

# It's The Message

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A novel by

Walton Taylor

# Chapter 1

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December 3, 2018

The air in the Posner Community Hall was thick with the smell of damp wool, stale coffee, and the electric tension of a town divided.

"Place is packed," Mike Wallace whispered, leaning in. Mike, his best friend and the youth pastor at Posner Evangelical, was the opposite: all presence, a tightly coiled spring of earnest energy.

"It's a new era, Mike. Gotta see the king get his crown." Ryan's voice was flat, even to his own ears.

He scanned the room. It was a perfect cross-section of New Posner. In the front rows, the oil men, clean-shaven and sharp in their pressed company jackets from Trans-Global Energy. Their wives looked bored. Sprinkled among them were the town's new Muslim families—the men in prayer caps, the women in colorful hijabs, their children sitting quiet and observant.

In the back, the Old Posner. Ranchers in worn denim and flannel, their faces mapped by wind and sun. Clint Abernathy, whose family had run cattle here for a century, was staring daggers at the stage.

At the side of the room, Sheriff Barbara Kern stood with her arms crossed. Twelve years she'd worn the badge, and she looked tired. Her husband's death five years ago had taken something from her, something Ryan recognized. Beside her, her new deputy, Dylan Finch, looked like he'd walked straight off a college campus. He was vibrating with self-importance, nodding enthusiastically to a few of the younger men from the oil company.

Up front, Leslie Park, one of Ryan's clients, was talking animatedly with a man in a suit Ryan recognized as a Trans-Global executive. Leslie was all in on the boom. Her PTSD, the reason she came to see him, seemed a distant memory when she smelled a commission.

The meeting was called to order. Haseem Abakar, immaculate in a dark suit, walked to the podium. He was handsome, charismatic, and the highest-paid land-relations manager Trans-Global had. And now, he was the mayor-elect of Posner, Montana.

He placed his left hand on a Quran held by his wife and raised his right. He was sworn in. Polite, scattered applause followed.

Abakar smiled, a politician's smile that didn't quite reach his eyes. "Thank you," he said, his voice smooth and confident. "Thank you to all who have placed their trust in me. Posner is on the brink of a new era of prosperity, an era of partnership."

He spoke for ten minutes about growth, about the tax revenue from the oil company, about building a new community center. Ryan felt his attention drifting. He'd finished his history degree at CWU, married Asia just a month before his first deployment, and then shipped out. He'd done his four years, risen to Staff Sergeant, come home with a son he'd never met and a darkness he couldn't shake. He'd used his GI Bill to get his PhD in Psychology from Montana State University Billings, moved here to this quiet corner of Montana to escape the noise. To build a practice, a family. To be left alone. But the world had followed him.

"...and in that spirit of partnership and inclusivity," Abakar was saying, "I am, as my first act, submitting an amendment to the town's noise ordinance."

A few people shifted. Clint Abernathy leaned forward.

"Our community has grown," Abakar continued. "And we must grow with it. This change will accommodate the religious practices of all our citizens, allowing for the public broadcast of the Adhan, the call to prayer, from the new mosque on Third Street."

The room went silent. Ryan felt a cold jolt, sharper than the melancholy. He saw Mike's jaw set.

"What the hell does that mean?" someone muttered from the back.

Clint Abernathy stood up, his face red. "Mayor, this is a church town! We don't need that... that noise blasted all over creation."

"It is a town for all faiths, Mr. Abernathy," Abakar said, his voice hardening slightly. "And for those of no faith. The ordinance change is a formality. The speakers are a right, protected."

Sheriff Kern took one step forward, and just her presence was enough to make Clint sit back down, fuming.

Beside Ryan, Mike's phone buzzed. He glanced down, and his entire demeanor changed. A wide, uncharacteristic smile split his face. He shoved the phone in front of Ryan.

It was a text from his wife, Sam. **THEY CALLED. IT'S A GO. THEY HAVE A BOY FOR US TO MEET. NINE YEARS OLD. WE'RE GOING! I LOVE YOU!**

Ryan forced a smile. "Mike, that's... that's incredible. I'm so happy for you, man."

"Can you believe it?" Mike whispered, his eyes shining. "After all this time."

The meeting adjourned into a chaos of angry mutters and excited congratulations. Ryan watched Leslie Park shake the executive's hand. He saw Deputy Finch clapping Haseem Abakar on the back. But Ryan's mind was somewhere else. He was happy for Mike, truly. But the announcement had landed like a stone in his gut.

