spent all day trying to defrost it. We were resigned to not eating that evening. I was tired, and hungry as a bear after a hard day at jihad camp, so I wasn't having it. I broke out my fishing pole and went fishing.

The brothers seemed not to understand the unwritten etiquette of fishing. Talking scares fish away. Even though cell phones were banned during the camp, Umar was constantly on his. Kurt didn't mind so much, as he was constantly organizing food supplies for the homeless in the city, but this time he was rowing a boat and talking on the phone across the lake that I was fishing on. How was I to catch dinner with him doing that? I motioned for him to put it up and move off of the lake, and he went back to the camp. Discouraged and resigning myself to going hungry that day, I thought to myself, *Well, Kurt would tell me that the mujahedeen went many days with little or no food, right? I guess I should just deal with it.* It became dark, and I threw out my line in despair one last time. As I began reeling in my line, it snagged on a submerged tree. Or so I thought. As I reeled in my line, it was moving towards me, low and sluggish.

"Maybe I snagged a turtle," I said to myself under my breath.

Still struggling to reel in my line, a huge fish leaped nearly two feet out from the water, trying to throw off my line. I was in shock and struggled with it as it leaped out of the water time and time again. After what seemed like ages, I finally got it to shore. It was the largest largemouth bass I had ever seen—the largest I had ever caught, all twenty-six inches.

I ran up from the lake to the camp with this huge fish in my hands, and everyone's eyes lit up. We gave thanks to Allah and had dinner.

We sat around the campfire for Qur'an reading while we ate. Kurt announced that he may have found a religious leader to guide us at jihad camp. We didn't have to look far. It was a scholar, Dr. Sajid Sultan, who was already with the IFNA, and who was in control of the IslamAnswers Northwest chapter. My ears perked up. I remembered Agent Smith instructing me to tell her immediately if they find an organizational link to this jihad camp. At the same time, my heart sank, as this was the very thing I was trying to avoid, the involvement of our community organizations in such extremist activities.

"I heard that he used to attend camps before, and may be willing to attend ours as well," Kurt said.

“Are you certain?” I questioned. “What makes you certain he would support what we are doing here?”

“He has similar views to us on the war in Iraq,” Kurt said. “I have a good relationship with him, and Umar and I can talk to him and find out. I think he would support this.”

I played it smooth, as if I were concerned about being discovered.

“Well, just be cautious what you tell him, we wouldn’t want to be found out,” I said.

“I will,” he said.

We continued with our tarbiyyah (religious learning) program.

“I was reading about the battle of Ta’if,” Kurt said. “Umar, do you know it?”

“Yes,” Umar said. “That’s one of the battles where the Prophet Muhammad’s army used catapults during the siege.”

Kurt continued.

“Yes. The use of catapults killed innocent people in that battle. It is one of the justifications for targeting a city’s civilians. Innocent people will die. It’s part of war. It can’t be avoided. Neither can it be considered collateral damage because it is intentional. If you fire a catapult into a city, you have an understanding that you will intentionally kill civilians. The catapults do not discriminate,” he explained. “It’s like during Operation Desert Storm, when the US bombed the Amiriyah shelter in Iraq, killing 408 civilians. That was intentional, because a bomb cannot discriminate. Or, when Israel sent Apache helicopters and fired Hellfire missiles at Sheikh Yassin on his way to the Mosque. It killed more than just him. Other than his bodyguards, twelve innocent bystanders were killed.”

In those days, catapults were commonly used by armies all over the known world, but the new Muslim army was not yet skilled in using them and often missed their targets. Civilians were sometimes casualties of war by every army that used them. Today we call them “collateral damage.” This was the first time I’d heard about the sort of idea that Kurt was proposing, that Muslims should not avoid collateral damage or even prefer to inflict it.

The Prophet is recorded in hadith saying, “During some of the battles of Allah’s Messenger a woman was found killed, so Allah’s Messenger forbade the killing of women and children.” Many hadith like this lead most reputable scholars to make the judgment that it is forbidden in Islam to deliberately target civilians (men also) because women and children represent noncombatants. What Kurt was teaching us was wholly contrary to mainstream Islamic doctrine. I remember thinking, surreptitiously, that he had just made the point for Muslims to do what we object to the most by the US and Israel, justifying the targeting of civilians, such as the families of terrorists and collateral damage, the very thing he hated to begin with. I don’t think he saw the hypocrisy of what he had just said.

“What does this mean, Sheikh?” I asked Kurt.

There is no clergy in Islam or religiously officiated title of “sheikh.” The word “sheikh” literally means “wise old man.” We sometimes called each other by this title when we were teaching each other.

Kurt continued.

“It means that there are circumstances where the Army of God during the Prophet’s time, just like the US and Israel, killed innocent civilians. They knew they would do so. It is justification for brother Osama’s war against the west.”

“Osama bin Laden?” I asked.

“Yes,” he replied, “and get this, people in repressed regimes don’t have the right to vote their elected leaders. Their leaders do what they want. So, it is harder to blame the people for what they cannot control. But we live in a democracy. We get to choose our leaders, and that makes us complicit in their crimes. As Muslims we have a duty to make hijra (immigration) to a Muslim country and join the jihad in defense of our Muslim brothers who are oppressed and being killed. It also means that anyone who lives in a democracy is guilty of the crimes their leaders commit, like George Bush and Dick Cheney. They, too, are legitimate targets, until they cause change in their societies. The power to support or reject violent and unjust foreign policy is with the one who has a vote.”

Kurt was directly referring to Osama bin Laden’s Letter to America on November 24, 2002, where he stated,

You may then dispute that all the above does not justify aggression against civilians, for crimes they did not commit and offenses in which they did not partake. The American people are the ones who pay the taxes which fund the planes that bomb us in Afghanistan, the tanks that strike and destroy our homes in Palestine, the armies which occupy our lands in the Arabian Gulf, and the fleets which ensure the blockade of Iraq. These tax dollars are given to Israel for it to continue to attack us and penetrate our lands. So the American people are the ones who fund the attacks against us, and they are the ones who oversee the expenditure of these monies in the way they wish, through their elected candidates.

Hakeem and I were flabbergasted at how he connected the dots. It was a masterpiece of propaganda. Where had he come up with that? He had justified the murder of innocent civilians. The Qu’ran that I read values all life forms, not just humans, and it urges the protection of innocent lives: “If any one slew a person it would be as if he slew the whole people: and if any one saved a life, it would be as if he saved the life of the whole people.”

He was using Internet teaching from Osama bin Laden to twist the message of Islam to fit his increasingly violent political views. Kurt and Umar’s motivations were less religiously motivated, though they drew heavily on religious texts for justification. Their motivation was driven more by the politics of anger and vengeance that they used to justify in the expression of their religion.

The Texas Gun Show came to Stockton, at the El Toro Convention Center, a few weeks later. The jihad training camp needed ammunition supplies, and Umar asked me to accompany him to the gun show, as he said he felt like a foreigner. Having me, a white guy, there, made it safer for him to walk among the white nationalists without too much suspicion. The hundreds of rounds of 5.56-round full metal jacket ammunition weren’t cutting it. We needed more. The gun show was a perfect place to acquire guns and ammunition with almost

no background checks. Umar was very keen on getting a Texas-made AK-47 assault rifle. They weren't as well-made as a real AK-47 made in Russia, but they were cheaper.

The FBI had set up surveillance of Umar and me going to the gun show, and I was wired. Agent Davis couldn't have agents inside the center, in case they were spotted. The gun shows are frequented by a lot of different kinds of people, from regular citizens to right-wing extremist militias. The last thing we needed was a three-way standoff between me and Umar, the FBI, and a right-wing nut who thinks the government is coming after their guns.

We walked into the convention center, and inside was a massive hall with individual stalls set up in rows, with hundreds of people selling guns and ammunition. It was an incredible sight, with every kind of gun you can think of being sold. It was Second Amendment heaven for any card-carrying National Rifle Association (NRA) gun rights buffs, among others.

I received a text from Angela, saying the transmitter wasn't working in the venue. It was a hair-raising moment, because the further into the center we walked, the weaker the wire transmitter became, until the FBI could not hear what was going on. It was recording but not transmitting. At any moment, I could be discovered by Umar or some right-wing extremist and the FBI would be late to the party. I surreptitiously repositioned my concealed carry 9 mm Glock for easier access, to be ready for any eventuality.

We walked up and down all of the stalls a couple times, before we picked up 1,000 rounds of ammunition and carted them outside, to the car. We were not the only ones loading up ammunition and guns, so no one batted an eye. Jihad camp was resupplied with enough rounds of ammunition for a small war, courtesy of the Second Amendment.

