

Selected Deleted Chapters from

The Breath of God

by Jeffrey Small

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

When I watch movies on DVD, I often enjoy checking out the extras features, especially the deleted scenes. These deletions provide an interesting behind-the-scenes insight into the editing process that goes into making the film. They can also give different perspectives on the characters and plot. However, in almost every case I've watched such scenes (or seen "Director's Cut" versions of the film in which such scenes are added back in), I prefer the edited theatrically released versions. I feel that to be the case with my deleted chapters here too (with maybe the exception of the final one). Editors exist for a reason! Those of us who create these works often do not have the distance and perspective (or will power) to cut out our finely crafted prose.

That being said, I thought it might be interesting to provide fans of *The Breath of God* a deeper insight into several of my characters. Below you will find four chapters edited out from the final published novel. When I speak to book clubs, I'm often asked about my writing and editing process. The first draft of the novel was over 700 pages long! The four chapters here give you a taste of my weeding out process. In most of these cases, the chapters were removed because the novel was too long, and while they provided interesting backstory, they didn't move the plot along fast enough. In addition to editing out chapters like these for length, I also cut out a lot of writing that was simply bad or boring, but I'm not about to show that.

Spoiler alert: you will want to read the original book first because the samples below do contain some spoilers. Also, these have not been edited or proofed to the level the published novel has been, so read at your own peril!

1. Reverend Brady Backstory

This first deleted chapter occurs the second time we meet Reverend Brady. It provides his background story on how he became born again as well as gives more insight into his amoral pursuit of finances for the New Hope development. I found his conversion experience powerful, and I like how it humanizes him and his beliefs. I then juxtaposed the slimier side of his character immediately after this experience to show these tensions within him. Ultimately this chapter was too long, and somewhat repetitive with other scenes of Brady in the novel, so I took it out.

CHAPTER Birmingham, Alabama

The Reverend Brian Brady strode into the 7th floor waiting room of the UAB Hospital. William Jennings, the Director of Operations for The New Hope Church of God, followed a step behind. Brady spotted the family sitting together in a row of burgundy chairs facing the blank cream-colored wall. Coffee cups littered the floor around them. He wondered why these houses of death always felt so depressing, even the modern ones with their marble entrances and displays of technology. Maybe it was that smell. Evaluating his surroundings with distaste, Brady realized that he could do it better. What his congregation needed was a hospital that felt more like home: a place of dignity, a place of God. He would raise this idea at the next development committee meeting for the New Hope Community. Certainly, they could work a hospital into the plans.

The four Millbrook family members—lanky twin brothers Charlie and Don, their attractive younger sister Charlotte, and the only brunette of the group, Don's wife Nancy—stood as the two men approach. "Reverend!" they cried in unison.

"I left as soon as I received your call, Don." Brady shook the men's hands and embraced the two women. "How's she doing?"

“Not good,” Charlotte said, wiping the tears from her red and puffy eyes. “The doctor thinks mom may only have a day or two left. She asked for you this morning. Bless you for coming so quickly.”

Brady put a comforting arm around the slender waist of the twenty-eight year old daughter of one of the church’s most active volunteers. Since her husband, Robert, died unexpectedly of a heart attack seven years ago, Paula Millbrook had dedicated her boundless energy toward the church: she chaired the annual art auction fundraiser, helped organize the Thanksgiving and Christmas Outreach Dinners at the homeless shelter, and served on the New Member Welcoming Committee. Blessed by the fortune from her husband’s chemical distribution business, which Don and Charlie now ran, but whose stock she controlled, she didn’t worry about money. Unfortunately tragedy struck twice in the Millbrook family when doctors discovered last year that the lethargy she’d been experiencing was not due to her volunteer activities or tennis matches, but to lung cancer. Because she’d never smoked, no one realized that her persistent cough was anything other than her asthma. According to a phone conversation Brady had earlier in the day with her doctor, the last chemo treatments had failed. All they could do now was to keep her as comfortable as possible.

“I feel your sadness,” he said with tears welling up in his own eyes, “but soon your mother is going to a better place. She’s been a faithful servant of our Lord, and I’m sure that when she arrives in heaven, she’ll be first in line to greet Jesus.” He smiled at each of the siblings. “She’s the lucky one really.”

“Yes, Reverend, we know you’re right. We just don’t want to see her suffer any more,” Charlie said.

“I understand. If it’s ok, Mr. Jennings and I will go pray with her now. I hope that I can provide some small comfort in her last hours. But if I know your mom, she’ll probably be the one to comfort us.”

The siblings smiled, nodding their heads. “She’s down the hall in 716,” Don said. “Thank you, Reverend. We don’t know what we’d do without you.”

Dropping his arm from Charlotte’s waist, he took each of the men’s hands in a warm two-handed shake, before embracing the two women again. “God be with you, my children.”

