

“Bless those  
who persecute you;  
bless and do not  
curse.”

The Devil in  
A TRUE STORY  
Pew Number Seven

Rebecca Nichols Alonzo

with Bob DeMoss



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*To Mom and Dad for being servant-leaders, for showing God's endless love to the unlovable. Thank you for writing your memoirs so this book could be written. Our journey together continues through the years.*

*To my brother, Daniel; you were not only an answer to Mom and Dad's prayers but mine as well. Without you, I would have been a lonely only child.*

*To Aunt Dot, my constant guide and number one fan. I'm grateful for your love and wisdom. Your devotion to our family knows no bounds.*

*To Kenny, my husband and best friend. Thank you for all of the years of love and devotion, for being a man of integrity, and for holding my hand through the smiles and tears. You continue to amaze me.*

*For Kolby, my valiant warrior; your mighty heart toward the Lord and love for justice bless my life.*

*For Katelin, my delicate rose; the love of God is a sweet-smelling fragrance from your tender heart and is precious to me.*



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## AUTHOR'S NOTE

Let me be clear about one thing.

The story you're about to read actually happened, every last detail of it. As the plot unfolds, my hunch is that you'll need to remind yourself of this reality more than once. If you've ever required evidence to prove the adage "Truth is stranger than fiction," look no further. To be redundant, this *is* a true story.

In a way, I wish it were not. And at times I'm glad it's true.

Some of what transpired occurred before I was born, which, for obvious reasons, means I have no firsthand knowledge of those events. Likewise, there was a time when I was too young to comprehend the events swirling around me. However, my parents wisely kept thorough personal journals, thick family photo albums, stacks of newspaper clippings, an 8 mm film reel, and a priceless cassette tape narrated by my father. (Some of those photos appear on the opening pages of the chapters in this book. A list of captions is included on page 272.)

As if these items were not proof enough that this story actually occurred, as I wrote, I had at my disposal my memories, a federal court transcript, and crime scene reports and photographs. I also conducted numerous interviews with those witnesses who are still alive today. These invaluable resources provided a trustworthy road map through the minefield that was—and is—my life.

I don't share the following pages because I am looking for sympathy. Far from it. Rather, I invite you to travel with me to the very end where we discover perhaps the most disturbing part of the story: you and I have no choice but to forgive others . . . even if they are the monsters next door.

After all, forgiveness is the language of heaven.



## CHAPTER 1

# Walking, Crawling, Dead or Alive

I ran.

My bare feet pounding the pavement were burning from the sun-baked asphalt. Each contact between flesh and blacktop provoked bursts of pain as if I were stepping on broken glass. The deserted country road, stretching into the horizon, felt as if it were conspiring against me. No matter how hard I pushed myself, the safe place I was desperate to reach eluded me.

Still, I ran.

Had a thousand angry hornets been in pursuit, I couldn't have run any faster. Daddy's instructions had been simple: I had to be a big girl, run down the street as fast as my legs could carry me, and get help. There was nothing complicated about his request. Except for the fact that I'd have to abandon my hiding place under the kitchen table and risk being seen by the armed madman who had barricaded himself

with two hostages in my bedroom down the hall. I knew, however, that ignoring Daddy's plea was out of the question.

And so I ran.

Even though Daddy struggled to appear brave, the anguish in his eyes spoke volumes. Splotches of blood stained his shirt just below his right shoulder. The inky redness was as real as the fear gnawing at the edges of my heart. I wanted to be a big girl for the sake of my daddy. I really did. But the fear and chaos now clouding the air squeezed my lungs until my breathing burned within my chest.

My best intentions to get help were neutralized, at least at first. I remained hunkered down, unable to move, surrounded by the wooden legs of six kitchen chairs. I had no illusions that a flimsy 6 x 4 foot table would keep me safe, yet I was reluctant to leave what little protection it afforded me.