The pressure of the camps and the investigation had a knock-on effect on my relationship with my wife, which had been steadily deteriorating, in any case. My marriage broke down completely. I filed for divorce from Aminah and, heartbroken at being away from the kids, I moved into my own apartment in July.

Around Eid ul Adha, in December 2006, I was alone in my apartment, watching television, when Umar called me. He wanted to sacrifice a qurbani, an animal offering, in this case a goat. It was a tradition at that time of year. Typically, most Muslims will pay a professional butcher to sacrifice the animal and process the meat. In the Stockton area, there are some farms who will sell you the animal and allow you to kill, clean, and process the meat on location. Umar had the bright idea to do a do-it-yourself qurbani. Kurt thought it was a brilliant idea, too. The two of them went to the farm north of Stockton and paid for the animal.

Umar asked me, "Do you want to come?"

"Yeah, sure."

A distraction from my mountain of issues seemed a good idea.

I wasn't squeamish about killing animals for food. In addition to hunting, I had slaughtered animals for food on the farm when I was in the Christian cult. I understood what it was all about and how to do it. It would be a learning experience, since although I knew how to do it according to Islamic guidelines, I had never actually seen how Muslims do it.

Typically, the killing of an animal is supposed to be as humane as possible. The rules of doing so require that the animal is properly housed and taken care of throughout its life. It

is properly fed and watered. It is removed from the sight of other animals. A short supplication is made, and with a razor-sharp knife, the cut is made to the jugular, precise, clean, and fast. The theory is that the animal has no time to know what is happening before it dies.

The following day, we all met at the farm. There were myself, Kurt, Umar, and some of Umar's relatives, also carrying out their own qurbani. Kurt decided to be the one to kill the animal. He peered into the pen and picked out a lovely black-and-white-patched goat. He took the goat out of the pen, and led it to a muddied area in front. He made his supplication and then attempted to tackle the animal. However, he was clumsy and nervous, and the goat sensed what was happening and attempted to get away. After some minutes of struggle, Umar and two other bystanders tackled the poor animal to the ground, pinning its legs and pressing its head into the mud. By now it was clearly in discomfort, distressed and bleating for its life. Kurt took out his knife, put it up to the goat's neck, and made the most pathetic attempt at killing an animal that I have ever seen. The knife barely cut the hair on the goat. The animal was bleating for dear life again and kicking much harder. It clearly understood that it was about to die, and the spectacle now shifted into the sight of the other goats in the pen, upsetting them and making a severe ruckus. Kurt attempted to cut the goat a second time with the same lame stroke, but this time the goat kicked so hard that the knife slipped and barely ruptured its jugular. The knife nearly went into Kurt's own hand. He tried again, and this time the goat's blood squirted straight up into the air and all over him. I stood by, watching in horror and disgust. I walked up to Kurt, took the knife from him, and pushed him aside. I made a swift and clean cut and within seconds the goat flopped as its life ebbed away, its head hanging limply to the side. It was dead. I glared at Kurt. He knew exactly what I thought of his botched qurbani. It made me angry and sick, the suffering caused to the animal. I remember the thought going through my mind that these were the guys who were training to fight to kill people. They couldn't even put a small animal down.

A couple weeks later, we were back at our camp, loaded with supplies and ammunition. Emad joined us in full battle dress uniform. Jihad training became more intense, and we were training more military-like, practicing conceal and cover and general unit formations. We drilled by laying our unloaded weapons twenty-five yards downrange, sprinting at them with thirty-round clips in our hands, loading, chambering a round, and unloading the clip as fast as we could into human-shaped targets fifty yards away.

We were unloading clips in our semi-automatic rifles so fast that it sounded like fully automatic fire. It was interesting, that the National Firearms Act of 1934 banned fully automatic assault weapons like machineguns, because of the amount of damage they can do in such a short time. Yet here we were, laying down fire with semiauto assault rifles almost as fast. I can only imagine that in a terror attack these weapons would have the same mass casualty result that the government tried to avoid in passing the NFA 1934. The mass casualty these weapons were capable of was not meant to be within our Second Amendment rights to have. If these guys, like Reza, who had no plan other than to remain in the US, were

encouraged by extremist elements to embark on a plan on US soil, it would, without doubt, be a mass casualty event of a proportion the country has rarely seen.

The power of these weapons of war was enormous, and smoke filled the sunlit air as we unloaded clips with incredible speed and accuracy. We were a combat unit just about ready to prove ourselves on the battlefield. As we started to rest our weapons, and began to walk to the targets, to count our kill shots, something happened that put me on high alert.

Emad came back from taking a break and informed us that the police were in the drive, talking to the caretaker of the property. We all put our weapons up, hidden from view of the police, and remained concealed at the training area in the wooded part of the property while we assessed the situation. It was a puzzling moment, and Hakeem and I looked at each other and cautiously back at the other guys, expecting that things might get out of control. We all began to walk out, to sit by the campsite, where the police were talking to the caretaker, but Hakeem and I lingered a short distance behind the group.

"We got reports of fully automatic fire," the officer said.

"No, sir," Kurt said. "We have all been firing at targets, but none of our weapons are fully automatic."

I casually got my phone out and texted Agent Smith that the police had arrived and were concerned about the gunfire. Behind the scenes, the FBI were already working on it. As we were explaining to the police that we were target practicing, and didn't mean to cause alarm, the FBI contacted the sheriff on the scene. They informed him that this was part of their investigation, and there were two undercover operatives on location. The sheriff was calm and finished taking our details. He made everyone believe they bought the cover story that it was mere target practice that got too exuberant. We all breathed a sigh of relief afterwards. I thanked Allah that there wasn't a shootout, because these guys were ready for it.

After the police left, we decided to change our drill practice from live fire to formation tactics. There was no way in the world we could expect to get through 1,000 rounds that day, anyhow.

There was a dirt trail on the property that led from forest near the head of the training area. It wound all the way around the lake, with portions that went into the forest and back to the lake. It must have been two miles long, with trees and brush on both sides, which were great for cover and concealment. Hakeem rounded us all up, and briefed us on the next drill. He instructed us to unload our weapons, safety on, and take positions in the nearby trees. He walked past us and explained the difference between "conceal and cover." Good cover will most effectively reduce the ability for weapons contact to be made, with you shielding you from getting shot—things like trees, concrete, or hard ground. Concealment will allow the fighter to be most effectively hidden from view. The fighter can observe the target without the target noticing, so things like foliage or dark shadows are ideal for concealment. After his briefing, he instructed us to take cover as quickly as possible, and ready our weapons, training them downrange. We spread out and took positions behind trees, aiming our guns at an imaginary enemy in front of us. Hakeem was on point. The point man is the first and most exposed position in a combat military formation. He leads the unit through hostile and

unsecured territory. Hakeem instructed us to leap frog behind cover as quickly and quietly as possible while staying alert. The second guy in the line would move to the point, the third would move into the second person's position, the fourth into the third position, and so forth. In the line, the point man kept watch on the front, the second watched left, the third watched right, and the fourth watched the rear.

We were acting as a unit ready for war, and the group couldn't have been happier with the results of their hard work.

We were finally finished and resting back at camp, late that afternoon, when Mohammed (our IslamAnswers cameraman) had joined us, bringing his two young children. I was strongly opposed to children being at the camp, not only because of the illegality, but because of safety. Mohammed was not prone to radicalized views, but instead always maintained that his jihad was the Jihad bil Qalam (Struggle of the Pen) and his camera. To be fair, Mohammed often challenged the group to think about better ways than picking up a gun, and he kept his children well away from the shooting range. He often joked that for all we knew this was being recorded. Brother Will could be an FBI agent, or in the CIA. Little did he know. I joked with him and pulled out my pen.

"Here, speak into my pen."

They all laughed.

It was approaching evening, and we had dinner on the fire. Kurt opened his laptop for tarbiyyah religious training and began playing Anwar Al-Awlaki recordings out loud for us to listen, with a CD set called *The Constants of Jihad*. Anwar Al-Awlaki was an American-born Islamic lecturer with dual US-Yemeni citizenship and an important figure in Al-Qaida, Yemen. He was the most renowned senior recruiter and motivator of Jihad groups worldwide, and was central to planning terrorist attacks on behalf of Al-Qaida. He is so hated among Western countries that the US placed him on the CIA kill list. Anwar Al-Awlaki is the very first United States citizen ever targeted with a drone strike.

From a secret base inside of Saudi Arabia, the Joint Special Operations Command launched two Predator drones armed with Hellfire missiles, headed straight to their target. The operation was under CIA direction. As Anwar Al-Awlaki and his party stopped for breakfast, they were all struck and killed. The Obama administration claimed it was a major blow to Al-Qaida, yet even to this day jihadi groups draw on his life as a mujahid against the west and teachings on Jihad for inspiration.

