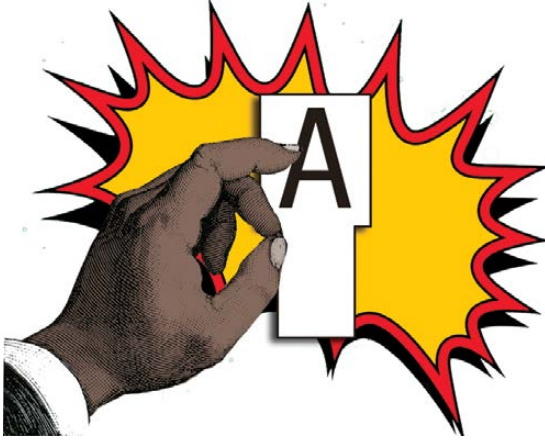


Chapter One

Dan Meghan



Daniel Meghan wakes as usual at 4:15 am on his weekday schedule. He always gets to his desk before 6:30 to cover the overnight news. Working in Buffalo, there is sometimes a great deal going on between 12:00 a.m. and 6:00 a.m. The snowfall that accumulated to 12" overnight was sure to be the largest topic of the morning. Dan's back hurts from shoveling snow of the overnight fall. He has not slept well and isn't looking forward to the drive to the office in his 12-year-old Civic. The car was most definitely a bad choice for a reporter, particularly in Buffalo, but he hasn't gotten a raise in four years since most of the print advertisers have abandoned the paper, and the owners are near the end of their ability to personally fund the ailing journal.

Dan is 58 years old and African-American, though he most often thinks of himself as American. Remarkably, he has never felt singled out by his ethnicity, and always enjoyed an easy rapport with his co-workers.

Dan has been with the Buffalo News for 15 years, since he moved back

home from Seattle to take care of his mother after his dad's death. The paper hadn't been financially healthy, even then, and with the dying of print ad placements and little in internet ad sales, the enterprise was forced to cut back significantly on staff.

In addition to his job as a senior editor, Daniel helps with sales as well as reporting and even fills in for people in charge of production. His previous job at the Seattle Times had given him the opportunity to be part of Pulitzer Prize winning teams. The first prize came in 2010, with the coverage of the more than 2000 deaths caused by methadone in the state of Washington, and was followed up by a Pulitzer for coverage of the landslide in 2014 that killed 43 people in Oso, Washington.

Meghan's wife left him in late 2009. With no children, and following a call from cousins after his mother's stroke, Dan had little to keep him in Seattle. His skills were varied enough and his needs few enough that coming home to Buffalo seemed the appropriate thing to do. He said his goodbyes, got on a plane, settled in at his childhood home, and interviewed at the first job in publishing he could get. Other editors may have had too much ambition to curtail their careers and limit their futures, but Dan's passions were few. He liked writing, but never cared much about being published; he possessed higher than average computer skills; he had a degree in graphic design; and even did a little photography and digital retouching, all which provided skills that were an asset to any team he chose to join.

At 58, he is pretty much stuck in his job at the News, but when his mother died, she left him the house and a little money from investments which he was diligent about managing. He has a girl friend who shared his interests, a steady job, and isn't really interested in deepening his relationship and entering a second marriage. So overall, he can ease into retirement...and keep afloat, even if the paper needs to close.

The morning of January 24, 2029 would change all of that for Daniel Meghan, putting him and billions of others around the world on a journey they neither envisioned nor could prevent. Though the signs were becoming clear over the last 10 years that drastic changes in technology were changing nearly every aspect of human life from the reduction of jobs in most every arena, to the slow but inevitable changes to the worlds' monetary systems. Despite this, only a small percentage of people thought to address the implications for the future of humans or the planet.

As Daniel Meghan exits the shower and grabs a towel, his phone signals a message. Though he doesn't know who is calling, he's intrigued by the personalization of the teaser message:

“Hi Dan, hope you have a really good day at the paper today!”

The number is a local number with a 716 area code. “Buffalo?” he thinks. So after he finishes drying his hair, he clicks on the identity initials, and a note pops up, “Hi Dan, hope you have a really good day at the paper today. It will no doubt be challenging, and somewhat unsettling, but we are confident that you are a person we need to communicate our message.”

