

Hell and Back: The First Death

PART I

Life and Death

Author Disclaimer:

This author being of sound mind and healthy fear of the Lord makes this claim. This book is a work of fiction and nothing more. It is by no means an addition to or manipulation of the written word of God. I heed the warning found in the prophecy of Revelation 22:18-19. I pray this book be an enjoyable read that sparks discussion and spiritual thought.

Old Warrior

Joe Rellik slipped through the jungle like a shadow. Training and experience allowed him to disappear. It was easy, like breathing, he didn't have to think about it. Death followed at his heels, ready to reap the harvest. Eyes focused on the bamboo and thatch hut, dead ahead. Joe held his breath, listening for anything unusual. He heard nothing but the sound of rain falling on water and blood pumping in his ears. In spite of the downpour, the awful heat of the bush permeated everything. Sweat and rain ran down his body into the thigh-deep water. Almost there, he wiped the back of his hand across his face as light poured forth from a window of the target. One last check of the heavy weapon assured Joe, locked and loaded.

A red and yellow snake swam directly between his legs. *I hate snakes! I hate this place!* No time to worry about that. Movement inside the hut forced Joe tight against a moss-covered tree. Raised voices argued in some Asian tongue, he couldn't tell for sure, either Vietnamese or Cambodian. It didn't matter. He'd been sent here for one reason. Kill everyone in and around the hut found at these exact coordinates.

He was ready, both excited and nervous. As soon as the lead started flying and the people started dying, he knew he'd feel all right again. It was his specialty. The knack for killing was the only gift he'd ever discovered about himself. It didn't matter anymore whether it was right or wrong. It was just what he did, and he was anxious to get on with it now. Joe leaned against the outer wall of the hut. He closed his eyes for a second or two to clear his head. The warm rain bounced off his cheeks.

Joe clenched his teeth and opened his eyes. In one fluid motion, he kicked the door hard, and stepped inside, the M-16 firing on full auto. His ears rang from the deafening roar as hot lead sought out flesh to destroy.

He released his trigger. Acrid smoke filled the air and empty shells littered the ground. Something was very wrong. No one was in the room, alive or dead.

He moved forward. The door slammed shut behind him. Joe whirled around and hit the deck, firing back toward the entrance.

Again, nothing, no one was there. When he stopped firing, silence choked the heavy air.

Then he heard it. He couldn't quite make it out. Could it be English? It sounded like a woman or a child.

He heard it again, "Daddy."

The word tugged at his heart. He didn't like to kill kids. They hadn't told him who his target was. Just to kill everyone here.

When he reached the back of the hut he found something strange - a hallway.

On full alert, he slowly stepped into the passage and slid forward. Red flags went off in his head. *This is wrong!*

His boots made a strange sound, and he noticed smooth concrete. The icy-cold hand of fear tickled its way up his spine. Concrete, in the jungle? *Where am I? I have to get out of here!*

Light streamed into the dim hall from a perfectly rectangular, metal-framed door. The kind found in a hospital or a school back home, not in a hut behind enemy lines.

He inched his way toward the open door. Without looking, he replaced the empty magazine with a full one, showing skill and precision obtained from years of practice.

He heard it again. Joe paused and held his breath, straining his ears. It was definitely a child or a woman calling, "Daddy."

The voice felt familiar. His fear deepened as his breath came quickly.

"Daddy!" the voice cried loudly. There was no mistaking it now. His heart sank into his boots. It was his daughter's voice.

He burst through the doorway. The blinding flash instantly turned to darkness and his eyes struggled to adjust. A musty smell assaulted his senses, and a lone beam of light cast eerie shadows on a stone wall. The steady sound of dripping water echoed through the dank room. A little girl sat in the corner with her back toward him. Her fine hair just hit her shoulders and had a tint of red to it. She wore white clothing, like linen, but dirty and unkempt. Her size told Joe she must be about ten years old.

His gun fell from his hands as he rushed toward her. The faint sound of a chopper reverberated overhead. He knew his time was limited.

"Sweetie," he said in his most gentle voice. "What are you doing here?" The girl didn't answer, and continued rocking her body back and forth.

"Sweetie? It's Daddy."

She stopped rocking.

Joe stretched his hand out to her shoulder. As he touched her cold, clammy skin, she fell backward. He swiftly knelt and caught her before she hit the floor.

Joe gasped at the sight of her. Scarlet blood stained her clothes, and her head flopped loosely. He cradled her head in his hands.

“Sweetie, Daddy’s here.”

Her little eyes flickered with life.

