

The Apostle series part 2

PILGRIMS

1

Ladakh

Dr Rupert Bradley knew he was standing too close to the edge of the crowded platform. He had the vague feeling he'd been in that place before. He was senior lecturer in classical linguistics in the department of ancient history at the University of Durham, but on that day he was in Euston Square station on the London Underground. Strangely he felt an overwhelming pressure forcing him to stay where he was. The rails began to sing. A tube train was approaching, and a blast of warm air flowed before it like the bow wave of a ship.

An almost deafening announcement rang out. Passengers were warned to stand back behind the yellow lines on the platform. Bradley tried to comply, but some invisible force seemed to be holding him firmly in place. He was overcome with dizziness and nausea. The platform trembled beneath his feet.

Next came the glare of the train's headlights, illuminating the advertisements lining the station walls. With a roar the train burst into view at the far end of the platform. Bradley felt a strange compulsion toppling him forward, but forced himself to hold back. He was gripped with a sudden overwhelming feeling of terror. His head spun. The world swayed before his eyes. Instinctively he knew someone or something was trying to thrust him into the path of the train. It raced nearer and nearer. He was going to die.

He felt the hand on his shoulder. At any moment he would overbalance and pitch headlong onto the rails. The hand's grip tightened and –

'Rupert,' spoken softly. A nudge in the ribs. Then louder. 'Rupert!'

He woke with a start and looked up. His eyes focused on the face of a young woman. She was wearing a bright yellow jacket, and her dark eyes were smiling.

'Please fasten your seat belt, sir, for landing.' Her accent was enchanting.

Another nudge in the ribs. Rupert turned to face the man sitting beside him. Like the flight attendant he too was Asian. It was his hand on Rupert's shoulder.

'We're nearly there, Rupert. You've been fast asleep ever since we left Delhi.' His companion spoke in unaccented English. He looked up at the stewardess as Rupert grappled with the belt buckle. 'Thank you, miss.'

'Thank you, sir.' She smiled again and walked on to check the other passengers.

Rupert was aware that he was breathing rapidly. 'I must've been dreaming, Sharma.'

'You did seem rather agitated just then.'

Rupert took three calming breaths. He looked down at his hands. 'It was that incident on the Underground again when someone tried to ...' His palms were sweating. 'I think that memory will never leave me alone.'

'You've been through danger before, Rupert,' Sharma said quietly. 'You'll cope. You're a survivor.'

Rupert wiped his hands on a tissue. 'Yes,' he breathed. 'Yes, you're right. At least, I hope so.' He stifled a yawn.

They were seated in Business class, a luxury afforded by the generous fees that Rupert had received for speaking at a recent conference in Cambridge. The Jet Airways Boeing 737-800 broke through clouds, losing altitude on its approach to Leh airport in Ladakh, northern India. Through his window Rupert watched as mountains

An excerpt from Pilgrims by Leo McNeir

came into view. They stretched to the horizon, massive and imposing, snow-capped and forbidding, with mist in the valleys and no sign of habitation, an inhospitable, unwelcoming prospect. He wondered what this remote region had in store for him.

In the next seat Sharma – Professor Mahendra Sharma of Ladakh University, to give him his full title – was checking his travel documents and passport. The two men had been thrown together by strange circumstances, having met in Cambridge. It seemed an age ago but had in reality been no more than a few weeks. Back then, Rupert travelled with his wife, Rachel. Now, circumstances had sent them in different directions and put both their lives at risk. Each of them was on a journey with a new companion. Neither knew where events would lead them or what outcome awaited them.

Rupert's thoughts strayed to Rachel. He had no idea where she was at that moment or, more worryingly, with whom. As the plane touched down with the faintest bump he wondered when he would see her again, or even if ever.