

Demonic

Chapter 3

Bill stopped the car again as they reached the floor of the Imperial Valley so his dogs could get some exercise. Mary had taken the opportunity to lie down on the backseat and get some rest. The road was deserted in both directions, making it seem as though they were the last people alive on the planet. He remembered that his boss, Tom White, had told him there were five suitcase nukes. If that was true, most of the country should be fine, although it was likely that terrorists had poured over the border during the aftermath of the nuclear attack. He turned on his cell phone and saw that he had a weak signal, so he dialed his wife's number. He was thrilled when she answered. "Bill, you're alive! Oh my God, we heard about the bomb in San Diego. Is the house okay? How are you? What about the dogs?"

He laughed and replied, "The dogs and I are doing fine. The police evacuated the city early this morning, so we're now in the Imperial Valley, heading east. I don't know how things are back home though."

"Well, it's just a house. As long as you are okay, everything will be fine."

"I'm heading toward Montana to be with you and the kids. How is everyone?"

After an agonizingly long pause, Audrey said, "Well, it's complicated, honey. We're being evacuated too. We're supposed to head to Cody, Wyoming. There is the threat of another bomb being detonated here tomorrow on the 9/11 anniversary."

"I had a dream about that!"

She chuckled and said, "So, now your dreams are coming true? Please."

"Bill, I found a radio station that's working!" Mary shouted from the car.

"Who's that, Bill?" Audrey asked.

"It's Mary Stewart, this new woman at the office. Her car broke down and when the evacuation order came, I figured I'd better help her out."

"Really?"

"What would you have me do, dear? Leave her there to be incinerated by the blast?"

"No, you're right and I'm sorry if I doubted you, but be careful, okay?"

"Yes, dear. I love you very much."

"I love you too. Tommy's calling me because we have to leave right now. I'll call you later." The line disconnected.

He led the two dogs back to the car and climbed in the driver's seat. "You should be able to use your phone now. I just talked to my wife."

"Okay, thanks. This is station KROP from Brawley." She turned up the volume.

"Sorry for the format change, folks, but the sheriff asked us to keep you informed about the news. It has been confirmed that nuclear bombs detonated early this morning in New York, Los Angeles and San Diego. Most of the residents had been evacuated, but it will be days before damage can be assessed due to the risk of radiation. A large group of terrorists were encountered in the Arizona desert late last night. It is rumored these men were on their way to Phoenix with another bomb. After a lengthy gunfight, the surviving terrorists escaped with their weapon of

mass destruction. The army has been called in to find and destroy them before they can reach a metropolitan area. Our local news is not good either. Sheriff Jones reports that a violent gang affiliated with a Mexican drug cartel has seized control of Calexico. As we reported last night, a large terror army continues to control El Centro. Everyone is urged to avoid those areas and especially Interstate 8. Units of the California and Arizona National Guard are on their way to support our local law enforcement teams that are now battling forces attempting to move in our direction.” There was a long pause. “Folks, Sheriff Avery Jones has just stepped into the studio. Here he is.”

“Thanks Billy. Our men have engaged two bands of terrorists just east and west of the Brawley area. If you are armed, your help is appreciated. We recommend that everyone else evacuate the area immediately. We are heavily outnumbered, but will do what we can to protect you. God help us all.” Bill turned off the radio.

“What do we do?” Mary asked.

“We’ve got to keep going. If we stay here, we’ll be dead. Mary, it’s up to you what you do, but I’m going to Wyoming to find and protect my family.”

She wiped the tears out of her eyes and replied, “Okay, I think we’re out of options too. Let’s go. I’ll let you drive.” The car sped east toward the Salton Sea. They had only traveled ten miles when the sound of rapid gunfire erupted to the south. A bullet hit the front fender and Bill slammed on the brakes. “Why are you stopping, Bill? We have to get out of here!”