“Oh Daddy,” she said. “You’re too late. I told them you’d come. They laughed at me. They said you’d never come, not for me anyway. I told them you would.”

He squeezed her to his chest, barely able to breathe. Joe had seen many people die. He knew he wasn’t going to save her. The room spun around him, and he felt like he might puke.

He pushed her back. “I did come for you, sweetie, don’t die,” he said. His voice strained with painful emotion.

Her eyes didn’t open, but in a whisper she said, “Why’d you leave me? Now I’m lost.” The air exhaled permanently out of her chest.

Awful laughter hidden in darkness echoed through the room. Joe couldn’t tell where it came from, and he covered his ears to block it out.

The fading light wobbled and dimmed even more. He jumped up, dropped to his knees, and began feeling the floor for his gun. The laughter moved around him in a circle.

As he spun around, he noticed his daughter’s body was gone, and where it had lain stood an evil-looking black dog. The animal bristled thick and muscular with long wolf-like hair. Its eyes glowed red like embers of glowing coal.

Joe readied himself, as the hound growled low, took two steps forward, and then leapt at him with snarling teeth dripping rancid foam.

Joe covered his face with his hands and screamed out in anger.

“No!” The old man jumped awake, screaming into the night. Sweat soaked his white tank undershirt. Confused, he looked around the little room in the muted darkness. Moonlight shone through torn, white curtains and cast an odd light about the bedroom. He swung his feet to the cold floor as he tried to catch his breath realizing it’d been a dream - a terrible dream.

“They’re getting worse,” he mumbled.

Joe cradled his face in his hands and wept. The image of his daughter covered in blood stuck in his head. Lonely, bitter tears smeared over his wrinkled face. He slowly stood with a stern shift of his jaw. The deep pain of choices long made and consequences still being paid wore heavily on his old shoulders, but determination drove him on.

“Damn dreams,” he muttered as he hobbled, bow-legged to the bathroom. “You won’t scare me out of it.”

He turned on the light and lifted the lid to the toilet. As he urinated, the water filled with blood. He clenched his teeth against the internal pain. He went to the sink and splashed some cold water on his hands and face.

Joe stared into his own eyes in the mirror as water dripped from his chin. He couldn’t believe what he saw. The deep wrinkles, the drooping jowls, the age blemishes.

“How’d you get so old?”

His bright eyes appeared even more sharp blue than ever, set within the face of an old man. White hair stuck out from the top of his undershirt. He dried his face with a small towel, still muttering to himself as he ambled out of the bathroom.

“You think you’re going to scare me with a dream like that? Well you’re not. It just reminds me how strong I was and will be again. Then you’ll have hell to pay.”

Joe gave up going back to bed and went into the kitchen to make coffee. A faint light grew on the eastern rim of the surrounding mountains. Spring in the Rockies meant the temperatures dipped low at night. His smoky breath reflected the chill inside the poorly insulated house.

Joe whistled a marching tune as he stepped out the front door, his plucky attitude had returned. A fresh layer of frost glistened like crystal in the morning light. He carefully selected two small pieces of wood from the stockpile.

“This old house looks as bad as me,” he said. The clapboards had aged and needed new paint, a gutter hung down at one end; the front porch was mostly disconnected from the main structure.

“You’re so darn weak,” he said to himself. “You can barely carry these two little sticks. Ha! I must still be making somebody nervous with all these dreams coming like they are.”

He shuffled into the house and put the two logs in the wood burner.

The coffee pot groaned, spitting out steam and black coffee. After pouring a cup, Joe sat down close to the stove in an attempt to stay warm. He carefully put on his wire-rimmed reading glasses and opened his old Bible to a scripture he knew by memory.

“Luke 16:26, And besides all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed: so that they that would pass from hence to you cannot; neither can they pass to us, them that would come from thence,” he read out

loud.

He closed the Bible and left it lay on his lap, closing his eyes.

“No crossing back and forth. Only one way into either place and no way out.” Joe exhaled loudly at the weightiness of the thought. He struggled up from his chair and sat on the arm of the brown-and-tan-speckled couch. The couch was ugly and it had been several decades since it was new, but it still felt good. He thumbed the little black notebook he kept in his shirt pocket.

“Ah there,” he said, picking up the harvest gold phone. His big fingers carefully dialed the numbers. The rotary whined as it returned itself and the cord bobbed against his arm.

It rang a long time. He was about to hang up when he heard a sleepy woman’s voice answer, “Hello?”

“Hello, Joan?”

“Yes, who’s this?” the woman asked.

“It’s old Grandpa Joe.”

