

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Rapturous is a work of fiction. I made it up.

But in a nation where we are asked to believe that abortion is murder; where we are asked to believe that drone attacks on civilians abroad is a beneficent gesture to impart American freedom to the survivors; when we are asked to accept that corporations are people; when we are asked to believe that towers in downtown Manhattan were destroyed at the behest of a lone man with bad kidneys sitting in a cave in the Middle East—and that those towers imploded perfectly because of structural weakness; when we are asked to believe that a 747 jet could fly through the Pentagon, the world's most intensely video-protected building, leave no visual record and a hole too small for its fuselage; when we are asked to believe that incarcerating millions is justice; when we are asked to believe that being given the choice of two capitalists for President constitutes democracy; when we are asked to believe that racism is a thing of the past because there is a Black President; when we are asked to believe that the measure of one's social expertise arises from the size of one's bank account; when we are asked to believe that teachers deserve vilification while CEOs deserve deification; when we are asked to believe that the loving God of the Universe is going to take a small number of *Bible* believers to heaven while He tortures the rest of us—it seemed perfectly natural to write this book.

In fact, compared to the whoppers that we're supposed to swallow from the Government and religious leaders, this book hardly seems like fiction at all.

Except, it is fiction. I made it up.

—Brent Buell

DAY ONE

WEDNESDAY

OCTOBER 30, 2008

CHAPTER 1

STATEN ISLAND, NY—4:30 PM EST

“Mom and Dad have been downstairs with those mu’fuckin’ born-again all day praying that *Jesus* will make sure that Tim Michaeljohn wins this election and follows Dubya as the next president of the United Fascist States of America.” Eighteen-year old Lyla Edwards played with the ball in her tongue for a moment, moved the cell to her other ear and continued. “They did the same thing in 2004—and back then, frickin’ *Jesus* said, ‘yes.’”

“*Jesus* had nothing to do with it,” came the voice at the other end. “Remember the Ohio vote? That election and the one before it—the whole Florida thing and the Supreme Court—nothing supernatural. It was a stolen election, clear and simple.”

“True. But they just make me so fuckin’ angry.”

“You know I agree with you, dear. I just wish you could say it another way without the language. I feel like washing your mouth with soap. You know, ‘Michaeljohn’ and ‘Bush’—that’s language I can’t tolerate.”

Lyla laughed. “Geez, Grandma, you’re okay. How did *you* ever end up having my mom?”

“Life is cruel sometimes, honey. But your mom may be okay when she grows up. So will this country. All it needs is some adult supervision. It just hasn’t gotten any lately.”

“You got that right.” Lyla paused. “And Grandma, you’re cool with my being an anarchist? I could really get into breaking some corporate windows.”

“Don’t get yourself killed, and you’re fine with me. I’ll still go ahead and vote for Obama, because I have no other choice. But never forget what *I* really stand for. Anarchy seems tame compared to what I want.”

Lyla loved her Grandma Cattel. Marie Victoria Cattel, 65 years old, retired sociology and community development professor. In the late 90’s she took on Mayor Rudolph Giuliani’s get tough policing policy and condemned its source, the ultra conservative Manhattan Institute think tank.

She gained notoriety when she labeled the mayor's tactics as "basic fascism," and became vocal at demonstrations protesting the murder of Amadou Diallo by NYPD detectives. She took every opportunity to say that for cops to shoot an unarmed man 41 times while standing in his own doorway was outrageous no matter how cleverly the little mayor tried to spin it. Marie continued her high-profile protests when Giuliani undercover officers shot and killed another unarmed man—Patrick Dorismond—because he wouldn't participate in a drug sting. By the time all the officers in both cases had been found innocent on all charges and had been praised again and again by Giuliani for their heroic work, Marie Cattel was a household name. Photographs of her with Reverend Al Sharpton being dragged off in handcuffs filled tabloid covers. Even the newspaper of record, *The New York Times*, had deigned to quote her scathing rebukes of Giuliani and his "Gestapo," accompanied by a photo of her carrying one of Robert Lederman's satirical drawings of Giuliani as Hitler.

Lyla always asked her grandmother how it was possible that she had spawned her mother, Anna. An active Republican, Anna served as a local campaign director for Giuliani and later worked with equal vigor for the election of George W. Bush. A stay-at-home Staten Island mother, Anna spoke frequently and long about her current candidate's born again religious status, and frequently gushed, "Tim Michaeljohn is such a lovely, Christian gentleman."