In that space of indecision, I wondered how I might open the storm door without drawing attention to myself. One squeak from those crusty hinges was sure to announce my departure plans. Closing the door without a bang against the frame was equally important. The stealth of a burglar was needed, only I wasn't the bad guy.

Making no more sound than a leaf falling from a tree, I inched my way out from under the table. I stood and then scanned the room, left to right. I felt watched, although I had no way of knowing for sure whether or not hostile eyes were studying my movements. I inhaled the distinct yet unfamiliar smell of sulfur lingering in the air, a calling card left behind from the repeated blasts of a gun.

I willed myself to move.

My bare feet padded across the linoleum floor.

I was our family's lifeline, our only connection to the outside world. While I hadn't asked to be put in that position, I knew Daddy was depending on me. More than that, Daddy *needed* me to be strong.



To act. To do what he was powerless to do. I could see that my daddy, a strong ex-Navy man, was incapable of the simplest movement. The man whom I loved more than life itself, whose massive arms daily swept me off my feet while swallowing me with an unmatched tenderness, couldn't raise an arm to shoo a fly.

To see him so helpless frightened me.

Yes, Daddy was depending on *me*.

Conflicted at the sight of such vulnerability, I didn't want to look at my daddy. Yet my love for him galvanized my resolve. I reached for the storm-door handle. Slow and steady, as if disarming a bomb, and allowing myself quick glances backward to monitor the threat level of a sudden ambush, I opened the storm door and stepped outside. With equal care, I nestled the metal door against its frame.

I had to run.

I shot out from under the carport, down the driveway, and turned right where concrete and asphalt met. The unthinkable events of the last five minutes replayed themselves like an endless-loop video in my mind. My eyes stung, painted with hot tears at the memory. Regardless of their age, no one should have to witness what I had just experienced in that house—let alone a seven-year-old girl. The fresh images of what had transpired moments ago mocked me with the fact that my worst fears had just come true.

I had to keep running.

Although I couldn't see any activity through the curtains framing my bedroom window, that didn't mean the gunman wasn't keeping a sharp eye on the street. I hesitated, but only for a moment more. What *might* happen gave way to what *had* happened. I had to get help. Now, almost frantic to reach my destination, I redoubled my efforts.

I ran on.

To get help for Momma and Daddy. To escape the gunman. To

get away from all the threatening letters, the sniper gunshots, the menacing midnight phone calls, the home invasions—and the devil who seemed to be behind so many of them.

But I'm getting ahead of the story.

## NOTES ON CHAPTER OPENER PHOTOS

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# ENDNOTES

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- 31 *Willie Sellers comes to mind*: E. J. Sellers, interview with author, October 10, 2007.

## CHAPTER 4: THE DEVIL'S IN PEW NUMBER SEVEN

- 46 *Old-timers claimed that, as a youth*: E. J. Sellers, interview with author, October 10, 2007.
- 47 *Mr. Watts was quick to swallow the small fish in town*: Mr. Watts is described as “a county kingpin,” which speaks to his reputation and character. Debbie Norton, “Watts’s Guilty Plea Climaxed Surprising Case,” *Star News*, February 20, 1981.
- 47 *The farmers took the bait*: Clara Cartrette, “Watts Pictured As ‘Rich, Powerful Man’ Who Plotted,” *The News Reporter*, n.d.
- 47 *One of Watts’s favorite lackeys*: Debbie Norton, “Watts’s Guilty Plea Climaxed Surprising Case,” *Star News*, February 20, 1981. Clara Cartrette, “Witness Says Watts Asked Him to Kill Nichols,” *The News Reporter*, February 19, 1981. Roger Williams testified in court that “he acted as a paid ‘strong arm’ for Watts . . . to help collect unpaid debts.”
- 48 *“That’s the way to go, buddy”*: Clara Cartrette, “Witness Says Watts Asked Him to Kill Nichols,” *The News Reporter*, February 19, 1981.
- 49 *“Mr. Watts, I get my advice”*: Clara Cartrette, “Nichols Testifies to Bombings at Sellerstown,” *The News Reporter*, February 5, 1981.
- 50 *“Mr. Nichols, it doesn’t look”*: Ramona Nichols’s journal.
- 51 *“You had better not tell my wife”*: Robert Nichols’s journal. He also testified to these statements in court, as reported in Clara Cartrette, “Nichols Testifies to Bombings at Sellerstown,” *The News Reporter*, February 5, 1981.
- 54 *crawling or walking*: Clara Cartrette, “Nichols Testifies to Bombings,” *The News Reporter*, February 5, 1981.