Bill jumped out of his seat and ran toward the gunfire. Mary was outside the vehicle, shouting for him to return. A hundred yards ahead, he could see several police and Border Patrol officers firing on an advancing group of men wearing all black uniforms and masks obscuring their faces. His mind was filled with the images of the headless bodies and the dream of the masked man stabbing him in the neck. He could hear Mary shouting but knew he had to end this here and now. He prayed that Audrey would forgive him. A deep voice buried in his subconscious said softly, “That’s my boy!” He tripped over a rock and crashed to the ground. As he rolled over, he could see Mary running toward him. He wanted to tell her to go back, but instead jumped back to his feet and kept running. The group of terrorists was only a few hundred feet away and Bill was almost upon the police, only two of whom were still fighting.

One of the terrorists threw something toward the police who turned to flee. One officer was shot in the back and fell. Bill rushed past the other just as the grenade landed at his feet. He grabbed it and threw it back. The same terrorist was preparing to throw a second grenade when the one Bill threw stuck him square in the forehead. The man fell backward and the two grenades rolled into the center of the group and exploded. Bill fell to his knees, wheezing and panting for breath. It was eerily quiet. He looked behind himself and saw Mary comforting the last police officer who had been shot in the leg. She took off her blouse and wrapped it around his leg as a tourniquet. Bill looked at the dead policemen around him. There had to be twenty men and women who sacrificed themselves here. He fought the urge to cry. Anger began to surge throughout his body. He stood and walked over to the closest officer, a young woman who had been shot in the head. He knelt beside her and said a little prayer. He took her pistol and walked toward the enemies.

Most had been blown to pieces by the grenades. He checked each one for signs of life. He heard a low moan and spun around. The man who had thrown the grenades was beginning to stir. Bill was consumed with hatred for these evil men. He walked over to the man and pulled off his face mask. The man had been struck by shrapnel in the abdomen and was bleeding out quickly. Something snapped in Bill’s head. His blood was boiling and he couldn’t control it. He took the

officer's pistol and pressed it against the terrorist's throat and pulled the trigger. Blood splayed across his shirt. The man had a knife in a scabbard on his belt. Bill pulled it out and looked at the razor-sharp blade. He knew what he had to do. He knelt down and slit the dead man's throat.

"Bill?" Mary said. He turned to stare at her. "What's wrong with your eyes? Are you okay?"

"You saw this too!" he growled. As he watched her face, he saw her eyes turn bright red. She leaned down and kissed his forehead, took the knife from his hand and severed the dead man's head.

The wounded officer coughed and said, "Are you two okay?"

Bill opened his eyes. He was sitting against the rear tire of his car. The officer was sitting five feet in front of him petting the two dogs. "What happened? How did I get here? Who are you?"

"You don't remember?" Bill shook his head. "I'm Deputy Sam Cunningham of the Imperial County Sheriff's Department. You saved my life and killed those terrorists. Thank you."

Bill noticed Mary waking up. She was sitting against the front tire. Her arms and hands were red with blood. He looked down at his own hands and saw them dripping with blood as well. "I don't know what happened."

"One of those bastards threw a grenade and you threw it back at them as he prepared to throw a second. The rest of them were killed by the grenade blasts."

"Really?"

"Yes, sir. You really don't remember anything?" Bill shook his head again. "Well, that's when you and your friend cut off their heads and put them on that fence-line," Sam said while pointing to a fence a few hundred feet away. Bill looked and saw the heads on the fence. Mary was looking at both of them in disbelief. "Don't take me wrong, sir. I wanted to do the same thing after what they're doing here."

"You've been shot."

"Yeah, your friend wrapped her blouse around my leg, but the wound wasn't too bad. I'd give her the shirt back but it's kind of bloody. You two also gathered all the guns, grenades, and ammo and put them in your trunk. It's only been a couple minutes ago that you finished and sat down. Are you okay to take me to Brawley so I can see a doctor?"

Mary and Bill helped Sam into the back seat, and then tried to wash most of the blood off of their hands and arms. Within two minutes, they had pulled back onto the highway and accelerated toward the town. "Just tell us where to go, deputy."