Entering the private room, he could see that her children had tried to make it as comfortable as possible. The side table overflowed with bouquets of flowers and at least a dozen get well cards, while a homemade quilt lay across her legs. Paula appeared to be sleeping. Her head rested on the pillow with a yellow silk scarf replacing the thick blonde curls she used to have. Her once prominent cheekbones protruded grotesquely from her face. Careful not to disturb the IV needle, he lifted the hand that appeared as if her thin skin had been shrink-wrapped around her delicate bones. She opened her eyes. Although the rest of her was dying, he could see her beautiful blues still held the spark that was Paula.

“Don’t look so serious, Reverend. I’m not dead yet,” she said in her breathy southern drawl.

“I’m here for you, Paula, as long as you need me to be.”

“You’re such a good man. Will you sit with me?”

“I’d be honored.” He dragged a chair to her bedside, while motioning to Jennings to take the seat in the corner of the room. “You know, Paula, everyday I give thanks to

God for the opportunity He has bestowed on me to visit with people like you. Thirty years ago, I never would have dreamt I would be where I am today.”

“Really, Reverend? You weren’t born with the calling.”

“Oh, no. Not by a long shot. I began adulthood as a sinner.”

“I can’t imagine that.”

“You’ve never heard the story of the day I was re-born?”

The snapping sound of Jennings opening his briefcase followed by the rustling of papers interrupted his attention. He shot an annoyed look in the direction of his number two. Just because Jennings had heard versions of the story so many times he could tell it as if it were his own was no reason to upset his flow.

He turned back to Paula with a warm smile. “Well, I know that you’ve heard me speak in sermon about my modest upbringing, growing up with just my mother and two sisters in a trailer outside of Opelika.” She nodded as if she had heard the story but wanted to listen again. “My mother taught grade school during the day and then worked the early afternoon to midnight shift at the local athletic clothing factory. We didn’t have much growing up, and come Sunday’s she was just too tired to get up and take us to church.

“We all pitched in. I waited tables after school at this white linen restaurant in town, and at the end of the night, I would scrape off the leftovers that we couldn’t afford to order, and I would take them home to eat the next day. The big shots in town would carry on at their tables like they owned the world. I felt bitterness and envy. I vowed to learn business so that I would be richer than all of them, but God had other plans for me.” She gazed intently at him. He knew she was hooked.

“One day, a girl who waited tables with me, asked if I wanted to meet her at church on Sunday. I went, not out of desire to serve God, but because she was pretty. Imagine my surprise when I felt a connection there that I missed elsewhere in life.” Paula smiled as if she’d also felt a similar connection. “But I wasn’t ready to give up my sinful ways. One night after the restaurant emptied of its patrons and the manager left us to clean, we decided to raid the bar. By the time we locked the doors, we were all pretty drunk.” Her eyes were transfixed on his. “Do you know how sometimes one bad decision can lead to others?”

She nodded her head.

“Well, that’s the way sin works,” he continued. “The further you walk down the path of darkness, the easier it is to get lost in the forest. I asked the girl if she wanted a ride home. But I think we both know I had other plans in mind.” He shifted his gaze out the hospital room window. “I had no business driving a car that night.” His eyes welled with tears. “Not sure exactly what happened next. Just remember waking up in the hospital. A room about like this. The police told my mother that I ran off the road and hit a tree. I would be okay—only a concussion and a broken wrist.

“But the girl”—his voice caught in his throat—“she was in a coma. Severe head trauma; hit the windshield. Paula, I went straight to her room. The site will haunt me to this day. You couldn’t recognize her: tubes coming out everywhere, her face black and blue and swollen up. But the worst thing was the look her parents gave me. They didn’t need to say anything; the accusation was all over their faces. I spent the next three days at her bedside, holding her hand and crying.”

Paula gave his hand a comforting squeeze.

“The doctors told us not to raise our hopes. She might never wake up. They said all we could do for her was pray. So that’s what I did. On Sunday, I went to her church for the early morning service, and stayed through the eleven a.m. service. Desperate and in pain, I prayed on my knees for hours, asking God to trade my life for hers.”

At this point, he closed his eyes, reliving the experience. “For some reason that I can’t explain to this day, I blurted out during the preacher’s final sermon, ‘I surrender.’ Now, I must have spoken loudly because the preacher stopped and everyone turned and stared at me. I didn’t care, though, because all of a sudden a presence came over me. Like an electrical current running through my body, but instead of a jolt of pain, I was struck by a jolt of love and of peace. At that moment, God sent the Holy Spirit to take over my life. I started speaking in a language I’d never heard before. I didn’t know what I was saying, but I couldn’t stop. I lost all awareness of my surroundings, and yet I felt bathed in the light of the Lord. I desperately wanted to stay in the light. All became clear to me. The path out of the forest of darkness, the way to the light of God, was Jesus Christ, and that would be my life.”

He opened his eyes and met Paula’s enraptured gaze. “Ignoring the people staring at me as if I’d landed in the middle of their church from another planet, I ran down the aisle and out the back door. I don’t know why I went back to the hospital, but I did. When I got to the girl’s room, I could hear her parents crying and carrying on. I walked through the door, and there she was, sitting up in bed and smiling at them as if nothing had happened.”