**Tuesday, December 4, 2018**

Ryan was picking Ryan Jr. up from middle-school basketball practice. The winter dark had already settled in, and the truck's headlights cut through a light, swirling snow.

"We're heading straight to the church," Ryan said, as Ryan Jr. threw his gym bag in the back and climbed in. "Your mom and Natalie are meeting us there for the Christmas program rehearsal."

"Fine," Ryan Jr. mumbled, his face immediately illuminated by his phone.

As they turned onto Third Street, they passed the new mosque—a modest, white-brick building that used to be a struggling Lutheran church. A white van was parked on the curb, its hazard lights flashing. On a lift, two men in heavy coats were working under floodlights, securing black, horn-shaped speakers to the corners of the small, square minaret.

"What are they doing, Dad?" Ryan Jr. asked, this time actually looking up from his phone.

Ryan tightened his grip on the steering wheel. "Just work, bud. Mounting speakers."

"For what?"

"For their church," Ryan said.

**Wednesday, December 5, 2018. 5:28 AM.**

Ryan was jolted from a shallow, restless sleep.

*Allāhu Akbar... Allāhu Akbar...*

The sound was digital, tinny, and echoing through the frozen Montana dark. But his mind, in that first disoriented second, supplied the rest: the grit in the air, the weight of his vest, the smell of diesel.

He wasn't in Posner. He was outside Ramadi. 2006.

*The pre-dawn call, the Fajr, was just ending. He was on night patrol, the streetlights shot out, the world a muddy green through his NVGs. A flicker of movement in a doorway. He'd raised his hand, and the squad halted. Specialist Gavest was on point.*

"See it?" Ryan had whispered over the comms.

"Affirmative, LT. Looks like... hell, it's just a kid."

A small figure, no more than seven, stepped out of the shadows and stood alone in the middle of the street, 30 meters out.

"Hold position," Ryan commanded.

"He's just standing there, LT. Might be lost," Gavest said, his voice too soft for the radio. Gavest had a son about that age back in Ohio. He clicked off his comm, a breach of protocol. "Hey, buddy?" he called out, his voice stupidly gentle. He took a step forward.

"Gavest, no! Hold!"

Specialist Gavest unslung his rifle, letting it hang, and took another step, holding his hands out. "It's okay, kid. We're not..."

The world dissolved in a flash of white-hot light and a sound that Ryan felt more than heard, a concussion that ripped the air from his lungs. The blast threw him back, slamming his head against the side of a building. When he could see again, Specialist Gavest was gone. Just... gone. And the kid. And 20 meters away, his radio op, Lt. Parker, was on the ground, screaming and holding what was left of his leg.

*Allāhu Akbar... Allāhu Akbar...*

The voice, amplified and digitized, crackled from the mosque speakers two blocks away.

Beside him, Asia sat bolt upright. "Ryan? Ryan! What in God's name is that?"

From the room down the hall, his four-year-old, Natalie, started to wail.

The melancholy was gone, burned away by a hot, toxic rush of adrenaline and rage. He was 25 again, his hand reaching for a rifle that wasn't there, the smell of cordite and copper sharp in his nose.

**Friday, December 7, 2018**

The American Legion Post 45 was crowded, the air smelling of old wood, floor wax, and weak coffee. Ryan stood in the back, a member but not a joiner. He was here for the Pearl Harbor Memorial, an observance Posner took seriously, mostly because of Jebediah Abernathy.

Jeb, Clint Abernathy's grandfather, was ninety-five and sharp as a tack. He stood at the podium, his small frame frail in an oversized VFW garrison cap. He gripped the podium, his voice thin but carrying over the small microphone.

"We... we were trapped," Jeb said, not reading from notes, but seeing a place no one else in the room could. "The West Virginia... she'd turned over. We were in an air pocket, maybe a dozen of us. And we could hear 'em. Banging. Trapped in the next compartment. Young Mickelson... he was from Iowa... he was yelling, 'We gotta cut there! We gotta cut where they're banging!'"

Jebediah paused, his eyes scanning the crowd but looking through them. "I was praying. Lord, just show us. The air was getting thick. And this... this voice... just a still, small voice, right in my ear, said, 'Not there. Cut... here.' It said to cut away from the banging. It made no sense. Mick... he was screaming at me. But I'd heard it. 'Cut here,' it said again. So we did. Took us hours. When we broke through... it was the only way out. A narrow passage... clear to an open port."

