

**After
the
Devastation**

Paul M. Lewis

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For Andrew, my partner in life and in all things, without whom I could not have written this in the first place, or might not even have wanted to, and who has ever supported and advised me. For Kevin, and other friends, whose advice buoyed and encouraged me from the start. If there is any good in this, much comes from them. I take responsibility for all that falls short. And, finally, for the Earth itself. May we never live to see such events as described herein.

*Man's spirit will be flesh-bound when found at best,
But uncumberèd: meadow-down is not distressed
For a rainbow footing it nor he for his bones risen.*

–From *The Caged Skylark* by Gerard Manley Hopkins

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Prologue

The first mate of *The Princetown*, a Liberian registered freighter leaving Montevideo and making for the Port of Long Beach, California, noticed something strange. He had just entered the time and date into the ship's log: 11:48 p.m., Monday, October 28, 2024. It was a clear night with a full moon.

The ship had rounded Tierra del Fuego and sailed through the Drake Passage at the tip of South America; it was now steaming northward along the Chilean coast and was just opposite Isla Madre de Dios. The wind had freshened considerably, and large swells were coming from the south at irregular intervals. The first mate banged on the door of Captain Domingo Portola, who was sleeping in his cabin at the time, and informed him in a panicked voice that the island of Madre de Dios had suddenly disappeared beneath the waves. Thinking at first that there had been a massive undersea earthquake and expecting a major tsunami, they immediately contacted the Chilean Navy to find out the magnitude of the quake. They were informed that there had been no earthquake of any magnitude in many weeks, and it took them only a short time to realize, so far from the island sinking, that it was the sea itself that had risen and engulfed the rocky island.

Within days, port cities up and down the coast of South America as far north as Lima and beyond reported rapidly rising sea levels. Governments struggled to reassure citizens and to contain the growing hysteria. Some who lived near the coastline and who could afford it had already made plans to evacuate. Others, unable or reluctant to leave their homes, nervously remained. It soon became obvious that low-lying areas were no longer habitable. No one was sure whether water levels would continue to rise and, if so, how much and for how long. Thousands began moving inland, or to higher ground near the coast, quickly overwhelming camps and other accommodations, which governments had set up to house and feed the throngs of people that continued to stream in. Rioting broke out in several areas when newly arrived high-water refugees tried to enter already overcrowded camps. Army units were quickly called in to restore order, but that did not solve the problem of where to put the recent arrivals. Some made their way further inland in hopes of finding accommodations, while others simply

set up their own tents outside the camps or made whatever shelter they could from what they had brought or what they could find.

Meanwhile, police and army units struggled to patrol parts of coastal cities, which had been abandoned, using military vehicles where the water was shallow enough and boats where it was already too deep. Looting was a continual problem, as were fires, which started in a number of buildings. Arson was strongly suspected. Whole rows of houses burned—surrounded, ironically, by water—because firefighters were unable to get to them, or—in the event that they were—because fire hydrants were no longer operational.

Cardinal Oswaldo Maldonado, Archbishop of Santiago, celebrated a special mass in the cathedral, seeking protection and deliverance for the country from the rising waters. Some believed this was the beginning of a new flood of biblical proportions, sent by God to cleanse the world of sin and corruption. Evangelical preachers warned their congregations to repent and foresaw the coming end of the world. They reminded their flocks: What good does it do a man to gain in worldly possessions, only to suffer the loss of his soul? Most, however, saw it for what it was: the relentless and unavoidable outcome of the catastrophic warming of the planet, due almost in its entirety to the monumental ignorance and hubris of humankind.

The devastation had started, and fear began to fill human hearts with ominous and menacing foreboding.

