



The Ring
The Bomb
and the
Word

ASSAD R. WRIGHT

**The Ring, the Bomb,
and
the Word**

By

Assad R. Wright



Strategic Book Group

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P.O. Box 333
Durham CT 06422
www.StrategicBookClub.com

ISBN:978-1-61897-643-7

Dedication

This book is dedicated firstly to my wife Jean, who is the better part of me, and to my children: Donnett, Travis, Jordan, and Ashley. Secondly, to the most consistent and faith-believing group of prayer partners anyone could hope to have: Evangelist Mavis Dixon, Sister Jennifer Morris, Sister Lorna Renee Grey, Sister Joy Hagnet, Sister Shauntelle Gordon, Sister Brionna James, and Pastor Rupert Marriott. The prayer session in the waning part of the book was partially inspired by this prayer group. Finally, to all who understand that love is all there is.

Overview

When the Future Trend Nondenominational church decides to perform ten thousand marriages in one ceremony, a religious sect opposed to the idea of same-sex marriages plans the largest mass murder in American history. The fact that these are same-sex marriages will not prevent Chuck Chisolm and his partners, Prim Stone and Rip Ganders, with the ample resources of the Religious Unit of the Antiterrorism Task Force of the Department of Homeland Security from trying to stop such a disaster. To do this, the three agents must track down a group they've never heard of before and find and diffuse a twenty-kiloton tactical nuclear bomb before ten thousand couples say, "We do." In his quest, Chuck Chisolm comes face-to-face with the Bible in a way that changes his life forever.

Chapter One

The harsh, strident horn and glaring headlights of the eighteen-wheeler caused Chuck Chisolm first to jerk his head upward, bringing his left hand up to shade his eyes while at the same time using his right hand to jerk the wheel of the car out of the way of the oncoming truck bearing down on him at eighty miles an hour. The semi rushed past, missing him by inches, its horn waning as it rushed on into the night. The right front and rear wheels of his SUV momentarily rode the soft shoulder of the road. The vehicle teetered precariously for an instant then righted itself as all four wheels hit the macadam, danced like a drunken sailor on the deck of a small boat in a rough swell, and then steadied. Instinctively, he began shouting something about lousy drivers who ought to be forcibly subdued and chained whenever they attempted to drive until he caught himself, realizing he was at fault. He was driving and sleeping again.

Chuck pulled over the first chance he got, reached out, turned off the ignition, and leaned back in his seat. He breathed deeply for a moment or two, allowing the shaking in his entire body to subside. Bringing his two hands up toward his face, he willed them to be still. After inhaling deeply through his nostrils and exhaling slowly through his opened mouth for five repetitions, he slowly felt himself regaining control. He had to admit; this was a close one, too close for comfort even by his standards. With the back of his right hand, he wiped the perspiration from his forehead and prepared to resume his journey.

Chuck readjusted his rearview mirror, straightened out his seat belt, wiggled once or twice in his seat, then mentally told himself to stop stalling and get on with it. He laughed out loud at the self-reprimand, recognizing the nervousness in his own laugh, and reached out for the ignition. He stopped himself midway in the turning of the ignition key, returned it to its original off position, and leaned back in his seat. Shouldn't he thank God or something? After all, he nearly bought it back there. Sure, he had come close to cashing in his chips on numerous occasions as an operative in the Religious Unit of the Antiterrorism Task Force (ATTF) of the Department of Homeland Security. This, however, was different. Then, he knew his adversaries, studied them meticulously, and developed a repertoire of strategies, most of them deadly, to neutralize them in order to stay alive. This was very different. Grimacing ruefully, he realized that there wasn't much you could do about an eighteen-wheeler hurtling toward you at eighty miles per hour and you half asleep to boot. So, he guessed he ought to give God thanks or at least make some gesture to show his gratitude for not being smeared all over the highway.

The problem was that he had not prayed much since he went out on his own at eighteen. Before then, in his parents' home, he didn't have many options. When it came to going to church, reading the Bible, and praying, his parents didn't believe in giving their children many options. In fact, they had none. The wonder of it was that neither he nor his other siblings ever rebelled or even questioned it. It all seemed so natural. Now, thinking about his nonpraying ways, he felt a pang of guilt, glad his parents weren't around to drag him over the coals over it. He now began searching for the words to say and, finding it surprisingly difficult, decided to make it simple and get it over with. He finally decided on, "Look, God, I realize I nearly didn't make it back there. I have a feeling you had something to do with me still being in one piece. I guess what I want to say is thank you." With that, he sheepishly started the car and slowly pulled away. He was wide awake now.

Chapter Two

Forty-five miles ahead of Chuck, a beat-up Mustang with broken taillights swerved erratically from left to right, straightened out for a hundred yards or so, and repeated the swerving again. Behind the wheel, Timmy Thomas hiccupped repeatedly and told himself without much conviction that he was sober and in complete control.

“Timmy boy, no matter what anybody sez, you’re still the best driver ’round these parts, and every car was made to obey you,” he slurred.

As if to dispute this very assertion, the car headed for the right side of the road and a sheer drop of over two hundred feet, only to be pulled back at the last moment. Totally oblivious of this prospect, Timmy continued, “Yes Timmy, my boy, you’re the man. Nothing like having friends in high places who tell you important things. What’s more, you’re going to be an inte . . . inte . . .” He was searching for the word *integral*, decided it wasn’t worth it, and ended up lamely: “Anyway, you’re going to be big in this thing.”

