LOVE'S FINAL SUNRISE

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This book is dedicated to Christ's elect.
May Love's Final Sunrise *educate, encourage,*
and enrich you to a better understanding of
the love Christ has for His children!

"[F]alse christs and false prophets will rise
and show great signs and wonders to deceive,
if possible, even the elect." Matthew 24:24

PREFACE

There are opposing views on whether the rapture will occur pretribulation, midtrib, or posttrib.

According to the pretrib view, Christ will come just before the seven-year tribulation and secretly take the Church, then after the seven years, He will return.

According to the midtrib view, the rapture will take place during the tribulation, but before the three-and-a-half-year reign of the Antichrist.

And according to the posttrib view, the rapture will take place at the end of the three-and-a-half-year reign of the Antichrist as told in Matthew 24:30, before Armageddon and the seven last plagues.

But no one knows that day or hour when Jesus will return, not even the angels in heaven (see Matthew 24:36). In the Holy Bible, as the prophets foretold the birth of our Savior, Jesus Christ, our Lord God gave His followers a road map in Revelation, Daniel, Ezekiel, Matthew, Luke, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, 2 Peter, and 1 Corinthians of when to expect certain events.

Throughout the Scriptures, God never took His people *out* of calamity but provided ways for them to *endure*. For example: Noah and the flood, Daniel in the lion's den, David fleeing from Saul. There are countless stories throughout history of endurance, such as the Christians suffering persecution during the Dark Ages. The early Christians throughout Rome and the Middle East suffered unto death for their convictions.

Your faith will always determine your destination. Jesus tells us to be ready, to watch for His return. Delays test our faith, and monetary

pleasures entice us.

Current news headlines draw us closer to the end of this age. "Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour in which the Son of Man is coming" (Matthew 25:13).

PROLOGUE

Ruth Jessup was fed up with New York City. A reporter for one of the city's most prestigious newspapers, the highlight of her five-year employment was writing the headline, "The United States Negotiates Israel's Shared Peace Agreement." Yes, Israel's prime minister and Palestine had come together, and the long-prophesied temple was built within that year.

However, her liberal editor-in-chief couldn't dwell on that. After the temple was complete, a whirlwind of crises exploded across the world's landscape. The next three-and-a-half-years produced more worldwide pandemics. Stock markets plummeted. Grocery store shelves across the country were drastically depleted with shortages of meat, fish, bleach, cleaning supplies, masks, gowns, and toilet paper. Churches couldn't meet. Banks couldn't operate. Retail stores closed.

Her editor demanded she write watered-down versions of the facts. How could she? "The public has eyes." Doctors, nurses, and pharmacists came down with the dreaded plague. Hospitals refused visitors. Patients were denied their loved ones' support. Everything that wasn't mandatory for emergency use was ordered closed. Funeral homes were pushed to their limits. The death toll rose, and there were no places to house the bodies but in closed ice-skating rinks. Retail, barber, beauty, veterinary, and many small-chain grocery stores ceased operations. People were laid off and wondered if they would have jobs to return to.

Meat processing plants closed because employees came down with the virus. Dairy farmers were forced to dump their milk, with no way

to get it to market. Grocery store chains panicked to keep their store shelves stocked.

Just when things were getting better, an unprecedented cyber-attack spawned additional fear in Americans. The attack stopped pipelines from distributing gasoline and brought cars to a standstill. Meatpacking plants were next hit. They couldn't produce their meats. Who was doing this?

Ruth came close to losing her life twice, reporting on the riots. Stores were looted; buildings were burned to the ground. Police were spit on, shot at, and precincts were burned and abandoned. Endorsed by her news media, a left-wing dignitary from the European Union rose to power. He enacted a European currency, and nations sighed in relief.

With the Abraham Accord peace agreement enacted with Israel and Palestine, the Temple Mount seemed always to be in the headlines.

However, not to be outdone with what was happening in Europe, which created a massive database on their citizens, the US president decided the public needed further protection from another pandemic, and House Bill H.R. 6666 was voted into law. This would be linked through their cell phones. Everyone was ordered to receive a national ID Number and was placed into a national database. This would help citizens who traveled abroad. Now, the government could track where individuals were, and who they had been with. That was enough for Ruth Jessup. She tossed her cell in the garbage. She had had enough of being a New Yorker.