His voice cracked with emotion. "We got 'em out. All of 'em. We found out later... the compartment Mick was yelling about... it was full of aviation fuel vapor. One spark... we'd have been incinerated. The Lord... that still, small voice... He saved us all. And I thank Him every day for that. I thank Him for the lives of those men..."

As Jeb spoke, Ryan felt a strange resonance. He heard, as clearly as if someone was standing next to him, a soft voice say, "they remembered doing that."

Ryan's head snapped to his left. He saw a flicker, a brief glimmer of light over Jeb's shoulder, like the quick, warm smile of a friend he hadn't seen in years. It was gone in an instant.

He turned, expecting to see... who? The only person there was Asia, holding a sleepy Natalie on her hip. Asia was looking at him with a creased brow, a silent "What's wrong?"

Ryan shook his head, forcing a tight smile. "Nothing," he mouthed. "Just... my leg's asleep."

He turned back to the podium, but his heart was hammering. Auditory and visual hallucinations. Classic PTSD. He'd treated it in other vets. He'd never, ever

experienced it himself. He pushed the thought down, hard, locking it in the same box where he kept Ramadi.

**Sunday, December 9, 2018**

"So the foreman... he says I'm not pulling my weight. But I'm... I'm trying," his client, Gus Rossario, was saying. Gus was in his late twenties, a first-generation immigrant from Colombia. He'd had a rough start; three years in juvenile detention for assault and robbery as a teen. He was trying to keep his head down, working on Clint Abernathy's ranch.

Ryan nodded, trying to focus, when the Zuhr call, the midday prayer, began. It was 12:30, and the sound poured through the double-paned glass of his office, seemingly vibrating in his teeth.

Gus went rigid, his hands balling into fists on his knees. "Man, what is that? They've been doin' that all week."

"The new call to prayer," Ryan said, his own jaw tight.

"Frickin'..." Gus shook his head, his leg starting to bounce. "I had trouble with some of them guys in juvie. MS-13 was bad, sure, but the Somali kids... they had their own thing. Mean. Always yellin' that kind of stuff before a fight." He looked at Ryan, his eyes intense. "What is that? What's the deal with the loudspeakers, man? What do them guys even believe?"

*Ryan sighed, leaning back. The sound from outside was an oppressive weight. "It's... it's just their religion, Gus. Part of it." He found himself reciting words from a World Religions class he'd taken as an undergrad at CWU. "It's the Adhan. They're called to pray five times a day. It's one of their pillars. You know, like... Shahada, the profession of faith; Salat, the prayer; Zakat, the alms; Sawm, the fasting during Ramadan; and the Hajj, the pilgrimage to Mecca."*

Gus just stared at him. "A pillar? Man, it's a pillar of noise. Sounds like a threat to me."

"I... I get why you'd feel that way," Ryan said, trying to steer the conversation back. "Let's talk about the foreman. When he says you're not pulling your weight, what does that look like?"

But Ryan's own focus was shot. The voice from the speaker was a taunt.

**Wednesday, December 12, 2018**

The house was quiet. Asia had taken Natalie to a "Mommy and Me" class. Ryan Jr. was at school. The snow fell in lazy, silent drifts outside his office window.

He sat at his desk, looking at his schedule. His first client of the day, Leslie Park, was due in ten minutes. He felt the familiar dread, the heavy, suffocating weight. He didn't want to move. He didn't want to talk. He didn't want to listen to Leslie talk about her trauma, her triggers, and her excitement about the new housing development in the same breath.

He ran a hand over his face. He was 46 years old. He had a beautiful wife, two healthy kids, a successful practice. He had the life he was supposed to want. And he felt nothing.

His eyes fell on the leather-bound Bible on the corner of his desk, a gift from Asia. He hadn't cracked it open, not for himself, not outside of a Sunday service or a small group, for over a year. Not since Pastor Dave Nilwalski had sat in this very office, not as a pastor, but as a client.

Dave and his wife, Clara, had come for "couples counseling." The tension was so thick Ryan could have cut it. After Clara left for the restroom, Dave had broken down. "It was a moment of weakness, Ryan," he'd whispered, his face gray. "At a conference in Billings. I... I was unfaithful."

The confession had hit Ryan harder than he'd expected. If Pastor Dave, the man who was supposed to be the spiritual rock of their community, could fall... what hope was there for anyone? It had hollowed something out inside him, leaving only the dry husk of ritual. He'd been going through the motions ever since.

As he stared at the dust on the Bible's cover, he heard it again. That same soft, clear voice from the memorial. This time, it was just one message.

"Jeremiah 29."