Tears flowed down Paula’s cheeks. “This girl, is it?”

“Yes, it is. We married later that summer.”

“I never knew the whole story. So beautiful.” She held out her arms for a hug, which he did gently so as not to crush her frail body with his bulk. As he embraced her, he looked toward Jennings who made the annoying circular motion with his finger that he did whenever Brady carried on too long in his storytelling.

Sitting again, Brady straightened Paula’s blanket where he’d wrinkled it. “Enough about me. This must be a difficult time for you, Paula, and I don’t mean your sickness. I bet you’re more concerned about how your family will get along without your strong hand. We’ve already felt your absence at the church.”

“You know me too well,” she said.

“Have you set your worldly affairs in order?” He took her hand in both of his.

“Oh yes, Reverend. I was just going over my will last week. The kids will be quite comfortable with the income from the business. I think that Don and Charlie have really grown into their roles as co-presidents. And don’t you worry either, the church is well taken care of too. Ever since Bobby died, the church has been a second home to me, given me a real purpose.” She lowered her voice to a conspiratorial whisper. “Just as the good book teaches, I’m leaving ten percent of my estate to the church.”

When she glanced down to pull up her blanket, Brady cut his eyes to Jennings before quickly returning his steady gaze into her beautiful but tired eyes. “You are truly blessed, Paula. I only wish that everyone in the church could live by your example. Unfortunately, too many in our congregation have forgotten the story of Ananias and his wife, Sapphira. Do you remember Acts, Chapter Five, Paula?”

“I think so. It’s the one where... Can you refresh me? These drugs, they’re affecting my memory.”

“Oh, I’d be happy to. A couple had sold some property and given a portion of their proceeds to the Apostles to help out the young church, but they held back some of the money, not disclosing the full extent of their bounty. Peter confronted Ananias with his lie, telling the man that Satan had filled his heart. Peter went on to say that Ananias lied not just to the Apostles but to God. On hearing those words, Ananias fell dead to the floor. Next, Peter went to Sapphira, his wife, and confronted her because she knew about her husband’s misdeeds and did nothing. She promptly received God’s judgment and fell dead also.”

Paula looked at the reverend with a furrowed brow and pursed lips, as if she had just tasted something rotten in her food and was trying to figure out what had gone bad.

He continued, “But you and I know, Paula, that those who give to God receive back a hundredfold. I bet those Wall Street bankers would like to get such returns!”

He gazed earnestly into her eyes. “You understand the challenges we face with our construction budgets on the New Hope Community project. Doing God’s work in a land of Godless people can be difficult and expensive. These companies, all they care about is the almighty dollar, when they should be focused on the work they are doing for the almighty God! If only they were more like you, Paula, with your tireless volunteer efforts and your strong financial support. And,” he paused, caressing her arm, “I’m sure your children will continue your tradition of service, but you know the generation today. Sometimes they may intend well, but then get caught up in the temptations of youth. They may have different priorities than you and I.”

Paula looked at him as if she’d never considered this line of thought. “I always assumed that the kids would continue as I’ve done, but you’re right, Reverend. Just the

other day, Don started talking about building a new house. You know that we've always lived modestly, regardless of our fortunate financial situation. But ever since he married Nancy, he's been living a higher lifestyle. Her parents came from money, you know. They didn't earn it like my Bobby did."

"Well, I think that Don and Nancy will do right by you and the Lord," he said, "but Mr. Jennings and I were talking about your strong commitment to the church the other day, and we just wanted to make sure that your desires were carried out exactly the way you wanted, especially in light of our current financial concerns. Any unexpected drop in our revenue could put the entire project in jeopardy."

"What should I do, Reverend? I want to leave this world knowing that I helped make that project a reality."

"If only everyone had your sense of duty," he said, gently placing a hand on her head, "God's plan would be so much easier to put into place." Twisting his wrist, he glanced at his Rolex Presidential watch. He was running late for his haircut and manicure appointment. "I hate to leave you now, Paula, but Mr. Jennings has some documents here which should address your concerns about providing for the future financial well-being of the church without putting any of your children in the awkward position of making such decisions. Spend as much time with him as you need. I would just be a hindrance when it comes to all of that legal mumbo-jumbo anyway." He leaned down and brushed his lips against her cheek, which flushed at his touch.

"Thank you so much, Reverend."

"Go with Jesus, my child."

2. Grant and Kristin Backstory

This chapter would have been the second one with Grant and Kristin together. Here we begin to see the burgeoning attraction between them. It also gives more backstory on Grant, and I contrast how he responded to his religious upbringing versus the story we have above from Brady above. Also like the above chapter on Brady, I felt that this one was superfluous. Notice the similarities of these two deleted chapters: nothing is happening – we have just pages of storytelling with little sense of conflict. I felt that including these chapters would have taken away too much of the pacing that keeps readers turning pages. However, fans of Grant and Kristin might enjoy a little more of their interaction together. Also, you may recognize that I did include a few paragraphs from this chapter in others that remained in the book.

