

Opposing Cells

by

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*To my wife, Amy,
who supports me in so many ways;
thank you for allowing me to write,
and for being my best proof-reader.
I love you.*

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Prologue

Marseille, France. Fifteen years ago.

Ibrahim sucked cold air into his lungs and ran. Sirens screamed in the night a block behind. Not loud enough to drown out the sound of shoes hitting the pavement, or heartbeats pounding in his ears.

“Ibrahim!” Paolo shouted his name again.

He veered into a narrow alley and urged more speed into his long legs. The darkness prevented him from seeing the ground but he dared not slow down.

Footfalls echoed in the alley behind him. Paolo was older, faster, and gaining.

“Ibrahim, wait!”

He thought about slowing for his friend. Adrenaline wouldn't allow it. Besides, Paolo had meticulously planned the entire evening. He could take care of himself. *Is this what it's supposed to be like, Paolo? Running in the dark, lungs burning, expecting a bullet to end my fifteen years in an alley? Why did you talk me into this?*

Rain drops hit his face, and Ibrahim remembered his mother's funeral, a vivid and cruel picture that tortured his mind. It had rained that day too, like a gray backdrop to the blackness that now suffocated his

soul. Even two years later, he missed her. She would definitely not approve of his actions tonight.

His mind snapped back to the present, and Ibrahim wondered if the timer would work. *It has to work! How many minutes has it been?*

He skidded to a stop at the end of the alley. Seeing that the street beyond was void of traffic, he launched himself forward again, but a new sound stopped him short. A low *whump* rocked the ground beneath his feet. Ibrahim dropped to his knees and whirled toward the sound. Three blocks away an orange glow illuminated buildings, then faded. Paolo scrambled to his side and gripped his shoulder as a few pieces of debris clattered to the street with the rain.

“Ibrahim!”

He now looked at the older boy. There was a tremor in Paolo's voice. “Did you hear it? That was *our* doing, Ibrahim!” Paolo clapped him on the shoulder and a street light reflected in his wild eyes. “We did it! Allah will smile on us now, little brother!”

Ibrahim looked back up the street and shivered. Was Allah smiling? He glanced upward and saw only darkness and rain.

Then he and Paolo ran.

Chapter 1

Louisville, Kentucky. Present day.

Terrence Whitman checked his watch for the third time in five minutes. *Come on, people. This is worse than I expected.* He stood in the checkout line at the city's largest toy store on the day after Thanksgiving. In front of him, a roundish woman used both hands to transport a mountain of toys from her cart to the moving checkout counter. The sounds of cash registers filled the air, as throngs of people waited to exchange their hard-earned money for Christmas goods.

Terrence looked down at the two items he held in his hands. They were the latest craze in action figure toys, and he had managed to grab them before the shelf was bare. At first he felt like a conquering hero as he imagined the faces of his sons, Nicholas and Anthony, on Christmas morning. But now, after spending nearly thirty minutes in the checkout line watching materialism at work, he wondered if this worst-shopping-day-of-the-year shopping trip was worth it.

As he stepped forward and placed his items on the counter, another check of the watch revealed only forty-five minutes to get home and change before the babysitter arrived. He couldn't remember the last time he and Angela had gone out without the kids, and Terrence cringed

at the thought of her reaction should he arrive home late again. Not that he would blame her. Career demands had kept him from his family of late, something he had once vowed would never happen. Fortunately, the point-of-sale project was back on schedule now, which would allow him to make things right again at home.

Outside, he pulled his coat closer against the bitter wind. Suddenly his foot was sliding. *Ice*. He stumbled forward, crashing with some force into the shoulder of a man who quickly approached the toy store.

“Oops! Sorry about that!” Terrence apologized as he caught his footing. He turned to look at the man, and briefly took in the short black hair and dark complexion. The man wore a black winter coat, with his hands thrust deep into the pockets. A black duffle bag hung on his shoulder.

Terrence meant to reiterate his apology, but the words halted when he looked into the other man's face. The eyes smoldered like dark flames; the expression cold, hard as stone, something beyond anger. Terrence took a step backwards.

Abruptly, the stranger turned and rushed into the store. Terrence felt a chill when he saw the familiar image of a white bird in flight – and the letters *KCG* – on the man's retreating duffle bag.

“I don't remember seeing him bef–”

At that very instant, an explosion ripped through the front of the toy store. Windowpanes transformed into millions of shards of glass, hurled like shrapnel across the parking lot. A pickup truck swerved wildly as the blast threw Terrence directly into its path.



