

GRIM REAPER END OF DAYS

STEVE ALTEN

Based on a story by Steve Alten and Nick Nunziata


VARIANCE
USA
10/2010

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ISBN: 1-935142-16-X

ISBN-13: 978-1-935142-16-4

Published by Variance (USA)

www.variancepublishing.com

Library of Congress Catalog Number: 2010934993

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Cover Design by Erik Hollander, www.hollanderdesignlabs.com

Interior Artwork by John Toledo

Interior Design by Stanley Tremblay

Printed in the USA

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

AUTHOR'S NOTE

On May 5, 2009, at approximately 8:15 P.M. on a Tuesday night, I was vegging on the couch, recovering from a daylong writing session of *Grim Reaper*, resting up for a midnight edit. My six-year-old son was asleep in my bed; my fifteen-year-old daughter was at a neighbor's house being tutored.

I had been working on the novel you now hold in your hands for two long years, doing extensive research while coming to embrace a newfound sense of spirituality. With only two more weeks of writing anticipated, I felt excited to be in the home stretch of a book that contained a message I honestly believed could change people's lives.

What I had no way of knowing was that, within a span of minutes, reality would come crashing in, bringing me dangerously close to the very story I was writing.

Less than five miles away, my wife and soul mate had just entered a health-food store located in a strip mall close to our home. As she spoke to a clerk about her merchandise, two armed men wearing hoods and ski masks entered the store. One of the men aimed his gun at my wife's head . . .

Bad things happen to good people every day. Tragedies befall families. We search for meaning, we question God. Our faith is tested. Two years earlier, I had been diagnosed with Parkinson's disease at the age of forty-seven. No family history. I never blamed God; I simply thanked Him for not making it something far worse. There are so many people suffering in this world . . . how could I ever feel sorry for myself?

That night as I sat on the couch pondering my hero's fate, my wife was being held hostage, her arms and legs bound with duct tape as two men committed an act of evil that placed her life in their hands. After stealing her purse, jewelry, and the contents of the store safe, the armed robbers left. The police arrived. My wife called me, sobbing hysterically. Thankfully, no one in the store was hurt.

It was a bad night, but of course it could have been far worse.

This book is about good and evil, the choices we make, and why we are here. It draws wisdom from a two-thousand-year-old text that literally

decodes the Old Testament, providing scientific explanations about existence and spirituality without the burden of religious dogma. My wife had involved me in these studies a year earlier, setting me off on my own spiritual journey. The information revealed to me in books and lectures provided answers to questions about life and death that were as simple as they were astounding, yet so clear that I instinctively knew it to be true. It also became clear to me that *Grim Reaper* was intended to be something far more than just a thriller. And yet, had the events of that fateful Tuesday night turned out differently, you might not be reading this book.

I'd like to think differently. I'd like to believe that my faith would remain unshaken had my wife been murdered and that, eventually, I would have finished the book in the light it was intended. Then again, I could just as easily have grown angry and torched the manuscript in a fit of rage, having learned nothing from my studies, or my own hero's journey through Hell.

Thankfully, my wife came out of it all right, and I was spared the test of grief. After a brief respite, *Grim Reaper* was completed—my own spiritual journey having taken on a new sense of purpose.

How should I interpret the events of May 5, 2009? Did God intervene? Did my wife's faith keep her safe? Were we simply lucky? Was the incident intended as a reward or punishment for some past deed? I have learned that cause and effect is made deliberately confusing to ensure free will; otherwise, we'd all be animals performing for our master.

But, who knows—perhaps one day the man who held a gun to my soul mate's head will pick up this novel and garner the spiritual tools he needs to transform his own life.

That would be nice.

Either way, I'm grateful to have you reading the book. I sincerely hope it brings Light and understanding into your life, as writing it has done for me.

—Steve Alten, Ed.D.

“The earth was also corrupted before God and the earth was full of violence. God looked upon the earth and saw it was corrupt, for all flesh had corrupted their ways upon the earth. And God said to Noah, ‘The end of all flesh is come before Me for the earth is filled with violence because of them. And behold, I will destroy them with the earth.’”

—Genesis

"The hottest places in Hell are reserved for those who, in times of great moral crisis, maintain their neutrality."

—Dante Alighieri, *Dante's Inferno*



PROLOGUE

TIGRIS-EUPHRATES VALLEY

(ANCIENT IRAQ)

His left arm had been hurting since he had awoken. It began as a dull pain, birthed deep within the shoulder he habitually slept on every night, his right arm always reserved for cradling his wife. But as he pressed his palms against the thick wall of cedar in the bowels of a swaying darkness, his left biceps began to throb.