Anwar Al-Awlaki's CDs talked about the rights of Muslims to self-defense and about preparing for Jihad. They gave incredible religious justifications and details in many recorded sermons.

I asked Kurt, "Where did you get this recording?"

Kurt and Umar replied simultaneously. "It's a secret."

Kurt went on to say, "It's an underground recording. I can't tell you where I got it, but I can give you a copy."

Obviously, they were holding back something. Someone was feeding them materials to groom them for armed jihad.

“Yes, please. I’d like to listen to that in my free time at work,” I said.

After listening to parts of the CD by Anwar Al-Awlaki, we watched a video. It was Osama bin Laden’s November 2004 video address to the people of America. Kurt made reference to this as part of his justification for wanting to train for jihad and travel to Iraq to join insurgents there against US forces.

It wasn’t long after we had returned from the camp that I was woken by a call in the middle of the night.

It was Agent Smith.

“Will, I don’t want to worry you, but I was wondering if you could spend a few nights in a local hotel?”

From a dead sleep, I was instantly awake and went on high alert.

“What? Why? What’s going on?”

“Well, there isn’t any specific information that is worrying, but Kurt and Umar had been talking to Hakeem about you and whether you can be trusted. We want to make sure you are safe until we figure out what it’s about,” she said. “We have Hakeem involved and he will figure out what the guys are concerned about, and until then you can stay in a secret location.”

“What will I do for work tomorrow?” I asked.

“You can still go to work as normal, and communicate with them as normal, but we’d like you to be in a safe place for a few nights.”

“Okay, when?” I asked.

“Right now and for just a few days” she said.

I felt completely cold and I knew it was the shock setting in. My mind raced through possible scenarios.

Now I’m in fear for my life, this is real, I thought to myself. Now I had gotten Hakeem in place, was this because the FBI wanted me out? All they had to do was ask and I’d gladly be out. Agent Smith knew that. It couldn’t be that. Kurt’s parents were from the Black Panther civil rights movement back in the 1960s that deeply distrusted white people, and I understood the history of race relations in America. Often there is good reason for that, in my view. Though his father knew me and admired my Islamic work, was this issue now coming up because Kurt now had another black Muslim to confide in? It seemed kind of far-fetched. I never knew Kurt to be that suspicious of white people. Did someone see me meeting with FBI agents? I was very careful; it couldn’t possibly be that simple. Or could it?

A day later, I got a call from Agent Smith and breathed a sigh of relief. As it turned out, Hakeem and Kurt had been talking about race relations in America, and in that context Kurt asked whether I could be trusted. Hakeem smoothed it over with the group, and assured Kurt that he trusted me completely. Everything got back to normal.

The fear brought home how real it was, to such an extent that, from that night on, I packed my 9 mm Glock 17 every day, ready for any eventuality. I wasn’t without my Beretta .35 caliber backup pistol with an ankle holster, in case I was disarmed, either. In addition to my weekly classes, I put more time into training in martial arts, and even practiced my training

during all of my free time at work. I purchased a set of martial arts knives to hide along my belt. If anything was going to go down, I was going to be prepared, even if I had to go down with a fight.

By our March 2006 camp, we had been training for nearly a year. Recruitment was steady, and we had new people cycling through every camp we ran. At this particular camp was another child, which I had made serious objections to, despite Umar's adamant demands. This time he brought along a twelve-year-old kid.

"A child," I said, "cannot be a part of this group."

I was stern. Umar insisted that he wasn't going to be a part of the core group, but it would do him well to learn how to fire a weapon. Hakeem took issue, too. Hakeem and I approached the child's father afterward, and he apparently didn't know we would be firing assault rifles. We told him it would be best to keep him at home. What was Umar thinking? Besides the obvious, that we could be discovered, he was trying to radicalize a vulnerable young boy who had problems fitting in with other social groups.

We were getting hardened and seemingly more professional in our tactics of war. We learned from the famous and infamous mujahids of our time, the likes of Shamil Basayev, Osama bin Laden, and Anwar al-Awlaki. We were ready for Iraq and to join Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's insurgency. Umar had a brother in Kuwait and boasted often of having contacts who could get money and people across the border into Iraq. Our goals, once so farfetched, were becoming a reality.

I arose before everyone else the next day, and stayed up pondering my future. When fajr (morning prayer) time came I woke everyone up. It was a particularly misty morning. It reminded me of old gothic Hollywood horror films. Everything was blanketed in darkness, with the glow of the coming sunrise on a heavy fog. You could barely see the silhouettes of the trees through the fog, but nothing else. It seemed incredibly quiet at camp, and peaceful that morning, yet still quite ominous. After prayer and physical training, I started the fire and we all sat for breakfast. After a few sips of coffee, I turned to Kurt.

"Kurt, did you ever find out if Dr. Sultan would be our spiritual leader for the camp before we head off to Iraq?"

Umar chimed in quickly, "Yes, we talked to him."

Kurt replied, "Yes, he asked some about the camp and agreed to come if he can, but said that he was very busy at present."

"What did he say about the camp? Did you tell him what our plan was?" Hakeem said.

"Yes, we did. Umar and I approached him and explained that we feel it's our duty to help the brothers in Iraq. He seemed incredibly sympathetic. The only issue was timing," Kurt said.

It was July 2006. Kurt and Umar were dealt a devastating blow as they watched television news reports and surfed the internet for more information. Abu Musab al-Zarqawi was assassinated in a safe house north of Baqubah, Iraq, by two US Air Force F-16 jets carrying laser-guided GBU-12 and GPS-guided GBU-38 500-pound bombs. I got a call from Umar and met the two for coffee outside a local mall.

“Al-Qaida had lost trust in Zarqawi because of the massacres Al-Qaida Iraq committed in Iraq under his leadership,” Umar said.

“What do they expect?” Kurt replied. “It is what happens in war. I read some rumors of an inside job or betrayal. According to news reports, at least one member of Al-Qaida was involved in the betrayal to the Americans. A true mujahid had just been martyred, betrayed by someone he trusted.”

Instances of betrayal always made me nervous. It seemed that the two became more deeply paranoid and worried about betrayal, and I had to increase my vigilance. Even though they trusted me, I was outside of the bond they had together. I found that the two talking to each other, prior to bringing me into the loop, had been a common occurrence since the early stages.

I was now living a double life, but not of my choosing. They had every reason to worry.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Botched Extraction

ORIGINALLY, THE CASE for the jihad plot was handled by Special Agent Angela Smith. In order to protect my anonymity, security, and standing in the Islamic community, we had plans for my exit from the jihad group. These plans included my possible arrest and release without charges as a cover story, while it was clear Kurt and his gang were looking at long stretches in prison. The investigation was highly successful, in no small part due to my knowledge of the religion and this group, and my willingness to cooperate with the government.

Agent Smith had received a huge boost in her career and accepted a promotion that removed her from the case.

Agent Smith invited me to meet with her at the La Madeline café. In the evening, we sat under dim light by the fireplace, with cups of coffee in our hands.

“Will, I don’t know what you will think about this, but because of our success I have been given an opportunity for another job in the FBI,” she said.

“Angela, that is great,” I said. “I am so glad to hear that.”

“Really?” she replied. “It means that I may no longer be working this case. I know we have a relationship of trust, and I’d like you to meet with the person taking over the case. You already know him from working surveillance in the field.”

“Who is it?” I asked.

“Vince Davis,” she replied. “I want you to meet with him.”

“Oh yes, I seem to remember him,” I said.

Agent Smith arranged for us all to meet at the next debrief. I felt very uncomfortable with Vince. Generally, we got along, but his approach to Muslims was the polar opposite of Agent Smith’s. He was a far right-leaning Republican with anti-Islam views, so from the onset I didn’t quite trust him like I had Agent Smith. He was also inexperienced in running this kind of case, and taking it over was quite a career boost for him. He would naturally have something to prove to his superiors in handling the case.

Agent Davis wrapped up our meeting just as I got a call from Umar.

Kurt, Umar, and Hakeem were keen to have a chicken wing cook-off, and my apartment was the likely venue. One of my hidden talents was my skill on the barbecue. The brothers were amateurs, in my opinion, but we had a friendly competition.

“I sent you some details on email. After we eat, we can go on your PC and discuss some details on our travel plans,” said Umar.

“Sounds good. How could I turn down chicken wings?” I said.

Hakeem was with me, so when I hung up, I said, “You know anything about this cook-off at my place tonight, Hakeem?”

“Yeah, see you tonight, bring your apron,” he said with a smirk.