Angela walked to the top of the stairs, hands clenched. She closed her eyes and took a breath. “Boys! If you don't stop fighting, you'll both find yourselves on your bed.”

From somewhere in the basement came two answers in unison, “Yes, Mommy.”

She walked back through the kitchen, stooping to pick up little three-year-old Briana on the way. Angela was dressed for dinner in dark slacks and a deep red sweater. She wore the diamond and sapphire heart necklace that her husband had given her for Christmas last year.

She frowned at the clock on the living room mantle. A few minutes past six. Both Terry and the babysitter were late. In the case of the babysitter, who was practically a member of the family, tardiness was unusual. Terry, on the other hand, had acquired a habit of losing track of time.

“Now where do you suppose your Daddy is, Briana?” Angela switched on the TV to the local news, mumbling to herself. “I should have known. It’s far too much to expect a full evening alone with my husband.”

The scene on the television arrested her attention and her thoughts went silent. The sight was chaotic: sirens blaring and police vehicles flashing, with civilians and rescue workers rushing here and there. In the background, a storefront had been devastated by some kind of explosion. Fire burned through the gaping front wall, and black smoke billowed into the darkening evening sky. Several cars in the parking lot were damaged, and a white pickup truck had smashed into a light pole in front of the store.

Angela gasped. *That’s Berrenger’s Toys! Terry is there... was there.* Her heart began to race, and she leaned toward the television as if the reporter at the scene was speaking directly to her.

“...no information yet as to the cause of the explosion. Eyewitnesses claim that the explosion came from the checkout area at the front of the store, where checkout lines were filled with Christmas shoppers. There is wide speculation here that this is the work of terrorists, but local authorities are saying nothing at this time.”

“Is there any indication of the number of casualties?” asked Robert Schultz, the anchorman at the WLKT studio.

“No official reports at this time, Robert, but rescue workers have already indicated at least eleven dead, and possibly dozens more injured.”

“Okay, Tim. We’ll come back to you as soon as we hear anything new.”

As the view on the television switched to the grim face of the anchorman, Angela put Briana down and firmly told her, “Briana, go play with your dollies in your room.”

“Yes, Mommy.”

Angela thanked God that the little girl obeyed, and turned back to the television, where the anchorman was offering a recap.

“For those of you who joined in the middle of that report, we want to quickly summarize this late-breaking story. About forty-five minutes ago there was an explosion at the Berrenger's Toys and Hobbies store on Hurstbourne Lane. Authorities are offering no speculation as to the cause at this time, though from all appearances this would seem to be a terrorist bombing, which would make it the second such attack in just three weeks. Rescue workers at the scene are indicating at least eleven deaths, with possibly dozens more injured. We will keep you updated with any new information as we receive it here. But for a moment, let's turn to the other headlines for the day...”

Angela's heart pounded like a drum in her chest. She ran to the kitchen and snatched up the phone, dialing her husband's cell phone number.

“Please, Terry,” she pleaded, “answer your phone.” One ring. Two rings. Three. She choked back a cry as the answering service picked up. She put down the phone as her hands began to shake, and she felt her knees going weak. Her mind raced, unable to focus. *Oh God, what do I do? Terry, where are you?*

Just then the front door burst open and Angela heard a familiar voice. “I’m here! I’m so sorry I’m late!”



Ned Parker stared blankly through the large windows that comprised one wall of his seventeenth floor corporate office. Below him several hotels stretched out along the famed sugar-white beaches of

Florida's gulf coast. It was easy to see why Kellor Computing Group had chosen Panama City, Florida to be the sight of its worldwide corporate headquarters.

Ned turned from the tranquil scene before him and sat down at his desk, where papers were loosely arranged in piles. His eyes fell on a picture frame, where his two daughters smiled back at him from their apartment at UCLA. When had he seen them last? He doubted he could remember that far back. Not that they would *want* to see him. The smiles in the picture were for the camera, not him.

The phone rang, startling Ned out of his pondering thoughts. He knew it would be the call he was waiting for. *There truly is no rest for the weary.*

He picked up the receiver. "This is Ned."

"Mr. Parker. It's James. I got your message to call." The accent was always hard to figure: definitely foreign, but difficult to place.

"Yes, James. I need a status on when we can expect the next order to be placed. We filled the last shipment almost five weeks ago, and delivered everything that was agreed upon."

"Mr. Parker, there is no need to worry." James sounded overly calm, almost patronizing, as he continued. "This client cannot be rushed. It takes some time to process a shipment of this size."