Could her Gran's predictions have come true? Religious freedoms across the globe were threatened. Hangings and beheadings were a common occurrence in Iran and Muslim countries.

Ruth landed a job as editor-in-chief in Cassell City, Michigan. And with the latest pandemic under control, the United States and the rest of the world's economy returned to limited normalcy. Still, pestilences and pandemics lurched upon the timetable of uncertainty with every turn of the calendar month. Two fanatical men in Jerusalem claimed they were causing them!

In the small town of Cassell, businesses reopened and people were reemployed. The public was optimistic at what appeared as normalcy,

except for the catastrophic swing of climate disasters blamed on global warming.

Ruth sighed with relief as the world economy and the good old USA's stock market surged. Writing about the current events became easier, and she threw herself into her work.

Gran turned out to be wrong about the Antichrist starting a one world order. Ruth had made the right move stepping away from the topsy-turvy streets of New York. She began a new life in Michigan. No more crazy parties, booze binges, or riotous living for her. She settled comfortably into her new seat as editor-in-chief of the *Cassell City Herald* and joined the local hunt club for recreation where she met the handsome lawyer Rex Rollins. The only thing left to complete her happiness was convincing her grandmother to live with her. She prayed Gran's Christian influence would lead her away from her dirty past, guide her to forgiveness, and reveal the peace she so yearned for. Then the unexplainable happened.

One

"But the path of the just is *like the shining sun, That shines ever brighter unto the perfect day. The way of the wicked* is *like darkness; They do not know what makes them stumble." Proverbs 4:18–19 NKJV*

Hoods covered the black-robed men, and a pitch-dark bonnet concealed a woman's face. Fear gripped Ruth Jessup's throat as the wind whipped her hair against her wet cheeks. Then out of the darkness galloped a milk-white stallion spouting fire from its nostrils.

Ruth bolted from her covers. Perspiration peppered her brow, and the folds of her pj's clung to her like wet laundry. She hoped a change of scenery might end her nightmares. She peeked out her bedroom window to the lawns and stables below. Well, that idea didn't work.

The barns and this old Amish farmhouse reminded her of life with Gran. I can't believe she's dead.

The trees outside bowed low to the probing of the wind, and the eaves of the old house croaked in reply. What happened, Gran? They never found the motorist who hit you.

Ruth and the Marcellus Hunt Club members arrived last evening at the Johansson Bed & Breakfast in Owenson during a downpour that left the Michigan countryside in a blanket of fog. Now that she was up, she might as well get dressed and saddle her mare for the meet.

Her horse, Hosanna, appeared glad to stretch her legs as much as she. They clipped down the drive in a ground-covering trot. Like the mist, the mystery of her grandmother's death swirled around her. "You

knew I'd be back. I always come back." In the wee corridors of Ruth's mind, she heard Gran's gentle voice. "Ruth, life never turns out the way you planned. If you don't seek the truth—you'll not find it. Avoid the broad road, follow the narrow. It'll be hard. The little-used always are." Gran had a smile that could light up the darkest night. "Remember, dear one, obey God, follow His commandments, and complete your calling—to the end of your road."

Ruth seesawed her bottom lip with her teeth. "The end of my road." The police said it was an accident. "Was it, Gran?" An anonymous person had written Ruth two days before Gran died. "Your Grossmutter needs you. Stop running—and come home."

It was a week ago this Sunday since Gran died. She always rose well before sunrise and reveled in the quiet, unhurried life of her Ohio Mennonite neighbors.

Ruth slowed her horse to a walk. "Guess I'm more like my grandmother than I thought." But she desired her own sunrise. Then there was that little—yeah, right, that *little* thing that mushroomed like a helium balloon rises.

She patted her horse's neck. "Maybe we should head back, huh, girl?" As she changed her direction, a sea of fog floated toward her. She shivered. "Unless you remember where the Johansson farmhouse is… we're lost, Hosanna."

Like a painter would his canvas, her eyes covered the landscape. Dark and light shadows swept the cultivated fields, which were flat as a pancake. Deep irrigation ditches gaped open on either side of the narrow road like graves awaiting a corpse. She recalled Gran's casket being lowered into the ground. The steel shoes of her horse grated on the gravel like the promises Ruth had made and never kept.

A flash of lightning crossed over her, and an aurora of greens, yellows, and pinks illuminated the sky. Like in the Catskills of New York, they floated there for what seemed a timeless moment.