The surly old man ignored it, but then he ignored most things. It was easier with age. Not so with youth. Pride had railed against the indiscretions of the masses; the more he had spoken out, the more he was beaten. Still, there were worse things than physical pain. Words cut deeper than any wound.

The Voice had beckoned in his misery. It had promised a soul mate. Children. A covenant was struck. The outcast was no longer lonely.

Surrounded by darkness and evil, the righteous man had cleaved to the nourishing Light. When the stain of corruption spread, he moved his family into the wilderness. But the Voice grew weary of the wickedness and sexual immoralities. And when the Voice told him of his task, he committed himself and his sons without question.

He could never ignore the Voice.

But as the years turned to decades and the scorn of the men of renown

plotted against his household, the man's certainty waned, not because he didn't trust the Voice, but because he grew to despise the defiled ones whose ego-driven sins had so overwhelmingly changed the course of his own life, forecasting the End of Days.

Time and task stole his youth. His sons labored with him, married, and started their own families. He toiled on, forgoing comfort for devotion. Middle age bled into terminal weariness. As old age nestled within his bones, the memory of his covenant waned and his patience with the Voice gradually darkened to tolerance and at times resentment. What he never realized was that he was being tested, that his lack of compassion for the wicked had tainted his own soul, forever sealing his enemies' fate . . . and his own.

It began in the grayness of a heavy winter's morning. Icy rain. Unrelenting. After two days, the rivers overflowed. After a fortnight, the valley submerged.

The deluge made servants of the affluent and anchors of their gold. The suddenly homeless fled to higher ground. They demanded access into his vessel, but the old man said no. As the days passed, they offered to share their ill-gotten wealth. When the sea rose to meet the horizon, they pleaded.

The old man still refused. After a lifetime of humiliation and suffering, it was far too late for any reconciliation.

They threatened his sanctuary with fire, sealing their own fate. The mountainside erupted. The molten earth set the waters to boil. In the dark confines of his sanctuary, he listened to the tortured cries of the condemned . . . his satisfaction overcome by guilt. Taxed with the burden, he anointed himself the true victim; in doing so, he mentally excused himself from any accountability associated with the chaos, thereby discounting his own inaction and any transformation he might have had to bear.

Time passed. The Earth was baptized. He busied himself with daily worship. Maintained the livestock. His soul remained restless and tainted.

The candle flickered as it approached, its light partially veiled by the particles of barnyard dust churning in the air. His soul mate's face appeared, her inflection chiding. "And why is my husband hiding in the stables?"

He struggled to ignore the burning sensation radiating down his left forearm into his fingers. “Lower your voice, he might hear you.”

“Who might hear me? The Blessed One?”

“The Angel of Death. Come closer . . . mind the flame. Press your ear to the cedar, then tell me if he is near.”

Apprehensive but curious, she knelt by the wall and listened.

The middle deck was at water level, the boat rolling gently beneath them, and she could hear the sea beating against the vessel’s creaking hull. For a long moment she waited, the heat within the suffocating enclosure causing her to perspire.

And then she felt it . . . a cold presence that filtered into her frail bones, obliterating the warmth. The animals sensed it, too. The horses grew agitated. The cattle herded themselves into an adjoining pen.

Then, more terrifying—a faint scratching sound—the supernal being’s metal scythe testing the wood.

Unnerved, the old woman leapt to her feet, dropping the candle in the process. Flame met hay, the conflagration rising from the sparks like a hellish demon.

Stripping off his robe, the old man attempted to smother the beast, his feeble efforts only causing it to multiply.

Regaining her composure, his wife hurried to a trough, dipped a clay pot in the water, then doused the fire into submission. Steam rose from the ash, dispersing through the hold. Woodsmoke weighted the air.

The elderly woman embraced her naked husband in the darkness, their rapid pulses beating in sync. “Why is death stalking us?”

“Blood pressure’s dropping, sixty over forty. Hurry up with that brachial artery, I need to administer Dobutrex before we lose him.”

The old man babbled, confused by the strange voices suddenly sharing his head.

His wife grabbed him by the shoulders, shaking him back into the moment. “Why is death stalking us?”

He pushed her hand from his throbbing left shoulder, the pain magnifying in its intensity. “Man’s negativity has summoned the Angel of

Darkness . . . he stalks the earth unbridled. Fear not, for as long as we remain hidden from sight, he cannot harm us.”