I was completely caught off guard and had to rush out and buy wings. I didn’t have time to think fancy. I just slapped some barbecue sauce on them and began cooking. Around seven that evening, Kurt, Umar, and Hakeem came over with a variety of chicken wings. Kurt brought barbecue and honey-glazed habanero chicken wings. Umar made curried chicken wings, and Hakeem dished up jalapeno chicken wings. I’m not a fan of chicken wings—too much bone and not enough meat. I have to say, though, these were all good, and I ate well that evening, even though I did worry about what those habaneros would do to my gut.

Kurt won the mini-competition. By default, the spiciest food among the brothers was a guaranteed win. Almost immediately afterward, Umar got on my PC and opened a map of Pakistan.

“We should go to plan B, because plan A is looking too dangerous at the moment,” he said.

“Why?” I asked. “And what the hell is plan B?”

Plan B turned out to be not far removed from Plan A, which was to join the Taliban insurgents in Afghanistan, as opposed to joining the mujahedeen in Iraq. Umar knew a lot of people in Pakistan who could help us when we got there, so that was where we were flying. We pored over the map and agreed we could do that. Umar pointed out various locations and routes he thought we could use. There were a few options. Stay in Waziristan in Pakistan, link up with insurgents there, and earn a reputation before crossing; go through Peshawar, directly into Jalalabad, Afghanistan; or go around the long way, north, through the mountain regions of Pakistan.

The northern route was much harder but favorable to avoid travel suspicions, compared to going in directly into Jalalabad via Peshawar. Then we could hook up with insurgents from there. We needed to avoid US travel suspicions. Dubai was the answer, according to Umar. Dubai was a great holiday destination, where we could stay for a week, posing as tourists, before boarding a plane to Islamabad. It would be the perfect spot to use, to avoid suspicion. Umar announced that everything was in order, and that he was prepared to book tickets.

The new FBI team was hard at work behind the scenes, and seemed to want to wrap up the cases as soon as possible, but it seemed to drag on, as they became greedy for more intelligence leads. I waited.

It became increasingly apparent that these brothers were becoming more proficient in their military-style training and, like me, they held important positions in the Islamic community. This created a dimension I had not considered before, the very real possibility that, despite my best efforts to either simply carry on with my life after the arrests, or attempt to explain the truth to my closest friends, I was going to suffer severe community backlash, and possibly have to leave my community altogether. It became clear after Agent Davis took over the case. He seemed to have a reckless disregard for my security.

It was a heart-wrenching prospect. I valued the good we had accomplished, and all of my efforts were to protect that and the good standing of our religious institutions in American

society. It was like being separated from someone you love and spent your whole life caring for and nurturing. I had to consider it. I had to take that last breath and on a final prayer just let go. In the event that there was significant personal backlash, or my cover was blown, or my life threatened, I had to come up with an alternate exit strategy, one that would take me out of Stockton altogether and, sadly, away from the people I loved and spent years cultivating relationships with. But I had to consider every eventuality.

In the meantime, the FBI needed me to devote considerable time to review transcripts in a secured location of the video and audio taken in every meeting, camp, and conversation since the beginning. I could no longer devote my time to keeping up with the group. The sheer volume of work to be done required me to quit my normal job at the *Stockton Chronicle*.

Together with the FBI, I fabricated a story as my exit plan from the Jihad group, so I could focus on the transcripts without raising suspicion as to why I was gone, while still protecting my community standing and remaining secretly in Stockton. As far as anyone was concerned, I would be out of town for a while.

I went to the group after one of our regular meetings and explained to them that my aged mother, who lived in the middle of Iowa, was very ill, and I needed to go and take care of her. The brothers were immediately sympathetic and understanding, as it is a basic tenet of Islam that we look after our parents when they are old. They knew my mother lived far away.

I expected that the arrests would be made shortly thereafter, whilst I was safely out of the way. While everyone thought I was at my mother's, in reality, for the next two months, I was holed up in a hotel room, on the northwest side of town, reviewing all of the transcripts from the recorded conversations, correcting errors, and making them as accurate as possible. It was a heartbreaking task, as I realized once again that these were my friends and I would never be able to see or reconcile with them again. At the same time, I knew that what I was doing was the right thing. I only prayed that if the community eventually learned of how involved I was they would understand. I felt I had lived with it for so long I could not wait for the truth to come out.

I met the with FBI agents who handed me every audio and video recording I had made throughout the course of the investigation, along with hardcopy transcripts made by non-Muslim FBI transcribers, who quite obviously did not understand Arabic or Islamic concepts, terms, and phrases. These were not field agents, but techies who worked from behind a computer in an office. It was a tremendous volume of information, and riddled with lots of errors. I had to review every single word on every recording, and check all of them for accuracy, even the Arabic words. I was suited for the job, since I had been party to the conversations. It would help to prevent misunderstandings and mistranslation of the recorded evidence.

At one point, I realized that the Justice Department was trying to implicate Ayden and Mohammed Farouk, when it was clear in the transcripts, and in the opinions of the agents involved, that they were not extremists and had no such intent. I went straight to a meeting at the Justice Department, with a number of field agents involved, to make sure they were on

the same page, and that these guys were not training for jihad or remotely involved in the plot, even though they had attended the camps.

They were never charged, in the end.

From July to September, 2006, from the moment I got up until I went to sleep, nearly every day, I cross-checked the transcribed conversations. I had never worked so hard in my life as I fixed countless errors, mistranslations, and some transcriber bias issues. Sometimes, I broke down in tears for what we might have accomplished doing good in the community and the brotherhood we had lost. However, after submitting the transcripts to the FBI, I waited and I waited. No arrests had been made.

Then I waited some more.

Two months passed.

I monitored all of the news feeds. I couldn't understand what was taking the FBI so long to act. I was sure they had everything that they needed.

I should have known the brothers would get curious about my radio silence, as it was unlike me not to keep in touch. About three-and-a-half months after I had left the group, Umar, I believe out of genuine concern, called my ex-wife and obtained my mother's phone number. Obviously, I had not previously spoken to my mother about any of this, so when she received a call out of the blue from one of my friends, asking how she was, and how I was doing, she was totally dumbfounded. She told him she was fine and hadn't seen me recently.

When I received a phone call from my mother, letting me know that one of my friends had called for me, my stomach dropped. I asked her about the conversation, and she told me "some foreign-sounding guy" had called, asking about me. My immediate thought was, *Why the hell haven't they been arrested?* This was devastating news. *Have they realized that the plot has been discovered?*

Word started to filter back to me through friends and family that Umar was convinced I'd disappeared because I had something to run from, namely that I was a plant, an undercover agent. Kurt told him that perhaps I had gotten cold feet and run for the hills.

How the hell was I going to handle this? Had the FBI investigation been completely blown?

I immediately called Agent Smith, to let her know that the game was up. I was burned. She contacted Agent Davis, the lead on the end of the case, responsible for making the arrests and ensuring my security by following through on my exit plan. It was a considerable blunder by the FBI. Not only was my cover blown, but it put the other people at risk. It's not possible to predict what people might do after having their crimes discovered—go out in a blaze of glory, or flee the country.

When he couldn't get hold of me and informed of my mother's good health, Umar immediately contacted Kurt and told him of his suspicions. I'm sure that there must have been some very panicked and worried conversations between the remaining members of the group.

I'd like to tell you that it all went down like the movies. The plot was laid out for all to see, the crime, transmitted over the wire, triggering an explosive reaction by the gallant FBI team. Suddenly, a bang at the door as it burst open with flashing blue lights and people bursting

into the scene yelling commands. Dozens of guys dressed in black Kevlar SWAT vests, with automatic rifles and shotguns, fanning out through the apartment, hands raised and forced to the ground, everyone caught in the act.

Or maybe, in an alternate story, there would be a tense standoff as the brothers refused to give up without going out in a blaze of glory. In fact, the possibility of such outcomes did cross the minds of some in the new FBI team, but it was just too farfetched for me to confirm. The truth is rarely as glamorous, and in fact it is far more mundane. However, for me, regardless of the outcome, it was a period of intense sorrow and stress.

As it was, Kurt and Umar saved the FBI the trouble of actually finding and arresting them. Kurt, showing some rare foresight, went to the FBI offices and turned himself in. It must have been a really tough decision for him. I can only imagine the struggle that he went through, but in the end I'm sure this course of action would result in a much more lenient sentence. The FBI had Kurt contact Umar, who followed suit shortly afterwards, but he would never admit his part in the plot, claiming it had been a setup. Reza was arrested after work, and Emad was picked up from his university dorm by someone from the local FBI field office. All four were held in custody until the trials.

I let out a sigh of relief. What next?