His head snapped up. He looked around the empty, silent room. He felt a chill, a prickle on his neck. He reached for the Bible, his fingers tracing the gold lettering on the spine, just as the back door slid open.

It was Asia. "Ryan?" she called softly. "Your ten o'clock is here. Leslie's in the waiting room."

He pulled his hand back as if the book had burned him. He put on his glasses. He straightened the books on his desk. He manufactured the calm, therapeutic smile that was his second face.

"Thanks, honey," he called back. "I'll be right out."

He stood, but for a long moment, he didn't move. His eyes were fixed on the Bible. Jeremiah 29. He'd look it up later. Maybe he'd call Harry. Dr. Harry Steinbore, his old field medic, now a comfortable G.P. in Vermont. Harry would tell him he was just stressed. Harry would have a rational explanation.

Wouldn't he?

## Chapter 2

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Friday, December 14, 2018

For ten minutes, Ryan sat in his office, staring. His gaze jumped from the silent black rectangle of his smartphone to the dust-covered leather of his Bible.

Phone. Bible. Phone. Bible.

Call Harry. He's a doctor. He'll give you a rational explanation. Auditory hallucinations. Stress. PTSD. It's text-book.

Open the book. Jeremiah 29. Just look. What if it's not in your head?

What if it is?

The internal debate was a silent, grinding war. Rationality versus this... this pull.

He'd always prided himself on his control. His ability to compartmentalize. The anger, the guilt, the fear from Ramadi—he'd tied them in chains, shoved them in a box, and sat on the lid. It was a heavy, metaphysical burden, but it was his. This... this was different. This felt like something picking the lock.

Rationality won. It was safer.

He picked up the phone and dialed Harry Steinbore's number in Vermont. It had been months. Harry, their field medic, was now Dr. Harry, a balding, cheerful G.P.

"Ryan Medina! To what do I owe the honor? Don't tell me you're finally taking that ski trip," Harry's voice boomed over the speaker.

"Hey, Harry. How are you, man?"

"Living the dream. Kids are monsters, wife's a saint, you know the drill. You sound like hell. What's up?"

Ryan tried to keep his voice clinical. He explained the town meeting, the new mayor, the loudspeakers. He described the 5:00 AM call to prayer, and then, hesitantly, the flashback.

"So, yeah," Ryan finished. "Full-blown, textbook-triggered sensory memory. Just... more vivid than usual."

"Okay," Harry said, his voice now serious. "That's a significant stressor, Ryan. Not surprising you'd have a strong reaction. But that's not why you called. What else?"

Ryan stared at the Bible. "I... at the Vets hall, during the Pearl Harbor thing. I thought I... I thought I heard a voice. And I saw a... a flicker. A light. Like a person."

"Auditory and visual," Harry noted. "Okay. And...?"

"And I was sitting here, in my office, two days ago. And I think... I think I heard it again."

"What did it say?" Harry asked, his voice sharp.

"It doesn't matter."

"Ryan. What did it say?"

"It's not important, Harry. It was just... a word. A name or something."

There was a heavy sigh on the other end. "Staff Sergeant Medina," Harry said, his voice dropping into a tone Ryan hadn't heard in fifteen years. "Remember what you told us before the Fallujah push? You said, 'You hold back one piece of intel, you get us all killed. One man's secret is the whole squad's funeral.' You said operational intelligence is life. So don't hold back on me now. What did the voice say?"

The chains in Ryan's chest snapped. The control, perfected over years, dissolved.

"Don't you dare lecture me, 'Doctor' Steinbore!" Ryan's voice was a low, hostile snarl, the one he reserved for his darkest moments, the one his family knew and feared. "You have no idea what you're talking about. This isn't your op. You aren't my medic. And I don't need your armchair analysis about 'operational security!'"

He slammed the 'End Call' button, his hand shaking with a rage so potent it left a metallic taste in his mouth. He was pacing, vibrating with it, when the phone rang again. HARRY STEINBORE.

He silenced the call.

It rang again. HARRY STEINBORE.

"Leave me alone!" he yelled at the phone. He grabbed his keys, shoved his feet into his boots, and stormed out of the office, bypassing the main house.

"Ryan?" Asia called from the kitchen.

He ignored her, slamming the back door. He threw his truck into reverse, backed out too fast, and fishtailed on the icy gravel of the driveway before catching traction and tearing down the street.

Back in the house, the office phone rang again. Asia, her face tight with worry, walked into his office and answered it.

"Harry?"