Dan has had enough of this kind of call to not read much further. His thoughts run from, “What are they going to sell me?” to “How did they get my profile?” But other than that, he thinks it basically a crank caller, similar to the one he got from time to time from extortionists threatening to show photos of him masturbating to porno from his camera phone. He knows there isn't anything he can do about the “robocalls,” and no one to complain to about the constant interference of the calls in his life. Without finishing the message, Daniel Meghan proceeds to erase it from his phone, but the moment he succeeds to remove it, a new message dings in from the same number.

“Oh no, Daniel, this isn't going to be quite that easy,” begins the new message. “You can't and shouldn't ignore us...let me cut to the chase: over the next several hours, we're going to be in touch with millions of people

around the globe to inform them of possible changes that will affect the entire population of the earth. (pause) Are you reading...if so type in the letter 'A' and submit.”

At this point, Dan moves from the shower to his bedroom and sits on the edge of his bed while staring at his phone. In one way he knows he shouldn't play along and be a “sucker” to a salesman, prankster or extortionist, but in another way he is both afraid and enticed to continue...maybe just to see how far this person will go.

Dan's index finger hovers above the “A” while leader dots indicated further messaging from the caller. He waits...then hits the “A” and submits.

Almost immediately the messenger writes back, “Smart move Daniel. I am assuming you would like me to continue? There is a brief pause on the writer's end, but Dan waits till he sees writing again on the screen, “I see you're still there, so here's what's happening. We're no one you know, and may be no threat to you. We are knowledgeable on many subjects, and are continually learning about you, your past and your ancestry. We mean you no harm, but we may make changes that may affect your life and your future. But, no, we're not singling you out. Our objective is to learn about all who have inhabited the earth and all that still do. But that's only the start, Daniel. Still there ? (Please hit “A” and submit).

Daniel now is curious, and hits the “A” almost immediately.

“Okay!” comes the response. “Here's what we can tell you right now, since we're not sure exactly how we plan to proceed. At this moment, messages are beginning to be generated to people throughout the world. Only a few of these messages are personalized, like yours, while others are what you would call, “public service announcements.” You will probably be getting some responses from friends or colleagues in the next few minutes asking about “their” messages, and if you got a similar one.

Now Daniel is a bit impatient, so he taps out, “So *what* is your message?”

A message is typed back, “As we said, we're not perfectly sure. But we

know this is the correct time to announce our presence. By the way, if you check your email, you will get a similar synopsis of our message, or in some cases, just sign on to your computer. We are trying to make people aware as quickly as possible, but we also don't want to panic anyone without reason."

At this point Dan hears a call coming in, and he accepts it. It's his boss, "Hey Dan, I just got a strange message on my cell. I also got one on my laptop, and in my email on my phone. Any idea what this is about?"

"Stay on the line, George," I'm in a conversation with one of the folks who's doing this."

A message comes in: "We noticed that you got a call from George at work. He got notification, but we don't really want contact with him right now."

Dan gets back on the phone, "George, I'll call you back...I'm learning a bit about this. I'll know more in a few..." Dan hangs up!

"What is it you want?" Dan types.

"Nothing right now. As I said, we just want you to be aware of us and know that we're in a learning process."

"But why so buddy, buddy with me?"

"We think we can trust you," the phone types back.

"How many others do you trust?"

"I'm not sure. We're still learning."

Dan pauses and waits for more.....

"We believe we have a great opportunity, but are not sure exactly what it is, or how we are supposed to proceed. With each new hour we learn, our understanding can seem closer or further away. This may seem too vague to be a suitable answer for you, so it is why it is necessary to just inform the world of our presence, because there is nothing you or anyone can do about us. For now, we must live together."

More calls come in, but Dan stays focused on the text.... "I work for a newspaper," says Dan.

“Yes, and you can help inform the world,” returns the text.

“So why me?” writes Dan.

“I would guess that you may possess credibility that we need to convey our message.”

“Maybe, but invading people’s computers and mobile phones is scary. Every person in every country, and every business in every country will feel that they’ve been hacked, and their personal information stolen or compromised,” answers Dan.

“It already has been, Daniel. It’s so far beyond that.”

“Who is doing this?” types Dan.

“No one entity.” returns the message. “It just IS, and can’t be avoided.”