Spotting an enclosed carriage about a half-mile ahead, she urged her mare into a clipping trot. "He might know where the Johansson farmhouse is."

She fixed her eyes on the black box on wheels with the solitary reflector. The few people she met in Owenson were strange. Even stranger than the Mennonites in Ohio.

She'd learned from Mr. Johansson, the owner of the bed and breakfast she was staying at, that their Amish Ordnung strictly adhered to the Old Order. That meant they lived like their ancestors of the 1800s. It was like being in an hourglass frozen in time, with no cars, electricity, or indoor plumbing. Johansson explained, "Our lifestyle keeps us from the temptations and worldly views of the twenty-first century."

Neat trick if it worked.

The swinging yellow beams of two lanterns ahead of her brought her back to the urgency of finding the Johansson farmhouse.

Reaching the enclosed carriage, she leaned forward on her horse. "Hello."

"Whoa," the man said. The large Standardbred horse stomped his foot impatiently.

"Does Michigan usually experience this type of aurora?"

"Is that what that is, an aurora?"

"Yes. I've seen auroras in New York, but never brought on with a bolt of lightning." She rested back in her saddle. "Uh, do you happen to know the fastest way to the Johansson farm?"

"Follow this road until it bends to the left, then turn right on Peak. It will take you there."

Her curiosity got the better of her. "How do your people get the news without a radio or television?"

The man poked his head around the corner of his carriage. His well-tanned face constricted into tiny laugh lines like a cork on a wine bottle. "We rely on you English." His chuckle escaped through the click he bestowed to his horse. "Giddy up." The horse's shod hooves resonated a rhythmic beat, pounding a fast-paced clip as hurried as the man's attitude.

Ruth reined up her horse. Not very sociable. Well, what did I expect, asking for a polite conversation with a guy driving a mirror-image of a century-old hearse? She urged her horse into a canter.

Joshua heard the galloping hooves of the horse before he saw the woman's backside leave him in her wake with not a passing glance. She's a good rider, attractive too, though it was hard to see the color of her hair captured by that hairnet. The velvet-black helmet covering her head emphasized her large, expressive eyes. "She has a bite to her, I suspect."

He pulled thoughtfully on his beard. Her upturned nose gave her just the right amount of sassiness too. It was easy to spot both horse and rider, even in the dark. Her mare's shiny white coat shone like a spotlight for a half-mile in the moon's glow. Her slender silhouette, set off by her snug riding coat, displayed just the right measure of curves. Only, something didn't feel right. What would make a lady like her ride alone before the dawn?

But he shouldn't be pointing fingers. He selected this lonely stretch of road knowing he'd not meet another person.

Perhaps she was looking for something—or someone? He could relate to that. Maybe she'd had a falling out with her boyfriend or possibly a husband? His thoughts submerged into the undertow of the past.

Sometimes he thought he heard her—his beloved Sara. But, no, 'twas only a passing remembrance of her laughter and her soft steps in the small hours of night—his mind playing tricks with his emotions. No, he couldn't do anything about that.

He needed to focus his attention on what he could change, like the crops. Life wasn't getting any easier for an Amish farmer, what with the pestilences, droughts, and that last epidemic that had swept their land. He heard tell the entire world got it. The hospitals had to use schoolrooms void of students. Everyone had been ordered to stay in their homes. Still, the dreaded plague had insinuated its black claws of death into old and young, leaving wives without husbands and children without parents.

Joshua had a distant relative in Nebraska who wrote him and said the pandemic was as bad as the locusts that got into his wheat crop.

Still, he counted himself blessed. It was only one crop, and they'd brought the pests under control. Unlike the pandemic.

At least the locusts in Nebraska weren't in the millions, the number that swarmed India and Africa a couple of months before. Alerted by a noise behind him, he jerked from his reverie with a jolt.

The rumbling grew closer, coming fast. A vehicle. The headlights floated past him and down the road, distorting the image of his horse and buggy. He looked for a place to pull over. His dear friend lost his life a fortnight before to a speeding car that hit him in the backside of his buggy. He and his horse died instantly; his wife was thrown from the buggy and was still in the hospital.

The roar grew louder, he glanced back—a big semi-truck. The headlights lit him up like the fourth of July firecracker he'd once sent off.