As if to reward himself, Timmy kept his left hand on the steering wheel, used his right hand to reach down between the driver and passenger seats, and retrieved a whisky flask. The flask was already uncovered, so he brought it up to his lips. There was just enough liquid to wet his tongue. Bringing the empty flask close to his eyes, he peered at it bleary eyed with disbelief and angrily threw it over his shoulder into the backseat.

“What is the world coming to, Timmy boy, when a God-fearing,

law-abiding, stand-up citizen like yourself cannot get honest refreshments in his own auto . . . auto . . . m'bile? Not to worry, Timmy boy always has the answer.”

Reaching down as he did before, he came up with another flask, this one filled and unopened. He brought the bottle up to his mouth, clamped his teeth around the top, and twisted violently. The top came away between his teeth. Seeming to be in a hurry now, he spat it out, crashing it against the windshield, and brought the bottle up to his mouth. With his head leaning backward, he began sucking at the bottle like a man on a serious mission to quench his thirst. He finally lowered the bottle, now well below the halfway mark, smacked his lips appreciatively, and replaced the topless bottle between the seats.

“Aw, Timmy boy, you’re going places and soon,” he slurred, completely unaware that his foot was getting heavier on the accelerator and that the speedometer’s needle was passing seventy miles per hour. On the right shoulder, a sign declaring 120 miles from Jacksonville came up and receded quickly. The speedometer needle in the Mustang kept climbing, and Timmy was valiantly but futilely trying to fight off an encroaching stupor. He reached down again for the almost empty bottle but only found empty space. The bottle had slipped down between the cracks to the floor. He thrust down deeper and more vigorously, almost to the point of panic. The more pronounced movement brought his body further to the right, bringing his left hand, which was gripping the steering wheel, with it. The Mustang, already swerving right, ploughed across the soft shoulder and shot out into space. Still retaining its upright position, it landed in the top of a large ficus tree, lowering to settle between two large branches.

There was no indication that Timmy knew or was aware of what was happening. Bringing the rescued flask to his lips, he emptied it and repeated to himself, “Yes, sir, yer going places for sure.” The tree, unable to bear the weight of the Mustang and its driver, groaned plaintively and swayed to the right. The sound and movement caused Tim to look around him, wild-eyed and incredulous. There was no road, only treetops, lots of them, and space. The tree moved and groaned again, only louder this time. Timmy, full realization hitting him, began

screaming, “What in God’s name is hap—” His query was cut short by a loud sickening, tearing sound as the tree’s trunk began splitting all the way to the bottom from the fork where the car rested. The car, released from the tree, went crashing through the foliage of the lower trees and shrubbery, and landed on all four fully inflated tires. Like a frog on a trampoline, the car bounced straight up into the air, came down on all fours again, bounced once more, and began rolling down the side of the hill, finally resting on its side against a large boulder. Timmy, barely conscious now, could smell the pungent odor of spilling gasoline.

Chapter Three

Chuck Chisolm was driving smoothly now, drinking in the cool Georgian air coming through his opened sunroof as the utility vehicle hummed through the quiet night. The sign indicating 120 miles from Jacksonville came up in his peripheral vision and receded just as quickly. He looked at his watch and nodded approvingly, satisfied at the time he was making. He reached down for his cell phone, intending to call home, decided against it, and began speed dialing headquarters, decided against that too, and hung up. He'd call when he was pretty close to Miami. That way, he wouldn't have to listen to the inevitable advice of the director. The D, as he was affectionately called, felt obliged to give advice, usually unsolicited, in a sententious voice to whomever he was speaking. Normally, Chuck did not mind, even though the D seemed to know every idiomatic expression that ever existed and was willing to use all of them if given half a chance. Right now, he wanted to enjoy the night and the drive as he barreled south on the I-95 toward Florida.

Out of the corner of his right eye, he noticed the furrow on the soft shoulder of the road, and the warning bells tried to invade his consciousness. Two hundred yards down the road, he broke hard, the rear of the truck fanning the air like a bird's tail. After making sure no one was immediately behind, he backed up slowly to the spot he had noticed, parked on the soft shoulder, and got out of the car. He studied the indentations made by the wheels of a vehicle, but seeing no sign of

a crashed car, he turned around and began walking back to his vehicle. Midway there, he stopped suddenly, trying to make sense of some data that was screaming at him in his head. Whatever information was trying to force its way into his consciousness was very elusive. Standing very still without turning around, he retrieved a “photograph” of the scene he had just studied from his memory. Very meticulously, he segmented his visualization of the scene behind him into four quadrants and went over them one by one, starting from left to right. After completing the entire process, he realized that he was drawing a blank; no noticeable chord or nerve was struck. So, he decided to repeat the process, this time starting from right to left. When he reached the bottom left quadrant, he stopped, his breathing coming up short. Of course, what a fool he was for not detecting it earlier.