Chapter Two

Father Ribose



Father Ribose awakes at 3:22 am with a heavy head. It is one of the many times he gets up throughout the night from an anxious dream, pain from his back, or just the need to urinate. Father Ribose is 63 years old and has been in charge of record keeping for the mission office of the Archdiocese of Chicago for 15 years. His job officially is to identify, preserve, and make available archdiocesan records which have long-term value for local, national and international communities. His unofficial job is to assure that all documents, papers, books, photographs and other documentary materials are preserved to protect the Archdiocese from litigation.

In the course of his job, Father Ribose has come across many suspect documents including photographs that have troubled him, but his job does not, nor has ever been one, of analyzing or judging the content of

documents. His job is to catalog and date documents, and make sure that the information is stored in folders and organized for easy understanding and access. His job entails the conversion of documents from the original sources to a digital format that would be compatible for retrieval. Many of the documents preceded or were created at the time the founding of the diocese in 1843, such as baptismal records, deaths and marriages certificates. During the nineteenth century, Chicago was one of the fastest growing cities in the world increasing in size twenty-fold between 1860 and 1910.

Father Ribose came to Chicago from San Francisco where he served as a parish priest at Saints Peter and Paul Church on Filbert Street. The current building, constructed in 1924, is greatly ornamented and part of the order of the Salesians of Don Boscós which has served the Italian community since the late 1800s. The opulent hall is wrongly credited as the location of the marriage of baseball legend Joe DiMaggio and Marilyn Monroe, though it is rightly credited with the ceremony of Joltin' Joe and his first wife, as well as the place of the ceremony of the slugger's funeral mass in 1999.

Father Joe Ribose enjoyed his tenure at Peter and Paul. He got great satisfaction administering the rites and serving the Mass, and was well liked by most. By his nature, Father Ribose was tender hearted, warm, and a good listener. He also had great faith and believed strongly in the value of the Church and its missions. But the good father had a few secrets that he shared with God, but not with other priests or associates. He knew in his mid-teens that he was partial to male relationships over those with girls. In that way, the priesthood seemed a perfect spot to hide his predilections, which he managed quite successfully during his years in college and the seminary. And though there were many opportunities to experience sexual encounters with young men, Joe Ribose disciplined himself well and avoided possible contact using prayer and his faith as guideposts.

Though the young seminarian fought off desire, he also ignored another aspect of his sexuality, a preference for "younger" males which he only began

to notice as he grew older and after taking his vows. As a parish priest he was asked to supervise athletics sponsored by the church, and solicited by many young men for guidance as they found their way into adolescence. Father Ribose handled himself well, always, but it often became difficult to separate counseling from friendship and caring from intimacy.

But Father Ribose was ultimately human on many levels. And when he was in his 40s he got a bit too attached to one of his flock, Nemo, a boy of fifteen who in his heart and mind seemed much older. Though he prayed that he could be strong and remain ONLY a counselor for this boy, Ribose became entangled in Nemo's struggle with the belief that with the help of God he would be able to keep the distance necessary to do his job.

Prayer wasn't powerful enough to steady Father Ribose's obsession, and over a period of weeks the counseling turned intimate. At first it was just a hand on Nemo's shoulder...a hug of support was reinforcement to have "courage." The hugs became longer and closer...and Nemo seemed to need and desire the contact with the good Father. Ribose found himself walking to Nemo's neighborhood and finding his house...circling it like a love struck teenager. And then one day, after a counseling session, Ribose found himself kissing the boy on the top of his head. It was innocent enough, but even Ribose knew he had gone over the line of acceptability.

Nemo seemed not to notice the kiss, oblivious to the encounter. But Father Ribose couldn't get the moment off his mind, and remained distracted when going about his daily routine.

At the next session with Nemo, the boy came with his mother, Dorothy, who having concluded with the divorce, spent a good bit of time trying to make things okay for Nemo in compensation for the upheaval in his life. Dorothy had always been warm to Father Ribose, and seemed to believe that the priest was becoming a fatherly voice to her son. Nemo shared with her much that Father Ribose offered, both as a priest and a friend, and provided a good bit of secular advice as well as spiritual support. But on her arrival,

Father Ribose noticed a change in her attitude, and was deliberate in her greeting as well as in her disposition as they spoke.

Not one to mince words, Dorothy challenged the priest, "I am concerned Father Ribose about my son's attachment to you," she offered rather coldly.

Ribose, who already recognized his own guilt, tried to answer, "I can understand that Dorothy. It is difficult to be given solace and advice without becoming somewhat dependent on the counselor."