"Asia. Thank God. He's... he's not good, Asia. He's really not good. He told me about the flashbacks, but he's hiding something. He's..."

Asia's eyes went to the open back door. "He just tore out of here. Harry, what did you say to him?"

"I pushed him. Probably too hard. Asia, he's..."

"He's been angry," she whispered, twisting her wedding ring. "So angry. And sad. He won't talk to me."

"Just... just get him to call me. Please. I'm worried about him."

Asia hung up the phone and ran to the front door, pulling it open. The cold air hit her face. But the only sign of Ryan was the sound of his engine, fading in the distance.

### **Saturday, December 15, 2018**

Their small group met at the Redbirds' house. John and Leslie Redbird were elders in the local Crow Nation, quiet, grace-filled people who had seen it all. Mike and Sam Wallace were there, Sam glowing with the excitement of their adoption process.

And then there were Basim and Mariam Asfour. They were refugees from Iraq, in Posner for just under a year. They had been raised Muslim but had converted to Christianity, a secret that had forced them to flee their homeland. They were shy, deeply kind, and thrilled to be in a country where they could celebrate their new faith.

They sat in a circle, coffee cups steaming. Ryan was a master of the mask. He smiled. He nodded. He was the picture of a content, Christian husband. Only Asia saw the tension in his jaw.

They were working through a devotional on faithfulness. John Redbird, his voice a pleasant rumble, read from Proverbs. "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and

lean not on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight."

"That's a hard one, isn't it?" Mike said, rubbing his hands together. "Leaning not on our own understanding. As a guy, that's... that's my default."

"It is a comfort, though," Mariam Asfour said, her English soft and accented. She looked at her husband, Basim, and smiled. "It... it reminds me of how we came to faith. Of John."

"John?" Sam asked, encouraging her.

Mariam nodded. "We... we were devout. Sunni Muslims. Kurds, living on the Nineveh Plain. This was... 2014. It was a hard time. Saddam was gone, but many groups wanted to... to 'cleanse' the Kurds. There were many aid workers. We met a man named John Carpenter."

John Redbird chuckled into his coffee cup. "John Carpenter. A strong name. A builder."

"Yes," Basim said, nodding. "He was. He would come to our home every Friday, after the main prayer. For four months. He never missed. He brought two bags of rice, two pounds of dried fish, and enough flour for three loaves of bread. Every week."

John Redbird chuckled again. "Uncooked bread and fish. Man, God was really stacking up his message for you two, wasn't He?"

Mariam smiled kindly at him. "We see that now. At first, he would just ask questions about Islam. Simple things. Basim... he was so sure. He was hoping that John would say the Shahada. That he would become his brother in Allah. It was a very confusing time for us, we were leaning on our own understanding, just as the Proverb says. We had nothing, we were so lost. It wasn't until later, when we had to flee to the camp in Turkey, that we finally found... a real comfort. A real path."

"What happened in the camp?" Sam asked, leaning forward.

"It was... it was a comfort, to find an answer in a different book," Mariam said, her voice dropping. "My husband found an old, discarded Bible... and this is the first part I read. It felt like it was written just for us. It was... it was like in Jeremiah."

Ryan, who had been expertly dissociating, his mind a million miles away, felt his head snap up.

"What's that, Mariam?" Sam asked, her voice gentle.

"Oh, it is my favorite," she said, her eyes bright. "Jeremiah 29. 'For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the Lord, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.'"

Ryan's coffee cup rattled in his hand. He stood up abruptly. "Excuse me. Bathroom."

He walked, too fast, down the hall and locked the bathroom door behind him.

As the lock clicked, Mike Wallace looked at the remaining group, confused. "Is he... is he okay?"

Asia just shook her head, her face pale. "He's just... been under a lot of stress."

"Mariam," Sam said, turning back, "that's a beautiful verse. But... can you go back? What happened with John Carpenter? You said he started asking questions?"

Mariam nodded, her expression growing serious as she looked at Basim. "Oh, yes. It was... it was very hard. After a few months, his questions... they became... difficult. He would ask things, with such kindness... but they had no easy answers. He asked my husband, 'Basim, if the Quran is the infallible, unimpeachable word from the Creator, why is there such a need for the Tafsirs to explain it? And why do they so often conflict with each other about the very same Arabic words?'"

Mike Wallace just stared, his coffee forgotten.

"He asked," Mariam said, her eyes distant, "'How can the direct commands of Allah need interpretation? And how can that interpretation change over the centuries? Does Allah change his mind?' He asked, 'If the Quran itself claims to be Mubin—perfectly clear—then why is all this explanation essential?'"

