

Puzzle Master: Master of None

T.J. McKenna

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Dedication

In the Author's note to the eBook edition of *Puzzle Master*, I told the story of a neighbor's Easter cross and how I could still see it with my heart even after they moved away.

Master of None is dedicated to Kristen's bouncy, blonde ponytail - because I could still see it with my heart even after chemotherapy had taken it, strand-by-strand, to the floor... and because I always will.

Acknowledgements

Special thanks again go to the ever-patient and meticulous Diane, for all her work in copy editing. Without her, commas would appear at seemingly random intervals, “that” and “which” would be used interchangeably, and hyphens would be an endangered species.

Thanks also go to my three “Pre-readers”, Bob, Tamara and Shannon. All authors have nagging doubts about story tempo, whether characters are staying in character and generally about certain scenes that just don’t feel right. Bob, Tamara and Shannon helped me see various scenes through other eyes and improve them.

Finally, when I released *Puzzle Master* it didn’t cross my mind that it would be read around the world. Words cannot express the joy I feel when the hand of God guides free copies of my humble works where He wants them to be read. East Africa seems to be where He wanted *Puzzle Master* to land, particularly Nigeria and Ghana. Thank you to all who reached out by email or even just a “like” on Facebook. It keeps me going.

I can’t wait to see where His hands take *Master of None*.

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Prologue

Sheridan, Illinois 2192 A.D.

“Mom, when will you and Dad be home?” I asked my mother as she packed a bag one morning when I was eight years old.

“We’ll both be home tomorrow. I’m catching a late tube and meeting Dad for dinner with friends in Ohio; then we have a meeting in Philadelphia.”

She took some things out of a funny little homemade box she called an “incubator” and packed them into a shoulder bag.

“I wanted to show him that I finished the puzzle he gave me for my birthday.”

Mom stared at me while I held up a large spherical puzzle, then sighed.

“They called it ‘The Impossible Puzzle’ and you finished it in three days? It has over nine thousand pieces. Even the ‘Nearly Impossible Puzzle’ we got you last year took longer than that.”

“Mom, I was only seven then.”

“Nothing seems to be impossible for you. I guess once you’ve done the ‘Nearly Impossible,’ the ‘Impossible’ doesn’t look so hard anymore. You know, most adults give up on those puzzles long before finishing.”

“Tell me about it. Dad took part of the ‘Nearly Impossible Puzzle’ apart and I had to fix it.”

“Maybe you should glue it.”

“That’s okay. Dad promised he wouldn’t mess with it again.”

“If you’ve finished the puzzle, what am I going to leave to keep you busy while Mrs. Pierce looks after you tonight?”

“You don’t have to leave anything. I like just talking with Mrs. Pierce. She has lots of great stories from when she was young.”

I looked Mom in the eyes as I said it. I always thought she had the most beautiful blue eyes in the world. Then I frowned as I looked over the rest of her face.

“I take it you still don’t like my new haircut?” she asked.

“Not really. I liked it much better when it was long. I only ever remember it being long. That’s okay. I don’t like Dad’s new cut either. How long do you think it’ll take for it to grow back?”

“I’ll leave that for you to puzzle out.”

Mom removed a few more things from the incubator.

“What is all that stuff anyway?” I asked.

“Just some things I’ve cultured. Incubators can be used for a lot of things that need to be kept warm to grow. There’s some yogurt in there that’ll be ready in a few hours if you want to try it, but mostly scientists use incubators to grow things they want to study, like tissue samples. We could even hatch chicken eggs in there if we wanted.”

“Cool! Can we?”

“Not today.”

She removed two containers filled with a dark fluid from the refrigerator and added them to her shoulder bag.

“I need to pack a few more things and head for the tube station. Promise me you’ll be good until we’re back?”

“Define ‘good,’” I said.

This was my usual response and it elicited the usual smile from Mom. Normally this was the point where the exchange ended, but instead Mom got a serious look and held me gently by the shoulders.

“Just be who you know you should be. No matter what anyone else says.”

“What’s wrong, Mom? Why are you crying?”

She wiped a tear from the corner of each eye.

“It’s okay. Sometimes moms just want their little boys to stay little boys and we get sad when we remember you have to grow up.”

Six hours later Mrs. Pierce was awakened by a call to the house and I listened to her footsteps as she slowly climbed the stairs and placed her hand on the doorknob to my room. She stood there for a long time and I could hear a gentle rattle that indicated her hands were shaking. When she peeked in, her face looked disappointed to find that I was still awake and reading.

“Cephas. There was just a call to the house. There was an accident in the tube car your parents were on.”

Chapter One

Capon Springs, West Virginia, 2203 A.D.

You Are.

That was Martha's response when I asked her who was to lead Christians in the True Holy War.
How many times can those words echo in your head before they drive you insane?

You Are the leader of the True Holy War.

You Are a wanted man with a price on his head.

You Are the last hope for religious freedom.

You are in way over your head, Cephas Paulson.

A month ago I was on the shore of the Sea of Galilee listening as a risen Jesus Christ told me to "feed His sheep." The Bible recorded Him as saying those words to my namesake, Simon Peter, but the third and final time He spoke those words to Peter, Jesus was staring over Peter's shoulders and into my eyes. As I stood in Galilee, it all seemed simple. I would return to my own time and tell the godless world of 2202 that they had it all wrong, that Christ was the son of God and it was time to follow God's plan rather than continue with the mess mankind had made of things. The future looks anything but simple now.

The day after I arrived in Capon Springs, West Virginia, Martha traveled to a secret Four safe house to share the news that we'd escaped from the Cult Hunter Corps. When she returned she barely spoke and wouldn't look me in the eye. Since then she's tried her best to avoid me; yet I find her constantly lurking on the far edge of my peripheral vision. She must know I'll notice her, so I presume she's doing it on purpose.

Martha brought "instructors" with her from the Four safe house who have been tasked with giving me basic training, including hand-to-hand combat, knife throwing, and the use of stun guns. They too, are always nearby.

"The training teams say you've made rapid and impressive progress," Martha says as she joins the team escorting me to the knife throwing area.

"You gave someone with an attention for detail nothing else to do with his time," I reply. "Which reminds me... is it normal to cut a trainee's access to all computers and have them watched around the clock?"

She ignores the question.

"The lead instructor says you only stop to pray, eat and sleep," she continues. "He says you voluntarily run laps for hours at a time."

Running isn't always for the body. Some people have running in their soul.

"Speaking of the *lead instructor*, is it part of training that nobody will tell me their names or speak with me other than giving instructions?"

Although she's walking beside me and looking straight ahead, she now looks in the opposite direction rather than meeting my eyes to answer the question.

"I have to go," she says. "Enjoy the training."

Her response confirms what I've known for weeks, but didn't want to admit. My instructors aren't playing the part of drill sergeants. They're always in the background watching, waiting for me to stray over some imaginary line that I can sense, but not see.

I reach the one area where I haven't excelled, the knife throwing range.

One of the instructors stands beside me to demonstrate proper technique, then critique me while two others stand behind me.

Time to test the lines again.

After five terrible throws, I raise my knife into a throwing position but turn away from the target to face the men behind me.

“Can you tell from behind what I’m doing wrong?” I ask.

By the time I’m fully turned, their knives are ready to throw and the instructor standing next to me has lowered his knife to prepare for an upward thrust into my abdomen.

“So that’s a proper throwing stance? Thanks for the demonstration.”

Their response time is getting faster.

I turn back to the target.

They look gleeful, like they relish the possibility of killing me.

After knives, we go to a different range to practice shooting stun guns. This is my favorite training, probably because it comes so naturally to me. At first I was given stationary, human-sized targets that were either dressed in cult hunter uniforms or not. A screen would drop and I was given ten seconds to hit only the cult hunters. On my second try, I did it in six seconds. The next day, the figures started to move and I did it in five; so I suggested they challenge me by discarding the uniforms and distinguishing the targets with small purple earrings like those given to veteran cult hunters. The first time the earrings were actually in the ears, but they soon became hidden as necklaces, cuff links and even a shoe decoration. None of it has mattered. When I’m at the range, my eye for small detail allows me to neutralize the targets in seconds.

The fact that all my shots are to the head hasn’t gone unnoticed either.

I watch the faces and body language of my trainers as we walk to the gun range today. Sweat is forming on their foreheads and their eyes twitch as they think about what I can do with a stun gun in my hands. I won’t test them here. My gun is a training model locked in the lowest setting, while theirs are the full power variety.

Since they won’t tell me their names, I’ve given them each one based on their appearance or manners. The one I’ve named “Angry Eyebrows” speaks.

“Follow the same routine as always. Don’t approach the weapon that’s been set out for you until instructed. When you’re done, set it down and back two steps away from it before you turn to face us.”

And while I’m holding it you’ll have your guns on my back.

“Martha herself created today’s challenge,” he continues. “We’ve all been playing with it and I added a little twist just for you. There are ten combatants in the arena which you have ten minutes to neutralize. If you hit a non-combatant, a combatant you’ve already hit will come back to life. Nobody has ever hit all ten targets. I hold the record at six targets down when time expired. Don’t plan on beating it.”

The screen drops and a hundred or so small hover drones take off. The blue ones are the targets and the rest are black. They’re all the size and speed of a hummingbird, complete with a hummingbird’s ability to change direction and hover.

“There are only five targets,” I say.

I shoot.

“Make that four.”

One of the other instructors accuses Angry Eyebrows of cheating but he assures everyone that this is just his little twist and there are ten marked targets in the arena. The others remind him that his record was done with ten blue drones.

As they continue zipping this way and that around the target area, I can see that they’re not flying randomly. Each target has a unique pattern. As I hit my second target, I realize that the non-combatants are programmed to swarm around the targets, making it harder to get a clear shot. When I hit the third target, I see that - as a target is hit - the swarms randomly reorganize

themselves around the remaining targets, giving me a brief window with a clear shot. I hit the fourth and fifth blue targets in rapid succession before I realize my mistake.

The five remaining targets aren't blue. By saving them for last, I've made the job of finding them even harder as the swarms have grown around them. Angry Eyebrows has also made a mistake. He's created a puzzle.

I set my gun down on the counter in front of me and watch the five remaining swarms. Each still has a unique internal pattern with a center marked by the target drone. It takes some time, but I see what I've been seeking.

"The other five targets are marked only with purple cult hunter earrings," I say.

"I guess my record stands," Angry Eyebrows replies.

I back away from my weapon; then turn to face him.

"I'm amazed you got six," I say.

"Let him try with ten blue drones," another guard says, but I reach up and hit the reset button.

"I said I'm amazed that *you* got six," I say to Angry Eyebrows.

The screen drops again and all the drones return to flight. First I target the drones marked with purple stones. The first one goes down at the six-second mark and the second one is hit when it makes the mistake of hovering at the fourteen-second mark. The black drones race to reorganize themselves, marking the spot where the next target is to be found. I go after the targets farthest from the center to keep the black drones racing back and forth, unable to get organized around the targets. In less than a minute there are eight target drones on the ground. The last two blue targets are completely surrounded.

"Two to go smart guy," Angry eyebrows says. "Just try to hit one and you'll bring one of those others back to life."

And that is the solution.

I hit a black drone in each of the remaining swarms. As two revived targets start to lift off the ground, the remaining swarms split and dive down to surround them and expose the two blue drones in the air. I dispatch the two in the air, then the two near the ground in rapid succession before the swarms can organize. The remaining black drones all land to signal the game is over.

The clock stops at three minutes and sixteen seconds elapsed time. I didn't try to time it that way, but I smile anyway to make them think I did.

I'm so excited by the prospect of decreasing the time further that I forget to set my gun down before turning to face them. I don't know if they're stunned by what I accomplished or if my habit of setting the gun down has made them lazy, but all of their guns are either holstered or pointed at the ground. I point my gun downrange again, which is when they clue in to their mistake and train their guns on me.

Three dead men, and they know it. Why is there a gun in my hands, Lord? What do You want me, to learn?

I set the gun down and face them again. I'm expecting to see relief or gratitude on their faces, but instead I see only anger.

"Maybe I should quit early today," I say. "I was thinking I'd like to hit the obstacle course anyway."

"Good idea," says Angry Eyebrows. "I just thought of a new training exercise you could do."

I don't like the look in his eye or the smirk on his face.

They don't secure their stun guns in the range locker as usual.

"To teach you to keep your head down, you can do the obstacle course while we fire over your head."

The course begins with a crawling portion. For anyone else I'm sure the shots would be a meter above their head for safety. For me, their shots are so close I can feel my hair standing up from the

charge in the air. As I do a wall climbing section, a shot grazes my right foot, causing my entire leg to go numb; so I have to drag myself over the wall and then fall hard on the other side.

Next is a rope swing portion, where I'm hit in the left hand and fall into the muddy water below.

The last section requires me to zigzag while running through and jumping over various obstacles. The shots get closer and closer until one hits me square in the chest and I go down in a dusty heap. I feel like there's an elephant sitting on me, but I continue to crawl. The shooting stops as they watch me move inch by inch through the remainder of the course, using just one arm and one leg.

I lock eyes with each of my guards in turn.

You can stun my arms and legs, but you will not steal the fire from my eyes.

"Just quit," Angry Eyebrows yells.

"We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed," I yell back as I continue to claw my way along.

Hearing Bible verse from me angers them; so they resume shooting, causing dirt to spray into my mouth and eyes. Luckily, there are no more direct hits. The official finish line is painted on the ground. I reach just one hand across in defiance before I stop and close my eyes. I hear three sets of feet walk up to me, then a fourth set comes from a different direction.

"What happened here?" Martha's voice asks from above me.

She already knows the answer. She was watching the entire time. The question is whether she allowed it happen or if she ordered it.

There's no reply.

"Give me that stunner. If I don't get an answer, I'm going to shoot all three of you using whatever setting you just shot him with."

There's a pause.

"It's set on eight. What were you thinking?" Martha asks.

"Right now, I'm thinking I've never seen anyone keep moving after being shot once on eight, much less three times," Angry Eyebrows replies. "Why can't you see that he's too dangerous to keep here?"

Lord, help them to see that I'm no longer their enemy.

I open my eyes to find Martha has the pistol aimed at his chest.

"Don't shoot him, Martha. It was my idea," I say. "I asked for tougher training and things just got carried away."

Even through the dirt in my eyes, I can see Martha's face. She knows I'm lying.

"Clean him up, feed him and put him in bed," Martha says. "He's going on a trip tomorrow."

I wake at midnight to the shuffling of feet outside my door, when they change the instructors. I've never been shot with a stun gun before and I'm pleased to find that the numbness has worn off and that I'm not even sore as I make my way out of bed to listen to the conversation. Normally the daytime instructors would be here until midnight, but Martha must have reassigned them after what happened.

"You hear about what happened at the obstacle course?" the voice I know as "Razor Stubble" asks.

"Yeah, including that he took the blame himself. Whatever this scheme is all about, you have to admit that he's all in," the voice of "Light Foot" responds.

I named him that because he's a good runner.

I bet Angry Eyebrows and the rest failed to mention that I could have shot them all at the range.

“So you’re not buying the holy act either?”

“Of course not. There’s no such thing as a retired cult hunter. He should know.”

They know the phrase I coined?

“I don’t care what he said in his big speech. He killed my aunt and would kill me next if given the chance.”

“Then why are we training him? Martha sent a report to the Council saying we captured him, but she’s treating him like a new recruit.”

“Beats me. Every time he picks up a gun it gives me the creeps.”

“Not me. I’m hoping he’ll try something, just to give me the pleasure of shooting him.”

They move out of earshot and leave me to ponder my new world as I drift back into sleep.

Why have you brought me here, Lord?

After first reading the Bible three years ago, I imagined what it would be like to join a church. I dreamed about being in the company of Christians and living my life free from the anger and violence of the Cult Hunter Corps.

Four’ definitely isn’t the church Jesus described.

When I was The Cult Hunter, my mornings used to begin with looking into a mirror and trying to convince myself that everything I saw could be explained by evolution. It was an empty, soulless exercise. Now that my days begin with prayer, looking into the mirror has become an exercise of joy and wonder as I see the handiwork of the expert craftsman that created me.

I pray for guidance; I pray for my guards; I pray for every Christian in the world and every atheist too, but there’s one person I’m having trouble praying for: Martha. As a Christian, I want her to be happy, but as a man there’s part of me that can’t stand the thought of her being happy without me. So I pray for Martha to receive grace, wisdom, patience and many other things, but not happiness, and certainly not love. I pray aloud, almost hoping that the room is bugged and she’ll notice what’s missing from my prayers.

One kindness that Martha did for me when I was back in time was going to my house in Colorado Springs and removing the copies of the Bible that I’d collected. All copies of the Bible are rare, but my favorite is still the one that I read first - the copy I later stole from the basement of the museum in my hometown. I’ve carried it nearly everywhere since Martha returned it to me.

After praying, I look out my room window and watch the guests who are visiting Capon Springs. Everywhere I look, they appear to be gathered in fellowship. Three times per day they eat together in a large dining hall and the rest of their days are spent playing games, swimming in a large spring-fed pool or just talking to each other. Martha told me that “Capon” is roughly translated as “medicine waters,” but as I watch the people below me, I can’t help but feel that this place is made for much more than healing our bodies.

The instructors from Four have made it clear that I’m not invited to the meals, the games, or the conversations I see taking place outside my window. I dine alone in my room, feeling that His church is right in front of me, but the closest I’m allowed to approach is standing in the shadow of its steeple.

Leaving my room is the signal for the daily dance to begin. My instructors will follow me around the grounds just like kill team agents from the Corps used to follow me to and from classes. They try to blend in, but I see them as just another set of puzzle pieces that have been jammed into the wrong places.

I do my best to enjoy the serenity of Capon Springs by myself. It seems like every day I find a new wonder of nature or history to captivate my thoughts as I wander the grounds. I walk past an immaculately kept garden; then stop at one of the spring-fed fountains that run continuously. I

spend several minutes just watching the never-ending stream. Like everything else in this place, the fountain draws my mind to the Word of God.

And the LORD shall guide thee continually, and satisfy thy soul in drought, and make fat thy bones: and thou shalt be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water, whose waters fail not.

Martha is also walking the grounds, but her gait tells me she's here with a purpose. I watch as Martha approaches the instructors one by one and dismisses them. They look at me and confirm that she intends to guard me by herself, but they all leave without protest.

Is she confident that I won't attack her? Or is she confident that she can beat me?

"You ready to go?" Martha asks.

"Would it matter?"

"No. They've been demanding this meeting for weeks."

"They" are the Four Council, the leaders of the young Christians who are not content to hide in the shadows as Christians have done for generations. Just before rescuing me, Martha was promoted and is now one of "them." Her official title is "team leader" and she's been given command of a local Four unit called "Bethany House," to which I've also been assigned.

"You told me I'm the leader in the True Holy War. So it seems only fair I should get to review my troops."

My tone is acidic as I refer to myself as the leader of Four, which makes Martha frown.

"Like you, Cephas, sometimes my tongue gets ahead of my brain."

"It's nice to know we actually had something in common during your time as my student."

Her eyes flash with anger, but she says nothing.

"If I'm not their new leader, what's the purpose of the meeting?" I ask.

"I don't know. All I know is that they've been demanding this meeting since I informed them of the rescue. I've put them off because I thought taking time here to adjust to your new life might give you a better shot at convincing them you're a new man."

"Or at least a model prisoner?"

"You're not a prisoner."

I feign a sudden move towards her and her hand goes to the hunting knife that hangs from her belt. I stand and stare at her hand, which is wrapped around the handle. I'd like to cry, but I just nod my head in understanding. If my dream of joining the church that Christ described has been crushed, then my dream of loving Martha has been shattered into a million pieces that no human puzzle master can ever put back together.

"I'm ready when you are, Warden."

Chapter Two

We set off for Bethany House in an ancient electric bus that still purrs like a kitten but looks as if the wheels are in a competition to see which one will fall off first. There's no hover line to Capon Springs, but that's how the people here seem to like it. We travel several kilometers on the bus, then Brill lets us off in a secluded spot so we can't be traced back to Capon Springs. We'll walk to the nearest stop on the small hover line that runs between the towns of Wardensville and Gore, ride the bus for a few kilometers and then get off and walk into the hills where Bethany House is hidden.

"I wouldn't mind running instead of using the hover line," I say.

The time may come when I need to outrun both Four and the Bureau to stay alive.

Training for The Traveler's Initiative, then walking everywhere in ancient Israel were a joke compared to the fitness level expected of a Four member. I haven't gained huge amounts of muscle, but what I have looks like twisted ropes under my skin. Various chemical enhancements could quickly give me much larger muscles. Those shortcuts result in muscles that look great but have a fraction of the strength of natural muscle fibers and Four prefers an army of Davids over an army of fake Goliaths.

"No. Using the hover lines is our best opportunity to test the limits of government trackers," Martha replies.

On the day the Four movement helped me to escape from the Cult Hunter Corps, I smashed my old com and had Martha smash a tracking chip they had placed in her back. We both immediately ceased making electronic footprints. Looking back, I regret it as childish.

Four has always relied on lack of enhancements to stay invisible and within days of our escape, the Bureau was working on ways to "see" the invisible Christians. Anyone who was not making electronic footprints became suspect. Luckily the staff at Bethany House includes some technical wizards who have been working on ways to fool the sensors, though a more old-fashioned approach sometimes works just as well.

"Time for the hats and sunglasses," Martha says when we're nearing the point where Martha says cameras with facial recognition software are positioned.

When I was preparing for the Traveler's Initiative, my face got enough air time to make any movie star jealous. Even without the cameras, Martha worries I'll be recognized by the locals. According to Brill, if I'm recognized there's no guarantee anything will come of it. The people who live in these hills have a long history of being independently minded folks with no interest in helping the government find me.

When we get to the bus stop, Martha takes up position with her back to the visible security camera so the face recognition and lip reading software will get nothing. She expects me to follow her lead, but instead I stand, facing her, and get close. Then I nudge her to change the angle she's facing by twelve degrees.

"What are you doing? You're facing the camera."

"I'm facing the camera you can see. There's a hidden camera that you missed; so I'm blocking its view of your face while you block the view of mine. I hope you don't mind that I have to stand so close."

If standing close makes her uncomfortable, she shows no sign of it, but I'm sure she's annoyed that she missed something. Luckily she no longer doubts my observational skills and we timed our arrival so that we'll only be here for a moment.

"We won't need them, but put in your hacked com," Martha says.