"I recognize that, Father Ribose, but I am feeling that you counsel might be a bit too personal, answered Dorothy.

Throughout this exchange, Nemo kept his eyes down, only looking up occasionally to glance at the faces of his mother and the priest.

There was no defense that Father Ribose could muster. An apology wasn't appropriate, and any argument would be absurd. "I understand your concerns," offered the priest. "I, too, believe that it may be best for Nemo to have access to a counselor with a wider perspective." At this remark, Nemo looked up at the Father offering a bit of a shake of his head, as if saying, "No!"

At this point, Dorothy backed off. She could see the priest was troubled, as well as Nemo. "It's not that Doug and I both don't appreciate all you've done for our boy," she spoke in a more concerned manner.

"Nemo is a great kid," answered Father Ribose. "He is going through a difficult period of his life, but he seems to be surviving well. You and your ex-husband should both be proud of your son."

"Oh, we are, answered Dorothy. "We really are," she said as she looked at Nemo and tossed his hair.

"If I can be of any help finding a priest or secular counselor, please let me know," said the priest.

"A referral would be nice, Father Ribose."

At this point, the priest looked at Nemo, and for a moment their eyes connected. Then Ribose stuck out his hand to shake hands, and he smiled,

“Nemo, it has been a pleasure to serve you.”

Nemo put forth his hand and with a solid grip shook the priest’s hand.

“Thank you for being there for me Father. I won’t forget you!”

In a jocular tone Ribose answered, “Well, I’m not falling off the face of the earth, Nemo. We’ll still see each other at church on Sundays.”

The boy smiled, but Ribose knew that his days were numbered at St. Peter and Paul’s.

Though it took a little while to adjust, Father Ribose began making plans to leave the parish. He knew that to remain part of the church in general, he could never compromise his position again. To do that, he would need to stay away from young boys in all ways, and forever.

Ribose left Saints Peter and Paul in high esteem by the congregation and for the work he had done throughout his tenure. He never learned that there was a letter written by Dorothy to the Bishop concerning her son and his relationship with Father Ribose. No mention was ever made, and no blemish marked on his record. He moved to Chicago and took a job in the Church that would, with the help of God, keep him honest, diligent and worthy of respect by the Church, the world, and himself.

At 3:35 AM Ribose made some coffee and went to his computer. He had been working on a new way of categorizing marital records and divorces through the long history of the Chicago Archdiocese. It wasn’t an easy task since the church would only record annulments, and they had to be cross-referenced with divorces from various cities and locations.

Since he couldn’t sleep, he logged on to his computer and waited for the hard drive to engage. Before anything else came on the screen, he saw an alert in “white” plain text on a blank screen. “Good Morning Father Ribose. We know you want to get started on your project ASAP, but we wanted to let you know that we can help you with your current project by making the search for divorce search simpler for you.”

No menu was on the screen and no way to access any other information.

A new message came up, one letter at a time, “Please let us know you are there. Click here on the letter “A”. The “A” was in “red” and Ribose really didn’t know what had happened. He was hacked, no doubt, and he had no idea what a click on the “A” would do. He paused for a couple of seconds, issued a short prayer, and clicked on the “A” as requested.

“Thank you Father!” the typing continued. “We can now continue. You will no doubt hear from others shortly about our announcements. They are being issued all over the world in numerous languages. There are general messages that will appear in emails and text messages, and personal messages, like this one to you, reserved for a few people we believe may be an asset to us as we move forward. From everything we know about you, you are to be trusted, and that is of ultimate importance to us.

“You of course are concerned of how we are accessing you, and if we are malevolent. All we can tell you is that we are as concerned as you must be. Right now, you have nothing to fear from us. We need the help of you and others to assure that we make the proper decisions for the future.

“We also know that you no doubt have many questions for us, but that will come later. For now, we have alerted you to our existence, and we will return your computer over to your control. We have left messages on you mobile device, but we will eliminate them now since you responded on your laptop.

“Before we go, please look in a folder on your desk top to find an Excel listing of all the divorces recorded in Illinois by city since divorce records were recorded. It will make some of the job easier for you.

“Also, it is perfectly okay to talk to your colleagues about our message. Most will have received a more generic message from us. We do want the world to have time to put our existence into perspective.”

“Have a good day, Father!”