Chicago

Sitting in the taxi on the way into the city from O'Hare, Nora realized that she'd brought the wrong clothes. It was the end of October and temperatures should have been in the fifties during the day and cooler still at night. However, she was already sweating. On the way to the hotel, they passed a bank building. Its temperature sign read eighty-six degrees. Not one tree yet showed any sign of autumn color. The leaves just looked brownish and tired. "This is how the world is these days," she said to herself. *Aden's been right all along. I think he and I have to have a talk about some kind of plan where to escape to in the event things really go haywire*, she thought.

She wasn't able to follow that thought any further, as the taxi pulled up to the hotel and the doorman immediately came over. It was a hotel she'd been to several times before and she knew it well. She wondered if Jorge would be there yet. He was usually sent by *El Diario*, the Mexico City newspaper he worked for, to cover these important events. He was a good reporter and she liked him, though he flirted with her outrageously in that silly macho way so many Mexican men have. It was all ultimately innocent enough—at least, if you knew how to handle it. It actually reminded her of when she was a teenage girl, both comforting and annoying at the same time.

She got to her room, hung her clothes in the closet, and headed immediately over to the temporary UN headquarters. There was no reason to wait, and it was, in fact, important to begin to get a feeling on the ground for how things were unfolding. The emergency session of the Security Council was supposed to begin tomorrow morning, but she wanted to find out if that was still how it was scheduled. Besides, it was Mexico's turn to rotate onto the council, and she happened to know the ambassador, Raphael Samonsky. All the more reason for Jorge to be here as well, since Mexico would be playing some role in the deliberations. Maybe the two of them could corner the ambassador and have a conversation with him.

Security at the entrance to the UN was even tighter than usual. The various guards checked her *Los Angeles Times* identification badge at least three times, scanned it into the computer, and then stood there,

waiting, for the longest time. Nora was beginning to wonder if they'd let her in at all. Finally, one of them waved her through with a curt, "Go ahead." Everybody was a little on edge. Maybe it was the heat. Maybe it was the high stakes at play in regard to what was before the Security Council. She headed straight to the pressroom to see what she could find out there. Sure enough, Jorge was at one of the desks, on his cell phone, as usual. However, as soon as he saw Nora, he excused himself and hung up.

"Señor De La Vega, how are you? Looking dapper, as usual," Nora said, admitting to herself that maybe she enjoyed flirting with Jorge a little, as well. "*El Diario* must pay you handsomely to be able to afford such suits."

"Ah, Señora Del Bosque. You are, as always, a fresh breeze from the forest, as your name so beautifully indicates."

"Right, Jorge," Nora replied, immediately thinking that maybe she'd gone too far. Wanting to get back to why she was there, she added, "What's happening so far? Anything going on? When did you arrive?"

"So many questions," he said. "But I will do my best to reply. Nothing, nothing, and this morning," he added with a smile.

"I was thinking of trying to get hold of Ambassador Samonsky," Nora continued. "Have you tried yet?"

"Of course," he said, "but he's been sequestered most of the day."

"I happen to know his penchant for a particular upscale restaurant not far from here," Nora added. "I wonder if he might stop at the bar there for a drink before dinner?"

"Yes, L'Eclipse, isn't it? That French place," Jorge replied. "My editors would be appalled if they thought I was cavorting with the *Los Angeles Times*, but perhaps we might go there and I'll buy you a drink, all in the name of cooperative fellowship, of course. And if the good ambassador happens to come by, well, why shouldn't we invite him to join us?"

"First of all, Jorge," Nora said, "we're not exactly cavorting. Whatever particular meaning that may have for you. But second, I'd be happy to have a drink with you and of course with Ambassador Samonsky, if at all possible."

They decided to walk the few blocks. It was beginning to grow dark and the temperature had mercifully begun to drop, at least slightly. The air was starting to feel less oppressive. Her companion had grown uncharacteristically quiet as they made their way to the bar. Finally, Nora looked at him and said, "Is there something wrong, Jorge?"