"Yes sir, but after what we've been through, please just call me Sam."

"Thanks Sam and we are Bill and Mary. By the way, are you one hundred percent sure we did all those things?"

"No doubt about it, Bill. Were you a special ops guy at some time? You sure fought like one."

"No, I was never in the military. I don't know what came over us. What do you think, Mary?"

"I don't know what to think. With nukes going off and terrorists invading, it seems like the whole world is on fire!"

Her choice of words brought back the dream Bill had before the evacuation and he shivered.

Two hours later, they were driving east again on Highway 78, heading back into the desert and toward the Arizona border. Sam was taken to an urgent care center to be checked out. Sheriff Jones was shocked by the story he told of Bill's assault on the terrorists. He was also very grateful for the weapons and ammunition. He took Bill and Mary to a local coffee shop for breakfast, and then said goodbye as they drove off. He had left two semiautomatic rifles, two pistols and several hundred rounds of ammo in their trunk. They passed over Interstate 10 near Blythe. The freeway was clogged with cars heading into Arizona and hopefully safety. Bill was not interested in traffic so he continued north on the smaller highway. "Where are we headed, Bill?" Mary asked as she sat in the passenger seat rubbing Zelda's ears.

"Vegas."

"Don't you think that's a target for the terrorists?"

"I don't know, but as we head toward Wyoming, we are going to pass by large cities from time to time. Hopefully, we will be past Vegas before anything happens."

"Hopefully?"

"Mary, I don't know what else to do. I'm guessing that the terror army will focus their attacks tomorrow, on the 9/11 anniversary. Once we're beyond Las Vegas, there's a lot of empty desert out here. I doubt they'll be trying to find two random people driving along a deserted highway."

"Don't get upset, Bill. We're both going through the same thing. I don't know what to do either. Life isn't supposed to be like this."

"I'm sorry. As you said, this situation is bizarre. What we did back there was insane. I apologize if I'm quick tempered, but I just want to get back to my family." He took her hand and said, "Am I forgiven?"

She squeezed his hand and said, "Of course, Bill, all is forgiven. What's our next destination?"

"Needles. It should be an hour or hour and a half from here."

"Okay, then I'm going to get some sleep," she noted while letting go of his hand. She turned to the backseat and said, "Here, Chachis, come and sleep with us." The dog jumped into her lap and sat down. Bill glanced over at the three sitting so comfortably and smiled. He hoped his days as a soldier were over now.

Twenty minutes later, a long convoy of military vehicles began to approach on the other side of the highway. There were dozens of trucks carrying soldiers. He had to pull onto the shoulder as several heavy trucks came along carrying tanks on their trailers. He smiled knowing that Sheriff Jones was about to get the reinforcements he needed. A few minutes later, the excitement was over and it was just his car and the open road. He could hear Mary's breathing and wondered what she was dreaming about, and hoping it was not the gravelly-voiced stranger who claimed to be their father.

After another hour, he approached a sign saying it was ten miles to Needles. His car traveled up a gradual slope. Just as it was about to reach the top and start down the other side, something caught his eye, glinting in the bright sunlight. He slowed down and pulled over onto the shoulder and then stopped, pushing the gear shift into park. He climbed out of the car and looked in the direction of the reflection he had seen. Unable to see any details, he opened the trunk and removed a rifle with a scope and peered through it. It seemed to be a pickup truck stopped several hundred yards off the roadway. Something was in the back of the truck under a tarp. It also seemed like something was lying on the ground next to it. He took the rifle and slung

it over his shoulder and then rapped softly on the passenger window. Mary opened her eyes and lowered the window. "What's wrong, Bill?"

"There's a pickup truck parked over there," he said while pointing. "Something seems really wrong. I've got to check it out."

"Bill, are you sure?"

"I have this really bad feeling in my gut, Mary. It won't take too long."

"Do you want me to come?"

"No, I'm sure it's nothing. You stay here and keep an eye on the car, okay?" She looked terrified by the thought of being alone but nodded anyway. "It'll be okay. If something happens, just get the hell out of here." Before she could respond, he had turned on his heels and was moving toward the other vehicle.