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The Trials

AFTER THE ARRESTS, word went around very quickly, and the brothers and their families clearly believed they were the innocent parties. As word spread in this tight-knit community, I was quickly becoming the bad guy. The community converged in support of the brothers, automatically assuming that they were completely innocent, and condemning me as a munafiq (hypocrite), and an agent provocateur, meaning that I had deliberately created the situation to entrap Muslims. The story commonly circulated was that they had followed me on innocent fishing and hunting trips, and I had concocted this fantastical story around it. I know a number of members in the community knew the truth, but they kept silent. I had some understanding of the reasons for the backlash, and even some empathy. Muslims had been under much unwarranted scrutiny and suspicion since 9/11, and it was almost a reflex action for them to deny involvement. It was part of a siege mentality that even I used to engage in from time to time, as an Islamic activist, without considering the real facts of an event. And yet I was annoyed that the FBI hadn't followed through on our agreed exit plan. If they had done so, my involvement would not have been clouded in swirling anger and suspicion. I would simply be one of the many parties involved.

Living in Stockton was becoming extremely risky. I started to receive hate mail after the news broke in the community. I began to contact members in the community who I thought might be sympathetic. I explained how I cooperated with the FBI, and that my intention was to protect their organizations from a great tragedy and people overseas from even greater violence. There was no sympathy, only anger and a complete lack of understanding.

They asked why I hadn't been arrested. I told them I couldn't talk about my situation, as it might harm the defendants at trial, but made it abundantly clear that these friends of theirs, languishing in prison, were far from innocent. For some reason, these people were now more concerned about how to find me. I wondered why, but after receiving threatening emails I had no more illusions. My life was in danger. The FBI instructed me not to talk about the cases to anyone in the community. Not only would it jeopardize their investigation, but my safety, too. Strange that they should suddenly be concerned with my safety.

Shortly after, the media broke the news, and sensationally dubbed them the "Texas Taliban." It went international, with articles in the US to countries in South America and Europe, to Pakistan and Australia. Kurt ensured that he would protect himself by fully cooperating with the FBI and provide testimony to be used in the trials. The FBI had assured me that at no time would they mention my role in the operation to Kurt or any of the other defendants. At least I was grateful for that. Kurt made a deal with the prosecuting attorney's

office to plead guilty and receive only five years in prison, in exchange for his full cooperation and testimony. It was a smart move for Kurt, and in my view the right thing to do.

I met with the FBI several times, and they told me how cooperative he was. I wondered if this had filtered back to his friends and family, and if it had, if they would be a little more forgiving in judging me. Cooperating with the FBI was all I had done, and here was Kurt confirming the information provided by me in the investigation. He knew the game was up and they had him on video, audio, and with two undercover operative witnesses from the earliest stages of his plot. His independent statements completely corroborated the evidence in all of their cases. Kurt's trial was short and sentencing swift, in accordance with his agreement with federal authorities. He clearly understood the system.

Reza was on trial next. He chose a trial by judge, rather than jury, thinking that a jury would surely convict him based on the hatred and mistrust of Islam, rather than any direct evidence. He was probably right. He was convicted and sentenced to ten months in prison. I think he could have counted himself lucky, as it could have been far worse. He was an extremist and held extreme views, but he had never fully committed to the fight abroad. He never said he would ever go to Iraq or anywhere else, and the judge obviously knew that from the recorded meetings and my transcripts. However, the judge then dropped a bombshell and said he would be deported from the US. Reza vowed to fight the deportation, and eventually won the right to remain in the US. He cited political reasons relating to his case. He believed the Pakistani government would treat him badly, perhaps even torture him because of his conviction. The FBI wasn't happy. They were surprised when I agreed with Reza: I said the Pakistani government would certainly be interested in doing whatever they could to extract information from him on groups or individuals in Pakistan.

Emad Bhutt was next, and he accepted trial by jury. He was convicted and sentenced to six-and-a-half years in prison, followed by deportation to Pakistan. Emad was fully committed to training in preparation for battlefield jihad operations. I think his sentence was probably about right, though I couldn't help feeling that Umar brought him into the group against my wishes. I felt that Umar was responsible for Emad being involved in the first place. Kurt, who was the driving force behind the plot, had gotten off rather lightly in comparison. After all, Emad had only been involved right at the end.

It was a gut-wrenching and heartbreaking experience, as I watched the trials of my friends. Needless to say, I was bound by the FBI to be silent about the pretrial cases. I could not discuss them in any way, because my actions outside of the courtroom could impede them. It hurt, because prior to this, whenever the Islamic community was under scrutiny, I had always been the first one to stand up and represent them, condemn terrorist acts, correct stereotypes, and defend the faith from injustice. Now, I was unable to do so. I had every desire to help people understand that this was not an assault on them, or an indictment against the Islamic faith, but an effort to protect them, our religion, and our major institutions from a greater injustice. I had sacrificed a life and community standing that I enjoyed, not only for Stockton and American Muslims, but Muslims in Iraq and Afghanistan, too, as well as coalition soldiers who could be adversely affected (killed) by the intended acts of this

group. Believe me, I had no doubt that this group were more than capable and would have carried out terrorist acts if they had been left to their own devices. Since I couldn't speak, the vacuum was filled by the chatter of deniers in the community, reinforcing the blinders they insisted on wearing. People in the community came to focus less on my betrayal of my friends, but saw it as a betrayal of my community, even my religion. More than ten years on, after ISIS and the countless terrorist attacks on civilians in Europe, the US—even Pakistan, the country of birth of most of them—and elsewhere around the world, I wonder if the community would feel the same today, toward someone who prevented such horrific events.

I remained involved in the investigation, to make sure my brothers got a fair trial with solid evidence, rather than contrived evidence, based on the prejudices of FBI agents, who may not have been as sympathetic to their plight, like Agent Davis.

I wondered where it would all end and where it would leave me.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Exile

MY HANDS TREMBLED as I read the *Stockton Chronicle*. Marwan Abdullah, president of the Stockton League of Mosques and a good friend of mine, said he would urge Muslims to report any suspicious or potential terrorist activity to the authorities. I nodded my head in agreement, a sensible statement. I read on. He went on to say, but Muslims should not deny their faith. It was a confusing statement that seemed to clearly be doublespeak. Marwan was from Indonesia. We had talked often, and he had entrusted me to speak about issues relating to his home country when Indonesia was attacked in the media over the conflict in Eastern Timor.

Perhaps unknowingly, Marwan's doublespeak to the *Stockton Chronicle* inadvertently put the word out, which people took to the extreme, that by informing on my Muslim friends to bring this plot to justice, I had denied my faith. Denial of faith by siding with non-Muslims against a Muslim, under any circumstances, is not only apostasy but hypocrisy, according to extremist Muslims. The writing was on the wall for me. A munafiq (hypocrite) was worse than a disbeliever, because he claims to be Muslim and works to destroy Muslims.

The Qur'an states, "O you who have believed, do not take the disbelievers as allies instead of the believers. Do you wish to give Allah against yourselves a clear case? Indeed, the hypocrites will be in the lowest depths of the Fire—and never will you find for them a helper."

That was me, Will Prentiss, not just worthy of the death sentence attributed to apostasy by extremist elements, but now of the lowest depths of hell. Just great.

Shortly after the statement by SLM, I began reading more comments on Islamic websites and blogs, from other prominent friends of mine, calling me an "agent provocateur" and a munafiq whose only goal was to destroy Muslims. I became the embodiment of evil, hell-bent on destroying Islam from the start. The fallout was mounting again, and I was starting to get a cold and sick feeling about my future in Stockton.

I tried as best I could to salvage the situation by contacting IFNA leadership. I was still a moderator on the IslamAnswers forums, but the family members of Umar Jalali signed up and began a forum disruption campaign to get me banned. It saddened me immensely, as I had been friends with all of his family for some years, and the main instigator leading the campaign to slander and smoke me out was Umar's cousin, Hameed Kundi, also the brother of Reza, who was now in jail.

The abuse took a sinister turn. The death threats started arriving in private messages via the forum and social media. It may sound strange now, but when this started, I never imagined they would want to kill me.

The family and friends of Umar organized protests and a community-wide smear campaign against me, in the mosques and public venues, attended by the media and other special interest groups. Bizarre rumors began to be spread by them, mostly in the local media, on community forums, and on YouTube. I watched all of them each time with that knife in my heart twisting even harder. People I once considered close friends claimed that all my volunteer work in the community was solely to get rich, which was absurd, as I was never paid. Another rumor delved into that race issue that seems to keep creeping up. Supposedly, I was actually a neo-Nazi plant from the day I converted to Islam, and in reality hated Muslims. In another rumor, I was a down-and-out heroin addict and drug dealer. It was clear that people were cashing in on my infamy.

I made contact with the IslamAnswers website Shurah Council (a decision-making body) to explain the death threats, and also to try and explain that I had no real choice in cooperating with the FBI. I told them I had never encouraged them to follow the route they had chosen to take, nor was I an FBI undercover agent, like some people were saying. Terrorists have no part to play in our religion, I tried to reason.

