

Chapter 1

The Prophecy

Martha Todd and I were snuggled together on the sofa in our living room on one of those early-spring Minnesota nights when it's almost, but not quite, chilly enough to turn on the furnace. We were paying more attention to generating heat with our snuggling than to the Sunday night ten o'clock news until the talking heads on the anchor desk were replaced by an eye-catching on-scene reporter hunched under an umbrella outside the Xcel Energy Center in downtown St. Paul.

We didn't unsnuggle, but we turned our full visual and auditory attention to the young woman on the TV screen. She wore a neon yellow, ankle-length waterproof slicker with a hood that almost covered her eyes, and she held the sky blue Channel Four umbrella in her right hand. Drops of water from an April Fool's Day drizzle dribbled off the umbrella and dripped past her face as she spoke.

"Less than an hour ago, the auditorium here was the scene of a wild celebration, as an estimated two thousand members of the religious sect known as The Faithful United for Beatification at the Second Coming of Our Blessed Lord and Savior heard a message from their leader, Sister Rebekah," she said. She gestured toward the building with the notebook in her left hand, and snuck a peek at the notebook as she recited the name of the group.

"That's quite a mouthful," I said. "Glad I don't have to write about them."

"Lucky you," Martha said, squeezing my left thigh.

"Here's what happened inside the arena when Sister Rebekah concluded her speech to the Faithful United group with an astonishing prediction," said the reporter.

The picture on the screen shifted to a taped shot scanning the interior of the arena, which serves as the home of the Minnesota Wild hockey team. A wooden floor had been installed over the ice, and at one end of the rink a couple of thousand chairs facing a small platform were filled with people.

Having set the overall scene, the camera slowly zoomed in toward the dais, where a tall, slender woman stood as ramrod straight as a Marine on sentry duty. She was dressed in a white robe that hung without a ripple in the area where a woman's clothing usually curves outward over her breasts. Her long, narrow face looked like it was chiseled from onyx, with ice-blue eyes, a hawk bill nose and lips that matched the stony white of her cheeks. Her dark hair was clipped to within half an inch of her scalp and she was crowned with a woven ring of dried vines. By the magic of TV, the title "Sister Rebekah" appeared at the bottom of the screen.

"Look at that," Martha said. "It looks like there are thorns in that wreath."

The camera zoomed in until only her head and shoulders were showing as Sister Rebekah spoke in an almost masculine voice: "Sisters and brothers, I now conclude this Sabbath day message of faith and love with joyous news from on high. Buddha and St. Peter and, best of all, our blessed Lord and Savior, Jesus, have spoken to me this day, and each one of them has promised me that the Rapture we've all been praying for is only two weeks away." A collective gasp as strong as a giant vacuum cleaner could be heard from the crowd as she paused for dramatic effect. "Yes, sisters and brothers, the heavenly hosts have promised me that this glorious event will sweep across the world just two short weeks from tonight—on this coming Easter Sunday."

The airflow in the audience was reversed as the gasps turned to whoops of triumph and manic applause, and a camera facing the audience panned the auditorium to show people hugging each other, dancing in the aisles and waving their arms like tree branches in a gale. Finally the view swung back to the dais, where Sister Rebekah stood silently staring upward with her arms stretched full length toward the heaven that she was expecting to enter in fourteen days.

The scene cut back to the reporter under the umbrella. “That’s the amazing word from Sister Rebekah and the Faithful United,” she said. “Trish Valentine, reporting live, Channel Four News.” A mattress sale commercial appeared on the screen and I hit the mute button as I always do the instant a commercial appears and the volume increases.

“She could sing baritone with that voice,” Martha said. “What was that all about?”

“Apparently the world as we know it will possibly come to an end on Easter Sunday.”

“You mean there’s no point in boiling eggs and dying them?”

“Guess not. Maybe we’ll wind up somewhere warm enough to boil them without a stove when the Rapture comes.”

“What exactly is this Rapture anyway?” Martha asked. “It sounds like some sort of date-rape drug.”

“You’re thinking of what’s called ecstasy. The Rapture is the day those folks have been hoping and praying for,” I said. “It’s supposedly the second coming, when Jesus returns to earth, gathers the so-called righteous to his bosom and carries them off to heaven.”

“And what happens to us common, ordinary, everyday sinners?”

“As I said, we might go someplace where it’s so hot we won’t need a stove to boil those eggs. Or maybe we’ll just stay here and let global warming do its thing.”

“Do you think that weird woman was serious?”

“Looked like it to me. Her crowd sure thought she was.”

“You mean nobody’s going to come out and say ‘April fool?’”

“Apparently the lady’s not fooling.”

“People have been predicting the second coming and the end of the world for a long time, haven’t they?”

“They have. And, as you can see, so far they’ve all been wrong.”

Martha snuggled even closer and moved her hand farther up my thigh. “What do you think about this time?”

“I think we shouldn’t take any chances,” I said, clicking off the TV with the remote. “We should go straight to bed and not miss a single moment of what could be our last fourteen nights of making our own version of rapture.”

“Makes sense to me,” Martha said. She rose, took a couple of steps toward the bedroom, stopped and turned back. “Oh, god, Mitch, if the world ends will you have to write about it?”

I’m a newspaper reporter named Warren Mitchell, better known as Mitch. Martha Todd and I have been married for almost a year, after six years of shying away from the altar while we dealt with commitment issues brought on by previous marital and romantic disasters. I had lost my first wife and a baby in a car crash and years later had found a subsequent lover lying in bed with an old high school flame just after I’d bought an

engagement ring. Martha had been dragged around by her hair and beaten around her body by her first husband before leaving him and successfully suing for divorce.

“No, the second coming should be on the religion writer’s beat,” I said. “As previously noted, I’m glad that I’ll never have to type out the whole name of Sister Rebekah’s rapturous congregation.”

On that naïve note, Martha and I went off to bed, where we put a little extra effort into wrapping ourselves in the most rapturous moments possible in this pre-Raptured world.

“Heaven could not be better than this,” I said as we lay wrapped together at the end.

“Mmm,” Martha said as she drifted off to sleep.