This naturally put Anna on a collision course with Marie and Lyla. At the moment, the godly woman was on her knees downstairs in the living room with her husband, Julian Edwards, and three other couples from her church. Whispers of "Yes Jesus, sweet Jesus" escaped her lips. Julian was praying fervently. His face was upturned as he raised his hands above his head in praise.

"As your humble servant, Lord," he said in his rich baritone, "I beg Thee to hear our prayers seven days before the most crucial day in history. We are poised to hasten the blessed coming of your Son or to move disastrously away from it. We come before Thee asking Thy intervention to stop those who foolishly cry 'peace, peace' for we know there will be no peace. Thou hast appointed thy servant Tim Michaeljohn as thy child. He wants to bring about the glorious day, the return of Thy dear son, Jesus!"

On the word "Jesus," there were cries of "Yes Jesus, oh yes, Lord, sweet Jesus," from the seven others kneeling on Anna's new rug from Levitz.

Marked nearly three hundred dollars originally, Anna got it on closeout for \$59.95. She called it her Answered Prayer rug.

Julian's voice raised again, "Oh Lord," he began. "Lord, Precious Lord, we know that the coming of Thy Son to take the righteous home can only happen when the fullness of days has come. Only when Thy prophecies have been fulfilled can our Savior take us home."

There was another round of "Hallelujahs" and "Yes Lord."

"Armageddon, Armageddon, Armageddon!" Julian shouted the word like it was the name of his favorite football team. "Blessed Lord, Thy servant Tim Michaeljohn is not afraid of Armageddon! He will not shrink from the fulfillment of Thy word. He is ready for Thy Final War. Thou hast given this country, these precious United States, the power of weapons that can be used in Thy behalf to destroy those who would attack our Christian way of life. Thou hast given us the power to turn to ash them that worship false gods and who are so full of Allah this and Allah that."

Thinking himself clever, Julian gave what he called a "holy laugh"—sort of "Ah-Ha-Ha!" He'd used that laugh several times in church when delivering the main prayer and even gotten praise from a number of parishioners who marveled that he was so comfortable in his relationship with the Lord that he was able to laugh in His presence.

Anna poked him with her elbow when he began the second laugh for effect.

"Lord, touch the fingers of those using the Diebold voting machines next week. Point those fingers in the right direction. Place them on the column, which holds the name of Thy servant Tim Michaeljohn. And should those fingers be willful, should those fingers stray from the tender guidance of Thy hand... then Lord take ahold of those microchips and confound Thine enemies! Let the Democrats, the Independents, the Greens, the Communists, the Socialists and those godless New World Order Progressive Reformers feel Thy power. Let them watch Thee turn their votes from Satanic liberal votes into pure conservative Republican votes for Tim Michaeljohn, the chosen successor to Thy servant George W. Bush!"

In that moment of ecstasy and devotion, Julian outstretched his arms to embrace the ruler of the universe and then was silent.

* * * *

"Bye Grandma," Lyla said, and hung up the phone. There was a welcome quiet in the house. She listened for a moment at her door to make

sure the prayer circle had disbanded. Hearing nothing she figured it was safe to go to the kitchen for a snack. She would later remember humming “Sympathy for the Devil,” on the stairs just before blurting, “Holy Shit!”

CHAPTER 2

STATEN ISLAND, NY—8 PM EST

The police had Grandma Cattel cornered on one side of the room and Lyla on the other.

“I was on the phone with my granddaughter right before she hung up and went downstairs. It wasn’t more than five minutes before she called to tell me about *this*.”

Lyla, tired of her inquisitor’s disbelief, repeated her story slowly in less difficult words hoping someone would comprehend. “I hung up the phone from talking to Grandma. The house was quiet, so I came downstairs to get some food in the kitchen. Are you with me so far?”

“Don’t get smart. Just tell your story.” Detective Darcy O’Neil was twenty-seven years on the job and certain no new case could be more than a rearrangement of old ones.

“So I’m about *there* on the stairs,” she gestured to the midpoint of the stairway, “when I look down here where they had been kneeling and praying all day... and at first I just thought they had gone, but then I saw those.” She gestured again.

“We’re taking this down lady, describe what you saw.”