Mary looked at her cell phone, but had no reception. She sighed and climbed out of the car and retrieved the two pistols, then sat on the hood and watched him move away. After a minute or two, she let Chachis and Zelda out of the car to snoop around.

About three hundred yards from his car, Bill climbed down into a small ravine. Before climbing back out, he looked through the scope again. It was definitely a body next to the truck. He scanned the horizon but could not see anyone or anything out of order. He climbed out of the ravine and began to jog toward the truck. He was certain that some poor hunter had a heart attack in the middle of nowhere and expired. When he was within a hundred feet, he could tell the body was lying in a pool of blood. He crouched down and checked in all directions but still could not see anything amiss. He hurried over to the body and felt for a pulse, but the body was already cold. He walked to the other side of the truck and found a second body. This man had been shot in the chest and was dead as well. He went over to the truck and looked under the tarp. There was a large metal crate about the size of a steamer trunk. He did not know what it was, but his mind was screaming that this was the suitcase nuclear bomb. That meant terrorists were nearby and would return. He wished he could warn Mary, but he could not take the time. If they returned, the bomb would be theirs again. He wondered what to do. He heard laughter from the other side of a small rise and he headed toward it.

As he approached the top of the rise, he got down on his hands and knees and moved forward very slowly. He peeked quickly over the top and then ducked back down. There were ten terrorists in a circle. In the center of the circle was a man on his knees with another terrorist standing next to him. His dream about being stabbed in the neck flooded his brain and he fought the urge to scream. He glanced again and one of the men was recording the events on a video camera. The man standing next to the victim was speaking in a foreign language. All of the terrorists wore face masks. There was no time to wait. The slaughter could begin any second. He leveled his rifle on the man in the center who now brandished a knife over his head. Bill held his breath and squeezed the trigger. The bullet shot through the area and stuck the man with the knife in the wrist, blowing his hand off. He grabbed the stump of his arm and screamed. Bill fired again. The bullet stuck the man in the throat and he fell back dead. Bill fired again and again, but there was no way he could stop the others from killing their victim.

Suddenly, there was a blood-curdling scream as Mary rushed toward the men with a pistol in each hand. The terrorists ignored their victim and turned on her and charged. She fired as fast as she could with every bullet hitting its intended target. Bill fired as well. Within a few seconds, all the terrorists lie dead or dying. Bill jumped to his feet and rushed toward Mary and the victim. She had used one of the terrorist's knives to cut the captive's hands free and they were hugging each other and crying. One of the terrorists rolled over and leveled his pistol on

Mary, but Bill fired first and the man's head exploded. When he reached them, he dropped the rifle and hugged the others. "My God, are you okay?" he asked both of them.

The victim kissed Mary on the lips and Bill on the cheek and then fell to the ground and sobbed openly. "Thank you. I knew I was dead. You two must be like Navy Seals or something. That was amazing what you did." He was trembling uncontrollably and then threw up.

Bill kicked some dirt over the vomit and squatted next to the man and said, "I'm very sorry, but we don't have any time to waste. I'm Bill Watson and this is my friend, Mary Stewart. It's nice to meet you."

"I'm J.C. Emmanuel. Thank you for saving my life. What's the hurry? Are more of them coming?"

"That I don't know, J.C.," Bill replied, "but we're not going to wait around and find out." Bill stood up and pulled the other man to his feet. "What's in the back of your truck, son?"

"What? Oh my God, I forgot, those bastards killed Ted and Rob. We were just going hunting and they shot them dead. What kind of animals were those guys?"

"J.C., what's in the back of your truck?"

The man shook his head and replied, "It's Ted's truck, but there was nothing in the back."

"Well, there is now, and we have to get it out of here. Let's go!" Mary gathered up all the weapons while Bill led J.C. back to the truck. When she arrived at the truck, J.C. was kneeling next to one of his dead friends sobbing again. "Mary, J.C. should go with you. Drive as fast as you can to Needles and then call 911 or stop a cop if you see one. I think the thing in the back is a suitcase nuke. I'll drive the truck but am going to stay away from the town in case it detonates."