Normally a com will only activate when it detects enhancements that tell it that it's been placed in its owner's ear and will then connect to the worldwide communications system. Members of Four have no enhancement chips in their bodies; so these new coms have been altered to contain biographical information on hundreds of users and allow us to change who the system thinks we are.

To find those of us who have no enhancements, the government is equipping tube cars and hover buses with eye beams and body heat scanners to count the number of people using public transportation. If the physical count is different from the electronic count, the discrepancy is noted. Being so far off the beaten path, thus far the small hover buses in the area have not been updated to the new equipment.

"If your fancy hacked coms don't fool the system, we'll know it soon," I say as the hover bus comes into view.

"This time you're wrong. It's the same bus number that I used yesterday and it hasn't been updated."

It may be the same old bus; but glinting in the sun is a shiny new transmitter, probably to accommodate an additional data feed for the upgrades.

My com is active as we enter the bus but Martha has not put her com into her ear. I don't know if it's to test the new equipment or if she still doesn't believe me that the bus was upgraded last night. We take seats but the bus doesn't move.

"Will all passengers please activate their coms for an important announcement," a congenial female voice says over a speaker.

That's right, Henry. Make it look innocent so nobody thinks about the fact they're being tracked.

Martha grunts under her breath over the fact that I was right again, but puts her com into her ear, causing the bus to begin moving. The "important announcement" is a request for passengers to complete a survey about the quality of the service. We both do the survey.

Nothing to see here but a couple of happy, brainwashed citizens.

When I complete the survey, the system says "Thank you, William."

As far as the system knows, I'm William Ralph and Martha is now his longtime partner, Wendy. They're an elderly Christian couple who live about a kilometer from the stop where we'll get off the bus, so everything will appear normal. They and many other older Christians are happy to let members of Four impersonate them from time to time. In exchange, young people from Four take them what they need and care for them. Some have even been privately buried without telling the government so the deception can continue even after they've passed on.

When everyone has finished the survey, the screens revert to public service announcements. I'm looking down, but my head snaps up when I hear a familiar voice say: "This is a personal message for Dr. Cephas Paulson."

I look up and see the video is showing an image of someone I thought I'd never see again.

"Cephas, this is your Aunt Jennifer. Please listen to me. Time travel is a new thing and nobody knew what the effects would be. I raised you since you were eight years old and I know you. I can see you're confused about what's real and what's not. Wherever you are, please contact me so I can help you."

Not a chance. I remember the sort of "help" you offered to me when I was a kid.

The next propaganda spot is from Henry Portman himself. In this ad, Henry holds up the bloody synthetic bandage I brought back through time and announces I confessed to him that I saw someone carrying a body away from the area of the tomb. A government lab has analyzed the blood and determined it's human, which Henry is presenting as proof that the apostles simply stole Christ's body and made up the rest.

As I bagged the bandage, a few drops of blood fell into the lid of my first aid kit. Martha had the drop analyzed by people loyal to the Four network and they agreed that it's human blood.

But whose blood is it?

We get off the bus and start walking. Our path takes us straight past the neat little house of the real Bill and Wendy. There's a barn that's twice the size of the house and four horses grazing in a pasture. When we get near, I can see Wendy standing in a window watching us as we pass. Martha waves and we both order our coms to standby mode. Wendy and Bill can now turn their coms back on without the system recording them as being in two places at once. Outside the barn I see many jugs of Capon Springs water that other members of Four must have dropped off on their way past.

Martha motions for me to leave the road at a spot where the brush is thin and we start moving through the forest.

"Are you sure it's safe to be alone with me?" I ask.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Her hand brushes the handle of her knife.

"I saw firsthand what you did to the Bureau agent in my house and I'm not interested in taking a beating," I say. "But this is the first time we've been alone since we were locked in Henry's tube car together. Aren't you worried that instead of trying to take your knife I might do something even more horrific, like trying to kiss you again?"

"You were right earlier. I could use a run. Follow me," she says and takes off.

That's what Martha does when she wants to avoid a subject: she runs away.

I don't want to reveal to her just how good a shape I'm in; so when I catch her and begin to speak, I pretend to huff and puff for air.

"I think we should talk," I say.

Years as The Cult Hunter taught me that poking at a sensitive spot often yields unexpected information and right now talking about "us" appears to be as taboo as a subject can get. She increases the pace and I smile inwardly. She could triple the pace and I'd still be able to talk while running.

"What do you want to talk about?" she asks.

I see nothing to lose, so I blurt it out.

"After all the time we spent together and the way you kissed me - I need to know."

Martha stops so abruptly that I'm several steps ahead of her before I can turn around.

"What you need to know is how to move through the woods silently. Try to travel the next ten meters without making a sound. That includes talking."

I stand and stare at her. I know my face is revealing what's really on my mind and I'm surprised there are no tears rolling down my cheeks as I again reach the conclusion that I've never been anything more to her than a target to be killed or used in the fight for religious freedom. I sigh and begin walking away from her as silently as I can manage.

When I think I've gone about ten meters, I turn around expecting her to be where I last saw her and jump a little when I find she's right behind me.

"How'd you do that?" I ask.

She shows me a technique in which she rolls her feet from outside to in so that her weight doesn't commit until her foot has tested the ground for anything that'll make noise. I pick up the technique quickly.

"Martha, I still need to -"

"Now try to run as quietly as possible," she says and is off again.

I catch her and watch her quiet footfalls. Running quietly is all about carefully choosing where your foot will land and choosing your path to minimize contact with things such as dried sticks and leaves.

This time when Martha stops, she cuts me off before I even attempt to speak.

“Now we’ll loop around and track ourselves.”

We do a wide loop and arrive back at a rock that we passed earlier.

“We passed through here just a few minutes ago. Find our tracks,” she says.

I’ve never thought about tracking before, but as I stand there and focus on the forest floor, our footfalls start to stick out to me like they’re lit with neon signs. I can see broken sticks, flattened grasses and disturbed dirt. At first it’s my own steps that are most obvious, since I’m heavier and not yet good at hiding my tracks; but as I concentrate, even Martha’s light and carefully chosen steps become visible to me.

We run and walk and loop back on our own footsteps five more times to see how different running speeds produce different tracks. I start to ignore my own tracks and focus on Martha’s. By the fifth loop, my tracks are getting harder and harder to follow. I don’t share my observations - or my new hiding ability - with her.

I give up on trying to start a conversation and just immerse myself in this fascinating new puzzle. When we reach the end of the sixth tracking loop, I’m so happy with my rapid progress that, without thinking, I smile and reach out and touch her on the arm. Her body stiffens and she moves back a step to break the contact.

“I’m sorry,” I say. “It’s just that I’ve enjoyed this lesson and just being out here with you. It reminded me of laying in the grass together in the park near my house and how you reached out and touched my hand. You had no way of knowing, but that was the first real physical contact I’d had in years. Then when you kissed me, I -”

Martha lets out a loud sigh.

“What do you want from me, Cult Hunter? Is the puzzle really so hard that I have to give you all the pieces? Here’s a piece. Not everything is what it appears to be. I’m hiding my real feelings about you for the sake of my mission. Does that help?”

She’s hated me from the beginning?

Her hair is flowing around her shoulders in the breeze. It reminds me of a breezy day we spent together in Colorado Springs. I reach out and allow the ends to tickle my fingertips.

“Please don’t,” she says.

“The day the identities of the travelers were announced, you sent a rose to my hotel room. It said “kisses real,” but it was only real like this breeze that’s blowing your hair. I felt it as it passed through my life, but it was never really mine.”

She opens her mouth to speak, but I hold up my hand to stop her.

“The fact that I needed to ask the question was the answer all along.”

There’s nothing left to say; so we settle into a stiff walking pace with Martha in the lead.

How could I have been so fooled that I thought Martha could ever love me? Jocie was right. I fooled myself. Henry was right too. The Christians will never accept me. I was too good at acting the part of The Cult Hunter for them to ever see me as anything but a monster.

With the question of Martha’s feelings settled, my mind drifts to questions about my own fate. With both sides now wanting me dead, I want to lie down here in the woods and give them their wish; but three simple words are keeping me going: “Feed my sheep.”

Jesus once warned His apostles that they’d be going out as sheep among wolves. I want to believe the woman walking in front of me is one of Jesus’ precious lambs; but I’m afraid that I’m just fooling myself again. I’m afraid that she’s leading me straight into the wolves’ den.

“Martha, before this top secret meeting of the Four Council begins, can I ask a couple of tactical questions?” I ask the back of her head.

“Fire away.”

“Now that I’ve seen your training firsthand, what does Four intend to do with it? You claim you won’t stay in the shadows; so what are your operational plans?”

Martha’s pace increases by a half step.

“For that matter, how are other Christian groups trained and organized? If the older generations are in the shadows, what will they do to support you?”

Her hand brushes her hunting knife.

“Then there are your technical capabilities. These hacked coms are amazing. What other technical advantages do you have?”

I watch as her right arm stiffens and moves two additional centimeters from her body while her left hand tightens the straps on her pack. Her knees bend an extra degree or two. Anyone else would see a hiker. I see someone who’s prepared to spin on her left foot, plant with her right, and throw that knife into my chest in one fluid motion.

When I stop walking, it’s like I’ve triggered a tripwire. She spins and raises the knife, but it remains in her hand when she sees me standing there with my arms folded across my chest.

“So that’s it then, isn’t it? You really are my prison guard. I ask a few questions about your operations and you think this has all been an act. You think everything I’ve done and said is just another elaborate Cult Hunter trick to infiltrate your operations.”

“That’s still the prevailing opinion of the Council.”

Interesting.

“That knife isn’t in the Council’s hands. It’s in yours.”

“I have standing orders from the Council to kill you. None of them would blink an eye if I put a knife into you right now.”

“And yet the knife is in your hand rather than my chest. Why?”

I take a step towards her.

“I’m warning you, Cephias. As far as Four is concerned, you’re still The Cult Hunter. One wrong move and there’ll be a knife in your chest.”

A warning? Or a puzzle piece?

Another step forward.

“You’re not going to kill me, Martha.”

I walk past her.

“What makes you so sure?”

“Because you’ve already knifed me through the heart once today.”

Chapter Three

Martha's cousin William told me that Bethany House is the oldest and best of all the Four safe houses; so I'm surprised when Martha says "There it is" and through the trees I see a dilapidated house that appears to be in worse shape than Brill's electric bus. The house itself is at least two hundred years old and appears to have been abandoned for nearly half of that. It still has the original aluminum siding clinging to it and a rusty metal roof. What might have been a lawn surrounding the house is now more like a pasture with occasional trees springing up randomly.

"It looks... um, nice?" I say.

I take one step towards the house, then stop myself. There's no sign that anyone has approached the house. Even if the members of Four were careful not to create a path, there'd still be bent blades of grass. I look at the door and can see generations of unbroken spider webs in the sunlight. Nobody has gone through that door in a very long time. Martha watches me but says nothing.

"You use a secret entrance," I say.

I begin to walk in a circle around the house. Here and there I see signs that people have passed, but none of them ever stepped out from the shade of the tree line.

"You stay under the canopy. That way if a random drone happens to pass over, you're never photographed entering the house."

Martha gives a respectful nod.

I continue to walk around until I see signs of greater foot traffic. They've done a good job of spreading out where they walk to avoid creating a path; but the tracks spread out in a fan pattern, so all I need to do is follow them back to where they all meet. There I find a tunnel entrance that's hidden by a boulder and some small trees.

"I'm disturbed by how easy that was for you," Martha says. "Is everyone at the Corps this well trained?"

"Of course not. I just learned about tracking from you on our way here. I've told you many times, I just solve puzzles. Now that you've opened my eyes to them, broken sticks and disturbed ground are no different from puzzle pieces. Put them together and you see a bigger picture. I wish I'd discovered tracking years ago. It's really fun."

Martha just shakes her head.

Given the exterior of the house, I expect to crawl through the dirt to enter, but I'm happy to see the tunnel is big enough to stoop at first and then stand. Martha stops me before we climb a ladder to the main cavern.

"This is your first visit. You need to sign the guest book."

"Seriously? You keep a guest book?"

"Sure. Here's the pen."

She hands me a large nail that's hanging from a string. I look at the dirt walls and see dozens of sets of dates and initials have been carved into them. Four has been operating here for some time.

"Make them big. You're our most famous visitor."

"Then I'll use the initials that are most famous with Christians."

I carve "DRCP" in large letters. When I look up again I see that while I was carving, Martha fastened her long, blonde hair into a tight bun on the back of her head. Her features have gone from gentle and innocent to the look of a hardened battle commander in mere moments.

At the top of the ladder there's a small chamber with two more ladders leading down to other escape tunnels and two large passageways leading deeper into the complex. There's also a large metal door with a prominent "Danger, Do not Enter" sign.

“Is that where you keep the monsters? Or am I the first one you’ve captured?”

“That was supposed to be a fourth escape tunnel, but they ran into some sort of old mining area. The vent shafts are too dangerous; so they blocked it up. It turned out to be a blessing in disguise because we vent all the heat from our equipment into the old mine so the house above has no thermal signature for drones to detect.”

When we reach the main chamber, I stop abruptly. The room is much larger than I expected and looks like a modern military installation. I thought I’d find ancient computer technology and old men hunkered in the dark; but instead the room is full of modern gear and young people who look like a university research team. Most are about my age, but some of them appear to be no older than thirteen or fourteen years old.

“How?” I ask.

“Over a decade of hard work. I’m new to this house, but some of these people literally grew up here.”

“How’s it all powered?”

“The house above was chosen because it sits just a few hundred meters from an enormous set of underground power lines that feed electricity from the Sunspot One fusion reactor in Michigan to the East Coast of the United States. One nice thing about unlimited electricity is nobody notices when you take a little, so we tapped in without being noticed.”

“Apparently Four’s knack for deception goes beyond its people,” I say.

Martha is speechless that I’d be so harsh over our ended “relationship” but is rescued when several staff members notice us standing in the entry, allowing her to shift to her “Team Leader” persona. Her demeanor towards me switches to being outright cold, like she’s intentionally signaling to the others that I’m not to be trusted. The staff follows her lead and either eye me warily or ignore me.

“I’ll only be a minute. Stay here,” she says.

Martha leaves me standing alone and makes the mistake of turning her back on me.

Not far away an attractive woman about my age, with dark hair, keeps glancing at me: so I walk to where she’s sitting.

“Hi, I’m Cephas.”

At the sound of my voice, Martha’s head snaps around to see who I’m speaking with.

“I know who you are. I’m Amelia.”

“What’s your job, Amelia?”

“I’m supposed to be reading some boring government communications, but instead I’m reading a medical text. I want to be a doctor.”

“Helping to heal others is a beautiful goal. Do you have a minute to give me a quick tour? This my first time here.”

“A tour? I’m not even supposed to be talking to you.”

“I know. Nobody from Four talks to me. It’s pretty lonely; but you looked like the friendliest face in the room - so I thought I’d give it a try.”

“I thought my instructions to both of you were clear,” Martha says. “Out.”

Martha points, then pushes me roughly towards the door, which earns nods of approval from the staff.

As we leave the command center, I look at every screen I can. On one screen I see the Bible verses that are being hacked into random shows in various languages around the world. There’s a schedule showing that dozens of Four houses are taking turns doing the hacks. The second screen we pass is hacking me singing “He’ll find you” at the big press conference followed by shots of people singing the new “Christian” words and raising their arms into crosses at protests all over the world.

It's the first real news I've seen and it warms my heart to see others making a cross with their arms.

Martha leads me down a hallway. I wave goodbye to Amelia, whose head snaps back to her screen as we both earn irritated looks from Martha. She leads me down another hallway to an area known as "The dormitory" and shows me to a room with a simple bed, a desk and a chair.

"This is your room when you visit Bethany House. Wait here and someone will bring you when the Council is ready to meet with you."

"Sure. It won't be the first time I've sat alone and completed a puzzle long after the end result should have been obvious to me."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"An hour ago I was held at knifepoint by the woman I -"

Love.

I raise my head and look at her, but find her staring at the floor.

"By someone I apparently never really knew. I was wrong about her and I was wrong to think I could enter your world. There's no forgiveness, no redemption for me here. It seems that no matter what I do, I'll always be The Cult Hunter. Why don't you tell me how I can change that?"

She meets my gaze and for the first time in weeks I see the eyes I remember when she was my student. The fiery eyes that I thought wanted to be near me just because I'm me. The same blaze that seemed like a guiding light, but now feels like a lake of fire destined to burn me for eternity. It only lasts a moment before she breaks eye contact.

"I can't help you with that," she says and disappears.

Ten minutes later, a guy I saw in the command center takes me down another hallway and deposits me in a small room decorated only with a desk, two chairs and video equipment. All he needs to do is motion for me to sit; but instead he pushes me down into the chair and tells me to wait here for Martha.

This isn't for a conference. It's an interrogation room.

When he leaves, I walk to a door opposite where I entered to see if it's a control room. The old door is thin; so I can hear Martha is already on a conference with someone on the other side.

"This was your idea, Martha - not mine," a woman's voice says. "You're risking Bethany House and the entire network by having him there. Get some useful information out of him or get rid of him like you were supposed to do in the first place."

They're communicating electronically. They don't need me to create a new code. They never did.

"You're not listening, Zip. I'm telling you he's not what the leadership thinks he is."

"We all know what *you* think he is, Martha. I read the report and I also know you kissed him. Is that what this is about? Did you develop feelings for the animal?"

"No. Of course not."

I close my eyes.

"Then get me some information I can use or better yet, turn him over to me and let me do it. This is the best opportunity we've ever had or we're ever going to get. We must act."

"Six months ago I would have been first in line behind you; but things have changed. You need to meet him and see for yourself that he's not what we thought. We can use him."

"Fine. Introduce me to your new pet but don't ask for my help when you get bitten unless you commit Bethany to me right now."

"I'm not ready to do that, Zip. These people have always been a technical team. I'm training them hard, but they're not ready for combat. Bethany House will continue to support you with information, as it always has; but otherwise we're still neutral."

“You won’t always be the team leader at Bethany. If it was up to me, I’d remove you just for letting Paulson live.”

“Threats, Zip?”

“Advice.”

I knock hard on the door and enter without an invitation. As I do, I transform my face to a smile to hide what I’ve just heard.

Martha is seated in front of a control panel with a large screen featuring a young blonde woman. Her face is pretty; but my eye is drawn to the tattoo on the right side her neck. I can see part of what appears to be an intricate fractal pattern that reminds me of the sort of patterns I would draw when I was a child.

Patterns within patterns, puzzles within puzzles.

“Dr. Cephas Paulson! What an unexpected pleasure. My name is Zipporah - but everyone calls me Zip.”

“I hope I’m not intruding. I thought I might be late.”

“Intruding has always been your business Cult Hunter. I guess old habits are hard to break.”

“I thought I was here to make a first impression on the Four Council. It seems I was correct. I am too late.”

Before Zip can respond, Martha puts her hand onto my shoulder and guides me out of the control room.

“The meeting is about to start. You should have sat where you were told.”

Once I’m in the chair, a massive screen activates to reveal Martha’s face, which is being projected from the control room - even though I can see her through the open door.

“The meeting of the Four Council will now come to order,” she says.

The screen splits in two so that Martha is sharing with Zip; then splits into four; then six as more team leaders join. A minute later there are a hundred or more young faces looking back at me. They all defer to Zip to start the conversation.

“Let’s begin by welcoming Dr. Cephas Paulson,” Zip says.

There are a few polite claps, but even more murmuring.

“Thanks to Cephas, there’s been a worldwide swelling of support for religious freedom.”

That’s more than Martha has told me in weeks.

“I’ve made no secret of my desire to use this moment to show the world we’re here to stay and they’d better get used to seeing crosses again. We have the training and weapons. We have the technology. And now we have The Cult Hunter.”

I watch the faces carefully as Zip speaks. They’re angry. For three years I was the face of the Cult Hunter Corps, and now I’m the focal point of their rage.

“We all know what to do with our training, weapons and technology. The question is: What do we do with him?”

There are murmurs of making an example of me as a warning to the Corps.

“Cephas? Would you care to make a statement?” Zip asks.

“A statement? Am I on trial?”

“You are The Cult Hunter, aren’t you? Don’t you think killing a thousand Christians deserves a trial?”

A thousand? How I wish the number was that low.

I watch Martha’s face and conclude she didn’t know this “meeting” was going to be a trial.

“I’ll save you the effort. I plead guilty to you just like I stood before Christ and pled guilty to him. The question is: Can you find the same forgiveness that He did?”

“You’re not currently in God’s custody, Cult Hunter. You’re in ours.”

There are snickers and nods of approval from the Council.

“And technically I’m in Satan’s jurisdiction,” I say. “If you want to put me on trial as a war criminal, I can accept that, but I’d rather join you and try to atone for what I’ve done.”

“I intend to kill cult hunters,” Zip replies. “You acted as their poster boy; so now you can act as ours. Your conversion could put a righteous spin on my plans.”

“I spent three years as a symbol of fear and destruction. That man was destroyed when I turned my back on being The Cult Hunter and accepted the love of our Lord. I won’t become a new face of death for you.”

The smile never leaves Zip’s face, but her eyes tell me I’ve just sealed my own fate.

“Has any group ever won freedom without blood being shed?” she asks.

“It took just the blood of one man to win the only freedom we need. After seeing His blood shed, I don’t want to see more.”

Zip’s eyes narrow, but the smile remains on her face.

“Those are cheap words coming from you, Cult Hunter. You haven’t lived your life looking over your shoulder, listening for the tromping of boots behind you. Once you’ve been the hunted, maybe you’ll change your mind.”

A private message from Martha comes onto my screen: “End this.”

I look over the faces again. Most of them look angry, like Zip; but a few look open to hearing me.

“How can you silence tromping boots by putting them onto your own feet? I’m grateful to Four for rescuing me; but perhaps I’m not the sort of member you’re seeking.”

“So be it,” Zip says. “In view of his guilty plea, I move for an immediate sentencing vote.”

“You can’t,” Martha says. “Council rules require a one-month wait between a trial and sentencing.”

“But he confessed.”

“There’s no exception for confessions,” Martha says.

Zip and Martha stare into their respective cameras.

“Meeting adjourned,” Zip says. “The Council will meet again in thirty days for sentencing.”

A guard escorts me to my room; then sits in a chair outside.

I fall to my knees and pray.

“Lord, I’ve spent my life solving puzzles; but now I’m trapped in one of my own making. They’ve been angry for a long time - but it was me breaking the code that made Four what it is now. I twisted them. I drove them away from You.”

Feed My sheep.

“How can someone who caused such violence ever convince them that violence is the wrong path?”

Feed My sheep.