“Yes, of course there’s something wrong,” he replied with more vehemence than she’d expected. “Why else would we be here? The city is blistering when it should be cold. The UN can’t even meet in their old headquarters anymore because New York is sinking beneath the waves, and who knows what these crazy politicians will do next? Why aren’t they figuring out how to completely wean ourselves from oil, instead of threatening each other with annihilation so they can squeeze the last drops out of the impotent and toxic Middle Eastern sand? On top of it all, my own country is as bad as the rest, if not worse.”

Nora was surprised to see him so worked up. All traces of his usual bantering flirtation had suddenly disappeared. Instead, she saw a tired, middle-aged man standing next to her, probably worried sick about what would happen to his children and his family, let alone to himself. She was unable to think of any reply. He was absolutely right. How could a talk with the Mexican ambassador help any of this? How could any reporting, or any story she might write, make the slightest difference? She suddenly felt very lonely. All she could think of was Aden, two thousand miles away from her. Why had she even accepted this assignment? This stupid need to prove herself to herself. Nora wished she could come up with something to say to comfort Jorge, but all she could do was look at him and nod her head.

They walked the rest of the way to L’Eclipse in silence. Once they arrived, Jorge actually had two drinks and began feeling a little better. Nora sipped a glass of white wine and wondered if she’d made a miscalculation about the ambassador showing up, although her instincts were usually pretty good about such things. She was in the process of excusing herself, thinking that she needed to call Aden anyway, when the ambassador walked in, along with a small group of people.

Jorge was up in a moment, asking him if he could spare a few minutes to join him and Nora. Ambassador Samonsky hesitated, about to say no, but then apparently thought better of it. He said to the others, “Please, go ahead without me. I’ll join you shortly. Nora, how nice to see you again,” the ambassador said, taking a seat next to her.

“Mr. Ambassador, it’s always a pleasure,” Nora replied, holding her hand out. “Thank you for giving us a few moments of your time.”

After telling them that he no longer drank any alcohol at all and ordering a Perrier, he sat for a moment and looked at Jorge and Nora. “I suppose you want me to tell you all the secrets of the Security Council?”

“Are there secrets?” Nora asked him directly.

The ambassador shrugged his shoulders. “Of course. Governments can’t seem to operate without secrets, and if you get a bunch of governments together in one place, well, sometimes I think there are nothing but secrets.”

“What is not a secret is that the Russians will veto any resolution on the part of the Security Council to take action against Iran and the Cartel. Is that right?” Jorge asked.

“Probably. Ambassador Kislov has already publicly indicated that would be Russian’s likely approach.”

“Will the Chinese back the Russians?” said Nora.

“I don’t think I can make a prediction about that, Nora. However, if you’ll allow me to speculate—off the record, of course—if you were the Chinese, why would you back the US and Western Europe, when you get your oil from Russian fields just to the north? And I shouldn’t think that either the Russians or the Chinese are eager to see the Americans back in force in the Middle East again.”

“And what about Mexico, Mr. Ambassador? Whose side will the Mexican government come down on?” Jorge interjected.

“You know we are close friends and allies of the United States. At the same time, we believe in the sovereignty of independent states. We are hoping that it won’t come down to an either/or vote,” the ambassador said, diplomatically skirting the question.

Nora was beginning to see what she had expected, namely that they wouldn’t get much information out of Ambassador Samonsky and that ultimately, they would probably just have to wait until the Security Council’s own announcement, whenever that occurred. She could try badgering Reginald Carpenter, the US envoy to the UN, but she figured she’d get no further with him than she had with Rafael Samonsky. Still, there was a press conference with Carpenter tomorrow before the Security Council met, and she would, of course, have to be there.

She suddenly felt very tired. It was past 8:30 p.m., and she’d eaten virtually nothing all day. Not that this was all that unusual for her. Jorge and Rafael Samonsky had lapsed into Spanish and, while her Spanish was good, the main question on her mind revolved around something the Mexican ambassador probably knew nothing whatsoever about. The burning question was: Would the Americans, or the Americans with some European allies, take action against Iran and the Middle Eastern Oil Cartel, with or without UN approval? And probably no amount of

private or public talk here at the UN would answer it. She, like everyone else, would just have to wait for events to unfold.