"Bill, that's crazy!"

"No choice now, Mary. J.C. is in no condition to drive. I really don't think this thing is armed. Those bastards did not want to blow up the desert. They were saving it for Vegas or Phoenix; but I'm not going to take a chance of doing their dirty work for them, okay?" She kissed him on the lips and patted his cheek and took J.C.'s arm to lead him away.

"What about my friends?"

"J.C., you help me put them in the backseat of the truck. Then you two get the hell out of here."

After Mary and J.C. headed toward Needles, Bill drove the truck back to the highway. He was confused as to what to do. It was only a few miles to the town, but did not know how long it would take for them to get someone willing to take possession of the bomb. They had passed a sign saying it was ten miles to the town not long ago, and now he was wondering if that was far enough away if the thing did detonate. His cell phone rang and he almost jumped out of his skin. A chill ran down his back and his hands were suddenly clammy and his fingers trembled. He looked at the screen and saw the words "No Service" in the upper left. The phone rang again. He pressed the connect button and said, "Hello?"

The deep, gravelly voice said, "Don't worry son, I'll protect you."

He wondered if he had passed out somehow and was dreaming again. "Dad, is that you?"

"Yes, my darling son, it is me. Things are about to get very frightening, and you must lock away your fear and focus on your anger if you want to secure the bomb."

"I don't know what you mean."

"You will. Let your rage run free!" The line disconnected.

He stared at the phone for a moment, not certain what had just happened. When he looked up, he saw them. There had to be fifty or more terrorists, all wearing black and face masks. They were standing not twenty feet away in a semicircle around the truck. His heart was pounding and the sound of blood rushing in his ears was deafening. He grabbed the pistol on the passenger seat, but held it between his knees. The man directly in front of the truck began to speak in heavily accented English. "Who killed my men and what have you done with our sacrifice?" Bill did not reply, but brushed perspiration from his brow. "You know you will not survive this, don't you?" Bill shook his head and tried to look defiant. "The device will not detonate until we input the code, so our bullets will not harm it, but your body will be cut to pieces. Get out of the truck now and die like a martyr!"

Bill was panting for air and felt he was hyperventilating. He tried to calm himself, but knew his life would be over in seconds. Audrey, his daughter and grandchildren would mourn his death, but never find his body. This was it. The man was talking to the others in a foreign language and they leveled their rifles on the truck. Bill was overtaken with rage at the brutality of these monsters in human garb. This was his home, his country, and those bastards were here to destroy it. He prayed the bomb would detonate, incinerating him and sending them all to hell where they belonged. He glanced at his face in the rearview mirror and was shocked to see his eyes were glowing red. His skin was darkening and his face was twisting and contorting in front of his eyes. He heard ripping fabric and looked down to see large muscles breaking through the fabric of his shirt.

The terrorists opened fire and Bill dived for the floorboards. Bullets flew through the doors and windows and shards of glass rained down on him. Through the thunder of gunfire and shattering glass, he thought he could hear the terrorists laughing at him. His anger had won. All he could think about was slaughtering those bastards like the vermin they were. He screamed with a voice so loud that the truck and ground itself shook. Now he was in the air, somehow floating over the shattered truck that lay fifty feet below him. He noticed that the terrorists were running away as fast as they could. Bill smiled and knew he had won.

Bill woke to the sound of police sirens. He was lying on the front seat of the pickup truck. The sun was shining in his eyes. Somehow the roof of the cab had been ripped off. He glanced around and saw dozens of bullet holes in every direction and he was lying on top of a pile of broken glass. He sat up and reached for the handle on the driver's door to get out. When he touched the door, it fell off and landed on the road. He climbed out and watched two highway patrol cars headed toward him at high speed. He felt a strong breeze and looked down at his clothes that now hung from his body in shreds. He could see what looked like bullet holes in his shoes and trousers, but there was no blood. He examined his body for bullet wounds, but seemed to be in perfect condition, other than some small cuts from lying on the glass. The two cruisers pulled up next to him and stopped with their lights still flashing. The officers exited their cars and looked around at the scene. There was a large semicircle made from piles of shell casings. One of the officers came over to Bill and eyed him up and down, shaking his head. "Are you Bill Watson, sir?"