“This is my fault. They hate me because I deserve to be hated. I’m the one responsible for all that death and I deserve whatever punishment they think of for me.”

Feed My sheep.

“I don’t feed sheep! I solve puzzles and look at what happens when I do. They ordered Martha to kill me rather than rescue me. Why didn’t You just let her do it when she had the chance?”

My head snaps up.

“Thank you Lord. That’s an excellent puzzle.”

Chapter Four

I walk past the guard with my Bible still in my hand and don't hesitate when I get a surprised "Hey." I'm walking deeper into Bethany House rather than for the escape tunnels; so he shrugs and follows me. I also don't hesitate when I reach the command center and make a straight line for Martha.

"Get your knife ready, *team leader*. I have another question you're not going to like."

Two staff members stand to block me, but Martha motions for them to sit. She says nothing - but does brush her knife handle with her finger tips.

"The Four Council didn't send you onto Henry's tube car to rescue me. They sent you to kill me and I want to know why. Why, after I converted to Christianity on a worldwide stage, would they want me dead? It's clear you're all angry and I'm a convenient target for years of frustration; but there's more to it than that. The Four Council was desperate to kill me; so desperate they ordered you on a suicide mission. Why?"

All eyes in the room turn to Martha.

They didn't know.

"How do you know that? I haven't told anyone here."

"I'm very good at puzzles. Now answer the question."

"This isn't the time to -"

"Not the time? The world is out of time and so am I. Your friend, Zipporah is proposing starting a war by killing cult hunters and my name is on the top of her list."

I find that I'm yelling and as I meet eyes around the room, they look like mirrors, reflecting my anger.

I am sending you out like a sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as a snake and as innocent as a dove.

I bow my head and calm myself before speaking again. I hold up the Bible in my hand.

"Ever since I read this book, I've dreamed about living with Christians. I've wanted to live my life for Him. I've wanted to love like you love. But I was afraid and I used what I found in His book to break the final code. I read the words, but I didn't understand them. Now that I do, what I want most of all is to find forgiveness for what I've done. I thought I'd find it here with you, but I was wrong. There's no forgiveness in your hearts for me; so let's just get it over with."

I slowly turn to make eye contact with everyone in the room.

"I've hurt every one of you, and I'm sorry."

I stop when I reach the place where I want to find forgiveness most of all: Martha's eyes.

"Take out your knife, Martha. The last time you had your knife in your hand, you said you were understanding orders to kill me. If you think I'm still the monster, then throw your knife, but do it with me standing like this. This is how I want to die."

I raise my arms into a cross.

"If that's what you all think, then end me as a real Christian and go back to being whatever it is that you are."

She takes her knife into her hand and stands in a perfect throwing position. I've seen her throw. She can easily sink it into my chest at any spot she chooses.

I take a step towards her and her hand goes even further back.

"Throw your knife, Martha. Start the war."

I take another step.

"If you think I'm still The Cult Hunter, then you know I'm coming to take that knife and slit your throat without remorse. What's another dead Christian to me, after all I've killed? Throw it now."

She looks like a coiled spring as I inch closer, my arms still wide in a cross. She takes that extra inch of tension that signals everyone she's about to throw.

"I forgive you," Amelia yells. "My cousin Eric disappeared after you broke the final code. Everyone said you killed him. I don't know if that's true anymore, but even if it is, I forgive you."

As I sink to my knees, I see the corner of Martha's mouth curl ever so slightly, while her throwing arm relaxes.

"Don't do this, Martha," Amelia says.

"Get him out of my command center and get Austin on the line."

She walks over to me.

"You're right about one thing. Your work hurt all Christians; so all Christians should have a say in what happens to you, not just the Four Council. The Elders suffered the most. We'll see if they have any more forgiveness than you've found here."

"The Elders? Your parent's generation? The ones you criticized for hiding in the shadows?"

She leans down and whispers into my ear.

"Dark things hide in the shadows."

Thanks to my work as a cult hunter, the older generation of Christians has learned to mistrust technology; so it may take weeks to organize a meeting as messages are couriered on paper. I expect Martha to return me to Capon Springs; but she decides it's easier to guard me at Bethany House and reduces the risk of me being seen by the public. She splits the entire staff into teams of two and they take turns at guard duty. The only member of the house who's never allowed to guard me is Amelia. On several occasions, I catch Martha watching as I talk with Amelia, but she gives no hint of what she's thinking.

The rules of my confinement are simple. I'm escorted everywhere and I'm given no access to computers; but despite the protests of the staff, I'm still to be trained and can go for runs. Again I feel like I have nothing to do but exercise in the prison yard under the watchful eyes of the warden, Martha.

I run so far and so fast that I tire out even four-person teams; so Martha ends up forcing me to run laps on a set course with guards posted on the perimeter. I veer slightly off course often to secretly practice leaving no trail; then check my tracks on the next lap. In just a few days, it's virtually impossible to see where I've been.

The fact that I can outrun everyone in the house makes Martha nervous; so she increases her own training schedule. One morning she invites me out for a run early, while most of the staff is still asleep. I'd love to believe she wants to get me alone; but I'm sure she just wants to assess me.

She stops near a path I've never been down and I go into my usual act of wheezing and holding my side.

"Cut it out," she says. "That wasn't even a warm up for you."

"Was it the bad acting?"

"You just ran six kilometers breathing only through your nose."

"You know I could make a break for it and disappear in the woods." I say. "Why haven't you increased the guard?"

"Why haven't you made a break for it?"

"I have nowhere to go."

She leads me down a path into an area where the tree canopy is thick and shows me the Bethany House "training facility." It's a series of obstacle courses, throwing and shooting ranges and sparring areas hidden among the trees. The big man I call "Razor stubble" is putting on protective gear in an area that appears to be set up for boxing. Amelia sits on a makeshift bench nearby.

“I’m sorry I’m late,” Martha says to Razor Stubble; then looks at Amelia.

“I thought Blake was coming to run with Cephass while I spar.”

“He wasn’t feeling well when he woke up; so he asked if I would cover.”

“Shall we go?” I ask.

I extend my arm to Amelia with a big smile on my face and watch Martha’s reaction.

“You’ve run enough. Stay and watch us spar,” Martha says.

I sit next to Amelia on the bench as Martha puts on her gear.

“I’m glad they’re wearing gear. That guy is twice her size,” I say to Amelia.

“His name is Toby, and he’ll need the padding more than her. Bethany House was a technical team until Martha became leader. We all received basic combat training, but only a couple of us have any hope of knocking her off the top of the board.”

“The board?”

“It’s a friendly competition Martha created when she became team leader. There are scheduled matches which are computer scored and we’re ranked. There’s no disputing who owns the number one spot.”

Amelia points to a scoreboard hanging on a tree. There are about three dozen names, with Martha on top. Amelia is number twenty-three. Toby is number five.

The match begins. I thought it would be boxing, but it’s a true street fight where anything goes. Toby is very muscular, but he’s no match for Martha’s speed or precision. She makes him angry with minor kicks and jabs and then - when he commits to big swings that throw him off balance - she uses his own momentum to throw him like a doll.

This is an interesting new puzzle.

“Matches are assigned randomly. She was easy on me the first time; but I came up against her the day after you first talked to me in the command center and I thought the beating would never end,” Amelia says.

“Am I forgiven for that too?”

Amelia reaches out and pats my leg. I’m not the only one who must have taken my eye off the match when Amelia touches my leg because Toby gets in a hard punch to Martha’s midsection. She comes back at him with renewed focus and ferocity.

After ten minutes of watching Toby get flung around, they switch to fighting with sticks. Toby has a reach advantage, but Martha again patiently attacks his wrists and elbows with her superior speed until his frustration causes him to over commit on an attack. He’s sent sprawling when she uses her stick to sweep his feet.

“She fights differently against every member of the house,” Amelia says. “She’s exceptional at figuring out weaknesses and exploiting them. On the other hand, everyone in the house is a better fighter than before she arrived, including her. See the move she just made? She learned that from me.”

After another five minutes - and two more trips to the ground - Toby decides he’s had enough. Martha walks to the bench.

“Did they teach you anything like that in cult hunter school?”

“I just solved puzzles, but I’m ready to learn.”

I stand up, walk to the board and add my name at the bottom.

Under the rules of the house, I have two weeks to prepare before the computer will randomly place me in a combat match. I run about half the distance as I would normally, then tell the four perimeter guards that I’m done running for the day.

“Since I shortened the run, why don’t we all go down to the sparring area so I can learn some things before my first match?” I say.

Blake, who I used to call “Lightfoot,” is in charge today and he agrees.

“I’ll take you first,” says a man named Samuel, who was one of the guys who shot at me as I did the Capon Springs obstacle course.

As I put on protective gear, Blake explains that it’s called “reactive padding” because its ability to disperse the energy of an impact increases with the amount of force applied. Even so, it has its limits; so I will feel impacts and some pain, particularly from hard hits to the head.

I meet Samuel in the center of the sparring area while the others put on gear.

“What are the rules?” I ask.

“We adopted the same rules as you, Cult Hunter, with one exception. Here - if you say you concede - nobody puts a stunner to your head or slits your throat. Other than that, you can use any fighting style you like, including dirty.”

Blake says ‘begin’ and Samuel comes straight at me like a boxer. I dodge; so his first two swings connect with the padding on my arms, but the third hits me hard in the chest followed by a second to my head. Blake is right; the hits hurt through the padding, but a lot less than I thought they would. The object is to score points - not injure your teammates.

“I’ve wanted to do that to a cult hunter for a long time,” he says.

“Then I hope you meet one someday.”

He hits me two more times.

He’s good with his arms, but his legs are lazy.

“Those were for my aunt and uncle.”

“Are you sure that’s what they would have wanted?”

“No, my aunt would have done this.”

He attempts to kick me below the belt, but he’s not very good at it. I block, then hit him hard in the stomach, followed by an uppercut to the jaw. He felt it, but pretends otherwise.

“Thanks, Cult Hunter. Now I’m really going to enjoy this.”

I have greater speed in both my hands and feet.

When he comes at me again, I feint like a boxer; then land a nice front kick to his thigh before dancing away from him.

I instinctively know if he’s going to lead with his right or left before he does it. How?

I close and let him hit me hard enough that it hurts.

It’s his head. It tilts a centimeter away from whatever hand he’s going to lead with.

I close again and block his next seven punches by predicting them. Each swing is a little harder and a little more erratic than the last.

“My turn,” a guy named Edward calls.

“I’m not done,” Samuel replies.

I’d better let him hit me a few more times or this will never end.

Samuel closes on me again, but this time I use the signals he gives off to make sure his attempts at body blows land on me. I avoid his swings at my head.

“I’m still not done,” he says, but steps aside.

Edward is small and fast; but again I find it easy to predict his moves. It doesn’t feel any different than solving a puzzle. Each of their styles is made up of pieces that can be predicted, influenced and rearranged to suit me without them realizing it. Again I make sure that a certain number of blows land.

“You still need one more good kick for what you did to my cousin Emily,” Edward says after a couple of minutes.

“It sounds like you loved her very much. I’m sorry for the part I played in your loss.”

His left foot hurts less; so I wait for him to do a left side kick and allow it to hit my stomach padding.

“Was that a good enough kick for Emily?” I ask.

I don’t hear the answer because I take a blow to the back of my head that’s so hard I stumble forward into Edward.

“It’ll never be good enough,” Samuel’s voice says behind me - just before a kick to the kidneys sends me to the ground.

Several kicks to the ribs follow. As I make it to my knees, all four voices of my guards are calling out names of people they want to avenge. They knock me flat over and over again and each time I’m able to rise to my knees, whispering prayers. I’m still praying when they finally stop.

“What are you whispering?” Samuel asks. “If you have something to say, say it out loud.”

I look at Samuel, and then at the sky.

“Thank you, Lord, for providing these men an outlet for their anger today. If it’s Your will, I pray the pain they inflict on me relieves the pain I caused them. May I serve You and them in this way until their pain is gone and their hearts have room only for Your love. Amen.”

I don’t mention the beating to Martha, and neither do my attackers. Each day after that, I convince different guards to shorten the run and instead go for informal sparring sessions. I don’t invite Samuel, nor do I allow anyone to get behind me again. At first they all attack me viciously and I take some nasty lumps. Some know martial arts; some are trained in knife fighting; one specializes in kick boxing, and so forth. They don’t realize it, but sometimes I take hits just so I can watch an attack from beginning to end. Within days, I’ve learned the styles of half of the house and incorporated elements of each into my own. I’ve also learned their weaknesses; but I’m saving that information for when I need it more.

No matter how bad the beatings are, I always thank my guards for the lesson; then get down on my knees and thank God for the opportunity to learn. The first time I pray in front of them, they seem taken aback: but I want them all to know me as the person I am now rather than as The Cult Hunter. It’s not long before we all pray before and after we spar, which gives me an idea.

One afternoon, I walk to the threshold of the command center, which I’m still not allowed to enter.

“Amelia? Can I speak with you?” I call across the room.

Many heads turn, including Martha’s. Amelia crosses the room with a big smile on her face.

“Do you remember the first time I came here I told you I was lonely? I think I know something that would help. I’d like to join the staff Bible study group, but I don’t know when or where they meet.”

She frowns slightly.

“We don’t have a Bible study meeting.”

“Then how about a group prayer or fellowship meeting?” I ask.

“Nope.”

Lord, was I sent here to learn? Or to teach?

“Go back to your station, Amelia. Send a message to the entire staff that says: ‘Bible study with Cephas. Two o’clock in the sparring area.’”

That afternoon, Amelia and two others attend. The next day there are a dozen; a week later people are taking extra-long “breaks” during their shifts in the command center to attend. It’s hard to have prayer and fellowship with people named “Angry Eyebrows” or “Razor Stubble,” so I insist they all tell me their names.

They’ve all read the Bible, but as I look at their faces while speaking it seems like they’ve never really thought about the words or how they apply to their lives. Their faces light up as we discuss various passages and make sense of them together.

Martha never attends our study sessions, but she often finds excuses to visit the sparring area while they're happening. I see her, hovering on the edge of my vision as she listens and observes.

I'm walking Amelia back to the command center after one Bible study and I have her laughing as I tell her the story of getting Roman soldiers drunk just so I could buy a toga. She reaches out and touches my arm just as Martha appears in the doorway. I'm still not good at the whole flirting thing, but I'm pretty sure Amelia doesn't mean anything by it. Touching people as she speaks is just part of who she is. The look on Martha's face tells me she's reading more into the touch than I am.

"You're late," Martha snaps at Amelia.

"And you're distracting my staff," she snaps at me. "When you schedule a Bible study session, let me know. I'll send you the duty schedule and if anyone on the list attends, you're responsible for kicking them out. If there are any further infractions, then you're the one who'll be punished. Got it?"

She pushes past without waiting for a reply.

Chapter Five

Matches for the coming week are posted on Fridays; so half of the staff is in the command center waiting around to see who they'll be fighting. I stand at the doorway where I can read the matches on the big screen. I draw Jake, who is currently number twelve on the board. I've never sparred with him, but I watched him once when he faced Toby. He never made it to fighting with sticks because Toby landed a crushing body blow that left Jake on the ground, gasping for air.

"How about we go on Monday?" Jake asks. "We can be the warm-up match before the big event."

"The big event?"

"Didn't you see? Martha is facing Stephen. If he wins, it's possible for him to move from third to first."

Stephen is the man I used to call "Angry Eyebrows."

Lord, is it a sin that I'd like to see him beaten badly?

On Saturday, I'm scheduled to spar with Amelia. At the last minute Martha decides that the staff could use a break from guarding me, so I'll need to travel with her to Capon Springs instead. The trip through the woods is fun for me as she runs ahead, then lets me practice tracking her. I track her to a big rock and conclude from the marks next to it that she sat on the rock. From that point on, her track is nearly invisible. I find just a few broken fir needles and some spots that are little more than soft depressions. It takes me a half hour to follow her just forty meters, where I find her sitting in the limbs of a massive fir tree.

"It was like your feet were barely touching the ground. Are you learning to fly or something?" I ask.

I look at her feet and see how she did it. When she sat on the rock earlier, she was switching from hard soled hiking boots into a soft leather moccasin that would allow her to feel every twig and avoid leaving tracks.

"If I hadn't been sitting here watching you, I wouldn't believe it was possible. You followed an invisible track through three different ninety degree turns. Nobody can do that, Cephas. Nobody."

That's good to know.

We walk in silence as we approach the edge of the woods then make our way under cover until the only house with a view of us is the little house of the old couple we're impersonating. When we break cover, Wendy spots us and waves that she wants us to stop. Martha and I exchange looks. We can spare a few minutes.

"Leave on the hat and glasses," Martha says, returning to her team leader persona. "Austin says they can be trusted, but they don't need to know who's using Bill's identity."

"You make a much prettier me than me, dear," Wendy says as we approach the door.

Wendy is barely a meter and a half tall, with curly white hair. Her face still has a youthful look, but shows no sign of enhancements.

"I'm sure the real Bill would disagree," I say.

Wendy assesses me with kind eyes that suddenly go wide, but she keeps her emotions in check. *She knows who I am.*

"Bill?" she calls over her shoulder. "Bill, can you come here?"

We hear someone shuffling inside.

"What for?" he answers.

"It's time, Bill."

“Time for what?”

“It’s *the* time, Bill. Like we’ve talked about.”

“Oh. *The* time. I’ll go get it.”

We can hear rustling inside the house. Out of the corner of my eye I can see Martha senses something is going on, but she’s not preparing for danger.

She senses that Wendy is on edge.

Bill emerges. He’s a tall and handsome man, with a gentlemanly bearing and immaculate clothing. Like Wendy, his face shows no signs of enhancements.

“You can take off the hat and glasses, Dr. Paulson,” Bill says. “My Wendy may be eighty-four, but her eyes are as sharp as a hawk’s. Young man, you have no idea how long I’ve waited for this day.”

He’s so nervous his hands are shaking. Why?

Bill reaches into an inner jacket pocket and I can’t help but wonder if he has a weapon ready to avenge the loss of a loved one. As I watch him dig through his pocket, I relax. He’s holding his elbow in such a way that he’s reaching for something much smaller than a weapon. Whatever it is, it’s concealed completely inside his palm when his hand emerges.

Bill starts to slowly drop down onto one knee. Wendy’s hands come up to her mouth with excitement and I see tears start to well up in her eyes and run down her cheeks.

“Wendy? Will you marry me?” Bill asks.

He opens his hand to reveal a very old diamond solitaire engagement ring.

“Yes, I will.”

Wendy holds out her finger for Bill to put the ring in place. She looks as radiant as a twenty-year old.

“There now,” Bill says. “I’ve done it like I should have done it long ago.”

He rises back to his feet; then turns to me.

“When you came back and told the world the truth about Jesus, we promised each other that if we were to ever meet you, I would propose and we would beg you to marry us.”

“You want me to marry you? But I’m not a minister and the paperwork doesn’t even exist anymore.”

“Son, we don’t want a piece of paper. That’s all just government stuff. We want you to marry us in the eyes of God. There’s nobody more qualified than you for that.”

“Then I’ll do it. We’ll work out a time and a place, and I’ll do it.”

“Cephas?” Wendy says and glances at Martha. “Could Bill and I speak with you privately sometime before the ceremony?”

Martha looks uneasy about the request. I haven’t been left alone with anyone except trusted members of Four since our escape from Henry.

“Do you need some pre-nuptial counseling?” I ask.

“Something like that,” Bill replies.

“Sure, we can talk. I foresee spending a lot more time at Bethany House.”

“I’m happy to hear that,” Wendy says. “We’ve been very busy since you came back and have gone through a lot of the special Capon water Brill sends. Maybe you could carry some extra water the next time you come through?”

I enjoy a night in the comparative luxury of Capon Springs and we go back to Bethany House late on Sunday. I ask Martha for some tips on how to fight Jake, but she tells me that she had no intention of adding me to the board; so I need to figure it out on my own.

On Monday morning, I find myself walking to the training area alone. Blake was supposed to be my escort, but he didn’t show. I look at the woods and I’m sure I could be kilometers away

before they even realize I'm missing; but I'm not tempted. With or without a relationship with Martha, Bethany House now feels like home.

Jake is already in pads, waiting for me, and about half of the house has formed a gallery in the trees. Although Stephen is already warming up, Martha is not here for their match. Amelia waves to me from the crowd and wishes me good luck. Today there's a camera on the edge of the arena. A computer will score each move and determine a winner, as well as the rankings.

Jake is one of those guys who's always happy and smiling, and I'm not sure if that will make him easier to fight or more difficult. He smiles when he helps me with my gear; he smiles when he gives me tips on how to adjust the pads for better mobility; he smiles as he suggests a good stick weight.

"It's traditional to start hand-to-hand then move to sticks at ten minutes if you don't concede," Jake says.

"What happens if nobody concedes after sticks?"

"I don't think you'll need to worry about that today."

When we walk to the center of the ring, his smile disappears. If he beats me with a lot of points, he can move up one spot on the board; but if the score is close, he'll stay at number twelve. Since I'm an unknown, he can't move down.

Jake was never formally trained in the martial arts, but has picked up bits and pieces just like I have. We start to circle each other and take some exploratory jabs and kicks. He has long arms and likes to be at the perfect distance to strike without stepping too close, probably because he got too close to Toby and took a hard blow to the body. His desire to always be at a set distance puts him into a rhythm of throwing combinations of two attacks; then backing off and resetting himself. His hands are too fast for me to try to catch one and throw him, but using the signals he's giving off, it's easy to deflect what he throws at me and prevent him from scoring points.

After a dozen or so small combinations like this, I decide to see what will happen if I break his rhythm. I start to block his first punch or kick; then close in on him so he's too close for his second attack to be effective. Then when he backs to reset, I close even more or back out of his reach. With his usual rhythm broken, I can see the frustration building in him.

The gallery uses matches as team building events; so they've been yelling encouragement. Coming into my first match my greatest fear wasn't that I'd lose or get hurt; it was that the people of Bethany House would all be yelling the names of loved ones that I killed and asking Jake to avenge them. Most of the cheers are *for* Jake, but at least they're for him rather than *against* me.

At the end of ten minutes, we take a short break. I look around the gallery and I'm disappointed that Martha still hasn't come to watch me. Then I look at the scoreboard and smile when I see that I'm only a few points behind Jake.

Fighting with heavy sticks is more dangerous, but also more likely to end stalemates, like the one we're in now. When we start again, Jake uses the same rhythm of short attacks at the head, followed by backing off and resetting. This time I choose not to close on him. I keep back and easily block everything he throws as we move in an endless circle. He likes to combine stick moves with kicks and will even use his stick one-handed while I still keep both hands on my stick at all times. Using just one hand increases his reach substantially, but he sometimes looks off balance when he does it.