He sprinted to his truck and opened the trunk. In a hurry now, he took out two roadside hazard lights, placing one in front of and one behind the truck. Returning to the trunk, he slung a coil of rope over his left shoulder, grabbed a powerful rechargeable flashlight with the handle in his right hand, and trotted off toward the embankment. Almost immediately, he noticed the tree, split down the center. Below that, he noticed the broken branches of the foliage, and without taking up more time, he began looking for a way down. Fifteen yards to his left, he noticed a cut in the bank with a more gradual descent. He loped toward it and began scrambling down on his bottom, feet first. About thirty yards down, he came up on a sheer drop off of some forty-five feet. Looking around quickly, he noticed a sturdy tree trunk, its top broken off by what appeared to be heavy wind. He was working at a feverish pace now, realizing that time was not his ally. If someone was hurt below, the quicker someone reached him or her, the better the chance of survival. Slinging the rope around the trunk, he quickly tied a slipknot, tugging at it to make sure it would hold fast. He would be of no use to anyone with a broken leg or arm. Quickly, he began lowering himself hand below hand until he came to the end of the rope. He was hoping the rope would last until his toes touched the ground, but there was still a good ten feet of space between his feet and the ground. Not allowing himself to think, he dropped. As he dropped and began rolling downhill,

he tucked in his chin and drew his knees up in a fetal position, protecting his vital organs. He came up hard against the trunk of a tree, the air knocked out of him. Without looking for bruises, he came to his feet, quickly regained his equilibrium, and started scampering downhill, following the wake left by the rolling car. He finally sighted the car and sprinted toward it.

It was propped up sideways against a huge boulder, the passenger side down. Moving around to the front, he saw what had to be the driver. He was the sole occupant of the car. He thought about using his weight to pull the car down on all four tires but decided against such a course of action. Even if he could do it, it might simply make things worse. Noticing that the windshield was blown out, presumably by the impact, he maneuvered his way around and started crawling through the space left by the broken glass, making sure to keep his weight from tilting the car over. After much careful wiggling, he reached the victim, noticing that he was trapped by his seat belt. In fact, the seat belt might have saved his life, if he was still alive. He just couldn't tell. Keeping his movements circumscribed, he fished his utility knife from his pocket and began sawing at the belt. When he had it cut clear through, he began the careful extraction. Several times during the process, he felt the car move and was forced to stop, holding his breath, as if that would make a difference.

He had pulled most of the inert body through the windshield space when he stopped all movements and sniffed hard. He sniffed again to make sure and was now certain. What he was smelling was undoubtedly spilled gasoline. The scent must have been there from the beginning, but he was so intent on the rescue that it bypassed him completely. He mentally vowed to chide himself later. In his line of work, carelessness could get one killed, but now was not the time. He could smell something else faintly but irrefutably. It was the smell of smoke or something burning. Most likely, something in the electrical circuitry had ignited. He wasn't staying around to find out. Bending down, he lifted the driver basket style and began sprinting away from the doomed vehicle. The man weighed no more than a 140 pounds, and to Chuck, he looked underfed for a man nearly 6 feet tall. Running with the still unconscious

man was not a problem for Chuck. On his light workout days, he routinely bench-pressed over 350 pounds. Sighting a shallow gully up ahead, he ran toward it and lay down flat, the man beside him.

Moments later, the hillside shook with the explosion of the car. Fire and smoke rose up in the night sky, illuminating the surroundings. Dusting off the ash and debris from his clothes, Chuck retraced his steps to where he had dropped his flashlight in his mad dash for safety. Returning, he heard a moan and knelt down beside the badly injured man. The noise from the explosion must have brought him back from unconsciousness. Chuck placed his lips close to the man's ear and asked, "What is your name, sir?"

With a great deal of effort, the man answered, "Tim . . . Tim . . . Timmy."

"Okay, Timmy, you're safe now. I'm calling 911."

So saying, he pulled out his cellular phone and made the call. After giving directions as best he could, he hung up and returned to Timmy. "How you holding up, buddy?"

"Timmy going places," he answered. "Tim . . . Timmy knows stuff, important stuff."

Chuck reasoned that Timmy must be delirious. Just then, a voice hailed them as a uniformed figure burst through the undergrowth and wended his way toward them. "I'm Sergeant Cooper," the uniformed figure said. "Saw your hazard lights and heard the explosion coming down. Called in the cavalry on my way down," he explained, taking pleasure in his efficiency.

Chuck nodded, acknowledging the trooper's explanation.

Timmy began mumbling again, "They will all die . . . every one of them . . . all ten thousand couples before any one of them can say I do."

"What the devil is he talking about?" Chuck asked to no one in particular.

"How should I know?" asked the trooper. "I haven't even met the man."

"Mark my words," whispered Timmy. "Timmy boy knows things. Timmy boy's going places . . . going places." He was now gasping for every breath. "Before any . . . say I do, dead . . . all . . . going places."

With the last pronouncement barely heard, his eyes flew wide open and he died, empty eyes staring at the starry skies.

“He’s gone someplace all right,” chirped the trooper.

Chuck grunted noncommittally, walked a few paces, and stopped, preparing to give his statement to whoever of the cavalry wanted it.

Chapter Four

Rip Ganders was disgruntled. The fact was it didn't take much for him to be disgruntled as he was now. At such times, he seems to take great pains to let anyone within close proximity fully aware of his disposition. To some people, Rip Ganders was an irritable man. Most who knew him, however, knew that this was more a facade than reality and that his usually querulous demeanor mostly served to prevent people from guessing at what he was really thinking.

He was genuinely irritated now, though. In the past 6 weeks, the department had operatives crisscrossing the country in reaction to a spate of seemingly unconnected bombings, disruptions, and threats. The result was that the ATTF, including his Religious Unit, were spread very thin. The question of the ability to respond effectively to a threat of the magnitude of 9/11 or even Oklahoma City was a very germane one, troublesome but germane. Everyone realized that their effectiveness in responding to crisis situations could be severely compromised with them spread so thinly. Rip's current irritation was due to a combination of fatigue, sleep deprivation, and the fact that the last six supposedly trouble spots had all yielded a big, fat zero.