"He made me so angry," Basim interjected, his face tight with the memory. "I... I yelled at him. I called him a kafir and an agent of the West. He was... he was so patient."

"Why were you so angry?" Mike asked.

"Because I had no answer," Basim said, shame in his voice. "He had... he had pointed out that Isa, in the Sermon on the Mount, was so clear. That you must not harm 'one of these little ones.' Not one hair on their head. And then... then he asked me to explain Surah 65. The... the rules. For divorcing a child bride, 'before or after the marriage is consummated.' I... I had no answer. I just... I yelled."

Mariam put her hand on her husband's. "It was a process," she said, her eyes shining with tears. "We had to discover the lies for ourselves. But... I will never forget the

day we were baptized. It was... it was an emancipation. From slavery. From all that... fear."

Ryan, in the bathroom, heard none of this. He braced his hands on the sink, his knuckles white. He stared at his own reflection in the medicine cabinet.

How? How is this possible?

It was a coincidence. A stupid, random coincidence. Mariam had no idea. It meant nothing.

But as he stared at his own haunted eyes, he saw it again. In the reflection, just over his right shoulder. A flicker of light, a distortion in the air, warm and bright, like a benevolent smile. He spun around.

Nothing. Just a towel rack and a shower curtain.

He was losing his mind. It was the only explanation. The stress. The PTSD. He was cracking.

He splashed cold water on his face, the shock of it grounding him. He took a deep breath. He manufactured the mask. Calm. Placid. He was fine. He walked back out.

The group was standing, holding hands, just beginning their closing prayer. Asia's eyes met his, filled with a question he refused to answer. He took her hand and bowed his head, feeling like a complete fraud.

### **Sunday, December 16, 2018**

Pastor Dave Nilwalski stood at the pulpit. "This morning," he announced, "we are concluding our series on the minor prophets. And today, we are in Jeremiah, chapter 28."

Ryan sat stiffly in the pew between Asia and Ryan Jr. He opened his Bible, his fingers fumbling with the thin, gilded pages. He found the section. Jeremiah 28. He read along as Pastor Dave talked about the false prophet Hananiah.

"And Hananiah's message was one of easy comfort," Dave preached. "He was telling the people what they wanted to hear! 'The yoke is broken! You'll be home in two years!' It was a lie. But it was a comforting lie."

Ryan's eyes drifted to the bottom of the page. The chapter ended at verse 17. The next chapter, the one Mariam had quoted, the one the voice had whispered, started on the next page.

He stared at the page break, his heart starting to hammer. He felt a sudden, irrational dread.

Turn the page.

He couldn't.

His mind flashed, not to Ramadi, but to the debriefing after. Sitting in a hot, plywood-walled room, a captain telling him to write the After Action Report. To detail, minute by minute, how Specialist Gavest and a seven-year-old child had been vaporized. He remembered staring at the blank report form, his hand refusing to move, refusing to make it real.

"Ryan?" Asia whispered. "You okay?"

Pastor Dave was wrapping up. "We have to be wary of the false prophets... the ones who tell us what we want to hear."

Ryan just nodded, closing the Bible. He couldn't turn the page.

**Tuesday, December 18, 2018**

Ryan Jr. was on the living room floor, headset on, deep in a video game with his new friend, Micah Amaan. Ryan was in the kitchen, trying to get paperwork done, when Asia's car pulled into the driveway.

She came in, cold air and snowflakes swirling around her, and hit the button on the stereo in the hall.

"Oh, the night Santa went crazy," "Weird Al" Yankovic's voice, backed by a jaunty polka, filled the house. "The night Saint Nick kissed his wife goodbye..."

"Mom!" RJ yelled, ripping his headset off. "Turn it off! Turn it off!"

Asia, a huge Weird Al fan, just grinned and started playing air accordion. "What? It's a classic! 'He snuck into a bowling alley...'"

"Mom! Micah can hear you! It's so weird! Please!"

"It's Christmas, sweetie!" Asia sang along. "...and beat a bowler with his own left shoe!"

Micah Amaan, a quiet, polite kid, stood in the living room doorway, looking utterly baffled.

"Dad! Make her stop!" RJ pleaded, his face bright red.

Ryan, despite himself, felt the corner of his mouth twitch. "Asia, come on. Mercy. He has a guest."

"Fine," Asia sighed dramatically, turning it off. "But you two are missing out."

"I have to go to practice tonight," RJ groaned, flopping back on the floor. "It's so stupid. I just want to play games."