It's just a puzzle. Solve it.

Two pieces of his unique puzzle are easy to see. He only goes one-handed on the stick with his right hand and he only kicks with his right foot, never his left. I chance a look at his left foot and see an old scar across his Achilles tendon. I watch more and conclude that whatever gave him that scar made his left foot less flexible and weakened it so he uses it as his plant foot to kick with his

right. It also explains why we've only been circling in one direction: He's always trying to keep me to his right side because that's where his attacks all come from.

I feint to his right and make an unexpected move to his left side. He tries to switch us back, but I hold firm on his left, allowing me to become the attacker. I know that if he's forced to attack to his left, he'll have no choice but to increase his reach by going one-handed on the stick with his right hand. As his left hand comes off the stick, I go for a leg sweep on his left side; but with two hands on the stick, I can't reach far enough - and miss. Worse, by failing, I leave myself unprotected for a counter attack. He could easily hit my side, but instead tries for maximum points with a blow on the top of the head and comes up short. His stick misses my head gear and slices across my forehead, opening me up but luckily not blinding me, as the blood flows down my face. He backs away.

"Sorry, Cephas. I was aiming for the helmet. You want to concede?"

Now he's smiling again.

"Does it look like it'll need a laser cauterizer?"

"Definitely."

"Then we have thirty minutes. Can I have one minute to cover it?"

"Sure."

Jake is not the whole puzzle. The two of you together are the puzzle.

When we resume, I press him to the left again. I want another shot at the same move; but I can see that I'll need to go one-handed with my own stick in order to have the necessary reach. I've never tried it before. As predictable as a puzzle piece, he shifts the stick to his right hand and attempts to kick high. This time I block and pivot as before, but as I do I go one-handed and land a blow to the pads above his weak left ankle. He tries to back up, but I instinctively throw the stick to my left hand to block the attack on my head; then hit the same ankle again with my right foot.

The pieces click together in my head as Jake and I become a single puzzle for me to solve. I feel like a kid on the playground playing Christians and Cult Hunters again, manipulating the pieces five moves ahead. I remember something from the playground that I haven't felt for a long time.

The solution is joy. That's what was missing from my life when I was The Cult Hunter: Simple joy.

Jake stumbles as I continue to attack his ankle; so I press harder, giving him no chance to reset.

"Why are you smiling?" Jake asks as he jumps over my stick.

"I just realized how happy I feel."

"If you say you're enjoying hitting me, I'm going to ask for a Biblical reference," he replies.

"There's no joy in hitting you, Jake. It's that I feel like you're my brother and that we're both a part of each other and of something greater than either of us."

It's like the childhood joy of solving a puzzle.

Unfortunately for Jake, this puzzle is solved. First I'll have the stick in both hands; then just the left; then the right until he has no idea how to defend. All the while I stay on his left side, taking his feet out of play and even giving me the occasional shot at his back and racking up points.

"Enough! I concede," he says when my point total is too high for him to catch up.

I'm overjoyed to see that the smile is back on Jake's face as he says it. I ask him to pray with me.

After the prayer, the talk around the gallery is all about how sticks must be part of cult hunter training; but as I stand there, I'm looking at everyone I've sparred with and seeing solutions to puzzles. My mind goes beyond how I can beat each of them. Instead I'm seeing how I can help each of them to be better.

"You don't look like the winner," Amelia says. "You're covered in blood. Let me clean you up while we wait for the big show."

I sit on a rock while she wipes away the blood.

“It’s pretty deep, Cephas. You’re going to have to sit very still while I cauterize it because I’ll need to do it in layers.”

I try to sit still, but I’m shaking a little.

Amelia sits on the ground.

“Lie down and put your head in my lap.”

When she finishes, I start to sit up.

“Lie still for a minute,” she says.

A sunbeam is poking through the canopy and shining right on my face; so I close my eyes and enjoy the warmth.

Lord, for the first time in a long time, I feel like I have a home.

A shadow crosses my face. I open my eyes to find Martha standing above me.

“The computer ranked you at number fifteen. That’s the highest debut possible. Enjoy the victory, and apparently the spoils.”

Amelia only gets as far as “Martha, I was just” before Martha is gone to put on padding for her match. I sit up and lean against a tree, but stay next to Amelia in the gallery. Most of the house is here now and everyone is expecting the match to go beyond sticks to practice knives, where the first three touches wins.

“Your strongest round is sticks, right Stephen?” Martha asks and he nods. “Break with tradition and start there?”

This causes a murmur in the gallery because everyone knows Martha is much stronger than Stephen in hand-to-hand and is passing up the opportunity to score a lot of early points. Martha chooses the stick that I just finished using, which still has my blood on it, and the match begins. She spins it like a baton, which looks fancy but is all too easy to have knocked out of your hands. A dropped stick is big points for your opponent, so Stephen can’t resist trying with a simple thrust. Her stick is just a blur as she hits him three times before he can withdraw.

Martha circles to his left; then stops when she’s lined up perfectly to look at me seated next to Amelia. She spins the stick again. She’s taunting Stephen, but she isn’t even looking at him. She’s looking squarely at Amelia.

Stephen takes the bait again; but this time tries a very nice combination attack that’s known as one of his best. She blocks the first, ducks under the second and blocks the third while landing a kick square on his chest and knocking his stick to the ground by hitting the back of his hand.

“Pick it up.”

Stephen just stands there, testing his hand. Even through the reactive padding, that hit must have hurt. He picks it up, but I can see his grip is weak and his movements slower. Martha returns to the spot where she can glare at Amelia. When the action begins again, the only word to describe Martha’s assault is “savage.” Unlike the encouragement offered during my match, the gallery has become silent.

For two minutes, she pounds Stephen with the stick, her feet and her fists; then finally sweeps his feet out from under him. He lands on his back with the stick still in his hands and Martha comes down at him with a blow that would fracture his skull if he didn’t block it.

Amelia jumps to her feet.

“What’s the matter with you? You’re going to kill him.”

Martha looks up and sees that we’re all staring at her. She looks straight at Amelia; then at me and throws her helmet to the ground at Amelia’s feet.

“I concede.”

Chapter Six

The duty roster still includes guard shifts to watch me; but it hardly matters, because everyone knows where I'll be found. Hand-to-hand combat is a puzzle of motion for me to solve as much with my brain as with my body, and I spend the next week training with anyone who's available to spar. The sessions are no longer excuses for vicious attacks on me or an opportunity to seek revenge, but I do sense that some of them still harbor doubts about me.

I catch glimpses of Martha watching me from the trees every day, but she never approaches or speaks to me.

My second match comes down to the fact that I can tell exactly what sort of attack my opponent is about to throw, based solely on the distance she spreads her feet apart and the angles they make on the ground. I know every punch and kick that's coming before it arrives; so the match doesn't even get to the sticks round. I move from number fifteen to number eight. The woman I beat joins me in Bible study an hour after the match, bruised but smiling.

When nobody wants to spar, my guards allow me to go for long runs in the woods with the agreement I don't tell Martha that they let me go off alone. I like long runs. Letting my legs work on autopilot frees up my brain. Too often my thoughts and memories turn to pain as I think about how much I miss spending time with Martha; so I try to focus on how I can serve Christ and spread the good news.

I also think a lot about my own path forward and decide the best way I can serve Jesus is to return to teaching. Since I can't walk into my old classroom in Colorado Springs, I present the staff at Bethany House with a technical challenge: hack me into the live broadcasts of my old class, which have gone on without me - using a professor that was hand-picked by the government. The house is excited to do something other than act as a quiet listening post or train for combat. Since I'll be near communication equipment, Martha decides that security concerns will require her to coordinate the hack from the control booth, though I think she's just using it as an excuse to return to speaking terms.

Bethany House has a small studio, with a podium where I'll stand to do the broadcast. It's not as large or fancy as the university studio where I once worked; but it has a warm, comfortable feeling, like I've arrived in exactly the spot where God wants me to teach His Word.

"We're going to let the lecture start as usual and you'll break in after a minute or two," Martha says from the control room. "Do you know the woman they have teaching your old classes?"

As we speak through the glass, she removes some pins and allows her hair to fall from its "command center bun" to hanging freely around her shoulders.

Why must she do that? It's easier to forget about our time together when the hair is up in the bun.

"All too well," I say. "Her name is Karen Talkington and she was probably picked by Henry Portman himself. Let's just say Karen isn't exactly a deep thinker. She's an implausible combination of a remarkable memory coupled with an unremarkable intellect. As long as everything fits into her neat and narrow way of thinking, she can put on a good lecture. She'll do whatever she's told to do if she thinks it'll help her climb the ladder, and can perform amazing feats of self-delusion to justify herself."

"It sounds like you've known her for a while."

"Religious studies is a small community. I nicknamed her 'Talks-a-ton' because she can speak for hours without saying anything. I let the nickname slip at a party after an international symposium and it spread. She didn't like that much, and neither did her fans."

"She has fans?"

“People who say what the audience wants to hear will always have fans, no matter how narrow-minded the message. People who tell the audience what they don’t want to hear will be hated for it, no matter how great the message is. That’s why Christ was crucified, isn’t it? He offered a message most people didn’t want to hear. If He had brought the message ‘keep on sinning, it’s all good,’ He would have been very popular with the sinners of His day too.”

“Here she is now,” Martha says.

Karen’s face appears on the screen. She may have been pretty at some point in her life; but time and vanity have taken their toll. The many facial enhancements are obvious and out-of-place on a woman of her age. The effect is much like a woman who wears clothing that’s too young for her. It inspires pity rather than desire. The control board in front of me shows me her statistics. There’s nobody in her studio audience and just six students watching the lecture live. There are no offers for sex.

Nobody needs the grade that badly.

“In today’s lecture, we’re going to compare the destructive, addictive qualities of early twenty-first century religion to the destructive, addictive qualities of drugs that existed in that time period,” Karen says.

“I need a minute to take over her controls,” Martha says.

I begin to pray silently. I hope returning to lecturing fits well with God’s plan for me.

“Mankind, of course, eliminated addictive drugs many decades ago; so we don’t worry about it in our modern, perfect world. But what were the hallmarks of an addiction?” Karen asks, not expecting an answer.

“Addictions were marked by an uncontrollable and irrational need for something outside of ourselves. Sometimes that addiction was physical - to something like a drug - and sometimes it was a psychological addiction to something like religion. Either way, the addict got an artificial, but temporary ‘high’ that was soon followed by a craving to repeat that ‘high’ as soon as possible. In the case of religion, that explains the drive to attend church on a regular basis.”

“I almost have it,” Martha says.

I adjust my tie again, without thinking.

“Once addicted to a drug or religion, addicts found themselves in the company of fellow addicts and therefore had little chance of escape.”

“Got it,” Martha says.

The screen the world and I are seeing is now split between me and Karen.

“Luckily, my students are more fortunate, Karen. I’m here to offer them a chance to escape from your lecture.”

“What? What is this? Is that Dr. Paulson?”

“Yes, Dr. Talkington. This is Cephass Paulson. It’s good to be back behind the podium.”

I look at the student counter. The number watching has already jumped by two as the few who were watching start contacting others via their coms.

“You can’t do this,” Karen says.

The count jumps first by six and then by another ten. Martha sends me a message saying our hack attack is already being reported as “breaking news” on several channels. The count is now doubling or tripling every few seconds.

“I’m sorry, Karen, but I never got to give my final lectures, so I feel I owe it to the students. So, if you’ll excuse me?”

Martha shrinks Karen’s side of the screen to a small box in a lower corner. Thankfully she’s also muted.

“Dr. Talkington had a good idea. Let’s talk about the state of religion in early twenty-first century America. As a quick backdrop, let’s also make a couple of generalizations about religion

prior to that time. Prior to the birth of Christianity, prior to Judaism, Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism, there were tribal priests and shaman who claimed to be able to speak with fire gods, wind gods and whatnot. Later, the ancient Egyptians followed suit, as did the Greeks and Romans with Zeus and the gang. Even when the God of Abraham revealed Himself to mankind, they still had one thing in common with their pagan predecessors, namely religion.”

In the corner of the screen, Dr. “Talks-a-ton” is gesticulating wildly.

“Worship is the basis of religion; but all too often religion bears little resemblance to worship. Instead, religion became a structure created by man to take power over other men in God’s name. Whether this is through the evil intentions of men or is merely a byproduct of good intentions can be argued, but please remember the definition I just gave you: Religion is typically a structure created by man to take power over other men in God’s name.”

The viewing counter has topped ten thousand. Martha must have opened up access to the public.

“It’s no secret I’m a follower of Christ, and for that reason it pains me to say Christianity followed all other religions down the path I just described. Church leaders became more powerful than kings in the centuries that followed Christ’s resurrection. They had more gold and they had more swords at their command. Even when the United States was born, a great deal of the new nation’s wealth and power rested in the hands of a few religious leaders rather than the government.

I glance at the counter and see it’s jumping by hundreds at a time.

“Of course, the original First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution prohibited establishment of an official state religion. But was that concept included in the Bill of Rights to keep religion out of government? Was it ever the goal of the founders to stifle faith among our elected leaders? Or did they recognize that faith is an inherent part of our very being? Could it be that they wrote the First Amendment to ensure faithful leadership by ensuring no single religion could dominate the new government?”

I pause again and take a drink of water.

“Which brings me back to the topic of this class: Christianity from the beginning of the twenty-first century to the present. Specifically, I’d like to speak to the decline of Christianity in the United States from the year 2000 through the beginning of the Final Holy War in 2036. Some would say it’s inaccurate to refer to this period as a ‘decline’ because from 2000 to 2020 church membership was rising. In response, I’d argue an increase in membership isn’t the same thing as an increase in the number of believers.”

I see “Talks-a-ton” throw her hands into the air and walk off camera.

“Let’s think for a moment about the early 2000’s. At the beginning of the semester, we discussed how this period was marked by substantial changes in American culture. Old institutions were placed under constant attack, such as changes to the definition of ‘marriage’ and erosion of the family unit through government social welfare programs that allowed - or even encouraged - women to have children without holding men responsible for the raising of that child.”

A young man enters the small screen where Karen had been standing earlier. His face is well hidden by a hat and sunglasses. He holds up four fingers to the camera and then retreats off screen again.

“At the same time, what were once considered sacred Christian doctrines were being slowly manipulated by government intervention in cultural and religious affairs. For example, businesses run by Christians were told they must do business with individuals whose religious beliefs conflicted with their own. When Christian businesses refused to compromise their religious standards, their companies were destroyed by the government, using anti-discrimination laws.”

The count of the number of viewers has topped two hundred thousand. It's a drop in the bucket compared to the number of people watching the mindless entertainment programs available at this moment, but it's a start.

"Thanks for bearing with me as I set the stage for the question I want to ask: Namely, what was the government's official policy regarding religion through these decades?"

My board lights up as students registered in the class try to answer the question. I select a young woman named Lisa on the island of Trinidad in the Caribbean, and her face comes up on the screen.

"The government was trying to appear as religiously neutral as possible because it was trying to maintain the separation of church and state."

"I love your wording, Lisa. The key word in your answer is 'appear' to remain neutral. Let's not get started on the whole 'separation of church and state' thing, which was never in the U.S. Constitution in the first place. Let's explore the ways the government 'appeared' to be religiously neutral. Anyone?"

I choose Oscar in Mexico City.

"Prayer, including non-denominational prayer, was removed from public schools at things like sporting events and graduations because it was deemed an endorsement of religion by the state and because it offended non-believers."

"Excellent example. Who can give me another?"

I choose Larko in Ghana.

"The ten commandments were removed from courthouses."

"I can see you've all been doing some studying in my absence. So the government was removing all references to God and religion. They took 'In God we Trust' off the money and removed His name from the Pledge of Allegiance. So what? What's wrong with the government appearing to maintain neutrality?"

This time my board remains dark. Either nobody wants to suggest an answer or they're too eager to hear mine.

"The problem goes right back to the word 'appear.' Let's go back to the original wording of the First Amendment: 'Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion.' What would be the best way to get around that amendment and, in fact, establish a state religion?"

Again nobody volunteers.

"Perhaps the best and only way to accomplish such a feat would be if your religion claims to be a lack of religion. Everything you do could be passed off in the name of maintaining 'religious neutrality.' From the outside, you could appear to be the epitome of high-minded and objective, as you slowly remove God from all public places."

The viewer count has hit a half million and "Talks-a-ton" is back on screen, with her arms crossed.

"If we assume I'm correct in my estimation that the founding fathers wanted a system where no one religion could dominate, then their vision failed in the early 2000's and atheism became the unofficial religion of the United States government, long before the First Amendment was changed."

I signal Martha to end the transmission.

"Walk with me up to the command center," Martha says, as she fastens her hair back up into a tight bun.

"Why? I'm not allowed in."

"Amelia gets off her shift soon. I thought you might like to see her."

I smile.

“We’re just friends and occasionally I put my head in her lap while she laser cauterizes a deep cut.”

“That’s her story too,” Martha says. “It’s okay this once. Go ahead in and say hello to her.”

As I enter the command center, the staff looks up for a moment, but go back to their work when they see Martha behind me.

“Amelia, you have a visitor,” Martha says.

Amelia smiles, but it’s Martha’s face that I’m studying and she’s studying mine. Amelia is literally caught in the middle.

“How’d you get in here?” Amelia asks.

“I let him in to see you,” Martha replies for me.

Around the room, the staff are tilting their heads to listen. Less than a quarter of the staff is here, but everyone will know of this conversation before the sun sets.

“I thought it would be a nice treat for him. Besides, the list of next week’s matches comes out in a few minutes and I thought he’d like to see who he’s up against.”

Martha’s eyebrows go up by a millimeter.

She’s already seen the list.

Amelia’s eyes are shifting back and forth between Martha and me. Behind Martha, there’s a screen displaying a map of North America with hundreds of locations marked. Most are green, but a few are red. Most major cities have at least one light; but the majority appear to be in more rural areas.

“What’s that display all about?” I ask.

When Martha sees what I’m talking about, she reaches over and turns off the screen.

“You weren’t supposed to see that. It’s my fault. I shouldn’t have brought you in without telling someone to turn it off ahead of time.”

I picture the map in my mind.

“It was a map of all the Four safe houses in North America, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, and given your ability to observe and memorize, I didn’t want the information in your head.”

The heads around us tilt even farther.

“I thought you weren’t that integrated.”

“We are and we aren’t. We can send each other messages to coordinate efforts, but we don’t know the full names of the members at any given house, and we don’t know the physical location of the houses - other than the city and its Biblical code name. That way, if someone is captured, there’s a limit to who else they can compromise. On the other hand, our computers are linked to automatically back-up to other locations if a house hits the panic button.”

“The panic button? It sounds like something out of a spy movie,” I say.

“Which is probably where the idea came from. If a house is discovered, two members can put in a code that will send our data to the other houses and fry the drives beyond recovery.”

She’s answering my questions in front of the staff. Why?

“Why were most of the houses marked in green, but a couple were marked in red?”

The body language of everyone in the room is changing as she shares information with me. It’s as if they’ve been waiting for Martha’s approval to allow themselves to like me.

“The light switches to red when a house goes offline. Most of the time it’s either maintenance in the smaller houses that only have a few computers or someone gets nervous the feds have detected them and shuts down for a while. The biggest houses never go offline, but some of Four’s smallest houses are nothing more than a computer sitting in a barn or a basement.”

“There’s nothing wrong with humble beginnings,” I say. “Like being born in a manger.”

That raised some eyebrows.

“Now that you’ve told me these things, are you going to double the guard?” I ask.

“You’re not going anywhere. You’ve found a reason to stay.”

Martha raises her eyebrows and looks down at Amelia, who blushes.

People have been coming into the room because the match up list is about to come out. Martha orders her com to bring it up onto a large screen on the wall so everyone can see it.

“Bad luck, Cephas,” Martha says as I scan the list. “You’re going to have to give her a major beating or you’ll move down the board.”

My opponent is Amelia.

Chapter Seven

I make it to my room and am loosening my tie to remove it, when Martha enters without knocking.

“You think I set that up, don’t you?” she asks. “The matches are randomly generated and there’s nothing I can do about it.”

“You could enjoy it a little less.”

“I created the competition to make everyone in the house a better fighter. I think competition brings out the best in people. As a matter of fact, there’s one area where I think I could be more competitive.”

She crosses the room and smoothens my tie by running her hand down it as far as my belly button.

“Leave your tie on,” she says. “Martha the student always did love the ties.”

She’s so close I can smell her hair. I want to run my fingers through it, around to the back of her neck, then pull her into me for a kiss. I remind myself that as real as it was to me, it was never real to her and this is probably just a ploy to manipulate me in some way.

“Please don’t,” I say. “I can’t go through those games again.”

“Cephas? Have you seen Martha? We just got a message-”

Amelia enters the room; then stops short, when she sees how close we’re standing.

“I’m sorry. Was I interrupting something?”

“Always,” Martha mutters under her breath.

Amelia hands over a piece of paper and disappears.

“It looks like you need the tie after all. The elders will speak with you now.”

This time the screen is split into four sections, but only the first has a face on it. The other three show blank walls to indicate the occupants of those chairs have not yet arrived.

“Dr. Paulson. It’s a privilege to meet you,” the woman on the first screen says.

She’s probably in her middle fifties and is quite striking, with jet black hair coupled with a light complexion and deep blue eyes. Her beauty is natural. There are no signs of enhancing, but she’s showing the first signs of natural aging, with some barely perceptible wrinkles at the corners of her mouth. I would bet that she takes great pride in the fact that she’s not enhanced. Twenty years ago, I bet every head would have turned when she entered a room. Even today, I bet more heads would turn than not.

“My name is Aislin. I’m glad we’re getting an opportunity to speak before the others join us.”

“I don’t mind if the jury is late and I’d prefer the executioner not show up at all,” I reply.

She looks confused.

“Isn’t this part two of the trial that the Four Council started?”

“A trial, Dr. Paulson? Of course not.”

“So you don’t think of me as a war criminal?”

“We all have a past. I’d rather discuss the present and the future. Thanks to you, the future is looking much brighter. You’ve done more to restore faith to its rightful place in the world than most of my colleagues have done in decades.”

“Until very recently I was known more for hunting down believers than restoring them.”

“Wasn’t Paul known in the same way? But wasn’t he then used for much greater things?” she asks.

Paul described himself as a slave of Jesus Christ. So far, the motives of every Christian leader I’ve meet have been a little more selfish.

