

ABUNDANT RAIN

by: Vanessa Miller

Prologue

We wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places.

Ephesians 6:12

There was so much commotion on that twelfth day of September that no one noticed the two, tall-enough-to-give-Shaq-a-crook-in-his-neck figures that descended from on high. They walked through the eerie streets of New York passing many mournful and tear-soaked faces.

One man's knees buckled under the weight of his grief. His wife would not be coming out of the World Trade Center. He bowed his head low as he fell on the ground screaming, "Oh, God, why her? Why, God?"

Another grief-stricken victim shook her fists at the heavens and said, "You've never looked after us. Do You even exist?"

Nathan turned to Brogan. "The people's faith has waivered."

"Yes," Brogan answered. "Many saints will fall away from God because of yesterday's tragedy."

They continued on. Some assignments were harder to pull off than others. Nathan had a sinking feeling that this one would be a doozy. The prayers of the saints had risen to the heavens concerning Kenneth and Elizabeth Underwood. Aaron, the captain of the angelic hosts, had given Nathan charge over the safety and well-being of Kenneth. Likewise, Brogan had charge over Elizabeth.

Brogan pointed at the rubble. "You got any idea how we can get Kenneth out from under all that?"

Nathan shook his head. "We'll think of something."

"Why do you think the Almighty sends you on impossible assignments?"

“I don’t know.”

Their destination lay before them as a desolate wasteland. What was once beheld in awe was now the object of pity. Billowy smoke still rose from the ruins. In the place that was famous for buying and selling, body bags were now the commodity being exchanged, as executives and tycoons were lifted from the rubble.

Nathan pointed at a shadow that filled the air. “We’ve got company.”

“You didn’t think the evil one would miss the opportunity to see so much death and destruction did you?”

Nathan surveyed the layout. He wasn’t surprised at what his heavenly vision displayed. “His demons are all over this place. Just keep your head down, let’s find Kenneth and get out of here.” They moved quickly through the wreckage, each tossing aside stones that would have normally taken three or four men to lift.

Nathan and Brogan split up as they tirelessly worked hour after hour, removing rubble and pulling bodies from the debris. Brogan moved to the south side and continued sifting through the debris.

Nathan yelled. “I found him!”

Brogan ran back to the north side just in time to witness two hulking spirits standing over Nathan, growling and snarling. “Put him back, panzy boy.”

Nathan had Kenneth in his arms. He looked up to see who had just called him a panzy and was face to face with two of the biggest grizzly-looking demons he’d encountered in years. Their heads were like bats and they had ten-inch fangs. Nathan turned to Kenneth. He was bruised and bloody. Nathan couldn’t feel a pulse, but his body wasn’t cold yet. He had to be alive. Instead of getting his charge to a hospital right away, he was going to have to contend with Bif and Bof. “Get out of my way,” Nathan told them. “I’m on an assignment from the Lord!”

Bif and Bof burst out laughing. “You better put him down or I’m gon’ send you back to your Lord crying like a pigtail-wearing girl,” Bif told Nathan while massaging his fist with his scaly fang.

Brogan had already stripped out of his workman’s disguise and was now in full glory. Wings extended and sword drawn, he was ready for battle.

Nathan tried one more time. “Look, can y’all just get out of the way? I am not in the mood for kicking demon butt today, okay?”

The one with jaundice eyes spat brown mucus on the ground and snarled. “Punk, please. You’re the one in disguise, trying hard to not be noticed for who you are.” He puffed up his scaly chest. “We come as we are, cause we ain’t scared of,” he poked Nathan in the chest, “you or nobody else.”

“That’s right,” his beady-eyed, bat-faced cohort said. “Boy, I’m gon’ whup you so bad, you gon’ beg the Ancient of Days to make you human, so you can go on and die.”

Nathan laid his charge down, praying that he wouldn’t become a casualty of 9-11. But if he didn’t spank Bif’s and Bof’s fang-extended behinds, he wouldn’t get Kenneth out of here anyway. Nathan took off his workman’s hat and a bright light shone above his head. The demons green-eyed it and got fidgety when he pulled off his workman’s clothes, and they had to behold his huge wings and white garment trimmed in gold. “Yeah, you miss this gear, don’t you?”

Jaundice eyes told him, “We’re going to beat it off you, then we’ll wear yours.”

“Never again will you wear the Lord’s armor,” Brogan said.

The demons turned their intimidating stares on Brogan. “That’s all right,” Nathan said. “They talk like those big-bad fallen angels that got their wings clipped, but they fight like Sodomites.” Nathan pulled out his golden sword. “Come on with it.”