His irritation was evident in the way he yanked his car around a drunk bobbing and weaving his way across the side street he had just turned onto. Pushing his head through the window, he yelled, "Use a crosswalk, or better yet, stay home, idiot." Not satisfied with merely shouting, he slammed down hard on the horn, keeping his hand there.

Halfway down the next block, he realized that the horn was no longer necessary and withdrew his hand somewhat sheepishly. Under control now, but still grumpy, he continued west until the shops and other businesses, stacked closed together, began giving way to single family homes, small farms, and empty lots. Three miles further west, he began to notice the changes, subtle at first, but unmistakable. The homes got larger and more pretentious the further he drove. The lawns were so beautifully manicured that he wouldn't be at all surprised if the landscapers were college trained and used a plumb line to keep the grass evenly cut. The tall royal palms guarding most of the curved driveways seemed to shout, "If you don't belong here, turn around now." He ignored the flashy European cars nestled in the driveways, which seemed to share similar sentiments with the disapproving palm trees. He, however, reminded himself to give his 1995 Buick a coat or two of paint as soon as he had the time. He smiled mirthlessly, *The haves will always find a way to say how different they are from the have-nots*. Another mile and he saw the steeple even before he saw the church.

The church wasn't as large as he would have imagined, given the apparent affluence of the community, but he surmised that these people were more hung up with quality than with quantity. The problem was that such notions were simply cloaks for misplaced elitism. He swung his car through the open gate and up the palm-lined driveway. Following the written directions, he found the parking lot to the western side of the building and pulled up between two late-model BMWs. As he stepped away from his car, he looked around and realized how out of place his beat-up Buick looked among the other cars, shrugged, and sauntered toward the front of the church where a sign lied, "Reception area. Welcome." He certainly did not feel welcomed. And the raised eyebrows and down-turned lips of the welcoming party lining the church's vestibule gave him no reason to reassess his feelings. He could, however, understand their obvious misgivings. He was dressed more like the editor of a struggling newspaper, trying hard to come up with the lead story in the early edition with less than an hour before the presses begin rolling, rather than a guest at a much-publicized high-society wedding.

As he passed down the hall, he looked at the elegant hand-sown

gowns and top-of-the-line Armani and Givenchy tuxedos and smiled at the thought of his own department store-bought Bert Pulitzer suit, made in the Philippines. The fact that he had worn it to six such weddings in the last five weeks could only make it look less flattering in comparison to its present company.

Nearly six weeks ago, when the D explained their current assignments, he gave them no time for fancy shopping. According to the D, the new secretary of Homeland Security was concerned about a series of unexplained bombings and disturbances. The fact was that the brass in Washington, all the way up to the president, were having uneasy feelings about the whole affair. They wanted the dots connected and projections made in a hurry. Every terror group or potential terror group was coming under the microscope. Because an unusually large amount of these incidents involved weddings, to be specific, same-sex weddings, and abortion clinics, full pressure was brought on the Religious Unit. "People," the D intoned, addressing the more than thirty operatives in the briefing/situation room, "we need results like yesterday."

It was then that a bright-eyed, fresh-faced operative on the job for less than two weeks got up, arm up in the air, face beaming with anticipation, and asked, "Sir, does that mean we start beating the brush by the morrow?"

Rip turned to Chuck, "Morrow, did he say morrow?"

"At least, that's what I heard," replied Chuck.

The rest of the agents in the room groaned, waiting for the scads of idioms that were sure to come following the opening presented by the youthful innocence of the newcomer. Instead, the D ignored the young man and recited"

"Gather ye rosebuds while ye may,

Old time is still a-flyng

And this same flower that smiles today

Tomorrow may be dying."

Gathering up his things, he said, "Good day, ladies and gentlemen, your marching orders are in your mail slots. Do not let the grass grow under your feet." With that, he turned and walked out.

"What in tarnation was that?" asked Rip to no one in particular.

“Was what?” asked Prim.

“That, what he just said,” replied Rip.

“Oh, that, that was a verse of a poem by Robert Herrick,” Prim explained.

Rip started asking another question, thought better of it, shook his head, turned, and started walking toward the mail cubicles, grumbling to himself. “Expecting idioms, you get poems. What the devil is next?”

Walking briskly to the bank of cubicles, he retrieved a brown envelope from the slot bearing his name and stepped out of the way before the crowd got there. He ripped open the envelope as he strode purposefully toward the bank of elevators. At the top of the papers was a ticket to the international airport in Atlanta, Georgia. He began scanning the ticket quickly, talking to himself now, “Leaving Miami, leaving Miami, let’s see.” Looking at his watch, he added, “Good God, in less than three hours.” He quickened his pace and reached the elevators just as one of the doors was closing. Reaching out his hand, he inserted it between the closing doors, causing them to come apart again. He walked in just ahead of Chuck and Prim. He pushed the close button, ignoring the clatter of running feet coming around the corner. The elevator door closed and started moving toward the ground floor five stories down.

“I see you’re in a bit of a rush,” Chuck commented, looking at Rip.

“You don’t know the half of it,” answered Rip. “My plane leaves for Atlanta in less than three hours, and I have a wedding to attend one hour after we land.”

“I didn’t know you were the marrying kind,” Prim joked.

“I ain’t,” he began, caught himself, and ended up saying, “Guys, be serious. When’s your flight?”

I don’t have a flight,” Chuck said. “I cover five weddings and a couple clinics in Georgia and one wedding in Jacksonville about five weeks from now. My first case in Georgia is not until tomorrow night, so I guess I’ll drive up there and back.”

Rip rolled his eyes and looked at Prim.