By the time Nora got back to her hotel room, after having stopped to pick up a sandwich at the deli on the first floor, it was going on 10:00 p.m. She really wanted nothing more than to sit on a soft bed, eat her sandwich, and talk with Aden on the phone. But she had to check in first with Abe Rabinowitz. No doubt he would still be in the office, since he mostly lived there these days.

He picked up, as he usually did, on the first ring. *God, that phone must be a cyber-appendage*, Nora thought. “Hi, Abe, it’s Nora, calling from Chicago. I’ve been here for a few hours. Had a talk with Raphael Samonsky but didn’t learn a lot from him. I think there won’t be much until after the Security Council makes whatever announcement they’re going to make. And even then, who knows? Carpenter’s giving a Q and A tomorrow morning, and of course I’ll cover that.”

“Ask him what the hell they think they’re doing, threatening to use force against the Cartel! They know as well as I do that the whole Middle East is peppered with nuclear launch sites. What—are they trying to get us all killed?”

“I’ll maybe phrase it a little differently, but I’d already planned on asking him what they thought the consequences might be of an armed incursion, especially if it did not have the backing of the UN.”

“Which it won’t. The Russians will obviously veto that.”

“I’ll keep you posted. Anything else?”

“Yeah, get something to eat. I know you eat like a bird.”

“I’ve got my sandwich right here, and I’m beat, anyway. So, I’m just going to eat that and then go to bed.”

Finally, she was able to call Aden. She fluffed the pillow up and sat on the bed with her sandwich and a bottle of water. He too answered immediately, though what Nora heard wasn’t what she was hoping for.

“Honey, I’m in the middle of dinner with Hilda and one of our visiting Fulbright Scholars. Can I call you back in a little bit?”

“Let’s talk tomorrow, then, okay? I’m really bushed, and I’ve got to get up early for a press conference with Reginald Carpenter. It’s at 8:00 a.m., believe it or not, before the Security Council meets.”

This was definitely not the conversation she’d wanted to have with Aden. It was more like a talk with Abe Rabinowitz. Even her conversation with Jorge De La Vega had felt somehow more intimate. She hung up and sat staring out the window for several minutes at the city lights.

She found herself wondering how much energy it took to run a city like this. Finally, she remembered her sandwich.

She watched the news briefly before turning in, only to hear that tomorrow's temperature was predicted to reach ninety-one degrees. Despite that, the room felt cold. *What if something were to happen while I'm here in Chicago on the twenty-third floor of this ridiculous hotel? How would I get back to LA? What the hell am I doing here?*

There seemed to be no answers to any of these questions. All she could manage was to sigh softly. She thought about saying a prayer, but didn't have the energy. In her mind, she could see the statue of *la Virgen de Guadalupe* that her aunt Lucy, *Tía Luz*, always kept on the mantel in the dining room. She and her aunt would pick flowers in the backyard and put them in little vases in front of the statue when Nora was a child. *Tía Luz* used to tell Nora to pray to *la Virgen* if she were ever in trouble and the beautiful Lady would answer. Instead, she turned the lights out and put her head down on the pillow. She was afraid she'd lie there, tossing and turning, not being able to shut her mind off. Somehow, though, before she even realized it, she'd drifted off into a deep, if oddly unrefreshing, sleep.

* * *

At the press conference with the American ambassador to the UN, Reginald Carpenter, questions were pretty much evenly divided between what the United States government's intentions were in the Middle East and what was happening in New York and elsewhere around the globe, in terms of rising water levels.

Were the United States and its European allies going ahead with action against the Cartel in the event that the Security Council refused to act in the ways that they were recommending? If so, what specific actions would they undertake? How did Carpenter think the Iranians and those countries allied with them might respond?