“Grandpa Joe?” she asked, sounding confused.

“Yes, Grandpa Joe, you know, Joe Rellik, Matt’s dad.”

“Joe. It’s been a long time. Is something wrong? Do you know what time it is?” she asked.

He looked at his watch. “It’s nigh onto 6:30 here.”

“That makes it 5:30 in the morning in California. I was sleeping. We all are sleeping,” she said, with a deep sigh into the phone. “Can I help you?”

“I was hoping to get your address and pertinent information on you and the boys, like social security numbers or whatever you got,” he suddenly realized he hadn’t taken the time difference into account, but since she was up now, she might as well help him. “Sorry to wake you, it won’t take but a couple of minutes.”

“Joe, you call me after God knows how many years, with no contact with your grandsons at all to ask me that, at 5:30 in the morning?” Her voice held an edge to it, which made her sound a little aggravated and not as sleepy as when she first picked up the phone. “I should tell you where to go.”

“You could tell me where to go,” Joe chuckled to himself and continued. “And you’d be more right than you know.”

“Just out of sheer curiosity, what do you need all of that information for? Dare I ask?”

“Well I’m sure it won’t break no hearts, but I’m fixing to kick off. It won’t be long before I’ll be gone. You see, I’ve been pretty sick for a while now, and I can tell things have turned, you know, for the worse,” his

gravelly old voice trailed off.

“I’m sorry, Joe. Have you seen a doctor?” Joan asked.

“What the hell would I do that for? So they can charge me to tell me that I’m an old SOB and gonna die pretty doggone soon? I just told you that for free,” Joe said.

“Sometimes doctors tell us what’s wrong with us, and then we can fix it,” Joan said in a condescending, motherly sort of way.

“There ain’t no doc in the world gonna fix me up, as old as I am. Who’d want to?” Joe took a moment to calm down. “Anyway, I’m selling my patch of dirt to some greedy land-sharks. I’m making ‘em wait till I’m dead to move in on it, but other than me dying, it’s a done deal. You know lawyers and realtors and the like. You should see ‘em drive by my place real slow, circling like buzzards, wonderin’ if I’m dead yet. Gonna build a strip mall or something.” He stopped, but Joan didn’t say anything, so he continued. “You see, it’s gonna be a pretty fair chunk of change, and I always thought you were a real good woman. You done right by those boys as near as I could tell anyway, and with no help from that fruit-loop son of mine. I was aiming to give you and the boys the money.”

“How much money are you talking about?”

Joe chuckled again. “Got you awake now don’t I?”

She laughed too. “Yeah, you’ve got my attention.”

“Well it ought to end up around three-hundred-thousand or so,” Joe said.

The other end went silent. Joe thought he could hear crying.

“That ain’t as much as you think. Just enough for you to buy a car or put a down payment on a house or pay for college for Matt Jr. or Blake, or do whatever you like with it. I don’t care. It’s yours. I’ll be dead anyway.”

“You aren’t giving any to Matt?” Joan asked in a shaky voice.

“I shouldn’t, he’ll just blow it on something. It’ll be gone like the wind,” Joe stated.

Joan chuckled, “You do know your son, after all. Have you spoken to him?” she asked.

“Well, not since he told me he never wanted to speak to me or see me ever again,” he answered. “Even so, I’m planning to give him ten-grand. I have his address, so I don’t need to call him. He won’t know how much you and the boys got. So it’s up to you, if you want to tell him, don’t make no difference to me.”

“Joe, I want to thank you. That will mean the world to us, to me, to the boys. Really, it changes

everything. Things have been hard for us, and I've had to work two jobs. I've really tried..."

"Don't thank me; thank the good Lord. It's all His anyway," Joe said with conviction.

"I wish we'd known each other better. We should've stayed in touch. My boys would've done well to know you."

"You might think so, but I haven't been too good with kids. If you haven't noticed, my son hates me, and my daughter, well, you know."

"Don't be too hard on yourself," Joan said. "I haven't spoken to Matt Jr. in weeks. Blake told me he's living with some potheads in a shack on the beach, and all he does is surf all day."

Joe snorted. "Well the apple didn't fall too far from old Matt's tree there now, did it?"

"No, but he's not like Matt entirely, so maybe he'll come out of it. Let me tell you about apples not falling too far. Blake's sixteen and has his heart set on going to West Point. He wants to be like you, Joe."

"West Point? He wants to be a military man?" Joe asked, excited by the surprising news.

"Yes, he's serious. He's getting straight A's and volunteering in the community, doing everything he can to build his resume. Until now, he was going to need a scholarship, but your money will send him."