CHAPTER

Punakha, Bhutan

“Your hotel?” Grant asked, hoping he didn’t appear eager.

Their taxi, a silver Toyota Land Cruiser, stopped by a three story building with whitewashed plaster walls and a colorful pagoda-style timber roof that looked like a miniature version of the dzong.

Kristin tossed her head back and laughed. “Don’t you wish. Mine’s up the hill a ways, but this one has a decent breakfast.” The expression in her eyes, however, communicated to him that his idea wasn’t totally out of the question.

Although they had only met yesterday, she had been flirting with him since their first encounter; at least he thought she had. They were also the only two young Americans in this place. He was having a hard time remembering the last girl he’d been with. Was it Holly, the brunette with the spiky hair and the temper to match, or Michelle, the blonde theater major? He knew that at twenty-nine he was that age where dating undergrads was kind of creepy, but he was technically still in school too, and his boyish face made him look younger than he was. Dating students was uncomplicated: they didn’t

want to move in with him, or call him every second of the day. His research and writing had to be his priority.

“Well, let’s eat then,” he said, ignoring her jab. He could play the game too. When Kristin arrived at the monastery and announced that she would drive him to town for breakfast, he wasn’t sure if he was happier to be spending more time with her or to get something other than rice and cheese sauce to eat.

She helped him climb out onto Punakha’s main street, the only paved street in the small town. The ground floors of the buildings contained small shops—selling hardware, clothing, and groceries—many with dirt floors and unfinished wooden shelves. The shopkeepers and their families lived in apartments above the stores. Other than the unique Bhutanese architecture, the quiet town could have been set in the American Old West. The wind rushing through the valley even blew dust down the street, swirling around his cast and crutches. Only the tumbleweeds, he thought, were missing.

Five minutes later, Kristin carried two plates from the buffet to the checkered cloth covered table in the boutique tourist hotel’s small restaurant. He salivated over the hard boiled eggs, salami, and toast like a lion sizing up an injured antelope.

“So, when was the last time you really cried?” she asked.

“Excuse me?” he said through a mouthful of food. *What kind of way is that to start off a meal?*

“I think the question was clear.” She leaned forward, a bit of muffin in her slender fingers. “And breaking your leg doesn’t count.”

“Who knows? Sometime when I was a kid.” He shrugged. The voice in his head reminded him of another time—that humiliating day in college, *but that doesn't count*, he told himself. He had only cried out of frustration, and just briefly.

She stared at him with blue eyes that seemed so out of place within their almond shape. She had a way of studying him like she was trying to see underneath his skin. As much as he enjoyed looking at her, the intensity of her gaze made him self-conscious. He glanced down and noticed that she sat cross-legged in the chair.

“You're not eating any meat,” he said, as he folded a piece of salami onto a piece of toast. Her plate contained only sliced mango, a banana, and a muffin.

“Vegetarian, since I was fifteen.”

One of those. He should have guessed. Today, she wore a tangerine orange peasant skirt, a chunky beaded necklace over her fleece, and her hair in pigtails.

“Don't you worry about getting enough nutrients?” Even if it wasn't for his desire to have the optimum balance of protein and amino acids to support his workouts, Grant was simply too much a carnivore to give up meat. The past month had been difficult enough, he thought, savoring the smooth texture of the hard-boiled egg.

“One day when I was fifteen, my mom had bought a basket of blue crabs for dinner. We lived in Baltimore—daddy was an OB/GYN professor at John's Hopkins. We ate crab once a month, but on this occasion, watching her drop the squirming animals into the boiling water nauseated me. When we sat down at the table and daddy cracked the shells with a mallet, I began to cry. I still remember the splintering sound. Some juice squirted me in the face, and I announced that I wasn't going to eat any. Daddy got furious and told me I wasn't leaving until I finished my crab.”

“He a screamer?”

“Not when we were younger, but my sister died earlier that year. He changed.”

She shook her head as if to clear it. “So we sat there for two hours, not speaking. Finally, I looked him in the eyes and took a mouthful of crab.”

“So it was over?”

“I ran into the bathroom and threw up. Haven’t touched meat since.”

As if to emphasize the point, she rolled a piece of mango between her fingers and then placed it in her mouth. Grant couldn’t help but notice the way her full lips pulled the fruit from her fingertips. She had a way of touching everything around her, whether it was her food or his arm, like a blind person discerning the appearance of something from the way it felt.

“So what’s your story? Studying to be a priest or something?”

“Me a priest?” he laughed. “I’m strictly an academic. Research and writing. Maybe teach some, if I can get around my whole public speaking problem.” The words slipped out before he could stop them. Why did he just say that? Something in the directness of her questioning and her gaze made him forget about his internal censor. Admitting a weakness like that was not the way to impress a girl.

“A speaking phobia—but you’re so articulate.”

“Oh, it’s not a phobia, I mean, I’m not even that bad at it. I just prefer one-on-one or small group discussions where we can delve into the issues deeper.”

She smiled at him like she wasn’t totally buying his explanation. “Why religion then? Grow up in a religious household?”

