

FIRE FROM HEAVEN

Jacob Collin's Church hasn't been the same since the economic collapse of his hometown Flint Michigan during the 1980's. Throughout the following years, crime and poverty have turned the once upscale church into a shadow of its former self. Despite his best efforts to revive the city, the seasoned pastor begins to question his calling.

After a series of assaults on his congregants, Jacob decides that it's too costly to turn the other cheek. In his anger, he publicly curses the neighborhood where the assaults happened, by praying that God destroy the area. Two days later the area suffers a tragic fire that leaves many in the neighborhood dead. Jacob is shocked to see his words fulfilled. He is even more amazed when the survivors of the fire flock to the church to seek God's forgiveness and reconciliation.

When Jacob learns the true cause of the fire he must choose to allow the city to believe a lie or continue with a ministry of vengeance, knowing that the secret could be his undoing.

Chapter One

Jacob Collins

1986

It was another day by God's grace. That was what Jacob Collins wanted to believe. Though it was the latter part of the phrase that became harder to accept each day. He was having trouble sleeping again. Continuing to think of each coming Sunday brought the reminder of what his once glorious church had become. No longer was it the overflowing building where worshipers of all races, ages, and classes, would come to hear the word of God proclaimed with power. But now it was a place where the downtrodden, homeless, and lowly would surface for almost any other reason except for finding divine fellowship.

It was only eight years ago that the economic collapse of Flint, Michigan occurred. It hit the city harder than a metropolitan blackout, being felt from the

upscale to those who were so destitute that the assigning of a financial class would be a waste of words. Over thirty-seven thousand jobs were lost. And for a city of only one hundred thousand it was more than devastating. Businesses immediately closed, families relocated, and suicides, were the primary signs of the deflation. Though what Jacob remembered most was the complete and utter loss of faith by many churchgoers in the city. It was as if men and women of all ages and backgrounds had totally apostatized from their trust in the Divine.

He had tried to visit some of the most active members of his congregation. But before long their repetitious slander began to sicken him. “*Where was God at when they laid off my husband?*” The questions continued, seeming with time to become increasingly anathema. At first he tried to sympathize with the emotions of the most devastated. But as the

vehemence against God became stronger, he found himself so repulsed that it was a challenge to even be in the presence of those he now labeled “born again heathen.” In a matter of months his church membership decreased by half from four hundred active members to less than one hundred. And by the end of the first year of the recession with families moving, men turning away from God, and suicide, the active membership stood at 17 souls.

Throughout the past eight years he attempted to imitate his preacher Father Harold Collins. Harold had the ability to spark a revival at any venue he went to. He almost deified his father and the aura that followed him. The First Church of the Messiah was his father’s before it was handed down to him. He could remember the hoards of families who would flock to the church every Sunday to hear the fire and brimstone preachers breathe fear into the heart of every lost sinner while comforting every saint in the way of God. Those times were now a far and distant memory. Jacob had attempted to merge with the town’s other churches and pastors who

experienced a similar falling away. And though many uplifting sermons were preached and many prayer meetings were held with prayers and tears, more numbers continued to leave the church. Soon those pastors and ministers left. Some had to sell their buildings. Every thought of what his father would do in a situation like this had been exhausted. Besides the fact that he owned the church and promised his father that he would keep it until Christ's advent he too would have considered leaving the church behind. Though with no children to pass it down to he wondered if the building would be his only legacy.

It was finally time to wake up. No alarm clock was needed since his body had been trained since his youth to rise every morning at 6 a.m. It was always at that time when his loving mother would wake him up for breakfast on Sunday. The memory was etched in his mind. That wonderful smile and loving arm would gently caress his shoulder as she would joyfully recite

his name with a Psalm. *“Jacob, this is the day that the Lord had made; Let us rejoice and be glad in it.”* It was a beautiful way to arise on the Lord’s Day. For such a loving and godly family was one of the things that he was most thankful for. He as an adolescent always desired to return that same beatitude on his own children. Though, at the age of 19 he decided to remain celibate. He deemed that it would be the church and her people who would be his true spiritual offspring.