“Paul was known for great teaching and-”

“Indeed, Dr. Paulson,” a man says as he enters the view on the second screen and sits in the chair, “but as I’ve explained to Aislin many times, Paul was also a man of great patience.”

I would guess the man is of North African descent, perhaps Moroccan or Algerian. He appears to be about ten to fifteen years older than I am. In many ways, the most striking thing about him is the fact he’s wearing small round glasses. Although sunglasses are common, virtually everyone has their vision surgically corrected at a young age; so glasses with clear lenses are rarely seen.

“I am Garai, and like Paul, I am also a man of great patience. I don’t know what sort of action Aislin is hoping to take, but it is clear to me that right now is a time of great vulnerability for us and we must be cautious.”

“Patience should never be used as an excuse for doing nothing,” Aislin replies.

“Doing nothing is better than doing the wrong thing. For example -”

“This appears to be an old discussion for you two,” I say.

“I assume it didn’t take your much-celebrated powers of observation to figure that out,” Aislin replies.

“From what I’ve observed so far, the houses of the Four movement are divided,” I say. “Some are splitting off and preparing to fight. I’m told you represent the older generations of Christians, but your house seems to be just as divided. Tell me about your organizations.”

“Ladies first,” Garai says.

“I speak for those Christians who recognize that despite its flaws, the system has created a good life for humanity,” Aislin says. “My people have been consolidating resources and power for decades and are positioned to influence the system from within to reincorporate faith with minimal disruption. If we could unite behind your banner-”

“You want a Theocracy? A religious regime with me at its head?”

Or as just its figurehead?

“Dr. Paulson, don’t act naïve. I watched your lecture and you’re quite correct. We still vote and pretend it matters; but the United States has been a Theocracy for two-hundred years, with the religion in charge being atheism,” she replies.

I turn to Garai.

“It looks like I hold the banner and Aislin walks the halls of power and money. What do you bring to the parade?”

“Aislin represents the aristocracy - those people who only invite change so long as they remain in charge. You could say that I, therefore, represent the common man. While Aislin represents a few well connected individuals, I represent millions of Christians and the network that holds them together.”

“Garai has people passing papers back and forth in the shadows,” Aislin replies, “but they might come out if you lead them.”

The aristocrats and the common man. The Sadducees and the Pharisees. New pieces in the same old puzzle.

“The creation of the Four movement is making more sense. You have people who want to lead, but you have no followers.”

I nod to Aislin.

“And you have followers, but nowhere to lead them.”

I nod to Garai.

“Young Christians created Four because they got sick of waiting for you two to do something. Now they have technology and combat teams and are split over what to do with themselves. You should be flattered at how well they’re emulating you.”

We sit in silence, but their eyes tell me they’re both seething.

“I think I see now what the players are bringing to the table - except for one. What is it you *really* want me to bring to the True Holy War? Shall I swell Garai’s ranks of Christians hiding in the

shadows? Could I bring more powerful believers into Aislin's organization? Can I teach Four how to deploy its technology for maximum effect, like I taught the Bureau?"

I watch their faces again, but still receive nothing but angry silence.

"Fine. If you can't fill in those blanks, at least fill the blank screens on the wall. It's clear that I don't lead anyone; so at least tell me who sits in the last two chairs and really speak for Four."

"For now, that would be me," a male voice says as a man enters the view of the camera.

It's Brill's twin brother Austin, who once posed as a bartender in San Francisco just to speak to me. Austin and Brill look to be in at least their eighties, with deeply wrinkled faces but young and fiery eyes. I wonder if he sees the irony of his face representing the youth movement.

"And the last chair?"

Zip sits in the last seat, but says nothing.

"How long have you two been listening?"

"Since the beginning," Austin replies

I gauge the faces of Aislin, Garai and Martha.

They knew Austin and Zip were listening all along. This was just another game and even Martha was in on it.

I shoot a hurt but resolute look at Martha through the open door to the control room. She looks away from my gaze.

"People, money and technology. You seem to have a nice little balance of power here. You don't need me."

"Perhaps not, Dr. Paulson, but you must see that you need us," Aislin replies first. "Without us, you're nothing but a face on a screen."

"I know, but it's starting to look like being with *any* of you would only serve to ruin me."

I'm looking at Martha as I say the last part. Was it just a few months ago that she said having sex with me would "ruin" me? She's rendered speechless by the implication she's corrupted and it would soil me to be around her. The others, of course, don't understand the reference, but everyone can see the wound I've inflicted on Martha.

"I warned you!"

Martha yells at the faces on the screens when she recovers her voice.

The five of them start bickering over each other's motives; whether I can be trusted; the dangers of action and inaction; and a variety of issues they've argued over a hundred times before. I sit there in silence for a while; then stand to leave.

"Where are you going?" Martha asks and the bickering ends.

"I think I'll follow Paul's path and keep teaching. Hearts have been stirred all over the world. I just want to keep on doing what I've done my entire life: study and teach."

"Teaching God's Word is a noble goal," Aislin says. "But you must see that you have a wider role to play. You stirred those hearts, and you are the only choice to lead them into battle."

You Are. There are those words again. The world stepping in to define me.

"I've been told once that I could be the real leader in the True Holy War... but this isn't an army I can lead."

I recognize Martha's footfalls as she catches up with me a kilometer from Bethany House.

"Where are you going? And where is your guard?"

"I want to spend time with people who have no agenda; so I told him to get lost. I'm going to Bill and Wendy's house. If you want to take guard duty, then join me; otherwise I'll see you when I get back."

We walk in silence until we reach the edge of the woods, where we can look across the open field at Bill and Wendy's little house. Once again, Wendy is in the window. This time the door is standing open for us and I can smell something delicious cooking inside.

“Have you ever had home-baked bread, dear?” Wendy asks me.

She’s wearing a pink frilly cooking apron that must be a hundred years old, but has been treated with loving care as it’s been passed from one generation to the next.

“It’s been a while. My Mother would sometimes make it when I was young.”

“She sounds like my kind of gal. Maybe she and I should trade recipes sometime.”

“She would have loved that. Unfortunately, she and my Father died in an accident when I was eight.”

“How horrible. What happened?”

“A freak tube car depressurization. You must remember it, the accident wasn’t far from here. It happened on the line between Winchester and Martinsburg.”

“I do remember it,” Wendy says. “With you parents gone, who raised you?”

Wendy removes the bread from the pan to cool.

“My Aunt Jennifer.”

“I guess she wasn’t the bread-baking sort then?” Wendy asks.

I snort a laugh at the thought of it. Aunt Jennifer was definitely not the bread-baking sort. My Dad’s sister was a cold, childless woman who did not want to be saddled with her nephew. She was tall and lanky like Dad, but with dark, hawkish features and a calculating demeanor. The paradox of mentally imposing a frilly pink apron onto her is an image worth laughing at.

“Aunt Jennifer didn’t cook. Mostly we just left each other alone as much as possible.”

“Is she still alive? Is she the only family you have, dear?”

Wendy cocks her head to one side.

She’s probing for something.

“Oh, she’s quite alive, but I’m sure she’ll have disowned me. She’s a devout atheist.”

“And what about your Mother’s side? No family there?”

My face drops as I stare at Wendy, which doesn’t seem to bother her in the least. I stare long enough that I can see Martha begin to tense and scan the room for danger.

“I never said my Aunt Jennifer was from my Dad’s side of the family.”

I reply in a slow, measured voice as I gauge Wendy’s reaction to being caught.

“Just like James,” Bill says as he enters the room. “He never missed a detail either. When your Father was young, I once saw him playing a game with some other boys. He crossed a field at a dead sprint with his head down. You know what he did then? He stopped the game and retraced his steps, and bent down and picked a four-leafed clover. His brain had noticed a break in the usual pattern of clover leaves as he sprinted past. I’ll never forget it.”

“There’s a lot of Hannah in there too,” Wendy says. “The memory, the gift with languages and, of course, her thirst for knowledge.”

I stand in silence, looking back and forth between them. Now I know why they wanted to speak with me. They just stand there smiling, enjoying the fact that they’ve surprised me and waiting to hear what I’ll say next.

Knowing your parent’s names doesn’t mean they were friends.

“How well did you know my parents?”

“Very well. They were part of our prayer group.”

“Prayer group? My parents weren’t Christians. They were well-known atheists. Mom worked for the Department of Education in the group that monitored curriculum to ensure there were no accidental religious references and Dad worked for the Department of Energy.”

“And they worked very hard and sometimes attended meetings that went late into the night or on Sunday mornings?”

I sit down hard in one of the chairs at the kitchen table.

“I’ll have that slice of bread now,” I say.

Everyone waits for me to speak.

“Why didn’t they tell me?” I ask.

“They were in too sensitive a position to risk it. You might have bowed your head in thanks or looked at the sky for too long, or any number of things in front of the wrong person.”

“He’s right,” Martha adds. “My parents drilled those sorts of things into me from a very early age and they weren’t in any sort of government positions.”

Wendy brings the bread, already covered with melted butter.

It tastes just like I remember Mom’s bread tasting. Is it the same recipe?

“Thanks for telling me. I see why you wanted to keep it private.”

“Actually, there’s more that we’d intended to be for your ears only, but we discussed it with Brill and he says there’s nothing we can’t say in front of Martha,” Wendy says.

We all sit in awkward silence, waiting for either Bill or Wendy to speak what’s on their minds.

“Well?” I say.

“This isn’t easy,” Bill says. “So I guess I’ll just spit it out. Cephas, your parents didn’t die in a freak accident. They were murdered.”

“Murdered? That’s not possible. When I was ten, Aunt Jennifer showed me the files she had kept on my parent’s deaths. I saw the pictures of what was left of the tube car. I read the independent analysis of the part failure on the magnetic lift. They redesigned half of the system after the accident. If it was a murder, someone would have found evidence. Aunt Jennifer herself went to D.C. to -“

“Ah, yes. Your Aunt Jennifer. I’m sure the file she showed you contained all of the right things for you to see. I’ll give you a copy of all the information I gathered. I’m sure you’ll see some differences.”

I take another bite of the bread.

“Did you know Jennifer wasn’t supposed to become your guardian if something happened to your parents?” Wendy asks. “Your parents wanted you to be raised by your Mother’s sister, your Aunt Kimberly.”

“I don’t have an Aunt Kimberly. My Mom was an only child.”

“Is that what Jennifer told you? I’m not surprised. She and your Father were raised as ardent religious abolitionists. When your Father fell in love with your Mother, his whole family was beside itself. When your folks died, Jennifer used her connections in the government and pounced on the chance to get you away from what she considered to be the religious nuts on your mother’s side.”

“Aunt Jennifer is the one who encouraged my ability with foreign languages. She’s the one who put me onto studying the ancient languages. She used to make me study for hours and hours. She told me I would be the greatest abolitionist ever if I understood the languages of the Bible because I’d be able to hunt down the cults.”

“And that was a darned good plan on her part - until God used it for his own purposes,” Bill says. “God floated you right down the river and into Pharaoh’s house, just like Moses.”

“This is all coming too fast,” I say. “My parents were secret Christians high up in the government and didn’t die in an accident. I have another family out there who were hidden from me, and now I’m being compared to Moses. On top of Aislin and Garai, I’ve heard enough for one day.”

“Have another bite of bread and let it all settle for a while, dear,” Wendy says.

I take her advice and try to let the information melt into me like the butter on her bread.

“Where does my Aunt Kimberly live? Does she know about me?”

“She knows about you, but I don’t know where she lives,” Bill replies. “We thought you knew. We wouldn’t have mentioned her if we’d realized.”

“Why did the government kill my parents? Did they find their secret?”

“It’s not clear it was the government. For all we know, it was Aislin or Garai. They’re both capable of it.”

My head snaps around to Martha.

“How much of this did you know?”

“All of it.”

I stare at Martha.

“How could you let me meet with them without telling me one of them might have murdered my parents?”

“There’s no proof. I didn’t want to bias you.”

“You’re right. What’s most important to know is not which group has my parents’ blood on its hands. It’s the fact that all sides are capable of murder. And by saying they’re capable of murder, I mean they’re capable of murder while claiming it was a righteous killing done in the name of their god - whether it’s in the name of Jesus or in the name of the god they made themselves, named atheism. The bottom line is all of these groups are still religions and religions have become the true enemy of God’s people.”

All three of them look shocked at my statement.

“You see religion as the enemy?” Wendy asks. “Without religion, how would the faithful be organized? How would we ensure sound doctrine is followed? If everyone is off on their own, they’ll start to develop all sorts of strange beliefs. They’ll start adding things and removing things.”

A broad smile crosses my face.

“Wendy, you’re describing what most organized religions have been doing for two millennia. We’ve been separated from God since Eve bit the apple and in some ways, we only separated more after Jesus died on the cross. Religious institutions and their doctrines are just another sign of our separation from God - not the pathway back.”

“You make it all sound so simple,” Bill says.

“It is simple. Jesus made it as easy for us as he could, and yet we still messed it up. Love Him and love your neighbor. It’s the institutions we created that are so complex.”

“So, what’s your plan to change the system? Find a staff and say to everyone ‘Let my people go’?”

“If you’re going to keep comparing me to Moses, then I’ll point out that Moses didn’t have his own plan. He had faith and let it all work out according to God’s plan. As for the staff, I already have one.”

Chapter Eight

When we get back to Bethany House, we find that “Talks-a-ton” moved the lecture time for my advanced class and it will start soon. Luckily, I prepared several lectures in advance. My old colleague looks neither surprised nor angry; she just walks off the screen without a word. She’s getting paid for doing no work and, technically “her” lecture is now the most highly watched in school history. The counter showing the number of people watching starts to climb.

“I was thinking about the ground we covered in my last lecture; so for fun today I’ve brought some short videos for you to watch. These clips are almost two-hundred years old. One was done in the year 2019 and the other in 2025 and they show what I call a ‘video preacher.’ Video preachers were men and women who would do religious programs for people to watch at home instead of physically attending a church. Let’s take a look.”

The students laugh a little at the quality of the ancient video. It begins with a man wearing a suit and tie, standing on a stage, holding a metal stick in a hand having a large gold ring on each finger.

“I like the tie.”

The video automatically pauses when I interrupt and the students laugh.

“This was long before coms were created. The metal stick is called a microphone. He speaks into it to amplify his voice. One thing that’s truly amazing is how high he’s gotten his hair to stand up. This was long before the day of carbon fiber hair implants so they used to spray some sort of washable plastic into their hair to get it up that high.”

The video continues and the man speaks or, more accurately, yells into his microphone:

“There’s so much unhappiness in the world. People rush around in their daily lives trying to do all the things they need to do in order to live; but does that make them happy?” the preacher asks.

“No!” the preacher and the audience shout together.

“People make lots of money. Does that make them happy?”

“No!”

“Of course those things don’t make people happy. It’s helping and giving that makes us truly happy.”

His voice was loud from the start, but has been building to a fever pitch.

“And there is no ministry in the world that gives of itself more than this one. You, my beloved, are the finest examples of Christians I could ask for, and it’s a daily honor to wake up and minister to you. I truly mean that.”

There are shouts of “amen” and “halleluiah” from the audience.

“But there’s so much more to do in the world.”

Now his voice drops low and sad.

“God almighty gave us free will, and men all over the world use that free will in the service of Satan.”

The crowd boos and hisses. A large woman seated behind the preacher faints and falls out of her chair.

“Somebody please help that sister up.”

He says it on cue, without turning to look at her, and continues his roll before the audience can come off its high.

“You heard me right: Satan has an army, and that’s why we must stand up and count ourselves among the army of God - and I for one am ready to march into that battle with my sword held high.”

He’s returned to his fever pitch and the audience screams with joy.

“I would gladly march into that battle alone. You know I would. You know I would cross swords with the devil himself - just he and I locked in mortal combat if the Lord told me to do it. But that’s not what the Lord wants, is it?”

The crowd screams “No” and another woman faints.

“Of course it isn’t. The Lord wants you behind me, because He knows together we are stronger and that only together can we defeat the enemy. So who’s behind me?”

The crowd roars.

“I said, who is behind me?”

More roars.

The preacher falls to his knees. There are tears rolling down his cheeks on cue.

“Oh, I just knew it. I knew I was among the chosen.”

He’s switched to a cross between blubbering and wailing.

“I’m so tired, but you lift me up. You give me the strength to keep on fighting.”

He begins to rise up, like he’s gaining strength from the audience.

“I’d do it alone. You know I would - with your strength behind me; but it takes more than one small man like me. It takes resources. Would you ask me to face the devil himself without a sword?”

His pitch is rising again and the audience yells “No.”

“Of course you wouldn’t. Beloved, if we are going to take the battle to Satan, we need our swords, and our swords are food and blankets to feed and cover the children. We need to show Satan that no matter what he and his evil men do, we will stand and protect the children. Can I have an Amen?”

The crowd shouts ‘Amen.’

“There are saints passing among you right now. Show your glory to the saints and give generously to help me stand up to Satan and his tricks.”

I pause the video.

“What are your observations?”

I choose Diane in Idaho.

“Dr. Talkington compared religion to drug addiction. The crowd does seem to act like addicts.”

“Excellent observation. You found one point where Dr. Talkington and I agree. What else?”

I choose Manuel in Cordova, Spain.

“He acted like a street performer who was doing it for money rather than the joy of the performance.”

“Another excellent observation. I did some research on this man and it turns out he had a personal net worth of over seventeen million dollars, and the non-profit corporation behind his ministry controlled over one-hundred million. That’s a lot of money these days, but in 2019 it was a staggering amount of money.”

“Here’s the point I was trying to make. This man throws about words like ‘God,’ ‘Lord’ and ‘saints,’ but at any time did he preach from the Word of God? Did any of you hear him even once teach anything from the Bible?”

“I’m going to play a short video of the same man in 2025 that I think will further illustrate the point.”

The same preacher comes onto the screen. His hair is even higher, despite the fact there’s now less of it. The clip is of the end of the service.

“We have fought long and hard, beloved. We have poked our fingers into Satan’s eyes everywhere and every time the Lord has asked, and He is pleased with us. As we leave here today in fellowship, I want to remind you all that as God’s warriors, you all deserve happiness. Go home

today and find something that makes you happy and do it. God created you; God loves you; and God wants you to be happy. Making yourself happy makes Him happy. For God, it's about you."

The video ends.

"The late 1900's through the mid 2030's in America were marked by this sort of twisting of the message of the Bible. If you remember nothing else about this lecture, remember this: It's not about you. It's never been about you. It's always been about God."

The next day Martha invites me to travel with her to Capon Springs and I accept. It's a hot day, so I'm glad to have a swim in the cold spring-fed pool. Martha dives in wearing a bikini and I find myself awash with thoughts that are far from pure.

Guard your thoughts, Cephas. Jesus said a man who makes love to a woman in his mind is an adulterer in his heart.

It's a good thing the water is so cold. I force myself to look only at her face. I remember the staring contest I had with Jocie and how the strength of my will had barely won out over the allure of her body. In a way, that battle was easier than this one. When I met her, Jocie was a creature of pure lust and was easy for me to resist. Although I'm no longer sure of how she feels about me, it's clear that I still have feelings for Martha, or at least the memory of who I thought Martha was.

"What are you thinking about?" she asks as she swims up next to me.

"I was thinking about Bill and Wendy," I lie.

Martha floats on her back. I close my eyes so I won't get caught staring at her, but not before the image is imprinted on my brain.

She's the opposite of Jocie. Jocie inspired lust for the sake of gaining control. Martha has no clue about the internal battle she's making me fight.

"Martha? When you were preparing to infiltrate my class, did you read any personality profiles on me?"

"They were pretty thin. Four had information from before your parents were killed that told us you were very smart, but after that there were just some scrubbed school records."

"Scrubbed?"

"Every year said the same thing, word-for-word even though they were supposedly written by different teachers. It said: 'An exceptionally gifted student whose talents should someday be employed by the Cult Hunter Corps for the benefit of mankind.' It was a touch obvious, if you ask me."

"That's all you had to go on? Government fiction?"

"We knew you were the code breaker, but of course there were no public records from your time with the Corps. I guess that's why we were wrong about all the reports of you torturing captured Christians to break our codes."

"That's still just background information. I'm talking about actual profiles that talked about me. What sort of person I am on the inside. How I think. What makes me happy or sad."

Martha pauses for a long while.

"There was nothing like that in the profile, but if you had asked me I would have said you didn't feel happy or sad. It was like you felt nothing at all. I remember watching a surveillance video we took of you walking to class. You'd go out of your way to frighten people off. You could part a crowded street, without saying a word."

"I called it wearing my cult hunter mask. At the time, I thought it was the perfect way to live my life. Then I met you and, for the first time, I wanted someone to really know me. So I took a chance and I took off the mask for you."

"So looking back, you wish you'd shut me out and kept on living that life?"

“Not for a second. Even if it was all an act on your part, I’m glad you found your way through to me. In a way, it prepared me for meeting Jesus - because He doesn’t see masks. He sees right through to who we really are. I’m glad I’m done with all that, because just being myself has helped the team here get past its notions about me. My only regret is...”

“What?” she asks.

“Forget it.”

“Is that the mask going back on?”

“Okay. When I took you to my attic and showed you the Bibles, I put my life into your hands. I fully exposed myself to you, but you didn’t do the same. You could have told me right there that you’re a Christian. It seems like your mask has never come off, and it hurts that seeing the real me isn’t good enough for you to reciprocate.”

She furrows her eyebrows and takes her time responding.

“I understand it’s difficult that you’re locked out of the control room and aren’t allowed to access computers; but we have to protect ourselves.”

“I’m not talking about Four’s secrets. I’m talking about you. Can’t you see that you’ve just taken off your ‘student’ mask and put on a ‘team leader’ mask? You haven’t let anyone in Bethany House know the real you, and some of us really want to.”

Some of us more than others.

“Do you realize you’ve never even told me your real name? The Bureau told me you stole the identity of a girl named Martha McLeod, who died as a baby.”

She chuckles.

“Martha McLeod is my real name. My death in infancy was faked so I could be raised off the grid. Stealing someone else’s identity is difficult. Faking a death and stealing your own identity is relatively easy.”

“That shows some long-term planning on your parent’s part.”

Martha stops floating and swims up close to me. Perhaps a little too close.

“If you want to call it a mask, that’s fine; but know that it’s hard for kids who grow up off grid to learn to trust and open up to anyone. We hide our faces from cameras; we watch the sky for drones; and we learn to disappear whenever a stranger knocks on the door. I remember once I was stuck at Aunt Kimberley’s house for hours when this drug salesman just wouldn’t take no for an answer and-”

The look on my face ends the story, when she realizes she’s slipped.