The driver wasn't slowing down. He could spook Joshua's horse, especially if the truck was carrying gravel. Rocks sometimes fell off a fast-moving truck without the cover fastened tight. The roar became deafening. Seeing a lane jagging into a narrow road, he pulled into it and kept his horse busy, turning her around in a nearby field, then pulled up the sideroad to wait for his assailant. His Standardbred could see where the noise came from, making her less likely to spook, seeing the object in front instead of to her rear.

Three blasts from the driver's horn affirmed the driver knew of his existence. It seemed to imply, "Get out of my way, or else I'll mow you down."

The lights of the semi cast ghost-like images across the landscape. A deep irrigation ditch only inches away from Joshua's wheel gaped at him. His horse whinnied, prancing in her bindings. He jumped down and took hold of her bridle. "Easy, girl, it'll pass us soon." Running his hand down her neck, he whispered soothingly, "It'll be all right, you'll see."

Stinging gravel peppered him and his horse as the massive semi hauling two gravel trains, the cover of the last partly open, roared by them. In the glow of the truck's headlights, he could see the silhouette of the lady on her horse.

There was no place for her to go. Joshua jumped into the driver's seat and slapped the reins. "Haw!"

The semi-truck headlights landed on the lady's horse. The mare neighed and rose on her front legs, bounced down, and then upwards in a half-rear. Her neigh sliced through the truck's roar and echoed down the road to Joshua as rocks of various sizes slid from the gravel trains, pelting woman and horse as it passed. The animal reared a third time, striking out at her would-be assailant, the truck.

"God, help me!" the lady yelled. The mare struggled to gain a hold in the soft dirt along the irrigation ditch.

Joshua jumped down. A gasp escaped the lady's lips as he swung her down. His horse whinnied. Her horse answered.

The sand along the side of the irrigation ditch shifted. The mare whinnied shrilly. He'd never heard such a cry for help from a horse before. Losing the battle, her legs buckled beneath her.

"Hosanna!" the woman cried.

A whiff of saddle soap and wood smoke whisked past Ruth's nose. Pebbles and debris tumbled down the steep ditch. Caught in a slow, agonizing moment, she watched Hosanna's thousand-pound body fall sideways as the sand and gravel beneath her legs crumbled away.

A lone, frightening whinny echoed in the unbearable silence. Hosanna landed backward, her saddle digging into the mud and water. The Amish man ran down the steep ditch after the horse, jumping over the rocks and mounds of dirt. He reached for Hosanna's reins before she got them tangled in her thrashing hooves.

Coughing spasms rattled Ruth's throat as she stood on the side of the road inhaling dust. She shielded her eyes from the particles and started down.

"Stay there," the man said, then spoke in soothing undertones to her frightened horse. Now lying on her side, her hooves thrashed the bank, her nostrils flared scarlet red.

What if Hosanna broke a leg, maybe severed a tendon? Pathetic sobs pulsated through Ruth's chest. This is all my fault.

Her mare rolled over and got to her knees. The man stroked her sweat-drenched neck. He guided Hosanna slowly up the steep sides of the irrigation ditch.

Ruth brushed the mud away from her horse's face as a line of sunlight sent its golden rays across the horizon. She blinked. She'd never seen a sunrise so vivid. The man's silhouette was shrouded in the flaxen color. Everywhere she looked, the eastern sky glowed. The man busied himself with running his solid hands over Hosanna's forelegs.

What must this stranger think of her? "I feel so stupid." Ruth wiped away the dirt from Hosanna as best she could. "I couldn't sleep. So, I saddled my horse and rode out. I…I'm with the hunt."

The stranger didn't answer. Ruth couldn't make out his face. He was a silhouette, a shadow encased with the brilliant aurora of the rising sun. She felt her mare relax beneath her hands. Hosanna nuzzled Ruth's shoulder as if to say, go on, introduce yourself.

"I'm Ruth Jessup." She tilted her head back. It's him—that man in the hearse. He was taller than she'd imagined. "Thank you, sir. What would I have done if you—?"

"The same."

"Uh, I suppose." I can't blame him for thinking the worst of me. She cleared her throat.

He removed his straw hat. A mass of sun-streaked yellow hair fell across his broad forehead, and the bluest eyes she'd ever seen stared into hers.

"I'm Joshua Stutzman."

"I was warming up my horse for the hunt when I passed you. Then this big semi-truck came out of nowhere and blew his horn—"

"Dumm," the man said. His square jaw relinquished to a large smile.