When the ruckus exploded and the fight was on, friction from the heavenly and hellish blows caused fire to spring up as rubble and debris were kicked out of the way. The fire fighters got busy extinguishing the flames, while the rescue workers pulled countless half-dead and lifeless bodies from the ruins. None of them were aware of the struggle at Ground Zero, but a certain tension hung in the air.

Nathan and Brogan gave as good as they got. One blow after another was dealt to the adversary. Nathan was feeling pretty good about his performance, considering that he hadn’t been in battle in at least a century. Then he saw one of the rescue workers kneel down by Kenneth. The rescue worker looked up at another guy, then said, “I don’t think this one is going to make it.”

Nathan swerved around his opponent. He knelt down at Kenneth's side and whispered in his ear, "You've got to make it. You've got too much to live for. Don't give up now."

Jaundice eyes grabbed Nathan by the back of the neck and threw him into a pit of rubble. Brogan soon followed. Nathan shook his head and looked at his comrade. "Come on, we can't let these monkeys whup on us like this."

Brogan stood up and started stretching his wounded body. "I know, man. They've gotten stronger since we last met."

"Don't look now, but here they come, and they brought friends." Nathan looked around the pit for something to knock off the heads of those demons. Several steel beams had been tossed into the rubble when the buildings collapsed. Each beam was already constructed in the form of a cross. That was all the sign he needed. He stood up and grabbed one of the beams. "You slice 'em and dice 'em with your sword and I'm going to have some batting practice with these beams," Nathan told Brogan.

The demons descended upon them. Bif, Bof and friends, lived through the night, but by morning they regretted their folly. Nathan picked up beam after beam and smashed one rotten skull after the next. Brogan then drove his sword threw their hell-possessed bodies. The demons that Brogan didn't get with the sword had steel beams driven through them. The beams were firmly planted in the ground. The deed took all night. Nathan and Brogan wearily ascended from the pit, too tired to notice the construction worker that walked into the World Trade Center looking for any sign of life and found hope. The man stood in front of the crosses that Nathan had erected, bellowed out, "Abba, Father! You are here!"

He ran past Nathan and Brogan as he spread the word of what he had found. Fire fighters and rescue workers followed him back to the sight. He carried a can of spray paint, and with it he wrote "God's House," and drew a directional arrow. The fire fighters looked at the shards of steel that formed crosses standing in perfect symmetry. In a place where everything else was in complete disarray, they bowed down and began to weep and pray to God.

"Where is he, man?" Nathan asked.

"I don't know," Brogan replied.

Nathan lifted his head to the heavens and asked, “Where is he, Lord? Please give me some direction.”

The heavens were silent.

Nathan fell to his knees, snatched gray debris from the ground, and threw the ashes on his head. “Not again. Oh, God, no, no, nooo!”

Covered in soot and ashes, Elizabeth Underwood opened her eyes. She spent the night amongst the rubble and debris at Ground Zero, waiting for news of her husband. When none came, she stood up, and ran her soot and ash stained hands through her tangled hair. She tried, unsuccessfully, to wipe some of the dirt from her clothes as she walked to one of the firemen. “How long is this going to take? I need answers, I need my husband!” she demanded.

He turned away, unable to meet her pitiful gaze. “We’re working hard. We’re going as fast as we can.”

She walked away. She wanted to tell him that today was her tenth anniversary, and that she and Kenneth had plans. But God had conspired against her. She woke up to a world that did not contain her husband. And she was forced to inhale and exhale without him. She could now answer the question Jesus asked, “Oh, death, where is your sting?” The sting was felt by loved ones. The people left behind. She, Elizabeth Underwood, had been stung.

She spent four years of college dating Kenneth, another ten years of marriage, loving and adoring him. Making him her world. Even through their bad times, she had loved that man.

Forget all the waiting, she would find her husband herself.

“Ma’am, you can’t go in there,” one of the firefighters told her.

Elizabeth kept walking.

“Look, lady,” he said, grabbing her arm. His grip was tight. “This is not a safe area. Just let us do our job, okay?”

“All right,” she said. He released her arm and Elizabeth took off running.

“Grab her!”

Two men in gray t-shirts and jeans grabbed Elizabeth and tried to pull her away from the rubble. “No!” she screamed. She dug in her heels and fought against their grip. “Please, please let me go. I’ve got to find my husband.”

They finally managed to pull Elizabeth out of the way. They sat her down on a piece of the Tower that had flown a hundred feet away from the building. “It’s for own your safety, ma’am. We don’t want you to get hurt.”

Both men were white, young and athletic. One of them had a mustache. The other was clean-shaven.

“But it’s my *anniversary*,” she whimpered.

The clean-shaven gentleman said, “Aw, dag. Just hold on. We’ll find your husband.”