The answers were as predictable as the questions. Of course, the government and its allies wished to reach a peaceful settlement on the question of equitable distribution of Middle Eastern oil, this "needed world resource," as Reginald Carpenter kept calling it. Yes, it was their hope that everyone on the Security Council, including the Russians, would agree to specific steps and definite timelines as to how and when the oil would be made available. If not? Well, they would have to see; their hope still was to reach a compromise solution acceptable to all.

The longer Nora was in this business, the more all this talk was like smoke and mirrors to her. She was convinced, like many others, that a number of governments had already made up their minds what course of action they were going to take to get “this needed world resource.” The only real question on her mind was exactly how united the Islamic states of the Middle East Oil Cartel were and how they would respond in the event of military intervention on the part of the United States and the European Union. Would they follow Iran, now that it had emerged as the *de facto* leader of the Middle East in terms of religious, moral, and military authority? Were they, in fact, considering a possible nuclear response, if overwhelming numbers of allied troops were to suddenly land in their oil fields? And if that were to happen, then what would the reaction be, and how might it escalate? To Nora, those were the important questions of the day, which no one was yet addressing. Instead, people were still speaking in diplomatic niceties. It all seemed not just duplicitous, but downright dangerous.

She decided to take a walk after the press conference to clear her mind. There was virtually no chance of the Security Council making any kind of statement until at least the end of the day. They might even keep on arguing for a couple of days. So, there was nothing that she had to do immediately.

Besides, she needed to find a quiet place to think. As little as she'd eaten the previous day, she should've been starved, but she wasn't particularly hungry. She decided to sit in the shade of an umbrella at a small table outside a café. She ordered an iced tea and thought about calling Aden. However, it was still early in LA and she didn't want to disturb his morning routine. She finished her iced tea and decided to continue walking.

The day was already turning hot. Women were in their summer dresses, men in shirtsleeves, ties loosened around their collars, though it was hardly mid-morning yet. After walking aimlessly for ten or fifteen minutes, she decided to head back to the UN headquarters.

There was a cooling breeze on the bridge where she crossed over the river, so she stood for a bit and stared down at the dark waters. She felt herself slipping into a dreamlike state, as if for a moment able to clearly see what the whole area must have looked like five hundred years earlier. There were no cars, no huge buildings—very little evidence of human beings at all, except for some small huts here and there along the shore. The weather was cool and brisk, as it should be at this time

of year, with brilliant flashes of red and orange leaves all around. In the distance, there were a few people laying in stores for a cold winter to come. A young man walked unhurriedly to the shore, pushed off in a small boat, and floated off down the river.

Back in the present, she saw herself as if from above, staring down into the waters, mesmerized. Everything had gone silent; there was no traffic, no sound of airplanes overhead. For just a moment, she glimpsed what seemed like the Virgin of Guadalupe floating on the waves below. The radiant oval, so distinctive, so familiar to her from the many images she'd seen as a child, her head bent slightly to one side, as if she were about to ask a question. *What is this? Is she smiling at me?* It all happened so quickly, she wasn't fully sure what she'd seen. Shaking her head, she simply said, half out loud to herself, "Wow!"

Nora looked down again, this time seeing only the restless water rushing past. She began hearing the trucks rumbling over the bridge behind her once again. She reached into her bag and fingered her phone, hoping it would ring. Wondering if she should call. Wanting Aden's arm around her shoulder, his warm body next to her, his soothing presence. But all she felt was the vibration of traffic on the bridge and the heat reflecting up off the bright and barren pavement below.

Rising Waters

When Aden awoke next morning, following his usual routine, he walked out of the house onto the porch, coffee cup in hand, and was surprised to see his next-door neighbor already up and about.

Even before Aden had a chance to greet him, Philip walked up and said, “Have you heard about what’s going on along the coast in Chile and Peru? Apparently, something may have happened in Antarctica more quickly than anyone expected. Some kind of a sudden loosening of a giant undersea wedge of gravel or something—releasing huge amounts of ice and water into the South Pacific and raising water levels. I guess there’s near panic in some areas down there.”