“Your arm . . . is something wrong?”

“You sure this was an IED? Look at the skin hanging below the remains of his elbow; the flesh has melted.”

The old man pulled away from his wife and moaned, his left arm suddenly radiating in scorching heat.

“Artery’s closed, start the Dobutrex. Okay, where’s the damn bone saw?”

“I think Rosen was using it to carve his brisket.”

“What is it?”

He cries out in agony, the blood rushing from his weathered face. “The flesh . . . it’s dripping off the bone!”

“How’s his BP?”

“Ninety over sixty.”

“Did you burn your arm in the fire?”

“No. It began hurting before the roosters arose to rant at the day.”

“Tell me what to do. How can I help?”

“Fetch me a cutting tool.”

“You’re scaring me. Let me find our son—”

“No time . . . ahh!”

“Let’s get another unit of blood in him before we take the arm. Nurse, be an angel and hold up that X-ray. I want to amputate right here, just below the insertion on the biceps tendon.”

The surly old man collapsed. His wife knelt beside him in the swaying darkness, the scratching sounds growing louder. “Speak to me! Please, my love . . . wake up!”

“Doctor, he’s awake.”

The soldier opened his eyes to bright lights and masked strangers wrapped in surgical gowns. The pain was blinding, his left arm ravaged meat, the agony competing with the pounding ache in his damaged skull.

The anesthetic washed cool his nerve endings. The panic smothered, he closed his eyes, drowning in sleep.

From across the Baghdad surgical suite, the Grim Reaper stared at the soiled American soldier like an old friend . . . waiting.

PART 1

DARKNESS

"Evil does not exist, or at least it does not exist unto itself. Evil is simply the absence of God. It is just like darkness and cold, a word that man has created to describe the absence of heat. God did not create evil. Evil is the result of what happens when man does not have God's love present in his heart. It's like the cold that comes when there is no heat or the darkness that comes when there is no light."

– Albert Einstein



JULY

FORT DETRICK, MARYLAND

7:12 A.M.

Somewhere in the cul-de-sac, the grayness of morning is violated by the hydraulics of a garbage truck. A dog responds from a screened-in patio. A school bus negotiates the loop with an emissions-belching growl, transporting campers to the local YMCA.

In the house with no kids at the end of the block, the woman with the candy-apple red hair snores softly against a down pillow. Her subconscious refuses to be disturbed by the awakening neighborhood. Her bladder tingles, still she lingers in sleep.

Mary Klipot clings to the dream the way a non-swimmer clings to a capsized boat in tempest seas.

In her dream, the emptiness is gone. In her dream, her father is not a nameless John, and her drug-addicted mother feels the remorse of abandonment. In her dream, there is a home and a warm bed. Chocolate chip cookies and good night kisses that do not taste of tobacco. The air is lilac-sweet and the walls a cheery white. There are private bathrooms and showers and teachers who are not nuns. There is no soundproof room on Wednesday and Saturday mornings, no leather straps and holy water splashes, and certainly no Father Santaromita.

In her dream, Mary is not special.

Special Mary. The orphan with the high I.Q. Smart, yet dangerous. Satan is the tiny voice in your head that says torch the cat, it'll be fun. Jump off the ledge, you can survive. God is missing in these moments. The brakes on a runaway truck. The doctor with the cold stethoscope gives it a name—temporal lobe epilepsy, and offers a prescription.

Father Santaromita knows better. The weekly exorcisms last until her eighth birthday.

She takes the medication. The bridled I.Q. pays dividends. Parochial-school honors. A college scholarship. Degrees in microbiology from Emory and Johns Hopkins. The future looks golden.

Of course, there are “other” challenges. Parties and coeds. Beer and drugs. The introverted redhead with the steely hazel eyes might be trailer-trash cute, but she doesn't put out. Special Mary is branded Virgin Mary. Abstinence labels her an outcast. *Come on, Mary. Only the good die young.* Mary dies a hundred deaths. She works two jobs so she can afford her own apartment.

Isolation is easier.

Straight A's open doors, lab work offers salvation. Mary has talent. The Defense Department sets up an interview. Fort Detrick needs her. Good pay and government benefits. The research is challenging. After a few years, she'll be assigned to a Level-4 containment lab where she can work with some of the most dangerous biological substances on the planet.

The little voice agrees. Mary takes the job. The career shall define a life less lived.