At first, some of them listened to me. Some even appeared sympathetic to me, but others were rabid in their anger. Nevertheless, the matter was taken to an informal IFNA National organization Shurah Council meeting. It was some sort of progress, and I dared to raise a modicum of hope. But it was short-lived, as they replied by interrogating me, attempting to find out exactly where I was. I could smell the danger. Then they returned with a verdict of sorts. I was expelled from membership by the IFNA National Shurah Council, and I now had no platform on which I could defend my actions. Shortly afterwards, IFNA released a statement detailing the decision made by the organization, which I had worked tirelessly to advance in America and defend from the perpetrators of this plot. It didn't matter. I was officially expelled from the organization and all of its services, for "Immoral Behavior." The FBI evidence and trials by jury counted for nothing with IFNA. I got the sense that the immense community work and the countless hours devoted to them amounted to nothing. I was so disappointed. I had expected more of them.

In an instant, people who loved me and had worked with me for years turned against me. It was like night and day.

IFNA did not stop there. The organization couldn't get at me, so they went after my online friends, anyone who had shown an ounce of sympathy for me. Many of my online supporters were Muslims, Christians, Jews, and Atheists, and had been active on the IFNA IslamAnswers forums for years, but as soon as I was expelled from the organization and my IslamAnswers website forum account banned, there was a forum inquest to find out who they were. They began to purge them from IFNA services and social media platforms. It was turning into a witch hunt. One of my good friends, Thelma Grayson, was a Muslim and a moderator at the forums. She secretly passed me some information in the private moderator forums. She

watched the drama unfold as they debated the case and my role in it. They started to ban people who sympathized with me, so that eventually the only people writing and commenting on the posts were anti-Will Prentiss. So much for fairness.

“Will Prentiss is a liar,” they wrote. “He entrapped poor innocent Muslim kids in a grand scheme to destroy Islam,” and, “Will Prentiss, agent provocateur, an Infidel and a munafiq, may he go straight to Hell.”

Thelma told me there were still some interesting posts, not necessarily coming from my supporters or friends. Someone wanted IFNA to give them answers and condemn the people involved in the Al-Qaida plot to murder American soldiers, and also their support of the Taliban. Incredibly, neither IFNA nor IslamAnswers leaders were giving it. Instead, they avoided the issue and made sweeping general statements. One said, “I personally feel that Muslims who side with the infidels are a bigger threat to Islam than those who profess disbelief openly. Such Muslims are trying to rip apart the religion of Allah internally by causing mischief and seducing simpletons from the path of truth.”

IFNA would normally use every media opportunity to preach condemnation of terrorism and extremism in reaction to other extremist plots, typically using me as their mouthpiece, but not in this case. They were unusually silent. It appeared that this plot was too close to home.

In the end, IFNA did the unthinkable, and sided with the Jihadists as they turned completely against me. They lived in a fantasy world of denial.

The threats toward me, published on the forum, were getting more and more venomous, and no one seemed to be policing the radicals and the haters. It was this stance that ultimately destroyed their credibility, and I watched with a broken heart as the organization I’d put so much of my life into spiraled into decline.

Even worse was to come. The *Stockton Chronicle* reported that the Islamic Fellowship of North America scholar, Dr. Sajid Sultan, had founded a new website dedicated to exposing and finding me. They called it *Terror Hoax*. Misinformation was regularly posted, such as his opening statement: “Dear brothers, these kids were entrapped. Two agent provocateurs, Will Prentiss and Hakeem Islam intentionally targeted kids to fulfil their evil desires to attack Muslims. I implore you to support these falsely accused brothers.”

He failed to mention that these kids were aged between nineteen and thirty-six years old when they joined the Khalid bin Waleed Jihad Training Camp. They omitted Kurt, the black Muslim, from the website altogether. If one didn’t know of the “Texas Taliban” cases and only read their website, it would appear that Umar, Emad, and Reza (three Pakistanis) were only involved in an innocent fishing trip and unfairly swooped on by the evil vulture Will Prentiss. I found this curious, because not only was Kurt the one responsible for the plot in the first place, and now was fully cooperating with authorities, but there was a historic bone of contention between Pakistanis and African-American Muslims in Stockton. Without doubt, they were not going to try to raise support for him, or identify themselves with him. The racism against blacks was apparent on the website, in a post telling everyone to call the IslamAnswers toll free hotline to tell them to “Stop Will Prentiss and Hakeem, THE BLACK.”

The website to support these would-be jihadis became frightening. They said that Will Prentiss had to be found; he had to be stopped. Then they started circulating my picture, asking, Where can we find him? Other posts by individuals such as “Abu Jamal,” who associated himself with Hizb ut-Tahrir, an extremist organization banned in the United Kingdom, stated, “The Islamic law regarding those who aid kuffar (non-Muslims) in fighting Muslims is very clear, their blood is not sacred.”

To work against a Muslim, in their view, was working against Islam itself, and it made a Muslim worse than a nonbeliever. They cherry-picked verses from the Qur’an: “Indeed, the hypocrites will be in the lowest depths of the Fire—and never will you find for them a helper.”

They distributed my photo in Pakistan to two national news sources, who wrote vitriol in the hopes of garnering support for their cause to smoke me out or find me. Big, red letters on the front page of *The Nation* newspaper article about the cases read, “FRAMED BY FBI,” and underneath my picture, also with red letters, said “Undercover FBI Agent.” This horrified me, but I was so relieved that the FBI had still kept my role under wraps publicly. I knew that global extremist groups would be more than interested if they found me in a mosque, praying, somewhere. With little doubt my name would be on the kill list of every group from the Taliban to Al-Qaida and beyond. Even the greatest of leaders in Islam, like the fourth Caliph and cousin of the Prophet Muhammad, Ali ibn Abi-Talib, did not escape assassination. He was attacked as he prayed in the mosque, killed during a time of great confusion, rebellion, and injustice among Muslims. This time in our history is known by us as the First Fitna, or First Great Trial. The First Fitna was the crisis of leadership brought about by the death of the Prophet Muhammad. Much like today, the event culminated in Muslims declaring each other non-Muslims, waging war and assassinating each other for apostasy or hypocrisy. It is also the origin of the divide between the Shi’atu-Ali (Followers of Ali or Shi’a) and the Sunni.

Years later, the youngest daughter of my ex-wife, Aminah, made contact with me and I found out that, as if it were not enough that some were targeting me, the entire Islamic community in Stockton lashed out at Aminah and her two adolescent daughters. I had wrongly thought that since our separation and divorce people would separate me from them. Perhaps they would even think that I took advantage of her, and offer her their support. On the contrary, at every event, at the Islamic school they attended, and at the Mosque, there were looks of scorn, and people ostracized them. Their closest family friends abandoned them and refused to talk to them. It would eventually have a long-term, marked effect on Aminah’s two girls. One of them abandoned Islam and ran away from home as a result of the jeers and emotional threats from community members. Her family have never been welcome in the community since. Muslims like to say that Islam does not teach excommunication like Christianity might, but contrary to the teachings of Islam that is exactly what happened. Like me, they were excommunicated by nearly everyone, including their close friends and community members.

The most damning betrayal, in my view, was not the personal betrayal of my friends and other individuals who spewed hate, misinformation, or death threats. The most damning of all was the betrayal of these organizations to stay true to the religion they preached, according to their ideals of Islam being a social justice movement. IFNA, IslamAnswers, and SLM became enablers and defenders of extremism by reacting to events and blaming the one individual trying to save their organizations. They were being used as a springboard for an Al-Qaida inspired plot to murder not just US soldiers, but ultimately fellow Muslims in Iraq and Afghanistan, not to mention the very real possibilities that they could have either been instructed remotely by their online contacts to prove themselves with an attack at home, or to actually get battle experience in Iraq or Afghanistan, and return to America and launch an attack. Fast forward until today, and it is not at all farfetched. Attacks like the San Bernadino attack of 2015, the Paris attacks of 2015, and the Peshawar school massacre of 2014 come to mind here. I acted on the principles I sincerely believed I had learned from those very organizations when I studied Islam.

Now came Umar's turn for trial. Little did I know the effect on my life his trial would have. Umar claimed he was on an innocent hunting trip and pleaded not guilty, claiming entrapment. Entrapment is when a person is persuaded or induced by a law enforcement agency to commit a crime when they originally didn't have any real intention to commit that crime. He claimed I had lured him into the trip. I remember thinking at the time that it was a pointless claim for him to make, as it was very clear in all of the recordings that he and Kurt had instigated the conversations, without any encouragement or coercion from anyone else, least of all me. Umar had made a foolish decision.