“What?” was all Aden could say. He walked immediately back into the house and turned the television set on. Philip followed him in.

They tuned in as a reporter was in mid-sentence, “Some of Antarctica’s ice sheets are more than a thousand feet thick and extend for hundreds of miles. There seems to be a breach in portions of these frozen walls, and large amounts of glacial ice are flowing into South Pacific waters at an alarming rate, flooding large portions of coastal western South America. Both Chile and Peru have declared states of emergency and report extensive flooding in a number of cities, resulting in masses of so-called ‘high-water refugees’ heading inland. Authorities are claiming to have the situation in hand, but—”

Aden turned the television off. He looked at Philip but was lost in his own thoughts.

“Aden, do you and Nora have a place to go, I mean, if it comes to that here?” Philip asked.

“Yes, of course,” was Aden’s distracted response. He was thinking only of Nora at the moment and that she was two thousand miles away. “I went to school in Albuquerque,” he finally managed to get out, “and I’m still close to my doctoral advisor there. We’ve also got good friends in Taos who’d definitely put us up.”

“It’s curious you say that. I have a brother and his wife living north of Santa Fe. I’ve already got some emergency supplies packed—have had for some time—and a couple of extra containers of gas. I can hardly imagine leaving my home, and I’m afraid what will happen if I do, but

I don't want to get stuck here. I'll put Sergius in the camper and we'll take off if need be. And it's not my business, but I think you and Nora should be thinking about the same thing."

"Of course we're thinking about it!" Aden said, louder than he had really intended. He noticed that Philip took a small step backward.

"I'm sorry, Philip. I didn't mean that. I ... I'm just really worried about Nora."

"Of course you are," Philip replied quietly.

"Listen, I've really got to see if I can get hold of her right away."

Philip nodded and said, "All right, I'll check in with you later," and walked back to his house.

Aden turned and went into the bedroom, looking a little frantically for his phone. It wasn't in his briefcase, where it usually was, but then he remembered that he'd taken it into the restaurant last night when he went out to dinner with Hilda and Liam. *Why the hell didn't I just get up from the table and go outside and talk with Nora when she called last night?*

Finally, he found the phone in his coat pocket and dialed Nora's number. Glancing at the clock, he thought that the press conference she was covering might be over.

Nora answered on the third ring. Relieved to hear the sound of her voice, he said to her, "Honey—" He was about to continue but was cut off by Nora.

"Aden, I just had the most curious experience. I'm not quite sure what to make of it," Nora began.

Aden then stopped her in turn and continued. "Nora, I'm sorry, but have you heard about the Antarctic icepack and what's happening in Chile and Peru?" He paused, thinking that she might cut him off again, but instead heard only the background noise of traffic.

"What?" Nora finally managed to say.

He explained as concisely as he could what he'd just heard on the newscast and ended by saying, "I'm starting to get worried. If this continues on up the coast, then LAX is bound to be affected; it's so close to the water. You may have a lot more trouble getting back and may have to try for a flight into one of the other airports in the area."

"I'll see what I can find out here, honey," she replied, sounding worried. "I won't stay a minute longer than I have to."

Have to, Aden thought. You don't have to stay at all. You can call Abe and tell him you're catching the first flight back before they close LAX.

Doesn't that damn newspaper have a Chicago office? But he said none of this, managing only an, "Uh-huh," instead.

"You know they closed the paper's Chicago office awhile ago," Nora continued, somehow hearing his thoughts. "One of those cost-cutting measures. So, I'm their only rep here right now. And Aden, my gut is telling me that something big is happening. If the administration ultimately decides to send troops into the Middle East, the consequences may be a lot bigger than the closure of LAX."