“Aunt Kimberley? *My* Aunt Kimberley? You know my family?”

“I know your aunt and uncle and all of your cousins very well. We all grew up in the same small town. Your Aunt Kimberley and my Mom are best friends. That’s why I call her Aunt Kimberley.”

That’s why Bill and Wendy could speak freely in front of Martha. She already knew the story of my parents’ murder.

“You’ve known this all along? When were you planning to tell me?”

“It was for your protection - and theirs. The Bureau knows about them and, if you try to contact them, you’ll all be in danger. They’re safer this way.”

“I don’t care that you’re the team leader. You have no right to make these decisions for them - or for me. All these years of seeing me in the news as I helped the Bureau hunt Christians, they must have thought I was a monster. You once said you’d had a mental shift about me. Why would you rob them of the chance to meet me and do the same?”

“Because they told me to. They already love you, Cephas. They’ve watched you over the years and have always loved you - and prayed for you - but they’ll contact you when they’re ready.”

I jump out of the pool.

“My whole life has become a puzzle where everyone else can see the pieces, except me. If I’ve learned anything from Bill and Wendy, it’s that I’ll never find what they have until I find someone who’s willing to take off her mask too. Right now, I don’t want to see what’s hiding behind yours. I may find that I wasn’t the true monster after all.”

For the rest of the day, I hide on a back porch and watch hummingbirds as they come to the flowers and feeders less than a meter from my chair. Other guests stop by, but none attempt to start a conversation. Like me, they want to be alone with their thoughts. I’m sure most of them wear a com twenty-four hours per day when they’re in the real world and are simply enjoying the temporary silence. I don’t know if they’re using the opportunity to draw closer to God, but I wish I was. Instead, I’m mired in trying to sort out how I feel about Martha, Four, and the elders.

“Mind if I sit?”

I look up to see that Brill has found me. I shrug; so he sits in a rocking chair beside me. The hummingbirds chirp at the intrusion, but soon go back to their business.

“If you’re refusing to speak with anyone who knew the truth about your family and failed to mention it, then I could talk to the birds instead,” he says.

“Go ahead. I’d like to hear whatever wisdom you share with birds. They probably know more about my life than I do, too.”

We sit in silence until a bird hovers at the flowers right in front of us.

“That’s a beautiful flower, isn’t it little bird?” Brill says. “You ever wonder who put it there for you, or do you just accept that it was part of His plan?”

I snort and the bird backs away for a moment; then zips back to the same flower.

“It’s not quite perfect though, is it?” Brill asks the bird. “One petal is out of shape and the beetles have been chewing at some of the leaves - and yet - He still put it there just for you to find today. Why didn’t He make it perfect for you, little bird?”

“What the bird should ask is if the flower is really pink.” I say. “Or is it hiding its true colors underneath? Or maybe it’s just pretending to have nectar - when it’s actually filled with something bitter.”

“Are we still talking about these flowers, Cephas? It sounds like you’re talking about the flower that ran up to Eagle Rock and has been sitting there, crying for hours.”

My eyes twitch in the direction of Eagle Rock.

“We must still be talking about these flowers. Martha doesn’t cry. Martha doesn’t do anything that might be seen as weakness.”

“Weakness? You think crying is a weakness? Jesus Himself cried when He walked the earth.”

“Sure, but when Jesus cried it was out of-”

A smile spreads across Brill’s face, when I stop myself mid-sentence.

“That’s right, son. Sometimes people cry out of love. I think you’ll find people do a lot of unexpected things out of love.”

Chapter Nine

The next day Martha leaves without me; so I tell Brill to forget about the bus and I run all the way to Bethany House alone. When I reach the point where the escape tunnels meet, I see something new has been added to the large metal door that says “Danger! Do not Enter.” A paper sign written in Martha’s script says: “Beware of Monsters.” I don’t know if it’s some sort of peace offering or what. I take it with me and put it on the door to my room.

I enter the command center unchallenged. Martha glances at me, but doesn’t acknowledge my presence. It’s like the staff can feel the air cooling in the room and they do their best to avoid eye contact with either of us. I look at the duty roster and find that nobody is assigned to guard me anymore. I walk to Martha and watch heads tilt to listen, as usual.

“Thanks for removing the guards.”

She still refuses to look at me.

“That’s right. You’re not a prisoner anymore. You’re free to go.”

Heads snap up around the room.

“I see. Am I also free to stay?”

Martha drops her voice to a whisper.

“If you don’t think it’ll ruin you. It’s your choice.”

I put my hand on her shoulder and allow it to linger.

“If you don’t mind having a monster in the house, then I’ll stay.”

“Sure. I can use the company.”

I haven’t been assigned any duties and with no guards, there’s no captive audience to spar with me. I try to practice throwing knives, but a consistent throw is still eluding me; so I give up. Amelia is waiting by the door to my room when I get back.

“Martha sent me. There’s another lecture to hack.”

“Why’d she send you? She likes to handle the controls herself.”

“She knows I like chess. I guess she thought I was a good pawn in whatever game you two are playing.”

I notice the “Beware of Monsters” sign is gone from my door. I look down the hall and see it’s now on Martha’s door.

Amelia and I go to the studio and I take my place at the podium. I’m adjusting my trademark necktie a few minutes before the scheduled start, when the screen unexpectedly comes to life and Aislin’s face appears.

“I guess you were serious about returning to teaching.”

“I’m nothing, if not a man of my word. I thought it took weeks to schedule a conference with you.”

“That’s Garai. I swear sometimes I wait for him to make a sheet of paper by hand before he replies to me. We seem to have gotten off on the wrong foot with you and I’d like another chance. All I want is to help our common cause of a return to religious freedom. I have resources that can help make it happen, but you own the public’s trust. That trust is more power than I hold and, frankly, is more power than you seem to understand. We’re both people of power and such people should stick together.”

“Are you proposing some sort of a deal?”

“I’m proposing we both act to our mutual benefit and the benefit of the entire world. You and I both know that the current form of atheism under which we’re living is just a perverted kind of

religion used to rob people of the right to choose the course of their lives, steal their resources, and give them an excuse to hate people of faith.”

Where have I heard those words before? Oh, yes. Henry Portman said much the same thing when referring to Christianity.

“Search your heart and you’ll see my way is the only way,” Aislin continues. “We must maintain the best parts of the current system if we have any hope of maintaining order.”

“We’ve been over this. You want to keep everything the same in terms of controlling people, but want to replace one form of Theocracy with another. I want no part in it.”

“I’ve found there are things in life which should always be chosen carefully, Professor. Your words and your friends are among those things.”

“It was also said long ago that it’s a good idea to keep your friends close and your enemies even closer. I can’t help but wonder on which of your lists I’d find my name.”

“Perhaps on both,” she replies.

“Perhaps I belong on neither? I have a class to teach, so let’s leave it at this. I’m going to teach to whoever will listen. I have no intention of interfering with, or participating in, any of your plans or with Garai’s. If my teaching helps or hurts your agenda, it’s no concern of mine. Does that sound fair?”

“You act like you don’t have an agenda, but I don’t believe that. Everyone has an agenda.”

“I never said I have no agenda. I just want to be sure that my agenda is in line with God’s agenda.”

“You may soon find, Professor, that your agenda can change quickly.”

I end the call.

“That went well,” Amelia says from the control booth. “Aren’t you in the least bit tempted to take her up on her offer? ‘Mr. President’ does have a certain ring to it, you know.”

“Not even a little.”

The screen again comes to life and Talks-a-ton walks out of view without argument.

“Hello, everyone. Today I think we should talk about Pharisees and Sadducees.”

Amelia comes in from the control room when the lecture is done.

“We haven’t set up a time for our match,” she says. “If I forfeit, you’ll hold your spot on the board.”

“If you forfeit, what will either of us learn? I’ve been thinking a lot about this house competition and the lessons it’s already taught me. Being a Christian isn’t supposed to be easy, Amelia. We’re supposed to fight the good fight. Sometimes we’re going to win and sometimes we’re going to lose, but no matter which it is, we should always thank God for the experience and the opportunity to grow. If you trust Him and you trust me, let’s go right now.”

The computer won’t allow for any secret fights. The match is announced to the house, but we expect the gallery to be minimal. We’re wrong. By the time we have our safety padding on, most of the house has arrived, including Martha.

Amelia is bouncing up and down and punching the air, but I go to my knees and begin to pray aloud.

“As Paul wrote in Ephesians, ‘we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness.’ For that reason, Lord, I pray that through this match you may show us that there are many ways to fight the good fight in Your name. Amen.”

I glance up. Everyone’s head is bowed in prayer, but Martha looks up at me. I thought she’d have an impatient look, eagerly waiting for me to beat up on Amelia, but instead she’s lighting me up with a smile. It disappears as soon as Amelia looks her way.

Amelia is trained in judo, but has adopted some unconventional street fighter moves. She'd be a better fighter if she'd stick to a more disciplined style. Right now, the elements she's trying to combine all seem to clash. Within two minutes of exploratory jabs and kicks, I feel I can read her every move. She attempts a punch, which I block because I knew it was coming.

"You drop your left hand by one centimeter before you punch with your right."

"I'll keep that in mind."

She attempts a roundhouse kick high, which I duck under but forego an easy counterattack.

"Three degree tilt in your pelvis before you do that move."

I start to say her moves a split second before she even starts them.

"Right front kick. Left punch. Left side kick."

She tries a three-move combination that comes from a common judo kata. The last part is a kick; so I catch her foot and use it to send her to the ground. She looks at me with her mouth open.

"Head tilt."

"Is there any point in continuing? Or can you tell my next move by how my butt is contacting the ground?"

I put out my hand to help her up.

"Your next move is to stand up and fight the good fight. Now that you're aware of what I'm doing, think about how to use it against me."

She retakes a fighting position and drops her left hand to imitate the way I could tell she was going to throw a right punch. She exaggerates it too much; so I know it's a fake and am ready for a left punch instead. Her moves continue to improve, so even though I can still tell what's coming, I let her land a few punches and a kick.

"Hey!" Martha yells at me from the gallery. "Throwing a match is cheating. You knew what she was going to do, but you're allowing her to score points anyway. Stop it."

Amelia stops moving and lowers her arms.

"Is that true?" Amelia asks.

"Yes, but what would you learn if I just beat you to a pulp? I'm not taking the hits *from* you. I'm taking them *for* you."

I look up at the gallery.

"Isn't that what Christians do? Don't we love our neighbor enough to take a hit for their benefit? Didn't our Lord take the ultimate hit on the cross for our benefit? I'll stand here and take hits from any one of you if I think it'll save your life one day. Yes, it'll hurt, but it's worth taking a hit for people you care about."

I look at Martha.

"Can we continue?"

She just shrugs, but I see that usual curling of the edge of her lip that tells me she's happy when she's pretending otherwise. I turn back to Amelia.

"You need to do more than just mask and vary your own signals. You need to read mine. Watch me carefully."

I start a series of attacks. She blocks some of them, but others land hard to her head and body.

"Stop focusing on my hands. Relax your vision and watch all of me."

Her blocks improve.

"It's your eyes. You're giving away your moves with your eyes."

"Good. Now use the signals I'm giving off as part of your counterattacks."

Her attack comes at me with smiles and laughs as she uses my eyes to predict my moves. I start to smile and laugh too.

"It's like we're dancing," she says. "It's so beautiful."

I use my eyes to misdirect her, spin, hit her lightly in the head; then sweep her feet out from under her to send her tumbling.

“If that was the dip, I don’t like the dance anymore,” Amelia says.

“Never forget that when an opponent knows you’re reading their signals, it can become your weakness instead of theirs.”

The gallery begins to clap.

“I’m glad I didn’t forfeit, but I’m ready to concede - on one condition. Teach me.”

“No,” Martha says

All heads turn to her.

“He’s going to teach us all.”

The next day Martha adds me to the duty roster as “combat trainer,” which is eight hours of teaching classes to small groups, but I stay on for an additional four hours because people keep asking for private lessons. I eat a late dinner and fall into bed.

The next morning I’m awakened by the recurring dream that I’m in a blacksmith shop. I can’t get back to sleep; so even though the sun has barely risen, I dress and head for the training area to work out the kinks from yesterday.

Martha is in the sparring area, already covered in sweat from practicing stick moves. She stops when she sees me.

“It’s like watching a ballerina,” I say. “I wish I had a large bouquet of roses to throw to you.”

“I’m just trying to stay a step ahead, now that there’s a real threat to my spot on the board.”

“Maybe someday....”

She doesn’t reply.

“Since we’re alone, I want to apologize for what I said at the pool the other day.” I say. “I didn’t mean what I said at the end. I’m just not used to it.”

“Not used to what?”

“Getting hurt. When I was The Cult Hunter, nobody ever hurt me.”

“Then why did you leave it?”

“Nobody ever loved me either. The irony that you were just acting the part isn’t lost on me, but that said, I would like to start over and get to know the real Martha, as friends.”

“You say that now, but you’re still hanging onto Martha, the student. You won’t want to kiss the real me. I doubt you’ll even like me.”

“Don’t you remember what I said about the masks we wear?” I ask.

“You’re not getting it, Cephas. I have removed the mask. I really am the nasty shrew of a team leader that lies and keeps secrets and beats people with a stick when I’m mad.”

“You’re also the team leader who’s fair and kind and would do anything for her team. And for the record, you weren’t acting mad when you beat Stephen. You were acting jealous. You may have never loved me, but part of you still wants to be the student sitting in the grass in the park.”

“Of course I was jealous. It’s not fair. When will it be my turn to -”

“Your turn to what?”

“When will it be my turn to have something as simple as your friendship come easily?”

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“I mean, everything is easy for you. You became an expert with a stun gun in a day. You learned combat skills in a week. You got the team to like you with two Bible studies. Even your match with Amelia looked more like a tickle fight than combat. The only thing that isn’t easy for you is-”

“Knife throwing?” I ask, and she glares.

“Me. The only thing that isn’t easy for you is being around me.”

She turns and puts the fighting stick back into the cabinet; so I sneak up behind her and grab her by the sides and attempt to tickle her ribs. She spins, smacks away my left hand, and puts my right arm into a painful wrist and elbow lock; then flips me to the ground. Lying there in the fir needles I can't help but start laughing and find I can't stop. Soon there are tears running down my face.

"Welcome to a tickle fight - Martha style," I say.

At first, I'm laughing too hard to see that she's not.

"What's really funny is that I knew ahead of time that you were going to do that and I just let you do it."

Martha is sitting against a rock, stone-faced.

"What's wrong?" I ask.

"Another hit you've taken for someone else. It's exactly what I was talking about."

I sit beside her and put my arm around her back, but say nothing.

"I ruin everything," she says.

I slide my hand along her back until it rests just under her armpit.

"I thought I could-"

I start to wiggle my fingers. I feel her tense for a moment, then intentionally relax; so I start to dig my fingers in harder, making her squirm.

"Cephas, there's so much more you need to know-."

"Like the best spot to tickle you?"

I go into a full scale tickle assault. She tries to twist away, but I spin her and go after both armpits.

"C'mon, Martha. You must remember how. Let's hear you laugh."

She lets out a little snort; so I stop.

"That was a humble beginning," I say.

I double my efforts until she's laughing without me tickling at all. I lean back and take joy in watching her laugh until my face hurts from smiling.

"You always know what people need, Cephas, even when they don't. Was tickling me just another piece of some puzzle that's floating around in your head?"

She raises her hand to keep me from replying.

"On second thought don't answer that. If I'm just another puzzle piece in your mind, I'd rather not know."

I'm up early again the next day; so I stop by the command center. Most of the staff is still in bed, but Martha is here, looking at a screen displaying a map of North America. It's similar to the one that shows which Four houses are online, but this one has roughly even numbers of red and green dots, with a few in blue. She sighs; then turns it off, but continues to stare at the blank screen.

"If you promise not to hurt me for trying, I'll massage your shoulders," I say.

"No, thank you."

"You look stressed. Is everything okay?"

"It's team leader business. Nothing for you to worry about."

Amelia walks in carrying what looks like a hot cinnamon roll.

"Hey, guys. Look at what Brill sent for us."

Martha looks at Amelia and then at me.

"I'm glad I skipped the massage. I have no interest in being the warm-up act."

Martha storms from the room.

"What was that about?" Amelia asks.

Your impeccable timing.

“She was looking at the map just as I came in.”

“Oh. Did more houses vote?” she asks.

“That’s my guess. Let’s pull it up and take a look.”

Amelia brings the map up at her usual station. It’s a map of the Four network, as I thought, but I don’t know what the red and green mean.

“There it is,” Amelia says. “Zip took the house in Wichita. She’s only a few houses short of half the Council.”

“How many are left to vote?” I ask.

Amelia counts the blue dots.

“Just five and she needs to take them all. It’s not likely, considering Eugene and Berkeley have always voted for Austin in the past.

Is Four in the midst of an election? Or a civil war?

Chapter Ten

I grab a cinnamon bun; then dress for a morning run to work out the sore spots from my new job as combat instructor. As I exit the tunnel, I find Martha by herself, stretching.

"I'm assuming your hands are tired from giving massages, but if your legs are up for it, we could run together. That is, if you haven't gotten smart and decided to run the other direction," she says.

"I need a short run to warm up, but I have another idea. Did you know there's only one person at Bethany who's never sparred with me?"

"The best fighter in the house, but that's not saying much since this is still a technical team rather than a combat team."

"So, what do you think? Cut the run in half and go a few rounds?"

"Just because you can dismantle Amelia doesn't mean you're ready for me."

"Are you sure? Amelia and I have been sneaking off for private lessons."

"What? When?"

"There really is a part of you that still wants to lie in the grass and hold my hand," I say.

"I'm concerned you're distracting my staff."

"Nice try. You are so busted."

I take off running.

Martha is a faster sprinter, but I have the advantage in endurance; so I pay no heed when she passes me. I know I'll catch her. As I pass the sparring area, I see she's stopped, twisted her hair into a bun, and is putting on a sparring helmet. Two other team members have just completed an early session; so when they see me approach, they exchange a look with each other and speed off.

"You ready?" Martha asks.

"Hey, look. I'm sorry. It was another lame attempt at flirting and I know that makes you uncomfortable. Let's just finish the run and forget it."

"Are we going or not?"

I've seen that defiant look before. Her mind is made up. Worse, I can see that she intends to teach me a lesson.

"Fine. Start with hand-to-hand?" I say.

"No points, three falls wins. If you survive for ten minutes of hand-to-hand, we add sticks. If you survive that, we go to training knives and the first touch wins."

"Is there a prize for the winner?" I ask.

"Sure. I have kitchen duty next week. Consider it yours."

"Great, but if I win, you agree to treat me better in front of the Bethany staff."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Ask the staff."

By the time I've put on a helmet and pads, a few members of the staff have shown up and are forming a gallery. More are coming through the woods as we begin, some still in their pajamas because they didn't want to miss this match.

Martha scares me with the ferocity of her first attacks. Her hands are like lightning and the best I can do is deflect the onslaught while I search for a weakness. I expect the Bethany staff to shout some encouragement, but they sit around us like stones until Toby calls out "Talk to us, Cephas. Tell us her weaknesses."

"As soon as I know, she'll be the first to find out."

The truth is that she's giving off the same sorts of signs as anyone else. She dips her elbow by a centimeter before she punches with her opposite hand. Her eyes are always two moves ahead of

her hands. Her foot position tells me exactly how and when she's going to kick. The problem is that I'm just not good enough to do anything about it, other than barely block her in time. If I wasn't able to predict her moves, I would have been pummeled by now.

I can't win this fight physically, but maybe this was always meant to be a mental puzzle.

Martha looks surprised when I block her attempt to sweep my legs out from under me. I learned a defense from Stephen, who I thank and wave to in the crowd. I make an attempt to counterattack and she catches me in a wrist lock, which I break using a technique I learned from a woman named Kasumi, who everyone calls "Misty." I thank and wave to her, too.

"What's this fighting style you're using today? It's pretty irregular," Martha asks.

"I call it The Best of Bethany."

On and on we go. She's still the attacker, but at least she's starting to slow down as she uses up her energy. Each time I use a move learned from a Bethany staff member, I acknowledge them - until Martha is looking annoyed with me.

"Five minute rest; then move to sticks?" Martha asks.

She's winded because she was the attacker; while I used less energy by blocking.

"With all due respect, *team leader*, cult hunters don't rest."

I throw her a stick.

When I first learned to fight with sticks, I had a habit of reaching too far, and my opponents made my knuckles and wrists pay the price. Those sorts of attacks are Martha's specialty. Today I fight closer to my body and protect myself. She notices that her usual tactics are being blocked.

"My compliments to your training team," she says, as I block a lunge attack.

"They're your team."

I feint, then attack low, but she spins out of the way and narrowly misses on an attack to my wrist.

"Lately, I'm not so sure."

She blocks my attack to her midsection, but I do manage to throw her off-balance for a moment. It seems like a trick; so I choose not to capitalize on it.

"Be sure."

"They talk about you constantly. They love Bible study with you. They love hearing your opinion and learning all you have to offer them. They just plain love you. The way you're acknowledging their help, even if I beat you, you've already won this fight in their hearts."

I miss-time a block and my left arm takes a painful hit from her stick. Several in the gallery groan in sympathetic pain. Martha looks proud.

Pride. Psalm 73. She's wearing her pride like a necklace and wrapping violence around herself like a cloak. Today pride is Martha's weakness.

"I have one very special person left to acknowledge," I say.

I begin what's known around Bethany as Amelia's 'signature' move. Martha looks at me with disbelief when she should be ducking. I try to soften the blow, but it's too late. The stick connects with the side of her head and puts her down hard.

She moans once and doesn't get up.

Martha wakes as I replace the ice pack on her head. She starts with a smile, as she realizes she's in her room in Bethany House and I'm the one caring for her. It only lasts a moment, when she remembers I'm also the one who put her here. She tries to sit up.

"Easy. You have a concussion."

Martha says nothing and eases her head back into her pillow.

"I'm sorry," I say. "I expected you to duck. It was like you never saw it coming."

“I never do with you, but at least this hit won’t hurt as long as the last one,” Martha mumbles and falls asleep again.

The next day I’m surprised when Martha asks me to travel with her to Capon Springs for a few days of rest in more comfortable surroundings. She tried to deny any physical effects of our duel, but the bruise on her face says it all. After an hour in the command center, the headache was too much; so she agreed to take the time off.

Our walk through the woods is slow, with Martha taking breaks every couple of kilometers and waiting for her head to stop pounding.