“*Those!* Eight wedding rings, four dresses, four men’s shirts and expand-a-pants, eight pairs of shoes, and *those*, uh, all that... underwear.”

“And where were they—the clothes—how were they situated?” O’Neil pretended to take notes.

“Just the way they are now, in a circle—a man’s clothes, then a woman’s—right around the circle. Mom’s clothes are right there next to Dad’s—and their wedding rings are with them. Is this fuckin’ weird or what?”

“You don’t need to curse, young lady.”

“Well what would you do if your crazy-assed parents had been praying all day that Tim Michaeljohn would become our next president—strike that—*THEIR* next president, and then you frickin’ come down the stairs and all

they've left you are some sorry assed clothes and some tighty whities?"

"And where do you think they have gone?"

"I dunno, a nudist colony?"

"Don't get smart," the cop was tiring of his pierced witness.

"Then don't ask stupid questions. How should I know where they went? My parents didn't go outside naked. Hell, since they got into that born again shit, I don't think they even *showered* naked."

Marie was straining to hear what Lyla was being asked. "For heaven's sake," she said to the cop standing in front of her. "Get out of my way. My granddaughter has just lost her parents—or whatever has happened—and they are badgering her." She stood, pushed past the officer and tapped O'Neil on the shoulder, "Excuse me young man," she said. "I think my granddaughter has been through quite enough for one day."

The burly detective was about to speak when his cell rang. "One minute," he said, raising a finger to Marie in the universal "I've got a call" sign.

Marie had just put her arm around Lyla when O'Neil snapped, "Turn on your TV."

"Dad got rid of the TV down here," Lyla said—her anger at her missing father evident in her tone. "He got rid of mine, the one in the great room, the one in mom's bedroom, and the one in the kitchen. The only one left is the one in his bedroom where he watched the *144,000 Club* and shit like that."

"Then let's go there." Signaling an officer to finish photographing the circle of clothes, O'Neil followed Marie and Lyla upstairs.

"This is my father's cell," Lyla said, pushing the door open. Julian Edward's bedroom had been the small guest room until the day nine years before when he and Marie had agreed that sexual relations after the possibility of conception were tantamount to fornication. The decision gave each of them a sense of righteousness, even though they were equally aware that very little was begin given up. Julian moved his clothes, religious books, television and overstuffed Berkline recliner into the room. He bought heavy drapes which obscured all light, and that done, declared the room home.

"He spent most of his time in here—and in his bathroom," Lyla said, adding, "You don't want to go in there unless you want to read *Bible* verses printed on toilet paper."

O'Neil was fumbling with the TV remote.

"How do you get it on CNN?" he was evidently frustrated.

“He’s got it blocked. You can only watch CBN on there.”

“CBN?”

Lyla sighed. “Yeah, Christ’s Broadcasting Network. Twenty-four hours a day of preaching to the choir. You know, Robinson Patrick...”

“The guy who was calling for assassinations of foreign presidents?”

“That one.”

The TV flickered on. A special news bulletin splashed across the lower third of the screen. Above it three very white Christians with good hair—two men and a woman—sat on an expensive couch in an elaborate living room set. Their eyes were squeezed shut so tightly that even the woman’s surgically stretched skin had wrinkles.

“Oh Lord,” the man ossified with Aqua Net prayed, “Oh Lord, is this the sign we have waited for? Is this the outpouring of the Holy Spirit? Is this the coming of the thief in the night?”

Apparently the man’s musings were interrupted by a message through his earpiece. “Oh, we have to cut away for a moment; we have a news feed from City Hall. Mayor Ari Barken is speaking.”

“We will track down and kill every one of these terrorists,” the diminutive mayor shouted. “We’ll show them that you kidnap New Yorkers at your own risk!”

The news feed ended abruptly and the man with the pretty hair thumped the very comfy couch he was sitting on. “There!” he said, emphasizing the word again with another thump, “you see? The mayor of New York who is of a different persuasion than we—he is unprepared to see the meaning of what is happening because he is not rooted in *The Word*!”

“Who’s that nut?” O’Neil demanded. “And what’s he talking about?”

“That’s Robinson Butthole Patrick,” Lyla said, “and I don’t have a clue.”