According to the FBI, Umar was a difficult person to deal with, and very hardheaded. Getting to his trial seemed to drag on. He was initially represented by a lawyer from a well-known national Islamic civil rights organization in the United States. He fired him and a number of other subsequent lawyers, after they suggested that the evidence was so overwhelming it would be in his best interest to take a deal similar to Kurt's of just five years in prison in exchange for a guilty plea. He refused. He sat in solitary confinement, firing lawyer after lawyer. I so wished I could have and made him see reason.

The FBI told me that solitary confinement was normal for terrorist cases, for their own safety from the general prison population. However, he eventually stopped firing his lawyers, and I breathed a sigh of relief as the last trial date came around. Needless to say, I followed it in the news. Umar Jalali was accused of planning to engage in battlefield jihad, with an additional ten firearm offenses, including purchasing firearms and ammunition. He also faced two conspiracy counts, relating to the training and financial support, and was accused of overstaying his visa. It wasn't looking good for him, and of course my transcripts and recordings backed up everything the prosecutor threw at him.

They were two days into the trial when the Justice Department prosecutors did the unthinkable. They hammered the final nail into my community coffin, by releasing my name in court. Some media sources falsely attributed the term "agent" to my name. I was never an agent for the FBI.

I'll never forget the moment. I sat reading Fox News that evening, drinking a cup of green tea, trying to steady my nerves.

"The prosecutors today told the court that a man named Will Prentiss became an FBI agent. Umar Jalali and three other men came to the attention of authorities after he decided things were getting out of hand."

My stomach dropped through the floor. Had I just read that, or was I imagining it? After all my heartfelt explanations, reaching out to the community leadership, begging them to see sense, and understand that I was as hurt and affected as the others—now, in open court, I had been casually named as an FBI agent.

I couldn't believe what I was seeing.

"Building improvised explosive devices, ambushing US soldiers fighting for America's freedom overseas, and committing acts of terror against civilian populations were all topics of discussion brought up by Mr. Jalali and recorded by Mr. Prentiss."

The article then reported that Umar Jalali's attorney claimed that Hakeem and I were agent provocateurs.

I sat in stunned silence, unable to move as the words sank in. Why had this happened? More importantly why had the FBI allowed this to happen? They were responsible for making sure the Justice Department knew the terms of our agreement not to release my name. Up until that point, the greater community could only guess the identities and roles of the operatives involved. No one could be 100 percent sure. Their cases had been based on secret recordings, and Hakeem's name had been freely bandied around in the press and during discussions within the community. That didn't matter to Hakeem, since his name was a fake name, as he was an undercover FBI agent. The second man was a mystery to the public, and that's the way it should have stayed. They didn't even need me to testify, since Kurt was cooperating so readily, in order to secure his deal for a reduced sentence. Why the hell had they decided to release my real name during this case? There was no logical reason that I could see.

I immediately called Agent Davis. He didn't take my call, and I was passed to another agent familiar with the case, whom I had only met on a number of occasions, Agent Arun Malik. The response from the FBI was unbelievable. At first they denied it had even happened. They vigorously protested their innocence, and I quoted them the article from Fox News. My name was right there in black and white.

Agent Malik said he had no idea how it had happened, but I got the impression he wasn't particularly concerned. Who was I to the FBI, anyway? I was a Muslim, after all. Worse still, I was a Muslim who had informed on his friends and brothers. I counted for nothing. The FBI had three convictions, and were waiting on the fourth, which would surely come after not one but two operatives had infiltrated the group and had Kurt's full cooperation.

Was this why the FBI disclosed my name? I stood in disbelief. The previous FBI team, led by Agent Angela Smith, respected me, knew my sacrifices, and understood the need to protect me. The new team was determined not only to get these guys, but in the process throw me to the wolves. Now I knew why I didn't trust Agent Davis when he took the lead in this investigation, and now I was being passed around to other, lower-level agents.

Almost immediately, there was an enormous renewed community backlash against me, from Muslims ranging from well-known religious scholars and community leaders, down to most of my friends. If my name wasn't already dirt, in the blink of an eye it was much worse, because it was now official public knowledge, and I was (erroneously) dubbed an FBI agent. It seemed every Muslim in Stockton blamed the two so-called agent provocateurs, but especially one Will Prentiss, who had supposedly masqueraded as a good friend to each of the four men who were now languishing in prison. It was as if people in the community believed I'd had a plan to target these guys from December 31, 1996, the day I became a Muslim, and five years prior to knowing a single one of them.

The heat was building again. I quickly went to my old apartment, packed as many of my belongings as I could, and collected my passport and other documents. I had never packed so fast in my life. Agent Davis sent a team to clean up the rest of the apartment, and I headed back to the hotel.

It was an out-of-body experience. It seemed like I was looking down on myself. I never imagined my life being under threat, let alone from people I had worked so hard to foster and protect. The stress was incredible.

I became pale and ill, with a tight pain in my stomach from the ulcer that had been developing from the stress of this lengthy investigation. Now it was coming to a head, and my health was beginning to fail me. I couldn't sleep, eat, or be free. I was in my own cell, as I was locked up in my tiny hotel room, ordering room service.

I took a phone call from Agent Angela Smith. I think it was more a personal call, because she certainly wasn't on this case anymore. She told me she had spoken with someone in the agency, and that the threat was serious enough to relocate me. It would be under the Witness Protection Program, and I'd be given a new identity, a job, money—in fact, whatever I needed. I didn't have much faith in the FBI, at that point. Angela was not in any position to influence things. What if they released my details again, even when I was in Witness Protection? I had to still consider it.

I told her I wanted to be free to live wherever I wanted. I accepted that I might never be reestablished in the Islamic community in Stockton again, and if they could help with relocating me in say, Atlanta, Alabama, or even Iowa, where I had some family then I would possibly consider it. But I wanted to continue practicing my religion and, in time, become an integral part of the Muslim community wherever I went.

There was a strange silence at the other end of the phone.

"Angela? What's up?"

"I don't think you'd be safe," she replied. "It's too close to home."

"But the Witness Protection program is good, is it not?"

"Normally."

"What do you mean, normally?"

Angela told me something that I'd suspected for some time but never really wanted to admit. While she realized and understood my religion, where I stood and why I felt compelled to do what I did, Davis and the new team were right-wing Republicans with a

completely different stand regarding Muslims. Angela told me that the probable reason they had neglected my security was because I was expendable, another hardline Muslim. They weren't interested in whether my life became hell.

"I'm not hardline," I protested.

Angela drew my attention to a seemingly innocent conversation.

Or so I thought.

The conversation had taken place after one of our routine operations, when we were chatting after a debriefing at the offices of the Justice Department in downtown Stockton with the prosecutors. I thought it was strange, at the time and I reasoned that they, who were doing most of the talking, didn't actually realize what a caliphate was. Their idea of a caliphate was a theocracy with harsh, Saudi-style sharia law being forced on people like beheadings and amputations for theft. My worldview, based on what I had been taught in Islam, was that a caliphate is not a theocracy but a unique economic and political union of multiple Muslim majority states or territories. Social issues and the criminal penal code of sharia could and should be modernized. Under a modern caliphate, Muslims would be united and be better-suited for public debate on how to do away with the outdated barbaric practices often seen in underdeveloped Muslim countries today. A caliphate is not diametrically opposed to modernization or democracy, is not inherently anti-West, and has a well-established diplomatic system to resolve conflict among Muslims. Rather than having everyone doing their own thing, they all would have to work together. So, as a Muslim, of course I would be happy with a caliphate.

"You said you would be happy with that," Angela said.

"Yes, of course."

"That probably explains it."

I couldn't see Angela, but knew she was shaking her head. Angela could be educated and objective about these things, and that was her strength in investigating cases like this, but not people like the new lead in the investigation, Agent Davis. He was as fundamentalist as a Baptist political Christian conservative could be, and very close-minded. And now I was shaking my head because everything clicked into place. Davis and his team, and now the prosecutors at the Justice Department, couldn't have cared less, because they had categorized me as a radical Islamist, because of my answer to their question, which they hadn't understood in the first place. They had used me for expediency, but ultimately held me in contempt for my views, and still saw me as an alien not to be trusted.

"So you wouldn't recommend the Witness Protection program, then?" I asked.

"No, Will, I wouldn't. I'm not saying they would deliberately go out of the way to blow your cover, but let's just say once you're there you'd be on your own."

"I see."

I'll never forget the words Angela spoke next. They will stay with me for a long time, possibly until the day I die.

"America is too dangerous, Will," she said. "It'll be safer for you somewhere in Europe. They have big Muslim communities there, and you can start fresh."

She gave me a lot to consider. I was now looking over my shoulder every time I left the hotel.