He rose up from the bed and looked to the familiar site of his small one bedroom loft apartment. He kept it simple and modest; a twin size bed, small study desk with a lamp, and a drawer to keep his linen. Inside his closet along with his suits could be found many long old-style Episcopal robes that had been passed down to him from his father. Earlier in his life he felt a pride, even as if the spirit of his father was overshadowing him as he would slip the sanctified cloth over his head and onto his back. It had been six years since he had worn one. They hung in the closet as if an ancient artifact as holy as the Shroud of Turin. With his congregation

being in its current condition, he felt a deep sense of unworthiness to his father and also of God to dawn such sanctified linen.

The phone rang as it always did about this time. It was his unrequited wake-up from Daryl Jones, one of the three deacons that remained as a remnant from his original congregation. Daryl was an intelligent man of intense religious convictions. That was one of the things that Jacob liked most about him. On the other hand Daryl could become boisterous, unrelenting, and negatively suspicious at anyone or anything at any time. Jacob attributed the strong black man's sporadic irrationality as an obvious effect of serving time in Vietnam. Daryl had spent time throughout his past enlistment frequenting the local V.A. hospital. Acute depression that revealed itself in spurts of violence caused many in the city to label him as psychiatric. Even many in Jacob's congregation seemed anxious to avoid him and weary of his pursuits to enjoin himself in the classification of

normal. But with spiritual eyes of loving perception, Jacob was able to see past the exterior of outward judgment and find within Daryl's heart a godly concern and passion for all those he came into contact with.

“Good morning Daryl, how are you? Jacob answered as he stood from the bed.

“God bless you Pastor. How did you sleep last night?” he asked in a reserved tone.

Jacob walked to the window. He thought before answering. He earnestly wanted to lie to Daryl by telling him, “Slept fine.” For only that response would pacify Daryl's inquiry. He knew that Jacob was not the same man of God he once was. Sensing the pastor's hesitancy, Daryl spoke up.

“Still not well huh?”

Jacob sighed as he looked stories down from his view. “I slept better than some I reckon. That's something to be thankful for. How are you?

“Fine”, he responded with a childlike jubilee. Jacob always admired that about Daryl. Even though he had been abandoned by his wife since the initial diagnosis of post-traumatic stress syndrome, he never carried a smidgen of bitterness in him.

“You know I wanted to run some more ideas to you about what we could do to bring some of the city back to the church.”

Jacob walked back to his bed. He looked at the Bible on his desk before sitting down. He pondered with amusement what new revelation Daryl had been given concerning gathering the lost members who had either left the city or were still wallowing in the idolatry of self-pity. He smiled before breaking the silence, “I would love to hear it, Daryl. Same church, same time?”

Daryl quickly interjected reacting to the feeling he was being brushed

off.

“Pastor, we need to go to the neighborhood.” “What neighborhood?” Jacob quickly asked.

There was a pause before Daryl responded. “East Wiling”

As soon as the word Wiling was transmitted through the telephone receiver, Jacob’s heart skipped a pace. East Wiling since the early 80’s had become the worst section of the whole south Flint. The once middle-class hub where working families would pilgrimage before to before ascending to homeownership had now become a living sepulcher for drug dealers, harlots, corpse disposal and every other evil that could be conceived. Jacob hadn’t visited the neighborhood since the economic collapse. Before then, many of his congregation came from Wiling Jacob made many journeys into the once small but productive wing of the city. He would visit the elderly, sick, and all others needing human touch.

Those times were well past. Things had changed drastically. The last time Jacob had heard of any minister attempting to evangelize Sodom was five years ago. That was when a group of God-fearing Protestants from Ann Arbor heard about the city's financial and spiritual condition. They came with a group of seven to visit, choosing first a revival attempt at Wiling. Although no news station would report what occurred that day, most in the city's clergy heard what happened to the Ann Arbor missionaries. While there were many inconsistencies in the story told, each account had the same familiar thread of depravity.

