

from Route 66 Choir

Michael Lund

**Eighth novel in the Route 66 Novel Series**

**Volume I: Advent** Chapter 1: In the Likeness of Fire

On the Sunday after September 11, 2001, Holy Trinity's old rector asked his congregation, "What are *your* thoughts?" It was the time in the service when he usually gave his sermon.

"*Our* thoughts!" Stanley Measure whispered to his wife, in his mind's eye seeing frantic crowds fleeing down different Manhattan streets. "*He's* the one who should have thoughts."

"Shhhh," hushed Felicia, thinking to herself that Stan wouldn't have paid attention to the sermon anyway. She also prayed that he was not thinking again of his own recently fallen tower. She nodded forward. Robin Shure was rising from a front pew.

Father Klein had briefly recounted what was then known about the attacks--the burning towers of the World Trade Center, scarred fields in Pennsylvania, attack on the Pentagon--before inviting comments from the congregation. Like Stan, Felicia thought this a dangerous procedure. "A free-for-all," she said to herself. "That's what we'll have, a regular, stirred up, hornets' next."

"I see Christ," said Robin simply. She was standing below the lecture. "I see Christ rushing into the burning buildings."

As she spoke, her eyes swept across the varied parishioners. But then her gaze gradually rose to the one stained glass window high above the entrance doors.

"All those firemen and policemen," Robin went on, "didn't think of themselves or the danger. It might have been the hot flames of hell, but they just came on straight ahead."

Stan grimaced, never comfortable with expressions of faith. He seldom attended church, especially now that his son was grown and his daughter off to college. But this Sunday he had felt differently. Adrift himself in early retirement, he latched onto the tragic national event as a springboard for the expression of his personal frustrations.

Robin's eyes were riveted on the dove high in the window. "Through the doors, up the stairs, into the smoke and . . . and . . ." She paused, as if unsure what to say next. Then she asked, "Who did they meet? *'In the likeness of fire . . . he whom the Lord foretold suddenly, swiftly descends.'*" She sat down abruptly.

The church was silent. Stan was unexpectedly moved by this simple declaration. Felicia, who knew this woman's strengths, smiled in approval. A local artist, Robin lived with an older husband on a small farm ten miles from town. She positioned life-size sculptures in fields and woods. Dogs, porpoises, llamas, pigs--a lifelike menagerie.

"Well, that could have been worse," Stan thought, confident that the invitation for people to speak would still lead to irrational outpourings. He was not disappointed, as half a dozen parishioners soon offered laments for the lost, anxiety about what might happen next, and vague schemes of retaliation. But, by the time the service ended, his generally negative opinion of humanity was contradicted again, this time by a local dignitary.

Before that, Sharon Rich, the social worker who'd puzzled many when she gave up her yodeling, explained, "My neighbor says we need to tear down those grain elevators east of town. They're landmarks. And the same people can use them to bomb Fairfield."

"We *should* declare war on *someone*," insisted Chester Lott, the sawmill operator. "I think Russia's behind it." He was known for deadpan irony, but his friends couldn't tell if this time he was being serious.

"Oh, it's Castro," insisted Maria Fuentes, cake maker and gossip. "He's been waiting since Bay of Pigs to get back at us. Those Twin Towers, they are like giant American cigars to him."

"I blame warmongers right here in the U.S.A.," Sonja Petersen nearly shouted. She hated men and blamed any act of violence on their sexual aggression. "Nuke 'em in their ammo belts," she regularly urged The Anti-War Womb, her women's support group.

Finally, even Father Klein seemed to realize the scene was approaching pandemonium. "One final statement," he ordered, gesturing toward Larry Thornton. A former St. Louis lawyer and judge who'd retired to run a worm farm in the county, he and his wife, a member of town council, represented stability and order.

Larry began with what Stan thought was a complete *non sequitur*. "The movie version," he said, "of *The Last of the Mohicans* leaves out a crucial character." This unexpected statement caused the restless congregation to settle down.