“You could say that. My dad was the preacher at a small evangelical church about an hour outside of Richmond, Virginia. Mom was born-again too. Our lives revolved around the church. From my earliest memories, my brother and I were taught that every word in the Bible is the inerrant word of God. To believe anything different would invite an eternity of damnation.”

“A lot of pressure for a child.”

“Tell me about it.” He dipped a second egg in the salt he’d sprinkled in a neat pile on his plate. He felt the weight of her gaze. She wanted him to elaborate. He looked at her and dropped the egg on his plate. *Why not?*

“I was twelve. The Wednesday before Easter, the weatherman had predicted severe thunderstorms that day. When I got off the bus, holding my raincoat, I looked up at the sky. No rain yet, but I couldn’t see the sun because of the black clouds. The light around me had an eerie quality—a pale red-gray that didn’t feel natural, and no wind. I’m talking completely still. Suddenly it began to hail. Not tiny pellets, but giant golf ball chunks of ice. I held my backpack over my head and sprinted into the house.”

“You thought it was a plague? Like fire and brimstone?”

“Worse. Inside, I yelled for my parents, but no one was home. I searched room to room. The house was empty. I dashed into the kitchen, the last room I checked, and I slipped. Almost hit the ground, but I grabbed the counter. When I looked down to see why I slipped, I was standing in a pool of blood.

“Oh my God.” She leaned toward him. “What happened?”

“Well, instantly I knew what had happened because my father had preached about it. My parents and Lucas, my younger brother, had been raptured up to heaven. They

were the devout believers, but lately in Sunday school, I'd been labeled the troublemaker for asking questions such as whether the person who lives in an African tribe and never hears about the life of Jesus is destined to go to hell, or how could Noah have possibly caught the millions of species across the globe in undiscovered lands, much less kept them alive on a boat? I thought that my family had been taken, and I had been left behind."

"Like the book series!"

He nodded. "I was convinced Armageddon had begun. About thirty minutes later, my family pulls into the driveway. Lucas has his hand wrapped in gauze. He'd sliced it open while cutting an apple. Mom and dad had rushed him to the ER while I was on my way home."

"Wow. Did that experience strengthen your faith?"

"Just the opposite. Over the next few years I started taking more science classes, and my doubts kept growing: Joshua stopping the sun from going across the sky, the Genesis creation stories, the burning bushes, the voices from heaven, and the parting of waters; these events seemed commonplace in Biblical times when people had no concept of modern science, but today they no longer occur. Many nights I lay awake praying to God to give me the faith to believe."

"Did you discuss your issues with your father?"

"At first. He said God was testing me, and that I wasn't praying diligently enough."

She placed her hand on his forearm. "But you still studied religion in school?"

“When I told dad that I wanted to attend UVA and major in Religious Studies, he got madder than I’d ever seen him. ‘You’re the eldest, Grant,’ he’d yelled. ‘It’s your responsibility to attend Moody’s Bible College, just like I did. Then you’ll be qualified to take over the church as head pastor when I retire.’ When I told him I didn’t want to be a minister, the spit flew from his mouth. ‘But that’s been the plan for you from the beginning.’ He stormed around the room, but for once I stood my ground with him. Finally, he calmed and said, ‘UVA is an immoral, Godless institution. You won’t get a cent of my money to go that place.’”

“But you went anyway.”

“I received a scholarship and worked my ass off, both in my studies and at two jobs to support myself.”

“Have you made up with your father?”

“He passed away my Sophomore year.”

Her fingers toyed with the cuff of the white cotton shirt the monks had lent him. “So you study religion in order to reclaim its power from those who made you feel guilty for your doubts, those who excluded you from their country club for the saved.”

He stared at her. As much as he enjoyed researching ancient history, he wasn’t one for analyzing his own past. He focused on the future, on his goals and the path to get him there. But he knew that she had nailed him. In his eyes, religion had led to war, terrorism, oppression, intolerance, and guilt. He’d cherished the opportunity to find a tenured university job—Professor Matthews, he liked the sound of that. But in his core, the fire that woke him up every day in pursuit of this goal was the desire to demystify religion, at least Christianity his specialty, to uncover its roots and origins.

He chose his words carefully. “Only through education can we counter the brainwashing that happens all over the world in the name of religion. And I’m not just talking about Islamic schools for terrorism in the Middle East, but kids like I was, here in the states who are taught that only they are the ones who are saved.”

“Have you found the answers you were searching for as a teenager?”

He took a bite of the egg that had been resting for some time on his plate. Chewing slowly, he leaned back in his chair and adjusted his right leg that was propped on an extra chair beside him. “By the time I entered grad school, I’d grown out of believing in the myths I’d learned as a child. I learned to study the Bible as one would critically examine any ancient text. Once I overcame my initial resistance to the idea that the texts were written by men and the words didn’t just appear on paper by God sending a bolt of lightning from the sky, I opened my mind to the possibility that while the authors may have been spiritually inspired, they would also have been influenced by their own personal agendas and their views were colored by living in an ancient and primitive world with different knowledge than we have today.”