It had reportedly been a fair Sunday afternoon five years ago when the missionaries entered the neighborhood. They sang songs of praise as they separated into two groups of two and one group of three. Undoubtedly most of the African –American residents were drawn back by the group of White and the lone Hispanic that chose to visit them unannounced. They went door to door with facial muscles flexed presenting the most sincere and concerned expressions. As the

doors opened unto them they were met with suspicious stares. Door after door was closed in their faces once the mention of the word church was pronounced. This rejection was received with a godly pity as the men continued on their journey. These were experienced soldiers who were acquainted not only with closed doors, but railings in foreign languages and open public ridicule. They committed themselves to the power of God and therefore were not in any way deterred by any encounter they would face.

“Lord God have mercy on these people”, the lead missionary in the first group prayed. Nowhere in his peripheral view could he escape some act of debauchery of lasciviousness being done. Whether it was a back door drug deal or solicitation, the missionaries saw and knew also that God saw; therefore they continued to pray.

When two of the missionaries were invited into a residence of two men they rejoiced in heart. They nevertheless remained prepared and alert to the

unexpected. As urban missionaries, they were taught the procedure for being targeted as robbery victims. Therefore each group of missionaries kept a high-frequency two-way radio to communicate with one another if any circumstance arose in which they might need assistance. But even with the threat, the men were spiritual optimists who always hoped for the manifestation of God's grace.

The two residents introduced themselves as Reginald and Hubert. Reginald was white, in his late thirties, and obviously effeminate. He politely greeted the servants of God with a disturbing smile. Hubert stood behind him as he listened to the men proclaim that they were ministers from Ann Arbor desiring to diagnose the spiritual condition of the city which had just been devastated. Reginald looked back at Hubert as if seeking a master's approval. Hubert nodded as Reginald welcomed the men inside to hear the gospel message. Reginald's stature was husk. He was a muscular black man apparently in his mid-40s. He was stoic in demeanor with deep penetrating brown eyes. He

had a thin mustache and thick beard which made his appearance look all the more peculiar. He smiled and shook the men's hands as they came inside.

The normal routine for the missionaries once welcomed in, was to ask the owner would it be acceptable if a prayer of blessing could be bestowed upon the residence. Hubert quickly agreed with a suspicious smile. They all gathered in a circle and held hands. The lead missionary opened his eyes as he finished his prayer to notice Hubert's eyes fixed upon him. That was not the strange thing that he primarily noticed. What was most evident was the arousal that protruded through Hubert's jeans as he began to sit down on the sofa.

The second missionary sat down on the sofa. Not sensing anything unusual he started to speak his ritual introduction; names, purpose, scripture; the question of faith. The question always consisted of an inquiry into one's own spiritual prognosis. Reginald leaned forward as he expressed that his mother and father were devout agnostics. He was an only child and was allowed to do

almost anything he wanted without boundaries. This was more understandable once the missionaries learned that Reginald's parents were drug-addicted. Reginald stated that even though he had been raised in a dysfunctional family, he always held to the idea that God existed and that he understood his needs. The missionaries were delighted to hear such a positive and correct interpretation of the divine. They believed that a spiritual seed had already been planted in the heart of the God-needing man.

The mood remained calm as Hubert began to express his own theology. He told of his early upbringing that detailed the death of his mother at birth. With no family to merge into he became the property of the state. He had lived in a total of 12 foster homes before the age of 16. The missionaries empathized with this dear soul as he told them of the abuse he suffered from foster parents.

Even while listening to the conclusion of Hubert's words, the lead missionary could not seem to erase from

his memory the earlier sight of Hubert. The uneasiness of his spirit seemed to be more alert when he glanced at Reginald. Though Hubert was finishing his story, Reginald was quietly laughing within himself, using his hand to cover his true candid expression. The initial judgment by the man's behavior was that either he was mentally disturbed, or that he knew Hubert was elaborating on a concocted fable that we are being told for an unknown reason. When Reginald caught the missionary glancing at him, he immediately attempted to return to a focused demeanor. Reginald attempted a sorrowful smile in the direction of the missionary before refocusing on Hubert.