“You won the sparring match; so I spoke with some of the staff. They all agree that I’ve been rough on you.”

“It’s okay. I was the Cult Hunter and you needed to be sure of me.”

“I even spoke with Amelia. She said she never sparred with you because I always found ways to keep her away from you. She said you already knew that stick combination when you and she had your match. How?”

“I learned it watching you. I was about to acknowledge everything you’ve done for me when I hit you.”

“Amelia wasn’t shy with her opinions. She had other things to say. She said maybe a hard hit to the head would help me admit some things I’ve been denying.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t want to say in case it’s just the pain killers talking.”

I suggest we take a long rest at Bill and Wendy’s house, and Martha agrees. As we approach the house, Martha stops to tie her shoe using a convenient boulder. We changed into shorts because it’s a warm day and as she bends over, my eyes are drawn to the graceful and athletic curves of her legs. I smile in appreciation of her body.

My thoughts are drawn to the moment when Martha placed her hand on top of mine all those months ago. How could something as simple as human skin touching human skin draw my thoughts to such sinful places? I look at my hands and know I want to do more than just appreciate how she looks. Much more.

Guard your thoughts, Cephas Paulson!

I don’t want to guard my thoughts. I want to think those thoughts, and then I want to act on them. I want a god that the “churches” created in the twentieth century; a god who lets me determine for myself what is - and is not - sin.

I am who I am.

Is this why Jesus said it would be better to pluck out your eye if it causes you to sin and enter heaven with one eye than be cast into hell with two? I avert my eyes again, but not before Martha catches me looking at her. She blushes slightly. I didn’t think it was possible to make her blush.

We reach the house and enjoy some warm muffins and cold lemonade with Bill and Wendy. These visits are supposed to be some sort of marriage counseling session for them before I perform a wedding ceremony, but I think I’m learning more from them than the other way around.

“I think it would be useful for me to talk to Bill alone. Would you ladies excuse us?”

Bill and I walk to a gazebo on the edge of their property, where he and Wendy sometimes watch the sunset over a little pond.

“I was hoping you could help me to work through something,” I say.

“Well, I didn’t figure we were out here to talk about me. What’s on your mind?”

“It’s kind of embarrassing. The thing is, like everyone else I’ve been surrounded by sex and lust my entire life, and resisting has never been a problem for me. If you’ve ever seen my old lectures,

you saw I'd get many sex offers in every class, and I was never tempted by them. I even refused Jocie, who was considered the world's most seductive woman."

"And that's changed?"

"I find myself having a difficult time controlling my thoughts towards Martha. Months ago, I thought we were in love, but it turns out that it was just an act to gain my trust. All we did was kiss, but I had some pretty lustful thoughts about her."

"And since then?" Bill asks.

"Despite how clear she's made her feelings towards me, let's just say my thoughts sometimes wander back to that place."

"God made you a man, Cephas. And with it comes some of the urges you're describing."

I feel momentarily crestfallen, assuming he's going to say what society has told me my whole life: that this is the world we live in, and it's okay to think and act this way.

"But He also made you a man of God. And that means you have responsibilities He expects you to live up to. I heard a guy say so on a lecture he hacked in on a while back. A fellow by the name of Cephas, I believe. Maybe you've heard of him?"

"I know the guy. He's not as wise as everyone thinks," I say.

"What everyone thinks? You've got no idea what people think or what they're saying about you. I'm glad you spend so much time reading and lecturing; but you need to remember that one of the most beautiful things about the Bible is how it was written to relate to - and help us - in everyday life. You can know every word of the Bible, but it's useless if it's just stuck in your head and not used in your life. You need to put your head up once in a while and look at the real world, including finding your place in it."

"I'll do that, but in the meantime, why don't you tell me a little of what the real world is saying about me?"

"Well, that lady Jocie you just mentioned did a private interview that got released after she was dead. In the version the government released to the public, about all she said was that the world needed to trust you. In the uncut version that got leaked out, she said a lot more. She said you understand truths most of us can't. She said you could look inside a person and see their soul. She said you had saved her soul. Of course, after that you came back and said Christ is real and you were touched by him. Well, you can imagine where the talk about you would go from there."

"Nobody told me about any of that."

"People are lost," Bill says. "Most can't put it into words, but deep down they know it. They want a purpose. They want their souls back and they think you can show them the way. Millions would die for you, just to have an outside shot at finding humanity's soul again."

Millions would die for me? That's not what I want.

I stand in stunned silence at his revelation. I want more than anything for humanity to find God's path again, but am I the one to lead them there?

"But you didn't ask me out here to have more burdens heaped on you. You came to ask my advice about Martha; so I'm going to repeat to you something your Father once said to me. He said, 'when you're seeking answers, first make sure you're asking the right questions.' Are you sure you're asking yourself the right question, Cephas? Are you sure this is only about lust?"

I exhale audibly; then smile.

"You're right. What I truly want to know is what to do when you're still in love with someone who's made it clear that she never has felt - and never will feel - the same way about you."

"But you're still hoping?"

"There's just something about the way she kissed me. You know?"

Bill gets a faraway look. He knows exactly what I'm talking about.

After two days of rest at Capon Springs, Martha's headache is gone and she can't stand being away from the command center any longer. The bruise on her head and face got even larger and turned purple, but she's chosen to regard it as a mark of honor.

"I've done nothing for two days. Join me on a slow run?" Martha asks.

"You just want to get your circulation moving to fade that bruise the rest of the way."

"I am still a woman ... or have you forgotten?"

I'm still not very good at it, but I'm pretty sure that was flirting.

When we're a kilometer into the woods, Martha speeds ahead and ducks behind a large fir tree, and just as I reach it, she tries to trip me. I jump over her foot and just barely turn in time to block a punch aimed at my face.

"Not bad," she says.

She takes off running again.

I get it. Flirting "Martha style" includes throwing punches.

This time she takes enough of a lead that I don't know which tree she's behind, so I go to silent stalking. I track her to two big trees, but I can't tell which one she's behind. If I remain focused on the ground to be sure of which tree, I'll leave myself open to an attack. As I try to decide how to proceed, I spot the tip of her shoe visible behind the tree on the right. I silently sneak to the tree and spring around its left side to catch her from behind. At the last moment, I see it's just her empty shoe and duck just in time, as she kicks from behind the tree on the left.

"Better than not bad," she says.

I grab her shoe and take off with it.

"Wait until you see my next move," she yells after me.

I leave her shoe on top of a rock, and then run for another set of big trees and wait for her to stalk in on me. She's so quiet, I hear only the faintest stirrings as she moves through the trees towards me until she's on the other side of the one I'm hiding behind. I can't decide if I should attempt a first strike or let her attack.

There's a sound to my left, but I know it's a stick Martha tossed as a distraction, so I spin right and catch her as she comes around, and stop my fist a few centimeters from her nose.

"Was that really your next move?" I ask.

"Nope. This is."

She pushes me, while sweeping my feet out from under me so I fall backwards onto the soft forest floor, with her tumbling on top of me. She straddles me; then pins my hands so her face is hovering over mine.

"Do you concede?" she asks.

"I never stood a chance."

She leans down and lets her fine hair tickle my face, with her lips just a few inches from mine.

"Why are you doing this?" I ask. "It wasn't long ago that you said we have other roles to play."

"Doing what?"

She continues to brush her hair across my face while never breaking contact with her eyes.

"Tempting me. Torturing me."

"You have a funny concept of torture. I'm not always the tough team leader of Bethany House, you know. I need to let my hair down and have fun sometimes too. Maybe part of me enjoyed being your favorite student and wants a taste of what she had."

Her face leans ever closer to mine. I want this with every part of my body. I want to be kissed like she kissed me all those months ago, and I don't want to stop at just kissing. But how can I? How can I give in to lust now?

As our lips are about to meet, she puts her weight down onto my chest and I feel something as sharp as a needle stick into my skin above my heart.

Bad choices cause pain. Choose carefully, Cephas.

In one motion, I send her tumbling by throwing her off with my arms and rolling away. I find myself facing her in a combat crouch like I'm about to fight for my life.

"That wasn't a training exercise to catch you off-guard. I was just going to kiss you."

"Martha, I don't know how—"

"As I remember it, you're quite good at kissing."

"I don't know how to be a Christian man."

And I certainly don't know how to be a Christian man towards women. How can I succeed in an area where even godly men like Sampson and David failed?

"Calm down, Cephas. It was just a kiss. Don't you want to kiss me again?"

"Not now, not like this. Kissing you right now would feel like kissing Jocie."

Her face falls.

"There are gentler ways to tell a woman you're not in love with her anymore."

Was it love? Or was it the idea of being in love?

"I guess I shouldn't be surprised," she says. "Since I stopped acting the part of your student, I've lied to you; kept you as a prisoner; and even held you at knifepoint. It's not much of a basis for a relationship. I told you that you wouldn't even like me, once you got to know the real me."

I inhale deeply.

"If you're asking me if I'm still in love with the actress who pretended to be my student, the answer is no."

"What about Martha, the team leader?" she asks.

"Martha the team leader; Martha the commando; the prison warden; name as many Martha's as you like. The answer is still no."

"I see."

"I don't love roles. I love people. Martha the person? Now that's someone I think I'd like to kiss someday."

"But not today?"

"Not today. You don't understand the price I paid for kissing you the first time. That's one hit I'm just not ready to take again."

Chapter Eleven

When we reach Bethany House, Amelia doesn't wait for us to put away our packs and come to the command center. She meets us in the tunnels.

"I'm glad you're back. Ouch! That's a nasty bruise."

"It was a hit worth taking. What's going on?" Martha asks.

"The elders are screaming for an immediate conference with Cephas. Before you do, let me show you why."

As we follow Amelia back to the command center, Martha's hands go up to her hair and begin to form it into a bun. I catch them.

"Old Martha says she likes the ties and old Cephas says he likes the ponytail."

We walk to Amelia's usual station.

"I saw a lot of chatter coming out of the F.B.I. and found this."

Amelia brings up a short video that was hacked into the middle of some popular comedy show, along with a gray number Four in the corner.

It's a video of me at the knife throwing range. As the knife whizzes through the air and sinks into a crude wooden target, the voiceover says: "Cephas is preparing to fight for his faith. Are you?"

"Stephen," I call across the room. "Isn't this the video you took of me last week so we could review my technique?"

"Yeah, but I didn't add the voice or hack it anywhere."

"It's not just the voice," I say. "The whole thing is spliced. I rarely make a knife stick into a target and I've certainly never sunk one into the bulls-eye like that. Who had access to the footage?"

"All of Four," Stephen replies. "I sent it out to the other houses so everyone could see you're alive and well."

"Zip!" Martha says and stands up.

"Get her on the line and send it to the interrogation room."

I decide it's best to leave Martha alone; so I wait in the command center.

"That was a nasty trick," I say to Amelia. "Did it win Zip any votes?"

"Three. But don't worry, Even if Zip takes command, Martha won't give up you or Bethany House without a fight. Besides, we're not that easy to find."

A message comes up on her screen.

"You'd better get downstairs. The Elders just signaled again."

As I enter the same interrogation room, I can again hear Martha talking with Zip through the thin door.

"I don't know what you're complaining about, Martha," Zip says. "I've heard the rumors about his shooting and fighting skills, and based on the bruise on your face, it looks like Cephas still has his killer instincts. Shall I put Bethany House down as with us? I'll attach you to Cameron's command so he can keep an eye on you, but you can stay team leader."

I'm ready to burst through the door, but I wait to hear Martha's answer.

"Since when do you respect team leadership? I know you're already contacting my team individually and pressuring them to leave so you can get one of them to guide you back here."

"You've left me no choice. Your loyalty to Four was compromised when you got involved with a cult hunter. What a waste. I could have put him to such good use."

"I'm not compromised and I'm not involved. I just need more time with him."

I don't believe it. I'm still just a tool in some agenda.

I leave the room and slam the door. Martha will know what I heard. I make it to the end of the escape tunnel before Martha catches me.

"Where are you going?" she asks.

"I'm leaving. What's it matter to you? You're the loyal team leader. Just go back and play your assigned role."

"My *role* includes keeping you safe. If you leave this house, you're as good as dead."

"Life. Death. You're the one who said 'it's a choice,' but apparently you misspoke. Apparently you meant to say 'it's a role.' Well, I'm not playing the role that Aislin or Garai or Zip or even you have planned for me."

I make my way to the sparring area and keep on going. I can hear Martha stalking me through the trees, but I don't look back. I put my head against a tree and pretend to be lost in thought. I let her creep closer and closer without letting on that I can now hear every tiny twig and needle as they crack under her weight. I hear her weight shift and know that an attack is coming. I assume it's to subdue me and take me back to Bethany House, but I don't know that she grabbed one of the fighting sticks in the sparring area until it's too late. I hear the soft whoosh just before it hits me painfully on the thigh. I manage to turn, just as she uses it to sweep my feet out from under me and send me to the ground where my head lands on a rock.

"What's the matter? No soft lap to put your head on today?" she asks.

I reach to the back of my head and my hand comes away red with blood.

"Quite the opposite."

Her face softens.

"Let me look at it."

She drops the stick and reaches to give me a hand up. I take her hand, but rather than sitting up I use my entire body to throw her through the air; then grab for the stick. She rolls out of it, but I'm too fast and have the stick up before she can make sense of what's happening.

"You're going to love this," I say. "You're going to get the fight you've wanted all along. No cameras, padding or gallery. Just the team leader against The Cult Hunter."

"What are you talking about?"

"I want answers and I'm going to get them - even if I have to beat them out of you."

I swing the stick hard to prove I'm serious and she barely jumps back in time. She begins to circle and waits for me to attack.

"I never got the answers I needed that day in the command center. It turns out that I wasn't even asking the right question. You admitted Four sent you on a suicide mission, but you told William to watch my com and come up with a rescue plan. Suicide missions don't need rescue plans. You went rogue and planned to disobey their orders from the very beginning."

Her eyebrows went up by a couple of millimeters. So far, so good.

"Four wanted me dead, but you wanted me alive. You've made it pretty plain that you didn't do it for love; so now you're going to tell me why you did it."

Her pupils dilated slightly. I'm onto something.

I swing hard, but she ducks and almost lands a kick to my side.

"You're going to have to do better than that, *Cult Hunter*."

I swing again and this time when she ducks, her hand comes up with a rock. She throws it at my head, but instead of attacking as I duck, she runs back the way we came. She's fast, but we both know I'll catch her before we reach the Bethany House tunnels. She veers instead for the sparring area and manages to get a fighting stick.

"You don't like fair fights, do you, Cult Hunter? You always want to have the advantage. We'll see who ends up answering questions."

She spins her stick just to taunt me, but I don't take the bait.

"New rules," I say. "For every hit that lands, we answer a question."

She nods and comes at me. I can still read her attacks and block them all, then sneak in a soft hit to her arm.

"I'll start off easy," I say. "Why are you still mad at me all the time?"

"That's it? This is all so we can talk about *us*?"

"It wasn't my original plan, but I guess the hard hit to my head on that rock made me admit a few things to myself. So, why are you still mad all the time?"

"What are you talking about?"

"You're treating me better, but it doesn't take great observational skills to read your body language. It's like you can't stand looking at me. What are you so mad about?"

"I'm mad that Amelia got a tickle fight and I got a three-day headache."

I take a hard jab. She blocks it, but I follow with a kick that glances off her leg. If she wasn't mad before, she is now.

"It looks like it's your turn to answer again," I say. "Why did you try to kiss me in the woods? What information could you possibly be trying to get from me? Do you need me to break a code, or make a new one for Four?"

"You only hit me once; so I'm choosing to answer the last question. We don't need a new code. When you broke Zack's last code, we realized we couldn't win that battle with you; so we found a different way to communicate. A hundred years ago, when ground based communications and satellites were made obsolete, they abandoned millions of kilometers of fiber optic lines in the ground. We repaired what we needed to make a private network. It's so low tech the government has no clue."

"I guess I'll need to hit you again to find out about the kiss," I say.

"You're welcome to try."

She comes at me again and doesn't let up. I try to get under her skin by calling out her attacks before she makes them.

"Left front kick; left punch; stick jab with parry."

Calling her moves makes her angrier than when I connect hits.

"Give it everything you've got, Martha, and let out all of that anger. I need you free of it."

I manage a hard hit to her lower leg, but when I try to follow up with another shot to her arm, she somehow catches my stick. She can't win the tug-of-war one-handed, so she drops her stick.

She took the hit to her leg on purpose.

Usually when I solve a puzzle, the pieces come together step-by-step; but once in a while it all comes together in a sudden flash of understanding.

"Of course," I say. "Here I was lecturing you on taking a hit for the benefit of others - but you've been taking hits for me all along."

I'm so dumbfounded by my thoughts, I barely feel the stick leave my hands as she takes it, and just stand there as it hits me in each arm.

"You didn't bring me here to hide me from Henry. You did it to protect me from Four and the elders. That's what you were talking about when you said you were hiding your true feelings for the sake of the mission. Saving me was your true mission all along - and you betrayed the Four council to do it."

A hit to the chest and another to each arm. I feel like I'm absorbing all of her pent up anger.

"When you said dark things hide in the shadows, you weren't trying to scare me. It was a warning to not trust Aislin and Garai."

I can't take this punishment forever; so I feint to the left and, when she falls for it, scramble to pick up the stick on the ground.

“You’ve even been manipulating the staff so they’d get to know me just like you did. You needed them to see the man inside the monster they’d built up in their minds. It’s the hit you took for me and for them. You even sacrificed our friendship in the process. That’s why you’re mad.”

Her eyes begin to water up, but she doesn’t stop her attacks. Her moves are getting erratic; so I block them easily.

“I’m mad because you can see when someone changes their grip on a stick by a centimeter, or their eye flickers for a half-second and you know exactly what they’re going to do next. I’m mad because you can see a couple of broken pine needles and know where someone walked an hour before.”

Almost there. I need to make her just a little madder.

“Right side kick.”

“Stop it!”

“Forward thrust. You contemplated a roundhouse, but thought better of it.”

“If you can see all those things, why can’t you-”

She stops for a moment; then winds up for a big attack.

“Why can’t I what?”

“Why can’t your powers of observation pick up on the simple fact that I really did fall in love with you? Why can’t they see that I still am in love with you?”

Her attack is aimed at my head and she knows I can easily block it.

I was wrong. I’ll gladly take that hit again ... but first I have to take this one.

Instead of blocking, I drop the stick and watch as her stick comes into my temple. My knees go weak and I collapse.

“But I still need an answer to my first question, Martha.”

Her face appears above mine, looking horrified by what she’s done.

“Why, Martha? Why?”

I feel myself slipping in and out of consciousness, though I’m not sure where I am. I get a sense that someone is kissing me, though I’m not sure if it’s real or just a pleasant dream. A few moments later - or perhaps it takes an hour - I’m lucid enough to smell the fir needles and feel them poking into my skin; so I know I’m still in the woods. Martha is gently parting and smoothing my hair.

“You have to tell me Martha. Why?”

“You really don’t know, do you?” she asks. “How could you, of all people, not know? When you sang the song, I assumed-”

“The song?”

“At the press conference. You sang the original words to ‘He’ll find you.’ Only a handful of people ever knew the real words.”

Martha begins to sing. I’ve never heard her sing before and to me her voice sounds like an angel’s.

“Why are you hiding, you children of the light?

Will you come out and praise the Son now he has heard your cries?

He’ll find you. He’ll find you, if your heart is right.

Come hear His truth and read His word and seek His perfect light.”

To my surprise, she continues into a second stanza.

“Why are you hiding, you children of the light?

Must I cloak the world with night to heal your blinded eyes?

He’ll find you. He’ll find you, if your heart is right.

Come hear His truth and read His word and seek His perfect light.”

“When you went back in time, it used the power from the world’s three fusion reactors. For a few minutes, the whole world was ‘cloaked by night.’ And then you opened everyone’s blind eyes with your testimony. That song was written when we were just children. My mother once told me it was a prophecy.”

“And you thought the Council and the elders might unite behind me if you could convince them I fulfilled a prophecy?”

I start to laugh, even though it makes the front and back of my head hurt.

“What’s so funny?”

“You should have come to Bible study. If you had, you’d know that prophets get killed.”

Chapter Twelve

This time Stephen meets us in the tunnels.

“Where have you two been? The elders are calling every five minutes and Zip sent a message directly to Martha.”

He hands a tablet to Martha; then looks at me. Blood ran down my face and shirt and I can feel more dried on the back of my head, but it’s the blood draining out of Martha’s face that concerns me more.

“What happened to you?” Stephen asks me.

“Tickle fight gone wrong.”

Martha can’t even manage to shoot me an annoyed look. She turns to Stephen.

“Who’s seen this?” she asks Stephen.

“Just me.”

“Share it with the House. They deserve to know.”

“It gets worse,” he replies. “You’d better get up to the command center.”

Stephen heads for the command center, but Martha gets a damp towel to clean me up; then steers me into her room.

“What was in Zip’s message?” I ask.

“Confirmation of what you said about prophets. Zip got the votes and they sentenced you to death as a war criminal. She’s demanding that I turn you over.”

“What are you going to do?” I ask.

Martha’s answer is to look into my eyes; then pull me into her for a long kiss.

The entire staff is in the command center and the large screen tells us what Stephen thought was worse than my death sentence. The Cult Hunter Corps is back in business, and the first order of the kill teams is to make sure the world knows that raising your arms into a cross is now an unofficial act of treason in their eyes.

The overly enhanced news anchor happily announces a new worldwide initiative to “enlighten” those who were “confused” by my speech. The official feed shows Bibles being turned in by smiling school children, who were induced to spy on their parents. Inset on the screen, around the official news, we’re seeing private footage taken around the world. In those shots, government “enlightenment” comes down the barrel of a stun gun or through a rifle butt to the head.

The worst of all is footage stolen from a government film crew. Eight people are in a line, and when they’re asked to deny Christ, they raise their arms up into crosses. Their leader says: “You can never take this cross away from me,” and they’re all shot with something the world hasn’t witnessed in several generations - bullets.

Four isn’t allowing the government to keep their actions secret from the public, like they did when I broke the final code. Every bit of footage is being hacked into the most popular programs worldwide.

The scenes continue to flash past until I can’t take anymore and turn to find Martha seated at a terminal. She’s looking at the map of Four houses.

“Zip couldn’t get the votes on her own, but the Corps got them for her,” Martha says.

I step to where I can see the map and there’s now only one green dot.

“Bethany House stands alone,” Martha says.

“What will she do next?”