Ned found a pen at his fingertips, and began to tap it on the desk. "James, you assured me that they already had the infrastructure to handle this deal. Has that changed in the past five weeks? Is there something else I should know?"

"No, of course not. But there are multiple warehouses located in different places, which requires a certain amount of coordination and planning." Here James paused before offering the more accurate reason for the delay. "Not to mention that our client is evaluating all angles of this endeavor. As you are aware, there are other objectives."

Ned closed his eyes and grimaced. He didn't want to know about the other objectives.

"We can't let this drag on forever, James. If we don't get these sales this quarter, none of this may matter."

“Don’t worry, Mr. Parker. Everything is under control. I’ll call you as soon as I know something.”

Ned hung up the phone and his gaze returned to the picture. He had sacrificed much to become CFO of the world’s third largest technology company. Now the company’s financial fate very possibly rested on the abilities of a brilliant young VP on the other side of the planet. *We can’t lose this deal, James.*



Roger and his wife Pam cleaned the supper dishes while Jacob and Matthew played in the back yard. The ringing of the phone interrupted their casual conversation.

“Hello,” Pam spoke into the receiver. Her gaze met Roger’s and a shadow crossed the smooth lines of her face.

Roger’s stomach knotted. “What is it?”

Pam’s face went from concern to disbelief, as her mouth dropped open.

“Oh, Angela! Maybe he’s on his way home and just has the cell phone turned off.” Her voice was calm, but her expression began to be fearful as she heard the response. Then she looked at Roger, unable to find words to say.

“What is it?” Roger said, his tone harsher than he wanted.

Pam covered the mouthpiece with her hand. “Terry hasn’t come home, and he’s not answering his phone even though it was on earlier!”

Roger tried to grasp what Pam was saying, but could not understand why it seemed so critical that Terry was late. “I don’t ...”

His confused query was interrupted as Pam spoke back into the phone.

“No! Angela, don’t leave your house yet. You don’t have any idea where to go. Just a minute.” Now she turned to Roger again.

“There’s been an explosion in the store where Terry was supposed to be. Turn on the local TV, and see if they say which hospital they are taking people to.”

Roger hurried to the other room and scooped up the TV remote. His heart began to beat faster as he took in the video footage before him. From the charred black storefront came billows of dark smoke. Fire and rescue vehicles flashed red and blue lights. Many people rushed around, calling for their loved-ones, while others simply sat on the pavement staring with wide eyes and pale, ghost-like expressions.

Pam continued the phone conversation. “Angela, you should start calling the hospitals in town to see if Terry's been admitted. Call us back to let us know what you find out.”

Roger remained glued to the television for several minutes, yet hearing nothing regarding victims and hospitals. Suddenly he got an idea.

“I'm going to call 911!”

The dispatcher informed Roger that he did not have any information on individuals, but that some ambulances had initially been dispatched from Northpark City Hospital.

A few minutes later Angela called, and Roger answered the phone. Her voice was controlled, though the fear and dismay were obvious.

“I didn't find out anything. His name is not in anyone's computer system yet. But I *know* that Terry would have called by now, Roger.”

“I called 911,” Roger responded, “and found out that at least some ambulances were dispatched from Northpark. I'm pretty sure that it's the closest hospital to the store. Do you want me to meet you there, and we'll see if Terry is there?”

“Yes! I'm going now. The babysitter can watch the kids.”

“Okay, I'll see you in a bit.”

Roger hung up the phone and hurried to get his jacket and car keys. Pam handed him the cell phone at the door.

“Please call me as soon as you know anything,” she said, and kissed him goodbye.

As Roger exited the freeway onto city streets, nearing the hospital, he thought of his long-time friend. They had met as co-workers over ten years ago. It had always seemed an unlikely friendship. Roger

was the stuff athletes are made of: tall, lean and broad shouldered with a mess of black hair. Terry was shorter, with thinning brown hair and average looks and build. Roger was quiet and reserved, while Terry possessed a natural ability to communicate.

Aside from the obvious differences, both men were intelligent and each possessed strong commonalities of character. They shared a steadfast belief in the reality of God, and the ability to relate to him. A quiet, humble life was preferred over fame, fortune or power. It was these shared qualities that became the foundation for their friendship, and even though they now worked for different companies, their families had remained close over the years.

Roger said a prayer as he turned into the hospital parking lot, "God, please take care of my friend."

That simple request, spoken out of a deep trust in God's goodness, brought a feeling of calm within his being.