Hubert finished his oral diary before looking down to the ground from his seat. The second missionary in his concern reached out to embrace Hubert's hand. Hubert looked up with that same stoic demeanor when his ears were met with the encouraging words, "Believe me, God knows your pain." Hubert grinned slightly. Though it was not the expression of one who had just

received comforting or caring words. It was a devilish smirk of a schoolyard bully who despite whatever sincere words were spoken by his victim, knew that he would inflict severe terror at any given moment.

The second missionary, seeking also to give more consolation, began to open his Bible. The man of God sought to grace Hubert not only with his words but with the Word of God. While the missionary began to flip through the pages, Hubert gave Reginald a quick glance and a nod. The glance still carried the schoolyard scowl that had the cognitive effect to communicate to Reginald that something was about to happen.

Hubert rose from his seat and sat down next to the second missionary. He smiled at him as he noticed the small two-way radio that was attached to his belt. He focused on it before giving the man of God another half-hearted smile. The second missionary attempted to regain a reasonable amount of space on the sofa as he discreetly moved away from Hubert a few inches. Reginald then attempted to make small talk with the

lead servant while Hubert began to lean closer to the missionary while the Bible Passage Isaiah 49:15 was read. Hubert's eyes rose to match the missionary's eyes as he looked up to exegete the scripture meaning. The missionary noticed how the vastly transfigured mannerism that the man had once displayed. No longer was Hubert's stoic and emotionally void presentation presentable. It had now transformed into something that could only be described as deep lust.

The missionary unable to interpret this lust quickly looked to his elder who at the time was engaged in conversation with Reginald. As his heart began to increase in pace, he felt Hubert's hand now on his thigh. He speechlessly looked back to the predator, whose eyes were now looking down at him. He then noticed Hubert beginning to touch his own privy members as his grip on the missionary's thigh became tighter and more forced. The first missionary saw in his sight the emergency that had befallen them both. Before attempting a defense of his frantically frozen brother he reached down to his 2-way radio. That was when he was

met with a shattering blow from Reginald's fist to his ear. He instantly sunk into deep unconsciousness leaving his brother to fend for himself.

The second missionary attempted to throw a punch at Hubert. Though by reason of his relenting fear, his jab was as weak as his now loose bowels. Hubert caught his tightly balled fist as if catching a lazy fly ball before brutally punching him in the abdomen numerous times. With one child of God unconscious and the other lacking breath they were now at the mercy of this unspeakable evil which had befallen them. By the time the police would arrive, all that was found was the two wounded men unable to fully speak of what had befallen them.

This was the picture of East Wiling that Jacob now had seared into his brain. It was externally just another low-scale neighborhood that most people would seek to avoid. Though internally, it was another one of Satan's playgrounds. And in it, he would rule and reign in the heart of all those that belonged to him.

Jacob sighed as he tried to shake the negative thoughts from his mind. Sure Wiling was a bad neighborhood, but that didn't mean that good people didn't live there. And yes, evil works were done there though that did not mean that God could not redeem it unto himself at any time of his choosing. There were the types of thoughts and assumptions which Jacob believed revealed that he was not the same man of God that he once was. The former Jacob Collins would not flinch at an opportunity to evangelize Hell itself if given the opportunity. But now it seemed as if a legendary story had him using terminology that seemed to fit in a novel more than in the heart of a Pastor.

“So you think it would be a good idea, Daryl?”

Daryl responded quickly. “I believe so, Pastor. This is where God wants us to go. They need us there Jacob.”

Jacob could sense the seriousness of Daryl's emotions. Rarely or almost never did he ever call Jacob by his first name unless a great need was being explained.

“I know that they need us,” Jacob responded somberly. “And I understand your passion for the people there and I am glad for it. We will discuss it after Church this afternoon with Christ and Henry.”

“Okay Pastor,” Daryl replied. “I really have a feeling that this can be the start of getting the church back to how it was. And don’t you worry Pastor about nothing happening to us like what happened to those men from up north. God will protect us.”

Jacob looked in the mirror from his position on his bed. “Alright Daryl,” he replied heavily. “Thank you for the call. I’ll see you in a few hours.”

END OF CHAPTER ONE