Her back arched as her shoulders slumped. How could she hold on? Didn’t he know that her world had collapsed?

Why have you done this to me Lord? We were faithful to You. My husband loved You – I thought You were supposed to rebuke the devourer? Two firemen pulled a man’s body out of the rubble. She put her hand to her mouth and gasped. Kenneth? Well, she couldn’t just sit on this rock and wonder.

She watched them lay the body on the ground. Elizabeth barreled through the on-lookers and workers. She fell after tripping on a rock, got up, and didn’t bother to brush the dirt from her clothes. She ignored the, “You can’t go in there,” and “Ma’am, come back,” pleas. Nobody was going to stop her.

By the time she reached the body, tears had welled in her eyes. She collapsed to her knees. As she looked in the face of this dead man she let the tears flow. He wasn’t Kenneth, but someone would miss him. She cried for that person, another victim of the sting of death.

“Ma’am, is this your husband?”

She shook her head. The workers bent down to pick the man up.

“Wait!” Elizabeth screamed.

The clean-shaven man she had talked to earlier said, “We have to move his body. I’m sorry.” He touched her shoulder.

“But, but – his family. They shouldn’t see him like this.” The man’s shirt and pant leg had been torn. She reached over and buttoned the jacket of his navy blue suit. They took the body into a building that had the word “Dead” spray painted on one side and “Alive” on the other. Had Mr. Navy Blue Suit also trusted in the Lord for his safety?

Brogan stood over Elizabeth, desperately trying to find a way to comfort her. Nathan was out scouring the city in search of Kenneth. Brogan looked toward the same building at which Elizabeth was staring, and prayed that Kenneth was not in there. At least, not on the same side they had just laid the man Elizabeth cried over.

He put his hand on her shoulder. Elizabeth looked around, immediately feeling a change in her environment. She shrugged, shifting away from this comforting feeling that was trying to overtake her and moved back into her state of misery. A night’s sleep on the hard dust-covered ground had not changed anything for her. She still prayed for lightening to strike, or for a bulldozer to run her over. Funny how death ignores you, when you crave it.

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Tommy Brooks sat at a back table in the Belante’ Club going over his nightly receipts, his mail, and paying bills. Empty glasses from the night before lined the bar and some of the tables. The club had been good to him. This was the Friday and Saturday night home to hustlers, gold-diggers, punks, and thieves. At least, that’s what the Dayton Daily Newspaper reported. Tommy didn’t care. Thieves paid their liquor bill just like well-educated businessmen. Oh, he’d had a few run-ins with the law because of his clientele, but cops and news cameras added to the appeal. The best thing that ever happened to the Belante’ Club was the night Isaac Walker got shot. Tommy shook his head. Ray-Ray

was the poster child for stupidity. Take on Isaac Walker? Hah, many had tried, but few lived to tell about it. Well, Ray-Ray's soul was now being tormented in hell for the effort.

At least that's the story Isaac was telling everybody. Isaac was on a letter-writing campaign. Determined to tell everybody about his so-called hell experience. Who would have thought, big-bad Isaac would go jail-house salvation. Tommy guessed it was his turn to hear the story, as he picked up his letter from Isaac and opened it.

Tommy,

Man, I just wanted to drop you a line and tell you how sorry I am about how things went down in your club. I've been rethinking a lot of stuff lately.

You're not going to believe this, but I took a trip to hell. I saw Ray-Ray. Do you remember my girl, Valerie? She was also there. They were being tormented like nothing I've ever seen. And, I've seen a lot, man. Whew. I don't know. My head is still messed up behind that whole scene.

Anyway, how is everyone doing on the outside? Was the 9-11 attack as big a shock to you as everyone else? Do you have any family members in New York? Nina's best friend, Elizabeth Underwood, went to New York with her husband to celebrate their tenth wedding anniversary. He was in the tower when it collapsed. She lives in Dayton. If you know her, you might send some flowers or something. I hear she's not doing too well.

I don't want to take up too much of your time. I just wanted to let you know that I'm a better man in prison, than I ever was on the street. God has graced me with a second chance, and I'm taking it.

May the peace of God reign in your life,

Isaac

Tommy laughed so hard he had to wipe the tears from his eyes. "Alert the warden! Somebody is selling drugs in prison." Tommy slapped his knee and tried to calm his chuckles. "Whew. I got to have whatever Isaac is taking."

He finally stopped laughing, sat back in his seat, and thought about Elizabeth. Yeah, he knew her. How could he forget the best vocalist he'd ever heard? The only time he'd ever considered giving up

his precious Belante' Club was due to the emotions she sparked in him. Five years ago, Elizabeth auditioned to be the lead singer at his nightclub. Her voice was like warm honey. He still dreamed about the sway of her body, as she bellowed out tunes that made you want to close your eyes and float away. Impressed, he called some cats he knew from the music industry, had them listen to her audition tape, and was about to sign her to a contract when she turned Jesus freak on him. Years had passed and he still hadn't been able to get her off his mind.