“Oh, I’m not as lucky as you guys. I have some cases in Key West, one in Negril and one in Ocho Rios,” smirked Prim.

“Negril?” queried Chuck.

“Ocho Rios? Tell me you don’t mean in Jamaica,” beseeched Rip.

“Look guys, this is very serious. When last have you seen the D give up an opportunity to lay on his idiomatic repertoire? Instead, he recited a poem.”

“Frankly, I don’t know which is worse,” countered Rip.

Chuck now stepped in as the unofficial but acknowledged head of the trio, “I agree with Prim, and I know you do too, Rip. This is way past serious. Something tells me these incidents are merely red herrings, geared to spread us thin and to draw our attention from the big one, whatever that may be. We can’t afford any slipups. We have to be at our very best, and even that may not be enough.”

Prim, with her long legs and athletic build, was able to keep up with the men without too much extra effort. To the right of the main building, which they were now leaving behind, lay a series of one-story structures the unit called the ICE building, the acronym standing for “in case of emergency.” The ICE building had a number of self-contained apartments, none larger than fifteen feet by twelve feet. Without the benefit of an identification plate, Rip walked to the third door in the second row of buildings, pulled a magnet strip from his pocket, flashed it over an almost invisible patch in the center of the door, and walked through as the door retreated into the walls on well-oiled casters. The door had no handle and did not swing in or out. It might not be break-in proof, but anyone making an unauthorized entry would find the heavy steel door more trouble than they bargained for. Rip did not say good-bye to the others. They never said good-byes. In embarking on a mission, they all knew and accepted the risks involved and so viewed sentimental good-byes as unnecessary or even counterproductive.

With the door firmly closed behind him, he began moving even faster now. He had no time to waste. Opening the door to a closet in the wall, he picked up a Samsonite suit bag and laid it flat on the single bed. Grabbing one of the two suits hanging from the closet rod, he quickly clipped it in. He then threw in some casual attire, socks, underwear, and two pairs of shoes. Moving even more quickly now, he lifted and removed a nightstand from the side of the bed. Kneeling near the space

left by the nightstand, he opened his palm with splayed fingers and pressed it down on a spot with no definitive markings. He heard the click and nodded with satisfaction as an opening appeared in the middle of a painting on the wall where the nightstand was. Reaching in, he pulled out a small metal box, which he quickly opened. From it, he took out a specially designed revolver, the USP 45 Tactical with magna-ported barrels and two clips of ammunition. The gunsmith who modified Rip's gun clearly understood his need for accuracy and power. The wicked-looking gun had twice the wallop of a 357 Magnum with very little recoil, and it had the ability to host a silencer if necessary. The real value of the special design lay in the fact that the gun was virtually jam free, even with extremely heavy and protracted usage. In addition to that, it was so accurate when being used by an expert as to make the use of a honing light unnecessary. And Rip was an expert by any standard. He thought about buying personal hygiene articles in the field, decided against it, and grabbed an already-packed pouch from the small cubicle posing as a bathroom and shower stall; the lesser the activity in the field, the better.

Making sure he had everything he needed, including ATTF passes, he swung the traveling suit bag over his shoulder, flashed his magnetic strip over the undetectable spot on the door, and dashed toward his car parked in the lot marked reserved. No need to worry about closing the door. It would close and seal itself. The car he would leave in the long-term parking garage at the airport, retrieve it on his return from his stint in Georgia, and drive up to West Palm Beach for the final leg of his assignment. On his drive to the airport, he ignored all posted speed limits and hoped there was no enthusiastic laser-wielding cop hiding around a corner. He knew he could explain things; he just didn't have the time. As he careened the car around the last bend and headed for the parking garage, he wished he had the time to get a tuxedo for the weddings. He thought about it some more and laughed.

Looking at the well-dressed people around him now, he laughed again as he headed for the sanctuary door. No amount of tailoring would make Rip look like these folks. He was big and brawny at 6 feet 2 and looked quite at home in overalls with a pneumatic drill pumping in his

huge hands. Regardless of who tailored a tuxedo for him, he would still stand out like a sore thumb among these folks. He walked into the sanctuary, felt the bifold doors swing silently behind him, moved to what he considered to be the center of the room, and sat down in the seat nearest to the aisle. If he had to move fast, he didn't want to have to be saying a lot of excuse-mes. Walking down the aisle, the feeling he got was not unlike walking a gauntlet. On both sides, people looked at him and at one another with raised eyebrows, as if questioning his reason for being here. Seeing that some of the looks still persisted, he reached out and took a hymnbook from the back of the seat in front of him and pretended to be absorbed. Frankly, he didn't care what these people thought, but he had a job to do. He began reading some of the lyrics and got pretty interested, not pretending anymore. He was not a religious person and knew next to nothing about religion. Prim, on the other hand, was deeply religious, though she was not one to wear it on her sleeve. She had invited both Chuck and himself to several meetings at which she was the main speaker on issues pertaining to the Bible. Although he had never attended any, he understood that Chuck might have gone on occasion.

The thing with Prim was, although she could see through his flimsy excuses, she was never condemning, only smiling and saying, "You can't run from the truth forever." Unlike Prim, no one could tell whether Chuck was religious or not. The man didn't smoke, didn't drink alcohol, didn't curse, and wasn't one to fool around with the chicks. Other agents joked that he was either a former priest or a priest in waiting. It was often rumored that he was from a religious family. How religious, no one seemed to know, and Chuck never seemed to be in a hurry to explain things. Rip was not concerned one way or another about the religious convictions Chuck may or may not have. What really impressed him about Chuck was the man's superb fitness and defensive skills and a mind that would make anything less than a supercomputer seem deficient. Those qualities had saved their bacon on numerous occasions.