## CHAPTER 5: UNDER SIEGE

- 62 *The antics of Mr. Watts in pew number seven*: Clara Cartrette, “Tyree Tells of Disruptions,” *The News Reporter*, February 9, 1981; Debbie Norton,

- “Witness Tells of Hearing Key Suspect in Case,” *Wilmington Morning Star*, February 6, 1981.
- 67 *And, while Detective Dudley had a hunch*: George Dudley, phone interview with author, January 22, 2009. This explosion, as well as the others directed at the Free Welcome parsonage or church, are itemized in Clara Cartrette, “Many Charges against Three County Residents,” *The News Reporter*, January 29, 1981.
- 68 *During the Sunday morning service*: Robert Nichols’s journal.

**CHAPTER 6: NOW I LAY ME DOWN TO SLEEP**

- 78 *Mr. Watts, arms folded high across his chest*: Robert Nichols’s personal journal. Details of the bombing itself were reported in “Field Near Parsonage Dynamited,” *The News Reporter*, December 5, 1974; “Minister’s Family Is Harassed,” *Fayetteville Observer*, December 6, 1974.
- 79 *“Last week’s dynamite hit out behind the house”*: Larry Cheek, “The Embattled Pastor,” *Fayetteville Times*, December 9, 1974.
- 82 *The handwritten note told Mr. Watts “to keep your mouth”*: Debbie Norton, “Writing Expert Testifies Suspect Printed Notes,” *Star News*, February 10, 1981.
- 82 *From the detective’s point of view*: “George Dudley, phone interview with author, February 9, 2009.
- 84 *“Tribute to Sellerstown”*: The article written by Ramona Nichols appeared in the *News Reporter* on December 16, 1974. Used with permission.
- 86 *“We used to look for the siege”*: Wray Thompson, “More Harassment at Sellerstown Parsonage,” *The News Reporter*, December 16, 1974.

**CHAPTER 7: THE TOUGHEST GUY IN TOWN**

- 94 *Aunt Pat’s older daughter, Terri, had a ringside seat*: Terri Cox, interviewed in person by author on October 20, 2007, in Sellerstown.
- 101 *As we’d soon discover, on Saturday, June 28, 1975*: Clara Cartrette, “Witness Says Watts Near Sellerstown Bomb Scene,” *The News Reporter*, February 9, 1981.
- 107 *The strategy of this, the third bombing*: Wray Thompson, “Explosion Damages Church Home Again,” *The News Reporter*, July 3, 1975.
- 108 *“Don’t go out there”*: Carolyn Sellers, interview with author, October 20, 2007.
- 109 *Eleanor asked, “Where’s Danny?”*: Pat Sellers recounted details of this exchange in an interview with the author, October 19, 2007, in Sellerstown.
- 112 *“I’m no quitter”*: Wray Thompson, “Explosion Damages Church Home Again,” *The News Reporter*, July 3, 1975.
- 112 *“So many of God’s soldiers”*: Ray Wyche, “Tenacious Pastor Bucks Violence,” *The Carolina Scene*, July 24, 1975.