Grant paused to drink his orange juice, which came from a can but was still a welcome break from the water and tea he had consumed the past month. He noticed that Kristin was fixated on him again. He’d been talking non-stop. He usually resisted doing that around the girls he met in school, especially about his research. But unlike most of them, her eyes hadn’t glazed over yet.

“Enough about my work. Tell me about life as a photojournalist.”

“Not something you can really tell. I’ll show you.” She reached into the black daypack which rested on the gray vinyl tile by her feet and removed her Nikon. After

fiddling with a few buttons in the back of the camera, she handed it to him. “Hit the right arrow to scroll.”

Grant stared at the three inch LCD screen. Although the image was small, the rawness of the emotion caused him to take a breath. An Indian girl in her early teens gazed at him. Her face was delicate, feminine, beautiful but smudged with dirt. The expression in her eyes, however, affected him most – a melancholy resignation from having grown up in conditions that he couldn’t even comprehend. The subsequent photos all featured girls and young women – some introspective portraits and others just details – a hand with dirty nails but intricate henna designs painted on it, the back of the woman whose sari was flowing in the wind like a colorful sail. Grant was moved but not sure what to say without sounding trite.

“Isn’t it lonely traveling from one country to another in search of the right picture?”

“I like it that way. Never needed someone to take care of me, plus I meet interesting people everywhere.” She slapped his arm playfully. “Anyway my home base is New York. I keep a small apartment in the Village. Have a core group of friends I hang with when I’m there.”

“But you can’t have a lasting relationship with anyone.”

“Can’t be disappointed by them either.”

They continued talking, moving from one topic to another with an ease that was never interrupted by an uncomfortable silence. When he realized that the elderly Germans filing into the restaurant had come for lunch, he glanced at his watch.

“How did that happen?” He turned his wrist for her to see, since he noticed that she didn’t wear a watch. “I need to make a call to the States. I hope it’s not too late.” And then, he needed to find Kinley.

Kristin stood and began to stack their plates.

“Stop, I’ll do that. You’ve waited on me enough today.” He placed his hands on the table for leverage, but it wobbled under his weight.

“Sit down, you invalid, before I have to clean more than just these dishes.” She pointed her index finger at him and then his chair.

“Yes, ma’am. Whatever you say,” he responded in his most respectful tone.

“Good. Just how I like them. Obedient.” She laughed.

On his way to the lobby reception desk, he crossed an antique carpet, *probably hand woven in either India or Tibet*, he thought. The rug’s rich colors and intricate patterns seemed out of character with the rest of the hotel furnishings. She sat in one of the two mismatched club chairs by the dust covered glass window. Like the restaurant, the lobby was over-lit with several bare bulbs screwed into the plaster ceiling.

He rested his crutches against the bar-height reception desk whose wood laminate peeled away from its edges and corners. “Excuse me, do you have a phone I can use for an international call?”

The receptionist with a brunette bob replied, “You have credit card?”

“Yes. Visa work?”

“Visa good. Five dollar, first minute. Two dollar each minute later.” The girl who couldn’t have been a day older than eighteen directed him down the hall to the “Business Office,” a term he thought was stretching it. When he shut the door behind him in the

closet sized room consisting of a small table and a hard wooden chair, he didn't have enough room to sit with his cast-covered leg. After several unsuccessful attempts at dialing where he managed to receive only a recording in Bhutanese, he punched zero for the help of an operator.

After another wait and a noise that Grant wasn't sure was a ringing or a busy signal, a distant voice came over the receiver. "Harold Billingsly."

"Harold, it's Grant." He smiled to himself. It felt good to hear a familiar voice.

"Thank goodness, Grant. How are you? Your doctor has called me once a week, but not being able to hear from you..."

"Leg's doing much better, I should be back within the week." He realized that with his extended chat with Kristin, he was two hours overdue for his pain medicine, but his leg felt fine.

"And these monks who've been caring for you."

"Fascinating." Grant wondered whether his professor could hear his heart pounding through the phone line. "But, Harold, you'll never guess what they claim to have in their library."

3. Tim Internalizing Brady's Sermon

In this chapter, we see Tim at work on the weekend, listening to a Brady sermon on the radio. This chapter would have been the second one we had from Tim (prior to the CDC bombing). Notice a trend here? In the chapters in which I first introduced new characters, I did a good job of moving the plot forward, but then in the second ones, I stopped the action for too long to explain their motivations and give long backstories. As I continued to edit the novel many times, I tried instead to incorporate glimpses here and there of their motivations rather than the info dumps I do here.