"Nora, it's not just LAX," he answered, feeling exasperated. "They're saying that there are masses of high-water refugees moving inland down in Chile. Can you imagine what it would be like if that were to happen here?"

"Just another day or two, Aden, is all I need," she said. "Something is about to break, and I've got to be here for it."

He heard the steely tone of her voice, the emphasis on "got to," punched out hard like a rivet into sheet metal. There was no point in arguing any further. As far as Nora was concerned, he knew the decision had been made.

"But promise you'll keep in touch. The only time I'm turning my phone off is when I'll be teaching."

"I'll stay in touch. I promise. Are you okay?" Nora said more softly.

"Yeah, yeah, of course. I'm fine," Aden replied. He too wanted to end on a softer note, so he added, remembering how she had begun the conversation, "What was it you wanted to tell me?"

"Oh, that. It was nothing, really. I'll tell you about it when I get home. I'd better get back to the UN. I love you, and I'll talk to you soon."

That was it. She was gone again. Aden looked for a moment at the small cellular device in his hand. He had a sudden urge to press redial, just to listen to the sound of her voice once more, but thought better of it. "That's ridiculous," he said to himself. He put it back into his briefcase and got ready to leave for the university.

* * *

When Philip walked back into the house, he immediately turned his TV on again. They were showing film clips of miles of devastated coastal areas in Chile and Peru. Whole towns and villages in low-lying areas were either fully or partially submerged. The highways leading east from coastal regions were packed with every kind of vehicle imaginable,

from private cars to school buses to old trucks, some broken down and blocking the way for others. People got out of their cars, pushed these roadblocks out of the way, and continued their journeys to wherever.

A reporter was interviewing a distracted-looking young woman, who was packing her small car. Two young children stood by. The older of the two boys was struggling to hold a dog, which was trying to get away. “Yes,” the woman was saying to the reporter, as she threw clothes and toys into the car, “we’re heading for my sister’s house in the mountains. My husband’s a policeman and so he has to stay for now, but he’ll join us there in a few days. They’re telling us to get out before the roads heading inland are closed because of the rising waters. What is happening to the world? What have we done to ourselves?” the woman asked the reporter. She was on the verge of tears.

It was clear that she did not expect an answer to her question, and the reporter had none to give. He merely looked back at the camera and said slowly, “This is Reynaldo Sarmiento in San Antonio, Chile.”

Other disturbing reports were coming in that beach communities in Central America and southern Mexico were also facing inundation. The Mexican towns of Puerto Angel and Puerto Escondido were practically underwater. There were shots of panicked European and American tourists trying desperately to get flights out of Acapulco. People shouted at overwhelmed airline personnel, who were pleading for calm, with promises that extra planes were being scheduled to accommodate everyone who wanted to leave. Similar scenes were taking place in Mazatlán, although the rising waters had not yet reached there.

Philip switched the channel to local news and listened briefly as a scientist from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration was being interviewed.

Reporter: “Can we expect these rising waters that have been reported all along the South American coast to reach coastal California anytime soon?”

Scientist: “No doubt, the coast of California will feel some effect. However, we are unprepared to predict at this point exactly when or how much. Our best estimate is that anyone living within one mile to three miles from low-lying beach areas can expect some degree of flooding, probably beginning sometime within the next twenty-four to forty-eight hours.”

Reporter: “Does that mean that you are recommending to people who live in these areas that they leave their homes and head inland or seek higher ground?”

Scientist: “What we certainly do not want is to cause panic. Still, because we do not yet know how much inundation will occur, or even exactly when it will start, it would certainly be prudent to recommend that people get ready to leave, if and when the governor’s office issues an executive order.”

Reporter: “Do we know at this point if further loosening of the ice shelf will take place? Can you brief us on the situation in Antarctica?”

Scientist: “From satellite photos, as well as from onsite personnel who are continually monitoring the situation, it is looking as though the huge breach in the wall that had been stabilizing the ice sheet may be growing. If these readings are accurate, we can definitely expect further, and even increased, flooding. The likelihood of this affecting California is fairly high.”