**CHAPTER 8: HOLDING ON TO HOPE**

- 113 *Daddy was toying with the unthinkable*: Robert Nichols's journal testimony.  
 114 "They felt like they could get to my husband": Doug Cumming, "Attacks on  
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 115 *Everyone in the community knew*: Ibid., David Eskridge, "Preacher Knows  
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 116 *With the exception of his sea green eyes*: Clara Cartrette, e-mail message to  
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 117 *Sharing an office with George Dudley*: Clara Cartrette, "Witness Says Watts  
 Near Sellerstown Bomb Scene," *The News Reporter*, February 9, 1981.  
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 said he "understood Agent Mercer was offering a \$10,000 reward for  
 information that Watts was bombing the parsonage."  
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 Violence," *The Carolina Scene*, July 24, 1975.  
 118 *He had done so much to chase my family away*: Clara Cartrette, "Tabor  
 City Man Says Watts Would Remove Nichols," *The News Reporter*,  
 February 5, 1981.  
 120 "We were clicking on the same clock": James Tyree, interview with author  
 in person on October 20, 2007.  
 120 "Brother James, God can do the same thing for you": Ibid.  
 126 "You can see how closely they are watching us": David Eskridge, "Preacher  
 Knows Bombers," *Wilmington Morning Star*, September 24, 1975.

**CHAPTER 9: HEARING VOICES**

- 131 "The search warrant is merely a tool": Wray Thompson, "Feds Search  
 Premises in Sellerstown Probe," *The News Reporter*, October 2, 1975.  
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 132 "On October 16, 1975, the governor publicly offered": "State Offers \$2,500  
 Reward," *News Reporter*, October 16, 1975.  
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 against Three County Residents," *The News Reporter*, January 29, 1981.  
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 Eight for Bombing Inquiry," *The News Reporter*, n.d.  
 135 "I've never been a violent person": Dot Nichols, interview with author on  
 November 24, 2008, in Franklin, Tennessee.  
 135 "It will take at least three weeks to come around": "Rev. Nichols a Patient  
 in University Center," November 25, 1975. (Note: Author's newspaper  
 clipping does not indicate the reporter's or newspaper's name.)

- 136 *The generous church family voted to purchase Daddy a new 1976 Buick:* Robert Nichols's journal has a handwritten note: "Church helped buy car, 1976 Buick, made Mr. Watts mad."
- 137 "*You're a thorn in a friend of mine's side*": Clara Cartrette, "Williams Says Watts Would Frame Tedder," *The News Reporter*, February 19, 1981.
- 138 "*I've just got to get out*": Ibid.
- 138 "*You're a good ole boy*": Cartrette, "Witness Says Watts Asked Him to Kill Nichols," *The News Reporter*, February 19, 1981.
- 140 "*One more valley, one more hill*": "One More Valley," words and music by Dottie Rambo and Jimmie Davis, copyright © 1966.
- 141 *That evening, Mr. Watts returned to his old tricks:* Clara Cartrette, "Many Charges Against Three County Residents," *The News Reporter*, January 29, 1981.
- 142 "*If you make it look like an accident*": Clara Cartrette, "Williams Says Watts Would Frame Tedder," *The News Reporter*, February 19, 1981.
- 143 "*We're all sort of shaken*": "Blast Rocks Parsonage in Columbus," *Morning Star*, October 14, 1976.
- 143 "*I walked outside to see*": Clara Cartrette, "Blast Rocks Church, Suspect Questioned," *The News Reporter*, 1976. (Note: Author's newspaper clipping does not provide the specific date for this article.)
- 144 "*This thing's got to come to a close*": Ibid.
- 144 *What Mr. Watts failed to report:* Clara Cartrette, "Witness Says Watts Asked Him to Kill Nichols," *The News Reporter*, February 19, 1981.