A news crawl began right to left at the bottom of the screen: *Rash of disappearances reported in neighborhoods on Staten Island, NY. Police baffled, but Evangelical Christians prepared to rejoice.*

“What the . . . ?” It was O’Neil. “What are they . . . ?”

“Good Lord.” A horrified Marie looked like she’d just seen Dick Cheney. O’Neil turned to her.

“I think I know what they’re talking about.” She pointed at the screen. “If there are other people missing in the same way as Julian and Anna—these people aren’t thinking crime, they’re thinking it’s The Rapture.”

“The what?”

“The Rapture, the Secret Rapture. It’s a thing with some born-again Christians who say that at the end of time, right before the so-called ‘Time of Trouble,’ Jesus their Christ is going to come like a ‘thief in the night’ and take the righteous to heaven. They’re expecting millions of their kind just to disappear—poof.”

O’Neil looked at Lyla, prepared to ask if her grandmother was crazy.

Lyla shook her head. “Naw, no shit. Grandma’s right. That’s what my parents believed. They talked about it all the time. They had this whole set of books—didn’t you hear about them on *60 Minutes*—called the *Left Behind* series? Two guys—terrible writers—and they sold like 100 million copies of that shit.”

Reverend Robinson Patrick was working himself into a sweat. “It’s the righteous born aloft. Hallelujah!”

The news crawl continued. An estimated 100 people had simply vanished. Four car wrecks were reported. At each wreck, the police found nothing but the personal items of the disappeared. Along with clothes and jewelry, several weapons had been found—a Brazos Pro sX, a Ceska Zbrojovka 75B, several Glock 17’s, and two AK 47’s. God’s special children apparently had a taste for exotic weaponry.

O’Neil was back on his cellphone. “Listen, Captain, I’ve got eight more missing here. Exactly like the others. Religious nuts, y’know. You watching CBN?” There was a short pause. “CBN—you know, Christ’s Broadcasting Network?” Another pause. “No, I’m not watching MSNBC or CNN or ABC or CBS or NBC or FOX. I’m watching CBN.” Another pause. “Because it’s the only fucking channel that this nut case allows on his TV—that’s why.”

A closeup of a second man with purple-rinsed hair filled the screen. O’Neil signaled Lyla to turn up the volume.

“Thou hast heard our cry, oh Lord God,” the man said, tears very effectively streaking his cheeks. “But we ache to know Thy will, Thy plan. Answer us, oh Savior, oh Lord, oh Ruler of the Universe.”

Lyla rolled her eyes. “Grandma, this is fuckin’ weird. Julian and Anna weren’t raptured anywhere. That’s for sure. But where’d they go?”

It seemed the people on TV had the same question. Prayers finished, they began a roundtable discussion.

The Reverend Robinson Patrick, who sounded like a deputy sheriff from Alabama, was perplexed. “If this is the Rapture that we have so longed for, then *why* is it happenin’ only there on Staten Island, New York? Why are

we, who have so anticipated being with our Lord and Savior still sittin' here in a television studio? I wish that all you were seein' on the screen was three sets of clothes and Pearl Millicent's jewelry."

The woman with the stretched face smiled politely at the mention of her name and somewhat distractedly pawed at her considerable assemblage of rhinestones.

O'Neil snapped his cellphone shut with a whispered curse. "Damn if I know what's going on. NYPD is all over this. They've got Homeland Security coming in to see if this is some terrorist operation. Seems one of the things the Pentagon has been sitting on is an ultrasonic device that can vaporize people. Now they're worried it got into the wrong hands."

The surgically enhanced woman on TV, identified onscreen as *Reverend* Pearl Millicent, was addressing the issue. "Aren't all us righteous supposed to be taken at once? I just can't imagine that the only righteous people on the face of this earth are on Staten Island. I haven't even *been* there!"

"Had enough?" Lyla looked at O'Neil wearily.

"Yeah. Let's go back downstairs to the crime scene."

"Crime scene?" Marie made a face. "From the way my daughter and son-in-law have been acting, I wouldn't be surprised if this is some kind of elaborate hoax—all part of them 'witnessing' their faith or something. I don't think you should go calling it a crime until you come up with some bodies. My guess is that butt naked or not, they're going to come home after a few days and tell us that they were waiting on some mountaintop for Jesus, and that he stood them up. Want some coffee?"

Moments after the three left the room, "Breaking News" flashed across the screen. The governor of Texas was missing.