"Early in the story," Larry went on, seizing the opportunity, "Hawkeye and the two Mohicans are leading the Munro sisters toward Fort Henry. The soldiers assigned to escort the girls had already been massacred." Felicia perked up at his words.

Stan couldn't remember if he'd watched some of the movie. He tried to visualize what Larry was describing, but memories from his watch tower days were blurred with images of Hardy Boys' adventures read decades ago.

"The officer in charge before the attack, Major Heyward, is a good battlefield soldier, a veteran of European campaigns. But he doesn't understand the terrain or the enemy."

"Okay," thought Stan. "There's a military connection here, attack and response. It's a bit late for rescue in New York City today, though!" The estimated death toll would, however, go down in the weeks after the disaster, a rescue in numbers at least.

"When they reach a cave behind a waterfall," Larry went on., "Hawkeye posts Chingachgook and Uncas as guards at the two entrances. It's an odd little group, but they need each other. Men, women, soldiers, backwoodsmen."

Stan imagined himself saving beautiful girls who, grateful, later offered themselves to him without shame. Felicia had read the novel and would know no such thing ever occurred in Cooper.

"Inside the cave, a natural sound studio, Hawkeye tells the two young women they are safe until morning. Because the cave is well known to all who live in the area, though, they must move on before the evil Maqua and his men arrive."

Chingachgook and Uncas are, of course, the last of the Mohican tribe. Their deaths would mean the end of a way of life. Members of Holy Trinity vaguely feel that 9/11 threatens their own civilization, which they had believed to be unassailable.

"Now comes a moment in James Feminore Cooper's novel that the moviemakers left out," says Larry, a hand raised. "They sing."

"How does a banker know this?" wondered Stan. Unlike Felicia, he'd read only trade magazines and technical books for years.

"They sing," Larry went on, "when a character I haven't mentioned leads them--David Gamut, a choirmaster who'd fled the battle with Hawkeye and the others. Oh, he was an embarrassment to Major Hayward and these frontier fighters, not carrying a gun and barely able to keep up with the women. A misfit, apparently."

Stan winced, fearful now that he is a latter-day David Gamut, not the savior of Alice and Cora. Rather than melt at his touch, they would scorn his embrace. Felicia hears his sigh.

"Instead of a weapon, Gamut carries a worn hymnbook, embodiment of Old World liturgy and belief. The women know the hymns by heart, so, when he opens the book and says it's time to praise God, they join in easily, alto and soprano. Gamut is the tenor, and Hawkeye, surprisingly, adds a rough bass."

The picture is a haunting one for Felicia, four souls in grave danger lifting their voices in prayer: "*His oath, his covenant, his blood, / support me in the whelming flood. / when all around my soul gives way, / he then is all my hope and stay,*" said Larry, repeating words Cooper's characters (but not their movie counterparts) might have sung. He paused.

"After Hawkeye and the Mohicans have preserved the friends' bodies, you see, David Gamut brings the party's spirit together in love and celebration, though music, in harmony. They need that fellowship to survive as much as they need more firepower. Even the hardened Hawkeye, remembering his mother singing to him in childhood, weeps." Larry himself seemed close to tears.

"We've heard calls today for more violence on the body, as if we're soldiers and all we can do is fight. I think we must seek God's mercy and God's peace in the spirit. We need union not more division, understanding not anger."

"A singer!" Stan said to himself, surprised. "That's what I can be. Member of a goodly quartet." He saw himself rushing into some chamber, joining his voice in concert with others.

He little knew how prescient this odd thought was. Within the year he--a country music fan--would create The Route 66 Choir, salvation (so to speak) of the Episcopal Church of the Holy Trinity. Felicia argued that his inspiration also rescued their marriage. Stanley came to believe that he had saved the whole country--Mohicans and all!

. . . to be continued.