#### CHAPTER 10: BLACK THURSDAY

- 147 *The visitor came:* The story of the Ku Klux Klan member's visit was told to the author by Dot Nichols in an interview with the author on November 24, 2008, in Franklin, Tennessee. She learned of it from a conversation with Robert Nichols.
- 149–150 *Wanted these officers to know he was "well off":* Clara Cartrette, "Witness Says Watts Near Sellerstown Bomb Scene," *The News Reporter*, February 9, 1981.
- 153 "*Please get out of there*": As told to the author by Dot Nichols in an interview on November 24, 2008, in Franklin, Tennessee. She first heard about the exchange through a conversation with Grandma Welch.
- 153 *She was well aware of his criminal record:* Star Regional Staff, "Columbus Minister Injured, Wife Slain," *Wilmington Morning Star*, March 24, 1978.
- 155 "*You know, Ramona, I'm not sure how safe*": As told to the author by Pat Sellers in person at her house in Sellerstown, North Carolina, on October 19, 2007.
- 157 "*How are you doing, Harris?*": The following conversation and movements are from a transcript of the trial *State of North Carolina vs. Harris Kelton Williams*, as well as Rebecca's memories of the event.

**CHAPTER 11: UNANSWERED PRAYERS**

- 172 *At 6:09 p.m., as I would later learn:* Clara Cartrette, “Bizarre Shooting Described,” Clara Cartrette, *The News Reporter*, August 14, 1978.
- 173 “*How badly are you hurt?*”: The following conversations and movements are from a transcript of the trial *State of North Carolina vs. Harris Kelton Williams*.
- 179 *The phone rang:* Dot Nichols told the story of James Tyree’s call to Robert’s parents’ home during an interview with the author November 24, 2008, in Franklin, Tennessee.
- 182 “*We’re putting you . . . and her . . . in God’s hands?*”: Ibid.
- 186 “*Hands were raised in glory?*”: Clara Cartrette, “‘We’re Here in Victory’ Call of Memorial Service,” *The News Reporter*, March 27, 1978.
- 186 “*It would appear that we’re here in defeat?*”: Ibid.
- 186 “*Ramona was a servant of the church?*”: Ibid.

**CHAPTER 12: EIGHT MEN AND FOUR WOMEN**

- 197 “*Now, Rebecca, you see that thing?*”: Excerpts taken from the court transcript of the *State of North Carolina vs. Harris Kelton Williams*. Dialogue has been edited slightly for readability.
- 203 “*I would like to see justice?*”: Clara Cartrette, “Nichols Did Not Seek Vengeance,” *The News Reporter*, August 14, 1978.
- 203 “*It’s so hard to look at him?*”: Ibid.
- 204 *Assistant District Attorney Mike Easley was the first:* Details from the closing arguments reported by Clara Cartrette, “Williams Is Given Life Imprisonment,” *The News Reporter*, August 14, 1978.

**CHAPTER 13: PUTTING THE DEVIL ON TRIAL**

- 217 *According to the newspaper account:* Clara Cartrette, “Jury Selection Begins in Sellerstown Bombing Case,” *The News Reporter*, January 26, 1981.
- 217 *This move prevented the prosecutor:* Clara Cartrette, “Watts Pictured As ‘Rich, Powerful Man’ Who Plotted,” *The News Reporter*, n.d.
- 218 “*I have to take tranquilizers?*”: Bill Gaither, “3 Columbus Residents Indicted in Bombings,” *Fayetteville Times*, n.d.
- 218 “*If you’re not very careful?*”: Clara Cartrette, “Spivey Says Attorneys Harassed, Scared Him,” *The News Reporter*, n.d.
- 218 “*A rich and powerful man in Columbus County?*”: Clara Cartrette, “Watts Pictured As ‘Rich, Powerful Man’ Who Plotted.”
- 219 *One of the most damaging . . . was a government witness who claimed:* Debbie Norton, “Watts Pleads Guilty in Bombing,” *Wilmington Morning Star*, February 20, 1981.
- 219 “*The picture painted of him?*”: Clara Cartrette, “Watts Given Four 5-Year Terms; Fined \$25,000,” *The News Reporter*, February 23, 1981.