Finishing the last line of "Amazing Grace," he was about to close the hymnbook when he felt something tugging at the edge of his consciousness, trying to get through. He had felt it earlier as he walked

down the aisle but ignored it as he focused on avoiding the unfriendly stares of his fellow wedding attendants. The warning was now a silent scream inside his skull. Without drawing attention to himself, he finally closed the book and leaned back, his eyes closed. To someone looking on, he appeared as someone taking a nap. Contrary to that, however, he now put his mind into a fast rewind and backed up to where he entered the gate. He then started forward in super slow motion, trying to pin down the unusual or the out of place. Nothing in the driveway! Nothing in the parking lot . . . Wait, in the first row of cars, a Ford Corvette with heavily tinted glass. Even the back glass and the windshield were extremely dark, so heavily tinted, indeed, that he was sure they had to be way outside of allowable range. Something else was bothering him about the Ford. All the cars in the lot were parked with headlights toward the building, including his. The Corvette, however, was parked with the front facing the direction from which it had come. It was the only one in the entire lot. He needed a closer look.

He started to get up, intending to give the Corvette a closer look, when the door to the sanctuary was swung wide, and a voice like that of a ring announcer intoned, “Ladies and gentlemen, the wedding party.”

Still unsure whether to sit down or finish what he had intended to do, the first couple walking briskly down the aisle made up his mind for him, and he sat down, berating himself for an obvious slip up. He knew this was supposed to be a gay wedding but was still unprepared for what was to follow. Rip was expecting a maid of honor and her male escort to come dancing down the aisle to the tune of a popular wedding song. A few feet from the altar, they would bow and courtesy to each other and move to opposite ends. The rest of the wedding party would follow suit until a semicircle was formed around the altar, leaving a small opening for two people. The organ would then ring out the well-known tune of “Here Comes the Bride,” and the bride would come slowly up the aisle, borne on the arm of the giving-away father.

No such thing was happening here, and Rip was a bit confused, not knowing what or even how to think about what he was seeing. He liked to think inside the box, and changes that he couldn’t account for made him uncomfortable. He consoled himself with the thought that he was

here to carry out a specific task, and until what was happening impacted on him doing that job, he was unconcerned. Try as he might, though, he couldn't quite put it out of his mind as the first couple walked in. Two ladies walked in without the aid of music. They walked in arm in arm, and instead of separating to opposite sides, they remained together, arm in arm. These were followed by two men arm in arm, duplicating the exact positioning of the first couple. This continued until there were four couples on each side of the semicircle. Next came four children in single file, bearing flowers, boy-girl and boy-girl order. This group was followed by a single girl with a small cushion with two rings on top. The rings looked as if they would equal the lifetime earnings of an average family of ten. A door to the right of what he assumed to be the choir dais, empty now, opened, and the officiating minister walked through followed by his attendants. As he settled back in his seat, Rip scolded himself for not being more thorough. As Chuck had noted, they just couldn't afford any slip ups, no matter how trivial they may appear.

He began combing the room for anything that didn't look right to him. At that thought, he felt a chill running down his spine and a cold feeling in the pit of his stomach. The heavily tinted Ford parked facing the direction from which it had come definitely fit the description of a Doesn't Look Right (DLR) scenario. How many times had he told himself and others that one of the most fundamental practices in self preservation was detecting DLR situations and acting accordingly? He was about to do just that when the minister gave a loud cough, and as if by cue, the hesitant voice of a female came over the loudspeaker singing, "Born free, as free as the grass grows . . ." He was again taken off balance. Were they supposed to sing that type of songs in church? He couldn't be sure and decided to leave it alone. As the last line of the verse "born free to follow your heart" came to a close, two women walked arm in arm down the aisle and filled in the space left in the semicircle. Rip couldn't help noticing the lack of practiced grace associated with the entrance of the bridal party and the bride. Instead, what he was seeing here today was more like intentional defiance.

The minister coughed again, this time rather self-consciously preening himself, not unlike a peacock, and when he was sure all eyes

were on him, he began speaking, “Ladies and gentlemen, brothers and sisters, we are gathered here in the sight of God to unite this couple.” Before he could proceed any further, a soft murmur began at the back of the church and rippled its way to the front. Turning around, he found himself looking at one of the most beautiful ten-year-olds he’d ever seen. With a face that would make a cherub pine away in envy, she came up the aisle, dressed in flawless white. She was carrying a bouquet of some of the most beautiful flowers he had ever seen. With a smile that said the world was at her feet, she glided up to the couple and handed the woman on her right the flowers, bowed gracefully, turned around smartly, and glided back the way she had come. The admiration around the sanctuary was unmistakable. After what seemed like an eternity, the minister coughed again, pulling back the congregation from their reverie.

He began speaking again, but Rip wasn’t paying him much attention now. There were a couple things that didn’t add up. For one thing, whoever heard of flowers coming in after the bride had made her entrance? True, this wedding was as unconventional as one could get, but it still did not explain things. And secondly, why didn’t the little flowers-bearing angel remain with the party? He looked around behind him, but she was nowhere to be seen. This stunk of a DLR. Without wasting another second, he rose and began striding toward the back door, ignoring the repeated coughing of the reverend. Moving quickly through the vestibule, he was just in time to see the rear entrance door swinging shut, but not before seeing the white-dressed angel hurrying through. He wheeled around and started sprinting for the sanctuary.