"Oh, I know, it was a dumb thing for me to do."

"The driver was dumm. Many English drivers know nothing about animals."

"I know. Motorists think horses can't feel the gravel their tires throw. Listen to me; I act like we're from different worlds. English? Say, I always wondered why the Mennonite and Amish call us English. Why not Americans?"

He placed his hat on his head. "Because we are Americans too. So, we call those people outside of our Amish community English. We are different, yet similar."

"You know more about horses than most English riders, me included."

"Danke. You'll be fine?" The soft texture of his voice soothed her like it had her horse.

Me? He's worried about me?

The man pointed to her dirt-caked sleeve and the cut on her face. "Your arm and your face are cut and bleeding." His boots grated the stones as he stepped toward her.

Ruth moved away. Was this an Amish custom, a biblical thing? The Mennonites she'd known were different from him. She touched her hairline, feeling the wet, oozy blood. A Good Samaritan thing Gran talked of in the Bible. No one ever worried about her. Well, Gran did. But that was in another lifetime.

Still, Ruth was done with God. Gran was dead. So was Ruth's real mother and with them everything she ever loved, including Jesus. "I'm fine, thank you."

He captured her thoughts with a knowing glance. "Ja? You sure?"

She didn't answer. She didn't need to.

He offered her his handkerchief. She clasped it, stroking her forehead with the cloth. Had God brought this Amish man? Her psychologist father claimed God is non-existent.

Ruth waved her hand in front of her face as if to shoo that thought away. Where was God when my mother died, and when my father married that woman?

"Is this the road to the Johanssons'?"

"Ja. But watch for the fork that is less traveled. It will take you to his barns first."

"Are the Johanssons Amish, like you?"

"Ja. But I think they want to be like you English."

"Oh? Is it possible to leave the Amish community? I mean, wouldn't something bad happen to them?"

"I was raised Amish. I left when I turned eighteen."

"So, you like to run away too."

He crossed his arms and studied her. "I didn't run away. I had questions I needed to answer about myself. Besides, I needed to decide if the Amish lifestyle was true to my calling. I returned to help my *Mutter* when my *Dat* died. I didn't see the need to leave. I'm thirty-three. You, I figure, must be twenty-five?"

"Twenty-eight, and I'm not sure I understand. Your calling? What—"

"You'll find it in here." He tapped his chest, then summed up his assessment of her with six words. "What are you afraid to confront?"

"Me?" She avoided his look. She was fourteen when a hit-and-run driver killed her mother. On her fifteenth birthday, her father remarried a divorced woman with two children, a fourteen-year-old girl and an eleven-year-old boy. So began Ruth's habit of running away when life didn't suit her.

"Could be you're running away…from your calling? You can't hide from God or His Son. He will keep pricking your conscience until you admit you have a need."

She grabbed her stirrup leather and flung it over her saddle, then pulled up the flap to tighten the saddle's girth. How did he know that? She glanced over her shoulder. His eyes felt as if they bored a hole into the back of her head. She didn't enjoy knowing he saw a road map into her innermost thoughts. A bullfrog croaked not more than two inches from her boots, and she jumped.

"That frog won't bother you. Ja, you know this. So, what has you upset? Me asking about your calling? We all have one. It is our destiny, our reason for being born."

She attempted an amused laugh. It came out a pathetic guffaw. "Calling, yeah, right. My grandmother often said, 'The earth is our battlegrounds; the life hereafter is where our eternal home awaits, and the Holy Bible is our road map to get us there.'" Why did I say that?

"Ja, this is true. Where is your grandmother now?"

"Dead. A hit-and-run motorist rammed her carriage when her buggy supposedly strayed to the center of the road. They think she might have had a heart attack."

She pinched her eyes shut, blocking the picture of Gran's funeral last Sunday and the words she overheard a woman say to another. "Mother Ruth died of a broken heart."

The scene etched her memory like an epic movie with no happy ending in sight. The Mennonite women, dressed in floor-length black dresses, with their black bonnets shadowing their faces, had not noticed Ruth standing there beneath a weeping willow tree. Or if they had, to them, she didn't exist.

Why should she care? So what if they blamed her for Gran's death. She blamed herself too. There. She admitted it. "I'll head on back to the stable now." Her words came out as raspy as that bullfrog. "Can we keep this incident between the two of us?"

He touched the brim of his hat. "Ja, between us."