"Life's tough, bud," Ryan said. "Practice is practice." But as his son complained, Ryan felt that familiar, heavy melancholy settle back over him. The brief moment of levity was gone.

### **Wednesday, December 19, 2018**

He was in his office. The house was quiet. He'd seen three clients, and all three had mentioned the call to prayer. Gus Rossario was convinced "they" were timing it to disrupt his lunch break. Leslie Park was worried it would affect property values, even as she was closing on three new-builds.

Ryan stared at his phone. He'd been an idiot. He'd been a jerk. He'd let the beast out of the box at the wrong person.

He picked up the phone and dialed.

"Harry Steinbore."

"Harry. It's me."

There was a pause. "Are you done yelling?"

"Yeah. I'm... I'm sorry, man. I was out of line. You... you hit a nerve. That's all."

"I know," Harry said, his voice gentle. "I talked to Asia. She's worried sick, Ryan. I'm worried sick."

"I know. I... Harry, I don't know what to do with this. The voice... the flicker. I feel like I'm losing my grip. I'm a shrink. I know what this looks like. And it's not good."

"Maybe," Harry said slowly. "Or maybe it's something else."

"What do you mean, 'something else'? Like what?"

There was a long silence on the line. "Brother," Harry finally said, "I haven't told many people this. You... you're going to think I'm crazy. But this past year... after my daughter got sick... I... I've been praying for you, Ryan. Ever since I came to faith this past spring, you've been on my heart."

Ryan frowned, confused by the entire conversation. "Faith? What are you... But, Harry... you're Jewish."

# FIELD DISPATCH 001: Montana Sector, Posner

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**CLASSIFICATION: EYES OF HOST ONLY DATE: 20 DEC 2018** (Terran) **FROM:** Commander, Posner Garrison, Montana Sector **TO: GABRIEL, ECHELON COMMAND,**  
**SUBJ: SITUATION REPORT 001: ENEMY BEACHHEAD ESTABLISHED**

**1. SUMMARY:** Enemy forces have successfully established an operational beachhead within the Posner AO (Area of Operations). New infrastructure (audio broadcast system) is active, projecting spiritual dissonance and amplifying enemy influence. Local defenses are compromised and showing signs of systemic failure.

## **2. ENEMY FORCES & DISPOSITION:**

Zalambur (Market/Fraud): Confirmed active. Agent is leveraging new economic activity (Trans-Global) to sow discord, greed, and exploitation. Asset Leslie Park is unknowingly providing operational support.

Sut (Rumor/Lies): Agent is utilizing the new audio broadcasts to spread fear, confusion, and baseless accusations. Asset Gus Rossario is showing high susceptibility.

Dasim (Domestic Strife): Agent is exploiting the resulting discord, with multiple domestic disturbances noted. Primary target appears to be the Medina household, leveraging existing fractures in the primary asset's psyche.

A'war (Debauchery): Activity is increasing with the influx of transient workers. Standard probing of local weak points.

## **3. FRIENDLY FORCES & ASSET STATUS:**

Local Garrison: Units (Yadiel, Koliel, Tzofiel) are in position and observing.

Asset: Ryan Medina (Primary): Asset is spiritually inert, weighed down by self-imposed chains (guilt, fear, unresolved trauma). Koliel (Voice) has made two successful direct contacts (Ref: JEREMIAH 29). Asset is actively resisting, attributing contacts to psychological trauma (PTSD). Asset's internal defenses are high, but structural integrity is low. He is a high-priority target for Dasim.

Asset: Jebediah Abernathy: Aged but spiritually sound. High resonance. Koliel made successful contact during the 7 DEC memorial. Asset is a stable beacon, but his operational window is limited by physical constraints.

Asset: Sam Wallace: Stable, high-priority asset. Currently diverted by a personal objective (adoption), which is proceeding per plan.

Asset: Natalie Medina (Child): Asset is pure and highly receptive. Her fear response on 5 DEC was a direct spiritual reaction to the enemy's broadcast. She is a key atmospheric indicator.

**4. TACTICAL SITUATION:** Tzofiel (Scout) confirms partial observance of our units by Asset Medina on 7 DEC and 15 DEC. Asset is misinterpreting these observations as hallucinations. The enemy's audio broadcast is causing significant spiritual degradation, weakening the faith of the population and providing cover for enemy agents.

**5. REQUEST:** The enemy is consolidating gains. Local defenses are inadequate. Request permission to move from defensive observation to offensive operations to disrupt enemy consolidation and support primary asset (Medina).