"Yes, officer, I am."

"I'm Officer Dan Moncrieff of the Highway Patrol. Your friends, Mary Stewart and J.C. Emmanuel said you were in possession of the tactical nuclear weapon. May I see it?" Bill led the officer to the bed of the truck and pulled off the tarp. "Ms. Stewart said you two rescued Mr. Emmanuel from a band of terrorists. Was that near here?"

“Yes sir, it was just over there,” he said pointing to the site where he had first seen the truck. “I thought I’d better leave the bomb here rather than risk taking it into a populated area.”

The other officer joined them shaking her head. “Dan, you’re not going to believe this. There have to be fifty or more dead bodies out there. It looks like most of them were ripped limb from limb.” She turned to Bill and smiled, “Sir, I’m Officer Denise Kirkpatrick.”

“Bill Watson. It’s nice to meet you.”

“What exactly happened here?” Bill told them about the encounter with the terrorists. Both officers took notes but shook their heads with each unbelievable revelation. “So, you’re saying you were inside the truck when they fired upon it? That doesn’t seem likely. There is no way you could be alive after that.”

“All I remember is I was down on the floorboards and glass was raining down on me. I must have blacked out, because then I dreamed I was floating above the truck. I thought maybe I had died and my soul was leaving my body.” From the other direction, two armored personnel carriers starting to move toward them.

“Mr. Watson, who or what made those men retreat, and what killed them?”

“I don’t know. Like I said, I think I must have passed out.”

The other vehicles stopped, blocking the highway. Forty soldiers came out and formed a circle around the group. The single officer joined Bill and the police. “I am Captain Steve Pastor, US Army, and I am taking command of this area.” The officers introduced themselves and explained what they had learned and the captain’s eyes widened with each new event. He went over to the truck and examined the device in the bed. “Yea, this is a Soviet era twenty megaton nuclear device. I have two helos inbound from Twentynine Palms to take possession. I suggest that you leave the area as soon as possible. Mr. Watson, I will need a number to contact you if we have more questions.” Bill pulled his cell phone from his pocket and noticed a bullet hole through the center. “Was that thing in your pocket?” Bill nodded but kept looking at it dumbstruck.

“Captain, Mr. Watson has told us a lot that we don’t yet understand,” Denise said. “We’ll take him into Needles where his friends are waiting for him. We will get cell phone numbers from them and forward them to you. Mr. Watson, it may be some time before you can get a new phone unless you go to Las Vegas.” The air was pierced by the low whump-whump sound of the helicopters as they crossed over a nearby ridge. “We will leave the area for you sir. Please be advised that there are two victims in the back of the truck as well as fifty or more terrorist casualties in the area.” The captain nodded and then Bill and the police got into the cruisers and headed north.

Bill sat in the back seat while Denise drove. He felt a kiss on his cheek and turned to see Lou sitting next to him. “You did very well, son. I knew you could do it.”

“Can’t she see and hear you?”

“No, normal minds are capable of blocking out things that are incomprehensible as a way to maintain sanity and accept that physical reality is genuine. I think you did that yourself.”

“What do you mean?”

“Son, you did not pass out, and your spirit did not rise above the truck during the assault. It was all you.”

Bill swallowed hard and looked down at his hands, but they were no longer his hands. They were huge with long talons on each finger. He bent his head to look into the rearview mirror and saw the face of a monster, with fangs, pointed ears and blood-red eyes. The old man touched his shoulder, and Bill was normal again. “I don’t understand.”

“All things in time, my son. There is no hurry.” The old man faded away as the cruiser pulled into the station and parked.