It broke my heart to leave Texas. It was my home, and I loved it for its freedom, the people, the heat, and the outdoors. I had created a life and home in the Islamic community, and it dawned on me like a crushing wave that I was going to have to walk away from it all.

I drove around some of my old haunts. I drove by my favorite mosques and tearfully reminisced about some great times. I lamented the work that would now be lost. It was such a profound opportunity for them to rise above the ashes of what these brothers had secretly plotted, while they were supposed to be serving the community. Despite my killer ulcer, I ate at my favorite Tex-Mex restaurant, Pappasito's Cantina, one last time, and prepared to leave.

I left Texas and the United States with just one suitcase containing my entire life. I also had an empty wallet.

EPILOGUE

Did I have any regrets? Would I do it all again if I could turn back the clock?

It's hard to quantify the weight of the effect on my soul or fully comprehend the gravity of what I lost. I was a well-known, respected, and relied-upon Muslim, inside and outside the community. I lived a life that was immensely fulfilling, productive, and personally rewarding.

The Khalid bin Waleed Jihadi group had acted out in the name of their religion, and I acted out to stop them in the name of mine. As I learned in my days of the Anointing of God Ministries Christian church, it's not difficult to brainwash a person with false values, based on the scriptures we all hold dear. Powerful inspirational leaders, feeding us a false sense of right and wrong, coupled with our strong desire to do what is right, can be a recipe for disaster, if we put our faith in others rather than in our better judgement.

The trauma and fear of what I experienced made me wait well over a decade before I could begin to tell this story. When I examine life, I see a pure soul blackened by the scars inflicted by extremism since childhood. It has given me a sense of right and wrong. But still, I don't blame God. I blame people. Humanity and our religions are beautiful, but at times religion is misused by humanity and can bring into it a dark side. After reaching the depths of pain, as a result of this tragic event, I have risen to a brighter future than before. One might even say I am blessed. I do not hide or live in fear anymore.

Did I betray my friends? I recently received an online communication from my old friend, Marwan Abdullah, the President of the Stockton League of Mosques, via an old Facebook page that I no longer use much. I could see in his message the inner conflict of this question, as well as a glimmer of hope. In my response, I asked him to reason and put blame where it belonged. In Islam, we say that we are all responsible to Allah for our own actions. No one else is responsible for our own actions; we are. Good defeats evil through persistence and endurance, not by meeting evil with evil. Injustice breeds more injustice. On the contrary, the group betrayed themselves, their families, our Islamic institutions, the Stockton Islamic community, the American society that they benefitted from, and me. If these brothers had not plotted to join Al-Qaida Iraq, there would be no criminal case. Anyone who tries to stop them should not be held to blame for their actions or the pain caused as a result.

Doing the right thing is never easy. It would have been easier to acquiesce to extremism, or turn a blind eye and not be involved. I understand the fear of public backlash as a result of such a case. It was our community's biggest opportunity to rise above the anti-extremist rhetoric, and act in solidarity with a solid law enforcement case. A few eventually did, but their voices were drowned out by the many more who did not rise to the challenge. The community reaction is telling, of lessons not yet learned. As has been seen not only in the Jewish Holocaust, but even the Bosnian genocide of Muslims, a few people are perpetrators, even fewer are rescuers, and most are bystanders who are ambivalent to what is happening to others.

Where do you lie? How far would you go to protect your community? Wash your hands without saying a word? Maybe roll the dice and hope that radicalization will not turn on us

and kill our children? Someone else's children? Do we want to wash our hands of it, simply drop it in the lap of the law enforcement agencies, and hope for the best, or see it through to the end, to ensure proper justice is done?

There is no easy answer, except that we have a duty to stop it by whatever means necessary. We need to play an active role in preventing injustice.

As law-abiding Muslims, our hearts drop whenever there is a new attack and it's discovered it was an act of "Islamic terrorism." We wait on the edge of our seats in anticipation for the backlash; we send out our community media representatives and civil rights organizations, to condemn the attacks and distance ourselves from extremism. It just begs the question, when the signs of radicalization appear, why would we turn a blind eye? Why would our knee-jerk reaction be to ostracize the people who help law enforcement disrupt plots before they become attacks?

At some point, we have to say, "Never again. Not in our name," and stand firmly by those words. We must remember to stay true to ourselves, protect the innocent, and foster safe communities for all of us to live in, regardless of our faith or non-faith, cultures, and nationalities. After all, in my view, this is in the very footsteps of the Prophet Muhammad's life. In the end, we must trust that somehow, though we may not see it now, things will work out for the better.

Almost unbelievably, while this was happening, and I was going through some of the toughest times of my life, I met a stunning girl named Farrah, who was to change my life. Farrah was also a Muslim but not an American. She was traveling through Stockton on business, and by sheer chance we met one evening just before a meeting I was to have with the FBI. In fact, it made me late for the meeting, and the FBI was concerned I had bailed out on them. I was known to be punctual, and that's what they expected. When I explained to them that I met a girl, they told me to keep focus and not get distracted. However, her sunny and innocent outlook on the world was such a refreshing counterbalance to all that had been happening in my life lately. I could not help being attracted to her.

It was totally different from when I had met Aminah. We talked for many hours, and I was honest with my story. I don't know why. I was living a double life and accustomed to keeping secrets, but something about her made me trust her. I expected never to see her again. I would be kicking myself for letting my guard down and jeopardizing my security and the investigation. To my surprise, I found in her an understanding, comforting, and supportive voice. Europe had seen extremist attacks (not just from Muslims) and if someone didn't make an effort to prevent them, who would? She strengthened my confidence. When she went back to Europe and invited me to follow, it seemed too good to be true.

We had kept in touch regularly by the magic of Skype, which I thought was a wonderful invention. During late night calls and conversations, we shared our own stories about our lives, and I learned enough about her to know that she could be the one for me. Time zones made it difficult; I'd be driving in bright Texas sunshine, and she'd be in her pajamas after a long day at work, talking to me at midnight. I think we both lost a lot of sleep, and I did feel guilty for taking up so much of her time. She wasn't fazed by anything I told her about myself,

and I was incredibly grateful to finally connect with a sympathetic and understanding soul. She was easy on the eyes, too.

There were big differences between us. She was a lawyer. I was a truck driver. She was socially liberal, I was conservative; she was open and transparent, I was much more reserved. But we seemed to complement each other, and we had our faith and sense of justice in common. I'm not even sure when it happened, but we began falling for each other.

Against the backdrop of my work with the FBI, a new life opened up before me, and one day I woke up and realized I had decided to marry her, if she would have me. If it hadn't been for her steadfast support and encouragement, I believe I would be totally lost today.

I didn't need anything else from the FBI. They had let me down, blown my extraction strategy, and left me with nothing. I was expendable to them. I knew that, now. I'd get a job, start earning money again, and live in peace, knowing that I had done the right thing from the very beginning. In a year or two, I might return to Stockton, visit some of my true friends, and give an account of what had truly happened.

I landed at Heathrow Airport without so much as a jacket on my back to shield me from the cooler climate. Compared to Texas, when I stepped off of that plane, that first wintry day, it felt like the Arctic. I had lost everything I'd worked for in Stockton. I was jobless and homeless. I had no money, no community, and my friends had turned against me. I was truly in the place the eye does not see. But I was not without hope.

Since beginning my new life with Farrah, I've been blessed to travel all over the world, and have had positive experiences in Islamic communities all over the world. I live a rich and fulfilling life, now, in a way that I could not have ever done, having stayed in Stockton.

"He will forgive you your sins, and admit you to Gardens beneath which Rivers flow, and to beautiful mansions in Gardens of Eternity: that is indeed the Supreme Achievement."

Inshallah (God willing).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Will Prentiss grew up in a small town outside of Chicago. As a troubled teen raised in a single parent family, he moved to southern Illinois with his mother and joined a group that turned out to be a violent Christian cult. Fearing for his life, two years later he fled the group and moved back to the Chicago area with his father and finished high school. He enrolled in Bible college and soon after married.

His wife joined the United States Air Force and was stationed in the United Kingdom where he began work as a civilian. Here he began an intense personal study of Christianity, Judaism and Islam. He returned to the US three years later.

On New Years' Eve 1996, seeking enlightenment he converted to Islam.

Will soon became a well-known Islamic community activist and media representative for two major Islamic organizations. He created and implemented a highly successful accredited hate crimes and diversity program for law enforcement agencies, which he taught on behalf of the local Muslim community. He was also one of the local directors in charge of a national Islamic campaign which marketed to non-Muslims public access to Islam in North America through the media, telephone and internet. In addition, he has held many press conferences and interviews on behalf of Islamic organizations involving local newspapers, television stations, colleges, political rallies and private events. He also fundraised and promoted local area food relief programs for poor communities.