**AWAITING FURTHER INSTRUCTION.**

**REPLY: IN HIS TIME.**

# THE BLACK MIRROR REPORT

## Report 1 Q4 2018

The new mayor's office in Posner Town Hall was a testament to corporate efficiency. Clean lines, brushed steel, a faint scent of leather and lemon oil. The wide oak desk was clear save for a single, sleek laptop and a framed photo of a smiling wife and children that did not belong to Haseem Abakar.

Haseem himself stood, smoothing the front of his suit jacket. He checked his watch, ran a hand over his perfectly trimmed beard, and walked to the door. He paused, looked back at the impeccably clean, orderly room, and nodded, satisfied. He opened the door, stepped into the hallway, and closed it with a soft, expensive click.

The instant the latch engaged, the room... shifted.

The crisp, beige walls dissolved into slick, weeping stone. The tasteful recessed lighting died, replaced by a flickering, sulfurous glow from an unseen source. The plush carpet vanished, revealing a floor of packed, bloody earth and filth. The scent of lemon oil was choked out by the coppery tang of old fear and rotten meat.

Where the oak desk had been, a throne of fused bone and black iron now jutted from the ground, stained with something that was still wet.

And sitting on it was Zalambur.

He was a vile, bloated thing, a creature of greasy, overlapping plates of skin. Yet, he was squeezed, impossibly, into a pristine, double-breasted Armani suit. It strained against his bulk, the silk tie knotted perfectly at a throat that bubbled with putrescence. In one clawed hand, he held an ornate bottle of dark, swirling liquid—demonic wine—and he took a long, gurgling drink before wiping his lipless mouth on his sleeve, smearing the silk.

He stared at the far wall, where the tasteful abstract painting had been. Now, it was dominated by a large, black mirror, its surface not reflective, but swirling with an oily, abyssal darkness.

Zalambur bowed his head, a grotesque parody of respect.

"Master of the Abyss! Lord of the Nine," he began, his voice a wet rasp. "I report from the Posner beachhead. And the news is... delicious."

He took another drink. "Everything is proceeding. It is... laughable, my Lord, how easy this is. So much easier than fifty years ago. These new 'saints' have no... no fire. Not like that... that dreadful 'Jesus People' business."

Suddenly, an unseen, crushing weight slammed Zalambur down onto the throne. The bone-and-iron groaned under the impact. The bottle in his hand shattered, shards scattering across the filthy floor, and the dark, viscous wine wasn't absorbed by the ground, but by the very material of the throne, as if it drank it in. Zalambur gasped, a rattling sound, his grotesque features contorted in terror.

"A-apologies!" he stammered, scrambling to re-assume a posture of subservient stillness, though his bulk was now visibly caved in, his expensive suit ripped. "Apologies, Great One, for reminding you of that... that delay. A minor setback."

He cleared his throat, regaining his swagger, albeit with a nervous tremor. "But my operation is flawless. My agents are embedded and unseen. Sut is using their own technology to sow fear and rumor, turning the adhan into a blade that cuts them daily. A'war is finding the new arrivals... accommodating. And Dasim!" Zalambur chuckled, a sound like wet gravel. "Ah, Dasim is my masterpiece. He is already inside the Medina home. The primary asset, the 'warrior,' is so wrapped in his own guilt he's doing our work for us. The marriage is... fragile."

Zalambur leaned forward, his suit creaking. "And the pastor! A costly operation, yes, but worth every resource. The whispers of infidelity, the 'moment of weakness'... and their precious church attendance has plummeted." He checked a small, smoking ledger that appeared in his free hand. "By... 18.993 percent, to be precise. Their little 'house of hope' is now a house of doubt."

He grinned, showing rows of needle-like teeth. "My next steps are already in motion. We have broken his faith in his church. Now, we break his faith in his God. We will isolate the warrior, Medina, and when he is truly alone, we will offer him... an alternative. A truth that demands submission."

Zalambur raised his hand in a toast to the swirling darkness. "The town is ours. The man is ours. Victory is assured."

He waited, grinning obsequiously. The darkness in the mirror churned for a moment, then, with a profound indifference, faded to a simple, reflective black surface. The audience was over.

Zalambur's smile vanished. He stared at his own monstrous reflection.

"Nothing," he muttered, trying to pick shards of glass from his suit. "Not a word. No credit, no 'well done.' But this time... this time, he will see. He will see that I did this. Posner is my victory. And I will be promoted from a principality. I will be a Power."