Also, a few readers have asked why I made Tim an Army vet and why I made him gay. I have a huge respect for those who have served in the armed services, but I needed to make him into an Army vet to give him the skills he needed to be the bad guy. I also wanted to make his character deeper than someone who was merely a disillusioned former military man who had been discharged. I have many friends who are gay, and one point about Christian fundamentalism that disturbs me is its bizarre attitude toward homosexuality. Tim was raised by hardcore fundamentalists who demonized who he was at his core and convinced him that he would burn in hell because of his sexual orientation. This fundamentalist upbringing caused him to repress his sexuality, which became a key factor in making him psychotic (in addition to having an abusive father and a mother who was unhinged). Having the Army discharge him because of *Don't as Don't Tell* further exacerbated this repression within him. It is Tim's repression of his true self as a gay man and how this was demonized that leads to violence, not his being gay itself. We see this explicitly in the scene where he punches the male prostitute. So the violence we see in Tim is in part a commentary about the fundamentalist attitude against homosexuality.

CHAPTER

Gateway Business Park
Birmingham, Alabama

“There’s no end to it,” Tim said, grimacing as if he’d taken a bite of rancid food.

“No end to what?” Johnny poked his stupidly happy face over the cubicle.

Tim rotated his computer monitor so that Johnny could read the headline on the article entitled: *Outsourcing: The Next Wave*. “The exporting of our jobs to these heathen countries. You can’t dial a toll free number today and get an American on the line.”

“Didn’t that happen to your last job?”

“Shipped the whole damn department to India.”

Tim saw Elizabeth turn her bug eyes in his direction. She hated the use of any profanity in the office. He couldn't give a shit. Anyway they were the only three there this Sunday. The Information Systems Group took turns on the weekends—half working the Saturday shift and half on Sunday.

Tim lightly ran his fingers across his bare arm. Although the weather had turned unseasonably cold for an October day in the South, he never wore shirts with sleeves unless he was hunting. Couldn't stand the fabric against his skin.

“What time is it,” he asked. He didn't wear a watch either.

“Eleven ten,” Johnny said.

“Ohhh,” Elizabeth squealed. “We're missing the reverend.”

“Well, turn on the radio, you idiots,” Tim said. His fingers moved more rapidly. He stared at the radio, waiting for the voice they knew so well.

Remaining in his desk chair, Johnny rolled himself along the cubicles to the table by the wall that held the coffee pot and the boom box.

Over the static of the AM radio station, Reverend Brady's voice echoed through the office, “...and the signs are everywhere. Can you see them?”

“Yes we can!” came the enthusiastic reply from the congregation.

“The Sodom and Gomorrah of this millennium is not to be found in the Holy Land, but here in the United States. This hurricane that has battered Florida and is upon our coast is the second brutal storm in thirty days. Some may ask, ‘Why us?’ I'll tell you why, my friends. We're not getting His message! Every time God sends punishment our way—whether it's a tsunami that decimates the non-Christian people of Southeast Asia, an earthquake that hits the marijuana supporters in California, or the hurricanes that

devastate the casinos on the Gulf Coast—what do we do? We rebuild our cities, but we continue living in sin!”

Elizabeth pulled her chair closer to the stereo, as the reverend continued in a softer voice, “My heart does go out to the innocents who have suffered in these calamities. But are any of us truly innocent? Are we innocent when we silently watch the sins of our brothers and sisters? Are we innocent when we allow the godlessness in our society to spread like an unchecked virus. Our actions have consequences. The Bible is not quiet on this matter. God told Moses, as recorded in Leviticus Chapter Twenty, ‘If a man commits adultery, both the adulterer and the adulteress shall be put to death... If a man lies with a man, both have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death.’”

Tim had never heard anyone preach the way Brady did. He could capture each member of the congregation as if he were speaking directly to them. Unfortunately, the light rubbing of his hand on his arm had caused it to itch even more, distracting him from the sermon. He reached behind his neck and unlatched the clasp on the leather necklace he wore around his neck. He grasped the silver pendant of a cross shaped like a dagger and began to draw figure eights around his forearm with the pointy tip.

The reverend’s voice picked up in volume and pace. “Leviticus is clear: it condemns fornication, prostitution, bestiality, consulting with mediums, and not observing the Sabbath. And yet these things happen everyday in our country. Did you know that if you Google ‘sex,’ you get eight times the number of hits than if you Google ‘Jesus Christ’? God describes for Moses the penalties for this lifestyle in Chapter Eighteen, ‘The land will vomit you out for defiling it, as it vomited out the nation that

was before you.’ These hurricanes, earthquakes, and tornados of late are the vomiting of our land, just as prophesied.”

The reverend’s words spoke to him, but not through his ears. He felt as if the words originated within his own body. During Brady’s extended dramatic pause, he became aware of a stinging from his left arm. Glancing down, he saw a thin line of blood crossing over his skin as if he’d drawn a large “S” with a red marker across his forearm. He relaxed his grip on the crucifix, wiped his arm on his jeans, and retied the necklace around his neck.

When Reverend Brady spoke again, his voice softened to the point where Johnny, still sitting by the boom box, hit the volume up button. “I see your concerned expressions, but do not despair. In the midst of this darkness lies a ray of hope. God has a special place in His heart for the faithful, for His children. To those who observe His will, even amidst the harsh words of Leviticus, He tells us, ‘You shall not follow the practices of the nation that I am driving out before you. But I have said to you: you shall inherit their land, and I will give it to you to possess, a land flowing with milk and honey. I have separated you from the other peoples to be mine.’”