He was pounding up the aisle now, drawing gasps and shrieks of confusion and indignation from the audience and multiple coughs from the minister, who seemed unable to stop or control his throat actions. A few feet away from the couple, he began unbuttoning the top of his jacket without once slowing down. As he reached the couple, his hand was snaking out of his jacket, filled with the retooled USP 45 pistol. Flipping the gun to his left hand, he reached out and snatched the suspicious bouquet of flowers with his with his right and headed back the way he had come. A quarter of the way down the aisle, he moved

between two rows of seats placed farther apart to allow passage. Directly ahead of him, an imposing stained glass window loomed. Without breaking stride, he began shouting, "Down, get down!" Still some distance from the window, he brought the USP 45 up, placing shot after shot in it, all the time shouting, "For God's sake, get down." Noticing many still standing, he fairly screamed, "A bomb, a bomb, get down!" The word bomb did the trick. People were diving to the floor all over the sanctuary. The stain glass had now shattered, leaving a very large hole.

Slipping the gun into his jacket pocket, while ignoring the heat from its barrel, Rip drew his flower-laden right hand back, and with the best Dan Marino imitation he could muster, hurled the bouquet through the now open space in the window, at the same time hitting the floor himself. The high school coach, who persuaded him to shift from budding quarterback to linebacker because, according to him, his build suited that position better, should have seen that throw. The bouquet flew through the window, spiraling across the parking lot, making a tight arc as it began to come down. Rip's thought that he might have overreacted a tad and that there was no bomb after all was cut short by a horrendous blast. At first, it seemed the air was sucked out of his lungs, followed by tremendous heat that scorched everything in sight. Simultaneously, he heard the thudding against the building and realized what was happening when a late-model Benz was jammed into the stained glass window through which he had hurled the bouquet. Hearing a sickening creak, he looked up and realized that the entire wall and roof on that side of the building were about to collapse.

It seemed like all hell was breaking loose now. The wedding goers were in a mad rush for the front door or any opening they could find to get as far away as possible from the doomed building. The ugly scene was made worse by the angry yells, panicked screaming, and choice profanities, which seemed out of place in a church. Rip knew he had to get outside and to his car as quickly as possible. He also knew he had to stay away from the melee. In there, he knew he could be dragged down and trampled, as he knew must be happening to others in that stampede. Against the right side of the building and about eight rows from where he was now crouching, he noticed the front end of a Lexus truck

protruding slightly through a hole that was made when the blast flung it against the wall. Not wasting another second, he powered upward and headed for the truck. He had to knock some people aside, but that couldn't be helped. Reaching the vehicle, he put his back against the grill and began straining as he tried to push it backward. He could feel every muscle in his aching body strained to the limit, but still, the truck wouldn't move an inch. He closed his eyes, lowered himself, and bunched his muscles for one last do-or-die push when he heard grunts to his right and left. Opening his eyes, he noticed others had joined him in his quest for outside air and separation from the bombed-out church. He nodded briefly to no one in particular, and together, they began pushing in synchrony. Ever so slowly, the truck began moving backward in response to the pumping legs and straining biceps; it picked up speed until it was clear of the gaping hole.

Rip was the first one through, and without looking back, he started sprinting for his car, fearing the worst. The parking lot nearest the blast had become an instant junkyard of mangled metal and chrome. Gone were the rows of neatly parked cars. Cars were thrown every which way, even on top of each other. For him, hurrying as he now was, the lot had become an obstacle course. He bobbed and weaved his way around the damaged cars as best he could without slowing down too much. The farther away from ground zero he got, the more he began noticing less damage. He was now truly glad that the imperative of a quick getaway had accustomed him to parking as near to exit as he could. Slowing down beside his car, he saw that the front driver's side window was shattered. He quickly took off his jacket and used it to brush most of the broken glass away and sat behind the wheel. The engine started with the first crank of the key, and he backed out not too slowly into the driving lane. He began moving down the driveway much too slowly for him, but he had to take care not to hit the frightened people streaming out of the church. Luckily, only a few of them were out already. Reaching the gate, he quickly decided and turned to the left, back toward the town from which he had come. The bombers, whoever they were, would hardly go to the right, which led farther into the farm areas. More than likely, they would be headed through the town and to I-95. Once there,

he couldn't guess whether they would head north or south toward Miami. He had to reach them before then. He reached for his cellular phone to call 9/11 but put it back when he heard the wail of the sirens coming his way. The blast must have been heard for miles away. Less than a minute later, he was flashing by them, his car climbing steadily up to eighty miles per hour.

Rip began easing up his feet off the gas pedal as he noticed the open spaces being left behind and the buildings filling up both sides of the roadway. It did not take long for the speedometer needle to drop from ninety to the fifties. Rounding a curve in the road, he thought he saw the Ford ahead of him. Good, there was no way to climb the northern or southern ramp of I-95 without him tailing them. Ahead of him, he saw the two warehouse-type buildings, one to the left and the other to the right. Immediately beyond the buildings, he saw the street cutting across his with stop signs at both ends. What he did not see until too late were the two dump trucks reversing into his path. As the trucks closed, tail end to tail end, his reflexes took over, and he slammed down hard on the brake pedal. The antilock brakes responded well, and the tires bit hard into the asphalt, leaving two black trails of tire marks in the roadway. His car stopped less than ten feet from the iron bodies of the trucks blocking the road. Rip's brain was now in high gear, and his actions were not far behind. Before the car stopped, he kept his left hand on the wheel to keep the car straight, while at the same time, his right hand was pulling the USP 45 Tactical out of its holster. As the car came to a screeching halt, he flipped the door handle, kicked the door open, and dove out, rolling briefly and coming up kneeling with the sole of his left foot flat on the ground, the USP 45 slightly out from his body. Two men came hurrying from the trucks. The one on his right, a short stocky fellow with a sawed-off shotgun, was trying to bring the muzzle to bear, while the other, a stringy middle-aged man with spindly legs, struggled with a bazooka, which seemed too heavy for him on his shoulder. The bazooka-toting man slipped momentarily, caught himself, and tried to right the weapon.