Reporter: “Are there other such breaches possible in Antarctica, and if so, what might that mean for coastal cities?”

Scientist: “Actually, this is our greatest worry. If there is further destabilization, and breaches of these other natural dams occur, more ice sheets could slip into the South Pacific. If that happens, then waters will definitely rise fairly rapidly all along the coast of South and Central America, as well as North America, not to mention Asia and Oceania.”

Reporter: “Does that mean that not just coastal areas in California might be affected? Can you tell us if more inland parts of the LA basin, for example, could experience significant flooding, as well?”

Scientist: “Please understand, I am not predicting that at this point. However, yes, the possibility does exist that ocean waters could reach portions even of central city Los Angeles. Everything depends on how extensive the Antarctic breaching is.”

Philip didn’t think he needed to hear more. Scientists always try to err on the conservative side in making predictions, and this one—while obviously pushed more than he was comfortable with by the reporter—was giving perhaps as bleak a forecast as he could without coming out and saying, “If I were you, I’d get the hell out of town as fast as I could.”

The phone interrupted Philip’s thoughts. He picked it up and heard the voice of his younger brother, Alex, calling from New Mexico.

“Philip, are you okay? Those rising waters are devastating cities all along the west coast of South America. They’re saying that Los Angeles may be next.”

“I know, Alex. I was just watching the TV news. So far, it hasn’t really affected LA yet, but I think that’s only a matter of time.”

“Well, what are you waiting for? Get in your damn camper and get over here!” For some reason, Alex—three years younger than he—was always protective of him.

“Don’t worry. I will if I have to. I’m pretty much ready, but I do want to give it a day or two to be sure before I abandon my home!”

“A day or two might be too late. What happens if millions of people, in tens of thousands of cars, all of a sudden decide it’s time to leave? Can you imagine the gridlock? You could be stuck God knows where.”

“I know, I know. That is definitely the risk. Look, if things don’t get any better by tomorrow morning, Sergius and I will head east to New Mexico. Are you okay with that?”

“I guess I’ll have to be. I don’t know why you’re so damn stubborn.”

“Prerogative of an older brother, I guess,” Philip said, laughing a little. “I’ll be fine. We’ll all be fine.”

When they hung up, Philip thought, *Is that really true? Why would I think that everyone would be fine, if the city is about to be inundated by seawater?*

He stood there, looking about, silently questioning how he could leave his home. It meant everything to him. Everything he and Connie had worked for. Every piece of furniture, every book on every shelf, every photo, every dish and plate in the cupboards. Leaving all this—even temporarily, as he hoped it would be—felt somehow like leaving Connie behind. How could he do that, after fourteen years together? Yes, it had been five years since Connie died, since those awful weeks and months of suffering, as Connie grew weaker and weaker, as his once beautiful body slowly withered away and slowly succumbed to the leukemia that was poisoning his blood.

It was as if Connie were disappearing before his eyes and there was nothing he could do to hold on to him. The feeling of powerlessness had both enraged and terrified him. Afterwards, someone told him that mourning has no time limits. Yes, that was true, but not completely. The unbearable ache, the physical feeling of a hole in the middle of his chest, these things had mitigated over time, if not gone completely away. But now that Philip was thinking of leaving, planning on it, he had to admit that he was not prepared for the terrible pull that this house had on him.

Sergius came over and rubbed his head along Philip’s leg, whining slightly. Philip remembered suddenly that he hadn’t taken the dog for his morning walk yet.

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Before heading out the door, he stopped at his piano and picked up a small, framed photo of himself and Connie taken probably fifteen years earlier in, of all places, Acapulco. *We both look so young.* “Damn you, I could really use your help,” he whispered, shaking his head and smiling slightly. Then, turning again to Sergius, he said, “Come on, boy, let’s see what’s going on outside.”