"Well, I'll be, I'd no idea," Joe said.

"Of course you didn't; it's been years since we spoke. He was a little boy."

"If he wanted into West Point, all you had to do was ask. The man in charge of admissions served in 'Nam with me. All I have to do is call him," Joe offered.

"Thank you, Joe, but I know Blake would want to earn it."

"Oh he'll earn it. Everybody gets in any way they can. You better ask now 'cause I don't know how much longer I'll be here, like I said." Joe coughed a little.

"Let me ask Blake first," Joan said.

"Straight A's, huh?" Joe said. "That must be from your side. West Point, my grandson? That'd be something. He'd learn things I never did. I learned quick when they put a machine gun in my hand, strapped a parachute on my back, flung open the side door of an airplane and said, "See you on the ground, private!"

"Joe, I can't thank you enough. Maybe if you went to a doctor you could buy some more time?"

"Nah, no docs. It's finished. No use fighting it. Life's but a vapor, you know," Joe sounded tired. "I have to be going now, Joan."

"Thank you again, Joe."

“Do you have that information? I have to get going.”

“Sure.” She gave him what he needed and they said their goodbyes.

Joe rubbed his ear after hanging up with her. He stretched out his legs on the couch, and drifted off to sleep.



Joan set down her phone and swung her feet to the floor. The tiny bedroom had cracks spider-webbed across the stucco, but it was clean and all she could afford. The housing prices in San Diego were outrageous. Anyway, with Matt Jr. gone, it was just Blake and her now. She picked up the phone, noticing herself in the dresser mirror.

I look old. When this boy leaves, who will want me?

She dialed the number that had once been her own. It rang and rang, and she bit her lip.

“Hullo?” a sleepy and familiar voice answered.

“Matt, it’s Joan.”

“Joan, what time is it? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing much, your father’s dying. Have you spoken to him?” She asked, taking a little pleasure at the obvious dig.

“You know we don’t talk. What do you mean dying?” Matt asked.

“He called and told me how sick he was. I need to get a hold of little Matt. Do you know if he has a phone?” She said, upset at having to ask him in the first place.

“Mattie, yeah, he’s doing great. We hung out last week at the beach. It was way cool,” Matt said with his hippie surfer drawl. “No, he doesn’t have a phone. I can give him a message though?”

“I doubt he would get it,” Joan said viciously.

“Who is it Matt?” Joan heard a woman say. “Hang up.”

Joan’s anger flared. “Good Lord, Matt, you aren’t alone. Why didn’t you tell me?”

“You didn’t ask.”

“Well, how old is she? Seventeen?” Joan didn’t have time for this.

“Sweetie, how old are you?” Matt asked without moving the receiver away from his mouth.

“You’re sick!” she yelled into the phone.

“I guess she’s twenty-five, but I can’t remember her name either,” Matt snipped back.

“She’s barely older than your son; you were thirty when she was born!”

“It’s been nice talking to you, Joan,” Matt said in a lazy voice. “I feel much better about divorcing you, thanks for the reminder.”

“Your father wouldn’t treat his family this way!”

“He knows a thing or two about leaving a family,” Matt said sharply. “I don’t care if he does die. It means nothing to me.”

“You don’t care if your father dies? He seems like he’s become a very, uh, nice old man,” Joan said cautiously.

“Don’t buy all of his good-ole-boy bullshit. He abandoned all of us years ago. He can rot in hell for all I care.” Joan knew Matt spoke vindictively from years of repressed anger.

“How would you like it if one of your boys said all this about you?” Joan questioned him.

“I may not be perfect, but my boys *know* me, and I’m their friend.”

”Oh yeah, I forgot, you’re a great dad. I apologize. That’s why your oldest son is living in shack on the beach smoking dope all day, good for nothing. Tell your hussy to roll over! Maybe she should call her mom to let her know where she is!” Joan yelled and angrily hung up before Matt could say anything else. She threw the phone savagely across the room.

She ran her fingers through her hair and measured her breaths, attempting to regain composure. She felt so distraught and emotional, she wanted to cry, but she was too angry to let him have that kind of victory.

“Why on earth did I call him?” she asked herself. “I knew what would happen.” Her head snapped up at the sound of the light tap on the bedroom door.

“Mom?”

“Yes, honey. I’ll be right out.” Her countenance dropped under the weight of life. “Not a good way to start my day,” she whispered. She slipped on her robe and opened the door.