Rip did not take much time to assess the situation. He did not need to. He instinctively knew who posed the most immediate threat. The USP 45

barked viciously, and the shotgun-carrying would-be killer was catapulted backward, dead before he hit the ground. The hole between his sightless, staring eyes was as clean as could be. Rip did not want to see the mess at the back of his head. The bazooka fellow was caught in a panic and couldn't decide whether to continue the fight or run. Rip was hoping he would do the latter. What he needed now was information, and another dead assassin would not help. He was hoping that the man was not just another zealot with a death wish. With a sinking feeling, Rip realized that whatever cause the man was fighting for had a stronger hold on him than life did. The man's nostrils flared, his eyes took on a crazed look, and the business end of the bazooka began tilting upward. Rip couldn't imagine what it would look like to be hit with a bazooka shell from this distance. He wasn't willing to find out either. The USP 45 bucked in his hand twice. The two shots came so closely together that they almost sounded like one. The bazooka gunner, hit hard in the right side of his chest, was lifted off his feet and slammed to the ground on his back, the bazooka pointing straight to the sky. The motion caused his hand to jerk backward, pulling the trigger. There was a loud whoosh, accompanied by a puff of smoke, and the shell from the big gun rocketed straight up toward the sky. Rip was already moving. Sprinting forward, he grabbed the skinny man, feeling no strain, and rushed back to his car. Throwing him through the already opened door, he got in, cranking the engine even as he was slamming the door shut. Even as he flicked the car into reverse, he saw the bazooka shell hurtling back to earth. The tires screeched loudly as he slammed down on the gas pedal, sending the car rocketing backwards. A split second later, the bazooka shell exploded, scoring a direct hit on the truck. This was followed by an even louder sound as the gas tanks on the first truck exploded, sending flames and smoke outward and upward. The flames soon spread to the second truck, which exploded in similar fashion. Rip, having stopped the car just outside of the range of the direct blast, looked on in disbelief at the awful carnage. A low moan beside him helped to refocus his attention on matters at hand.

The badly wounded fellow gave a fitful cough and tried to speak.

"Easy there, fellow," admonished Rip. "Don't try to speak now; you're hurt worst than you might think."

Ignoring him, the man muttered, “We’re gonna get you. All three of you, and you won’t be able to stop us.”

“Stop you, stop you, what the devil are you jawing about? And stop you from doing what?”

“They’ll all die before any of them can say I do.”

“I do what?” shouted Rip, getting aggravated by this time. At the best of times, Rip preferred things plain and simple. He did not like mysteries and riddles, especially when quick and decisive actions were necessary. He reached out, grabbed the man by the front of his shirt, and pulled him upward, ignoring the obvious pain in the man’s tortured features.

“Look, buddy, I really don’t have time to play footsies with you. Say what you have to say, and say it plain.”

The dying man, his eyes getting weaker and his features getting slacker, moaned, “We’ll get you all.” He seemed to mentally force himself to come up with a number and finally said, “Three of you . . . that . . . that is, if we haven’t got the girl yet.” He cackled crazily, blood freely flowing out of the corners of his mouth. “We’ll stop them; you’ll see. We’ll stop them.” For one brief moment, lucidity seemed to return, and with eyes opened wide, he shouted, “What they are planning to do is wrong . . . wrong . . . wrong.” And then he died.

Rip was now fully frustrated but with a feeling of dread, as if time were running out. Running out for what, he had no idea. He, however, knew that he could not wait around any longer. To do so would tie him up for hours with the local authorities, and he didn’t have the time. Sure, he could smooth things out in time, but time seemed to be at a premium or was sure to be. There was too much they did not know. Without ceremony, he pushed the dead gunner out of the car and carefully drove forward, taking care to skirt safely around the bombed-out debris. Once clear, he gunned the motor, knowing full well that he had no chance of catching up to the cherubim of death.

Thinking about her now forced him to deal with something unnerving, which he had purposely forced aside in order to concentrate on the immediate. Given the size of the bouquet she was carrying, the bomb hidden inside could not have been more than a couple inches,

weighing no more than a few ounces. He was visualizing a packet of C4 no larger than the size of a regular box of matches. He shook his head in utter disbelief. There was no way that amount of C4 could have caused that much carnage, not even remotely. Then, something forced its way into his consciousness, which sent an ice-cold chill all the way up his spine. There were unconfirmed rumors, just rumors that no one had taken seriously. The rumor mill was saying that some group with no particular affiliation was experimenting with ultra-enhanced C4. The chatter was that ultra-enhanced C4 the size of a large button could take down an air bus capable of carrying nearly a thousand passengers. It was not said how small the trigger mechanisms had to be, but with computer chips hardly visible to the naked eye and the emergence of nanotechnology, who knows? One thing was for sure, his neck of the woods was getting very dangerous, and headquarters was where he needed to be. Repeating this aloud to himself, he climbed onto the southbound ramp of I-95, merged into the southbound lanes, and floored the accelerator pedal. The environs of Palm Beach began fading swiftly into the background.

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