In time, the dreams change.

The discovery had been unearthed in Montpellier. The archaeological team in charge of the dig required the services of a microbiologist experienced in working with exotic agents.

Montpellier is located six miles from the Mediterranean Sea. It is a town steeped in history and tradition, haunted by a nightmare shared by the entire Eurasian continent.

The archaeological dig was a mass grave—a communal pit that dated back to 1348. Six-and-a-half centuries had stripped away organs and flesh, leaving

behind an entanglement of bones. Three thousand men, women, and children. The bodies had been discarded in haste by their tortured loved ones whose grief was rendered secondary to their own terrifying fear.

Plague: the Black Death.

The Great Mortality.

Three hundred people a day had perished in London. Six hundred a day in Venice. It had ravaged Montpellier, killing off 90 percent of the townspeople. In only a few short years, the Black Death had reduced the continent's population from 80 million people to 30 million—all in an era where transportation was limited to horse and foot.

How had it killed so effectively? How had it spread so fast?

In charge of the excavation was Didier Raoult, a professor of medicine at the Mediterranean University in Marseilles. Raoult discovered that pulp tissue found inside the remains of plague victims' teeth, preserved in many of the unearthed skulls, could yield DNA evidence that would, for the first time, unlock the mystery.

Mary set to work. The culprit was *Yersinia pestis*—bubonic plague. A pestilence delivered from Hell. Extreme pain. High fever, chills, and welts. Followed by swelling of the bulbous—black golf-ball-sized protrusions that appeared on the victims' necks and groins. In due course, the infected internal organs failed, often bleeding out.

A thirteenth-century nursery rhyme provided vivid clues as to how quickly the Black Death had spread: *Ring around the rosie, a pocket full of posies, at-shoo, at-shoo, we all fall down*. One sneeze, and plague infected a household, eventually the entire village, wiping out its unsuspecting prey within days.

Impressed with her work, Didier Raoult presented Mary with a parting gift—a copy of a recently discovered unpublished memoir, written during the Great Plague by the Pope's personal surgeon, Guy de Chauliac. Translated from its original French, the diary detailed the Great Mortality's near eradication of the human species during the years 1346 through 1348.

Mary returned to Fort Detrick with de Chauliac's journal and samples of the 666-year-old killer. The Department of Defense was intrigued. The DoD claimed they wanted protection for American soldiers in case of a biological

attack. Thirty-one-year-old Mary Louise Klipot was promoted and placed in charge of the new project, dubbed Scythe.

Within a year, the CIA took over funding and Scythe disappeared off the books.

Mary awakens before the alarm sounds. Her belly gurgles. Her blood pressure drops. She barely makes it to the toilet in time.

Mary has been sick for a week. Andrew assured her it was just the flu. Andrew Bradosky was her lab tech. Thirty-nine. Boyishly charming and easy on the eyes. She had selected him from a pool of workers not because he was qualified but because she could read him. Even his attempts to foster a social relationship outside the lab were calculated toward promotion. The trip to Cancún last April was a welcome diversion, granted only after he acknowledged her rules of celibacy. Mary was saving herself for marriage. Andrew had no interest in marriage, but he did make good eye candy.

Mary dresses quickly. Cotton scrubs simplified her wardrobe choices. Loose-fitting clothing made for better choices in a BSL-4 suite and the environmental suit she wore for hours at a time.

Toast and jam were all her upset stomach could tolerate. This morning she would see the department physician. Not that she wanted to go. But she was sick, and standard operating procedure when working with exotic agents required routine checkups. Driving to work, she assured herself that it was probably just the flu. *Andrew could be right. Even a broken clock is right twice a day.*

She hated waiting. *Why were patients always relegated to antiseptic exam rooms with paper-lined cushioned tables and old issues of Golf Digest? And these exam gowns . . . had she ever worn one that actually fit? Did she have to be reminded that she needed to lose weight?* She vowed to hit the gym after work, then quickly dismissed the notion. She had far too much work to do, and Andrew as usual was behind on his duties. She considered bringing in a new technician, but worried about the innuendo.

The door opened and Roy Katzin entered, the physician's expression too

upbeat to conceal bad news. “So. We’ve run the gamut of tests using the most sophisticated machines taxpayer money can buy, and we think we’ve nailed down the source of your symptoms.”

“I already know, it’s the flu. Dr. Gagnon had it a few weeks ago and—”

“Mary, it’s not the flu. You’re pregnant.”