He'd had countless lovers since the day she walked through his door. He rubbed his goatee with his thumb and index finger. Women couldn't get enough of this Mandingo black brother. And he gave them all the loving they could handle. There was only one woman he couldn't stop thinking about. The one he had never touched, because she was married. At least, she had been married. Maybe, just maybe...

Lillian Edwards didn't take kindly to able bodies lying in bed all day. "Elizabeth, child, I swear you're going to end up with bed worms if you don't get out of that bed. Adjust your position, or something." Elizabeth figured the only way to shut her mother up was to sit in the living room. So here she was, in flannel pjs and Kenneth's old terrycloth robe. Her dark brown eyes carried the same vacant expression they had for the past two months, as she put her feet on the couch and hugged her knees to her chest.

"Do you want me to get you anything, honey?" her mom asked.

Elizabeth shook her head. Her shoulder-length hair swished lightly across her deep chocolate face. Elizabeth didn't speak much, and never initiated conversations anymore. Sometimes she would lay in bed real still, staring into space. Drifting away.

"You have got to snap out of this, Elizabeth. Your children need you," her mom told her.

"Don't you think I know that?" Elizabeth wanted to scream at her mother. She wanted to kick, throw something. Anything, but be trapped in this world of despair. Her children *were* suffering. She

wanted to hold them, tell them everything was going to be all right. But how could she, when she couldn't even figure out how to wake up without wishing for death?

“Real hard to watch my baby drift away like this,” Mrs. Edwards told Nina.

Elizabeth looked at her friend. Well, Nina was not just a friend. Since the day they met at a new member's meeting at The Rock Christian Fellowship, they had been best friends. Five years. Whew, where did the time go? They learned to lean on each other and count on their friendship to get them through tough times. But this was the toughest situation they'd ever faced. Elizabeth knew Nina wanted to help, but what could she do?

Nina nodded in agreement with Mrs. Edwards. “Real hard.”

Tears rolled down Elizabeth's face. Her mother grabbed the Kleenex. “I swear, sometimes I don't think she knows that she's crying.” She wiped her daughter's face and kissed her on the forehead. If only forehead kisses made it all better.

Elizabeth ran her hand through her hair, then reached out and touched her mother's hand. “They never gave me a body, Mama. How can I move on, if I can't even bury my husband?”

Nina knelt down in front of her friend and whispered, “Elizabeth, would you like to pray? Do you want me to read the Bible to you? That might be comforting, huh?”

Elizabeth lifted her head. She was going to tell Nina what she could do with her Bible readings. For two months, Nina had come to her house toting her Bible, quoting scriptures, talking about the joy of the Lord and His strength. Elizabeth had had enough. She opened her mouth to blast her friend when the doorbell rang.

Elizabeth sunk into the couch and pulled the cover over her body. She wanted to pull it over her head. Better yet, she wanted a pair of earplugs. That way she wouldn't have to listen to another do-gooder tell her to let Kenneth's memory rest in peace. “Get over his death and move on. Live for the Lord again,” as one of her visitors had told her. She wanted to know why they thought she should get over Kenneth's death, when no one had ever produced his body? And why should she live for the Lord? What had He done for her lately?

“I don’t want to see anyone else from the church right now,” she told her mom, then turned to Nina’s disapproving stare. “All they do is judge me. Don’t you think I know they’re talking behind my back?”

“Elizabeth---”

“I know how they feel, Nina,” Elizabeth said. “They think I should get over it. They’ve told me that I should allow God to take away my pain. Well, I don’t know how to do that, and I’m tired of listening to them preach at me.”

Nina replied, “All right, you lay down and rest. I’m gonna check on the kids.”

Before Nina could stand up, Mrs. Edwards walked back in the living room with a large bouquet of roses. Two dozen to be exact. “That was the florist. Here, read the card.” She handed Elizabeth the card, then placed the roses on the mantel.

“They’re from Tommy Brooks,” Elizabeth told them after opening the card.

“Tommy Brooks?” Nina put the base of her hand on her forehead as her fingers danced through her short, but stylish hair. “Isn’t he the owner of the Belante’ Club?”

“That’s him.” Elizabeth presented her friend with a sorta-kinda smile. “I auditioned for him a few years back. I was going to be his lead singer at the club.”

“Good thing you found Jesus,” Nina joked.

Elizabeth’s lips curved downward. She sunk back into the couch and mumbled, “Yeah, good thing.”