The young man before her always took her aback. In a split second she could see him in her mind as just a little boy. Now, here he stood, looking more like a man every day, his dark hair trimmed short in precise military style. Everyone noticed Blake’s sky-blue eyes, just like his father’s and grandfather’s. Despite the color being the same, Joan found it odd that the biggest difference between this boy and his father could be found in the eyes - something just beyond the color. It was the depth. Blake’s eyes held a solid assuredness, a steadiness that belied an inner strength. His father’s contained only uneasiness and insecurity.

“Who was on the phone?” Blake asked. “I heard it ring.”

Joan cracked a brown egg into a sizzling pan. “I was talking to your Dad just then, but when it rang before, believe it or not, it was your Grandpa Joe.” Joan stopped a moment to watch Blake’s reaction.

The smooth-skinned face of youth lit up with excitement. “What did he want? Did you tell him about me? Why did he call? What did he say?”

“I did tell him about you.”

“Really? What’d you say?” Blake’s eyes sparkled in anticipation.

“I told him you were an amazing young man, determined to go to West Point,” Joan said with a smile filled with pride.

“What did he say to that?” Blake prodded impatiently.

“He said that if you wanted into West Point, all you had to do was ask. He served in Vietnam with the admissions guy, and with a phone call you could be in,” Joan said, trying to contain her excitement at the possibilities.

Blake looked away as he absorbed the offer. “I can’t believe he offered to do that,” he said. “What’d you say?”

“I told him I couldn’t speak for you, and we’d let him know if you wanted to accept or not. He said that people got in any way they could and there’s no dishonor in accepting his help.”

“He said that?” Blake asked.

“Yes.”

“What should I do, Mom? Should I accept the offer?”

“If you really want to go to West Point, then I think you should let Grandpa Joe do all he can,” Joan said. Her heart soared at the prospects for Blake.

Blake nodded and said nothing, his brow wrinkled in contemplation.

“There’s more,” Joan continued. “Grandpa Joe said he’s very sick.”

“Sick like what?” Blake asked.

“Sick like he thinks he’ll not be here much longer,” Joan said tentatively.

Confusion and loss kicked Blake in the stomach.

“Mom, he can’t die now.”

“Also, he’s leaving me, you, and Matt Jr., most of his money, and it’s quite a lot,” Joan said. She tried to

contain her excitement at the idea of someone dying.

“Like how much?” Blake asked.

“Enough to pay for someone to go to West Point.” Joan smiled.

Blake remained quiet; all of his young dreams had just been handed to him on a silver platter. It was a lot for anyone to take in, much less a teenager.

Joan slid the scrambled eggs onto a plate in front of her pensive son. She sat down and watched as he ate in silence.

“What’re you thinking?” Joan finally asked. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine, just confused. Why would he do all that for me?” Blake asked. “He doesn’t even know me. We haven’t heard from him in years.”

“I think he’s a loner. There’s been a lot of pain in his life, and now I’m guessing he wants to help us as one last act of kindness on this earth.”

Blake picked up his backpack, and shouldered it. “I gotta get going to school. Can we talk about it tonight? Don’t call him, alright?” Blake asked.

“That’s fine, honey. Whatever you want,” Joan said.

“Did he call from Colorado?” Blake asked.

“Yes, it was the number I have for him from his place near Salida. I guess some people want to buy his campground and turn it into a strip mall or something, probably because it’s right on the highway. That’s where the money’s coming from. I was there once with your father, a long time ago, before you were born.”

Blake leaned over and hugged his mother. “See you tonight.” He opened the door.

“What time?” Joan asked.

“Uh, I’ll be late. I have practice, and then I’m going over to Collin’s house to study. We have a chemistry test coming up and we need to work on it.”

“So I’m on my own for supper?” Joan asked.

“Yeah, I’ll call you. If it gets really late, I may just crash at Collin’s, if it’s alright with you,” Blake said with a hopeful smile.

“That’s fine, just call me?” Joan didn’t suspect any subterfuge from this son. Blake had never lied to her before and she didn’t suspect it now.

“Yeah, we can talk tomorrow night. See you.” Blake flashed a smile that melted his mother’s heart.

She watched out the window as he climbed into the red Pontiac Sunbird that was ‘his’ car. Her heart swelled with pride. He’d worked all summer for the money to buy it. Most of his friends had nice vehicles their parents bought for them. They didn’t have that much extra, so he’d earned the money and bought the car himself. It wasn’t much, but it ran good and got him around. He took good care of it too. She turned away as he pulled out of the driveway.

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Blake smiled at his gas gauge. It registered full. He drove past the street that would’ve taken him to school and turned his car onto I-15, chasing the unknown.