Tim felt a rush of excitement, as if he were sitting in the church with the reverend. He could sense the heavy silence of the congregation, not even a muffled cough breaking the tension

“Let me ask you,” he said, his voice rising yet again. “Do you want to live in the land of milk and honey?”

“We do!” shouted the crowd. Tim, Johnny, and Elizabeth nodded their heads in unison.

“It’s very simple, then. All you have to do is accept Jesus as your savior.”

“Hallelujah!” Johnny exclaimed. “Can this man preach.”

A remarkable man, Tim thought. His only disappointment was that Brady still hadn’t used a single piece of material that Tim had emailed. He made a point to send at least one email a day to Brady with a new idea for a sermon. He’d spent many late nights surfing the net and had learned remarkable things. Brady rarely responded, but then he was a very busy man. Tim was determined, however, that once he hit upon the right topic, Brady would see his worth. He had gigabytes of files saved on topics as diverse as the creation of a New World Government by the Jewish controlled UN and the literal rebuilding of Babylon in Iraq—both signs pointing to Armageddon as foretold in the Book of Revelation.

“Yes, my children of New Hope, you will be saved. You who are the believers,” said Brady, concluding his sermon. “But do not let down your guard, for Satan is manipulative. Carry the strength of your faith in front of you like a sword against those who blaspheme against the Word. In Chapter Twenty-four, we see the fate of these blasphemers: ‘One who blasphemes the name of the Lord shall be put to death; the whole congregation shall stone the blasphemer. Aliens as well as citizens, when they blaspheme the Name, shall be put to death.’”

Stones? Tim smiled to himself. Moses obviously didn’t know about the firepower held in a thirty round mag of .223 caliber bullets. “Aliens as well as citizens,” the Bible said. *The only problem, he thought, is which blasphemers should go first.*

4. Kinley's Death

This short chapter was one of my favorites in the book. In it we have Kinley experiencing his own death from his POV. The imagery I use here is a combination of my own imagination (consistent with my theme of how we can think about the divine ground of existence and the symbolism of light and fire) with Buddhist writings about how one who is enlightened transitions with death.

After much debate with my editor, I took this chapter out because it was the only one in the novel from Kinley's POV. I felt an emotional connection to this passage because I had such strong feelings toward Kinley, and I was so sad to have him die. Kinley was my idealized wise teacher and spiritual guru—the one I always wanted to have. An astute reader pointed out to me that I have this guru with me always because Kinley came from inside of my mind. However, I am terrible at listening to myself!

Others have asked me why if I loved this character so much (as they did), did I have him die? Notice my use of language here—the passive tense—I'm not saying that I killed off Kinley, only that he died. At this point in the story, events had taken on their own momentum, and the story killed him. Just as Socrates died defending his philosophy, and his pupil Plato became the one to pass along his teachings, Kinley had to die so that Grant could be free to be the teacher.

Also, just as Tim becomes more Satanic and serpent-like by the end of the novel (his skin has become scaly, his face red, his teeth fangs, and his grip and speed python-like), Kinley has become my Christ-figure, sacrificing his life so that others may live.

This chapter gave me hope out of the sadness of Kinley's death because we get a sense here that Kinley is not lost to us. His physical form has died, but his individuality has merged with the power of being itself, a power that we can also access as Grant senses at the end of the novel.

CHAPTER

Tiger's Nest Monastery
Paro, Bhutan

Kinley no longer had the strength to speak. The time had come to surrender to his destiny. He looked forward to returning to the smoky light that had enveloped him before his friends had arrived at his side.

With their voices and their touch fading into the darkness, he became aware of tiny fireflies circling his body. They moved in a graceful yet random pattern that slowly coalesced, as each twinkling light merged with those around it. An immeasurable time later, all of the lights had joined together into one flickering source, a source which burned like a single candle flame in the pitch blackness of an infinite night.

Time no longer had meaning for him. Each sensation he experienced endlessly. But the sensations were not physical sensations of being in bodily form. He experienced the singularity of the candle flame not through his eyes, but he sensed it with his very being.

But at some point the endless experience did end. It transformed into yet a new sensation.

The candle flame grew, eclipsing the night. It wasn't so much that the flame itself became larger, but that Kinley's perspective magnified on the light until nothing but the light surrounded him. He floated in a blindingly white sky. But even the sky was not permanent, for at some point, it began to take on different hues: first glowing red, then orange.

A distant memory floated past. On rare days when he had sat in meditation, watching his breath without thought or comment, and his mind had been clear of

distraction and emotion, he had glimpsed for a fleeting moment a tiny spark of this very light he now experienced in its full intensity. But the spark had teased him, coming and going, giving him a taste of that which he could not put into words for his students. Now that he was part of the light itself, he felt no sense of satisfaction at having reached what he'd strived for his entire adult life. He just felt. Although his physical body no longer breathed, the spark breathed for him.

Finally, the light lost its hue. It was no longer white, nor black, nor colored. The light was perfectly clear.

He experienced pure joy of being.