“I’m not sure, but I know the best person to ask her.”

“What would I say to her?” I ask.

“Whatever you think she needs to hear.”

We go to the conference room and Martha puts in a call to Zip.

“The Cult Hunter, right on cue,” Zip says when her face comes onto the screen. “If you’re hoping you can still join me and beg for a pardon, it’s a little late. As a matter of fact, it’s a little late for all of your old friends. They’ve received the same sentence.”

I again find my eye drawn to the fractal tattoo on Zip’s neck.

“You can’t win a war with the Cult Hunter Corps, Zip. I don’t care how well trained you are. You’ll be out-manned and out-gunned and even if you could win, it’s not Christ’s way. People won’t come to Him when you hold them gunpoint. Stick to Austin’s way, with peaceful resistance.”

“Austin’s time leading Four is over. He’s disappeared.”

I look at Martha and she nods.

“And I don’t plan to start a war. Martha’s idea of painting the number four all over the world made me realize all we need to do is jump in and out of shadows and make the cult hunters disappear one at a time. Painting was great training though. Thanks for the idea, Martha.”

I say nothing.

“You just love my tattoo, don’t you, Cephas? You can’t take your eyes off it.”

She pulls her shirt off her right shoulder to show that it’s much larger than it first appeared.

“It’s a fractal pattern,” I say. “A very complex one. I’ve already identified over a dozen sub-patterns.”

She pulls her shirt back into place.

“We’re not good enough friends for you to count all of the patterns. Let’s just say it goes very far down.”

“God’s creation is like a fractal, Zip. I guarantee that you can’t see all of the patterns He’s woven into your life. Don’t do this. Wait for more of His plan to be revealed before you make decisions that could affect us all.”

“You have no idea how hypocritical that statement is, coming from you.”

She involuntarily glances at the tattoo on her shoulder.

“Zip? Who created that fractal?” I ask.

“Someone you sentenced to death with *your* decisions.”

Zip ends the call and Martha comes out of the control booth.

“It was Zach who created that fractal, wasn’t it?” I ask. “I should have figured it out the first time I saw it. He was a brilliant Christian code master; so he loved fractals, just like me.”

“Zach was Zip’s brother.”

“And I killed him. I wish you’d told me.”

“I never thought she’d take control of Four. Austin believed in you, even when you were The Cult Hunter. I thought you’d lead us someday.”

“Instead I destroyed it. My testimony is what set everything in motion. Everything Austin worked so hard to build is gone, and he’s in hiding - thanks to me.”

“Austin doesn’t hide. We received a message that gave us a private com frequency we can use to contact him.”

“Where is he?”

“He didn’t say. He just gave us the frequency and transmitted a coded message for you.”

She hands me a slip of paper with a string of random letters.

“I guess he assumed you could crack his code. How long will it take?” she asks.

“Got it.”

She gives me a look that screams the question: “Are you for real?”

“It’s what I do,” I say with a shrug.

“Can you tell me what it says?”

“Dear Cephas, I started with just Bethany House and I’m happy to hand it to you. I’ll be travelling around the world trying to finish the work that you have yet to begin. A.”

What in the world is that supposed to mean?

Aislin and Garai continue to demand a meeting with me. When they come up on the screen, they already look as angry as they were when the last call ended. They don’t bother with pleasantries.

“Dr. Paulson, why are you on the network throwing knives like some circus act? I put inciting this violence on your head,” Garai says.

“Don’t you have a bigger problem on your hands? Zipporah has taken control of the Four network from Austin. She’s also declared me a war criminal and sentenced me to death.”

“You’re not in control of Four?” Aislin asks.

“No. The video was of me learning basic self-defense. It was used without my consent.”

“Then it’s as I’ve said for years: Four is a rogue element,” Garai says. “You are not one of them, Dr. Paulson. You should leave immediately.”

“I agree,” Aislin says. “The members of Four are young and angry. I could offer you a more stable setting.”

“Thanks for the offer, but you’re forgetting one thing.”

“And what is that?” Garai asks.

“I’m young and angry too.”

“Are you sure you want to do this?” Martha asks.

“What choice do I have? The world associates me with Christianity and the Four movement. Killing cult hunters will play right into Henry’s propaganda war. If I can remind the world this isn’t what Christians are all about, before Zip goes through with her plan, maybe it’ll change her mind.”

We decide the best way to reach a large audience that includes current members of Four is to keep hacking in on my old lectures. Dr. Talkington starts her lecture at the appointed time and I see there are already over ten thousand people watching her live, waiting to see if I’ll show up and help them make sense of what’s happening. When I break in, the number rapidly climbs even higher.

“Thanks for coming today, Karen. It’s nice to see you’re still a fan.”

I hear Martha snort a laugh in the control booth.

“There’s a question on my mind today that I’m sure I share with millions of people around the world: What should we do in view of today’s attacks and murders by the Cult Hunter Corps? It’s already been suggested that we strike back; but how can someone commit murder and claim to have acted in Christ’s name? I don’t know. What I do know is that it isn’t too late for the Four movement to carefully consider its next action.”

“To try to make sense of what’s happening today, I thought it might help to take a more in-depth look at something I said several lectures ago. I referred to the years between 2000 and 2020 as a period of church decline, even though church membership was rising. My contention was that an increase in church membership isn’t the same thing as an increase in the number of believers. I’d like to explain some things about that time period that are similar to what’s happening in the world today.”

I see Martha get a curious look on her face. In the lower corner of the screen, there’s a series of numbers scrolling rapidly. The first two numbers lock on 40, while the rest keep scrolling.

“The latter half of the 1900’s, say from around 1960 and on - was one of the first great movements away from faith. New technologies, such as computers, were being invented and rapidly advancing. In this era there were large numbers of people who I characterize as ‘seeking truth without God.’ They wanted to know the truth about the purpose of their lives and the

universe, and when they couldn't find it, they tried to make up their own truth. Some relied on science until they found things science couldn't explain. Others insisted the only real truths were those contained in the human mind; and some even convinced themselves humans could be gods themselves, if they could reach higher levels of enlightenment."

The strange number counter has locked the numbers 4035061050503. My image starts to fade a little on the screen and Martha works madly until it's restored. All of the numbers start scrolling again. The first two lock on 45 almost immediately and the next two lock on 46 a moment later.

"If that generation could be characterized as 'seeking truth without God,' then their children should be described as 'seeking God without truth.' That's the generation that flooded the churches from 2000 to 2020. They desperately wanted the God that their parents had rejected, but they wanted Him without His truth, because His truth would require them to change their ways. So like their parents, they made up their own version of God. A version they could keep in a box and only take out when it suited them. They didn't want to hear that the wages of sin is death. So they made up a God who wouldn't tell them those things; a God who would let them live life on their own terms rather than His. Many preachers were happy to ignore the Bible and "go with the flow," as they used to say back then, because preaching what people wanted to hear filled the pews and, therefore, the collection plate.

I would suggest to you that many members of the Four movement are seeking God without considering His truth, and His truth still says: 'Thou shalt not kill.' Put another way, I believe the mistake all of these generations has made is easy to see. God said to Moses: 'I am who I am.' He didn't say: 'I am whoever man thinks I am.'"

The last two numbers lock to reveal the series 4546591083002 and again my image dims before Martha restores it. The numbers once again start scrolling, with the first two locking on 44 and the next two on 04 as quickly as before.

"Can everyone see how naturally this led into the 'Equalization' period that followed? Christians had become accustomed to defining God to be what suited their purposes so they could do whatever they wanted, without being held to a higher standard. When the government started Equalization to ensure all religions were equal, man jumped at the chance to have his own personal religion where he answered only to the god of his own making. I believe the Four movement has fallen into that same trap."

I finish my sentence just as the last two numbers lock to give the series 4404491031351. This time the transmission is cut and doesn't come back.

"What was up with the scrolling numbers?" I ask as Martha exits the control booth.

"It was some sort of new tracking program; so I cut the transmission. It came from your old studio in Colorado Springs. I was worried about you making an enemy of Zip, but I think Henry is trying to tell you he's still in this fight."

Martha's cousin William bursts through the door.

"I thought you'd never end."

"William, what's happened?"

"I knew you'd want to know immediately. We received a message from a source in Israel. The government removed the time travel device from the cave two days ago and replaced it with a fake. They left the arena cage in place to fool everyone, but our people could tell the device was a fake because it's smaller. They don't know where the real device has gone."

"They have a two-day head start. It could be anywhere by now," Martha says.

"We need to find it, fast," I say.

"Why? What does it mean?" William asks.

"It means I've received two death sentences in the same day."

Although I hate the idea, there's only one thing I can do. I need to ask Aislin, Garai and even Zip for their help to find and destroy the time machine before Henry can use it again. I can't help but wonder if such an alliance was also my parents' undoing.

I expect the news about the time travel device to hit the room like a bombshell, but it doesn't. The faces of the three Christian leaders are magnified many fold, up on their respective screens, and it's easy to see the information isn't a surprise to Aislin or Garai. Zip's eyes flicker wide with surprise for just a moment; then she gets a satisfied smile - but says nothing.

"The funds needed to move the device crossed my desk weeks ago, as did expenses of personnel from NASA to run it," Aislin says.

"I learned of the plan just a week ago," Garai says.

"Then where is it?"

"I don't know," Aislin says.

"My people last saw it loaded onto a tube car," Garai says. "The travel plan was confidential; so I too do not know the location of the device. What do you believe Henry is planning this time? Will he send someone back to kill Jesus as a child? Or maybe kill the Apostle Paul?"

"You already know the answer to that. Henry won't do anything that might result in a big change to his own life. He'll want to keep the change to the timeline as small and simple as possible. Namely, he needs to make the Travelers Initiative fail so the world never hears my testimony."

"So he'll change the timeline to send someone else in your place?"

"I don't think so. In his heart, Henry knows the truth; so he won't risk having someone else come back and give similar testimony. Besides, he'll still want the force of my celebrity behind the message. The best way to accomplish that is to allow me to complete the mission, but kill me before I can testify. He owns plenty of doctors. All he needs to do is put one on the space plane that brought me back to the states. They can inject me with something lethal and pass it off as an unexpected effect of time travel. Then he'll bring out the bloody bandage and claim I told him on my deathbed that I saw the apostles steal the body."

"Then your analysis matches our own," Garai says. "This is your problem, not ours."

"My problem? Really? You'd let Henry erase the last six weeks?"

"You've been clear that you want no part of any of our organizations; so wouldn't we also be in the same position as we were before? As I remember it, being associated with us would somehow 'ruin you.' We wouldn't want that," Aislin says.

I close my eyes and all I can see is Pharisees chanting: "Crucify."

"Then, don't do this for me. Do this for all the faithful. The Travelers Initiative sparked a worldwide revival. Don't let that be erased."

Zip crosses her arms.

"And if you can't do it for them, do it for yourselves. Ancient church bells that sat silent for generations have started mysteriously ringing. If I were a betting man, I'd bet every ring of those bells equals more money and people flowing into all of your organizations. None of you want those bells to go silent."

Modern Pharisees are the same as the ancient ones: flip them a silver coin to get cooperation.

"What would you have us do?" Garai asks.

"Bethany House has been hacking government data and intercepting communications, and we've come up with nothing. All I'm asking for is an exchange of information so we can find the time machine and destroy it before any changes are made to the timeline."

"I have other plans," Zip says. "I won't commit resources."

"You'd have more resources if your plan didn't include murder," I reply.

"You should be grateful to have fewer of your old pals around to get in your way."

“You, of all people, should want the timeline to stay intact. It put you in charge of Four.”

“I thought about what you said about patterns, Cephas. My ascension in Four has always been part of a larger pattern. It was inevitable.”

Yes, but perhaps not for the purpose you think.

Chapter Thirteen

Aislin and Garai begin sending all of the information they gather. It's not clear whether they're just refusing to triage the information out of laziness, or if they're intentionally trying to overload us, but the volume of reports we receive is staggering. I take it all and retreat to Capon Springs, where Brill gives me a comfortable little one-room log cabin. It must be at least three hundred years old, but it has a direct connection to Four's private database and multiple screens for displaying everything. I want to call it "The Think Tank," but Martha names it "The Outpost."

"We have nothing useful from Aislin," I say. "There've been no unusual personnel or resource requests anywhere near Israel, nor have there been any high priority shipments of cargo out of the area. They could have hidden it in a shipment of grapefruit and nobody would be the wiser. On this end, there's nothing to report either. No additional reassignments from NASA or the Department of Energy. Oh, but look at this. There's a request to increase the flow of fresh water to some government facility in Tennessee by an extra ten thousand gallons per month."

"How useful," Martha says. "Garai's report isn't much better. Surveillance camera production is up fifteen percent and seventy percent of the nation's hover buses are now upgraded to detect passengers without coms. Los Angeles is getting an unexpected upgrade to its power grid; a large shipment of South American hemp was received in New Orleans; Kansas is getting a new tornado detection system."

"Hemp?" I ask.

"Yeah. In New Orleans."

I smile.

"So, what?"

"In the twentieth century, mankind was consuming resources faster than new sources could be found and were polluting most everything in sight. In the United States, the government created an agency called the "Environmental Protection Agency" - or EPA for short - as a watchdog to keep the environment clean. By about the year 2040, the EPA had stopped all tree cutting on public lands. At the same time, the states were legalizing a narcotic plant called cannabis or marijuana. With no trees being cut down, the paper industry had no choice but to convert to the fibrous part of the cannabis plant in order to make paper. That fiber was known as hemp."

"Why would you think the hemp shipment is for paper?"

"Let me continue. One of the primary places for hemp paper production was in Tennessee, and the process requires a steady amount of clean water. Sound familiar?"

"But only Christians use paper, so that we can communicate without worrying about electronic eavesdropping."

She stops herself mid thought and then finishes.

"Except now it's Four that's eavesdropping on the government - not the other way around."

"That's why we haven't been able to pick up on anything useful electronically," I say. "High security items must have gone back to paper. Your parent's generation blinded the government by leaving the electronic world; so now that Four has turned the tables, the government is returning the favor."

"I'll send messages to Garai, and Aislin. If we're lucky, maybe one of them can intercept some of those papers and we can find out where the time machine is hidden."

"I hope so," I say.

I sit and begin rubbing my temples.

"Because right now we have nothing."

Martha walks across the room and picks up the staff that came back with me through time.

“Maybe you should try the whole Moses thing with the staff after all.”

She lifts it high in one hand like the pictures of Moses.

“Or now that you’re so good with a staff, maybe you could just beat Henry over the head with it.”

“Do I get a shot at Zip too?”

She starts to handle it more like a weapon and as she plays with it, she runs her hand down the shaft and feels the groups of carvings left there two thousand years ago: XXIX LVIII XXXI and XXXI VIII XVI.

“Did you ever figure out why the shepherd boy carved these Roman numerals?”

“I don’t think it was him. Nobody in his family could read or write; so it’s not likely he would know Roman numerals. It’s more likely it was done by the two Romans who saved me from Egyptian robbers. Even so, what do the numbers 29, 58, 31, 31, 8 and 16 mean?”

“Enemies killed? Days away from home?” Martha suggests.

“Women bedded?”

I immediately regret my reply.

“Maybe one day you’ll get to add a number one of your own,” she says, “but it’d better be the last number you ever add.”

I stay at Capon Springs for a few days. I want to be alone as I sort through the mounds of data, but Martha visits daily to bring me all the new information from Garai, Aislin and the Bethany House staff. If there’s a clue here that will lead me to the location of the time machine, it’s lost among all the other puzzle pieces.

“Any luck?” asks Martha as she enters the log cabin outpost. It’s become a daily ritual.

“Not a bit. If there’s any pattern in the chaos, then I’m not seeing it.”

“It’s hard to solve a puzzle when nobody gives you the pieces.”

“How about you? Any luck figuring out Henry’s new tracking program?”

“Same as yesterday. It’s clearly a tracker of some sort and it originated from Colorado Springs, but still we have no idea what the numbers mean. Whoever created it, I don’t think they work for the government.”

“What makes you say that?”

“It’s hard to define. There’s just a creativity to it that you don’t normally see from government types.”

I mull that for a moment.

“Want to trade projects?” I ask.

“Technology isn’t exactly your thing,” she says, then hesitates. “But maybe we need someone who doesn’t dig in too deep.”

“Are you saying I’m shallow?”

“No, I’m just thinking that not all technological problems have technological solutions. Maybe I’m missing the forest for the trees.”

I cross the room to her pile of papers and start to rummage through them, while she starts to look through mine. She’s carefully leafing through my piles while I’m taking her piles apart.

“Do you have to mess up my stacks?” she asks.

“Yes. I need to see the whole forest.”

The computer lingo is a foreign language to me. I can speak Aramaic, Latin, and Greek, but this stuff might as well be a page a muddy chicken walked across for all the sense it makes. I decide to focus on the numbers instead.

There are three sets of numbers: 4035061050503, 4404491031351, and 4546591083002. Each is a thirteen-digit number. In each case, the first digit is 4 and the seventh and eighth digits are 1 and

0 respectively. Otherwise, they're random. Martha has a report from a fancy computer algorithm that confirms this obvious fact.

I lean back in the chair and close my eyes to picture the scrolling numbers on the screen.

"Giving up already?" Martha asks.

I don't answer. Something about the way the numbers locked is on my mind.

I stick my com in my ear.

"Computer, replay my last lecture on this screen."

My face appears on the screen, just as the world saw it as I lectured.

"Mute the sound."

I watch the replay twice just to be sure.

"Did you notice that the digits didn't lock individually?" I ask.

"What do you mean?" she asks and crosses the room.

"They lock in groups. The first two digits lock together, then the next two. The pattern in each case is 2-2-2-3-2-2, for a total of thirteen digits."

"So?"

"Each time the final digits locked, my image blinked. What happened at that moment?"

"Just a routing glitch."

I give her a blank stare.

"Remember, Four doesn't send messages over the air directly to the computer we want to reach. We use ancient fiber optic lines. The lines are connected by small computers that read the message and send it to the right place. It's like your nervous system. Let's say you stub your toe. The signal has to travel from the nerve ending in your toe up to your brain, but it isn't a direct connection. The signal travels through a number of nerves by jumping from the end of one to the beginning of the next. Each jump is sort of a gateway where the signal is re-transmitted. Routing computers are kind of like those gateways. They receive the signal; then re-transmit it down the correct path."

I'm happy she kept the tech stuff simple for me.

"So a routing glitch is when one of those gateways messes up?"

"Right. For a moment, a computer in the line either lost the signal or forgot where to send it."

"And it happened at the exact moment the last digits locked?"

"Of course it did. Henry doesn't know we use ancient fiber optics but he does know we're bouncing the signal through multiple computers to hide the origin. The tracker program is back-tracking the source of our signal from one computer to the next until it finds where the signal originates."

"If they can see that the signal is bouncing here and there, won't they see that you're using ancient technology?"

"Probably not. Fiber optic lines installed in the early 2100's operated at nearly the speed of light and we installed some modern enhancements to disguise what we're doing."

"So how does a tracker eventually give them a physical location where they can find us?" I ask.

"Normally, all computers have a number assigned to them and a physical location is tied to that number. Our computers are not part of the registry: so the best they could do is try to guess at a general location based on the last registered routing computer in the line - but it would be a shot in the dark, at best. Our initial tap could be into a computer next door or halfway around the world."

A shot in the dark?

"Have you ever studied bats?" I ask.

"Bats? No."

"But you understand echolocation, right? The bat emits a sound and listens for the echo to judge the direction and distance of objects in the dark. I think they're trying to echo locate your

unregistered computers. They know the speed of the incoming signal and can track the incoming route. That should give them an approximate physical location. What's the physical location of the last unregistered computer the signal hit before it went to Colorado Springs?" I ask.

"Northern Colorado. We have a member of Four, who houses it in Fort Collins."

"Then the number 4035061050503 should somehow correspond to the physical location of that computer, and I think I know how. We've used the UGC system for pinpointing locations on earth for about a century now. Before that, we used a satellite system called GPS, but that was based - in part - on an even older system known as latitude and longitude."

"How do you know this stuff?" she asks.

"I'm a religious historian. Some ancient texts list the location of various religious sites using those systems; so I learned how to use them."

I turn back to the screen.

"Computer, using the latitude and longitude system, display a map of the coordinates north 40 degrees 35 minutes and 6 seconds by east 105 degrees 5 minutes and 3 seconds."

The map comes up with a prominent dot on a building in Fort Collins, Colorado.

Martha stands with her mouth open for a moment.

"Marry me," she says; then clamps her hand over her mouth and blushes.

"I thought you'd never ask; but right now we have to get word out to the people housing those computers. They're in serious danger."

We stand to leave the cabin and I grab a metal water bottle to fill with the cold Capon Springs Water that bubbles up in a fountain not far away. Martha holds the door for me and I glimpse my staff in the corner. The water bottle slips from my hand and hits the floor with a loud metallic clang, as I stare at the staff and Martha stares at me.

"What is it?" she asks.

"We've already failed."

"What are you talking about? Understanding even this much about the tracker is a huge breakthrough."

"We've already failed to destroy the time machine."

Martha stares at me.

I pick up the staff and take it to the screen. Reading the Roman numerals on the staff, I say: "Computer, using latitude and longitude, display the location for the coordinate north 29 degrees 58 minutes and 31 seconds by east 31 degrees 8 minutes and 16 seconds."

The computer displays a map of Giza, Egypt.

"Zoom in."

The dot is on the Great Sphinx.

"They didn't use latitude and longitude two thousand years ago, Martha. I don't know how or why, but someone went through time to give us the location of the time machine."

Why Giza? Why not just bring the machine to the States?

By the time we told the elders the time machine had been moved, Aislin and Garai already knew. When we told them the government was making paper to avoid Four's electronic eavesdropping, they yawned. When I tell them we know the new location of the time machine, I finally get the exploding bombshell I expected the first two times. At first it seems to be the fact that I possess information which they don't that's bothering them; but it's more than that. I think, on some level, they're fine with the idea of Henry getting rid of me.

It saves them the trouble.

"We can't help you, Dr. Paulson."

“So you’ve already forgotten the ringing church bells?” I ask. “You’re both fine with me being assassinated and the timeline changing?”

“You have no proof of Henry’s intentions,” Aislin replies.

“You’re right. It’s just an educated guess.”

“You know more than you’re saying, Dr. Paulson,” Garai adds.

“Don’t we all?” I reply.

“Not good enough to warrant the risk you’re asking me to take,” Aislin says. “Even with my connections, I can’t just get you onto a high speed government flight to an undisclosed destination in Africa. There would be too many questions; too many loose ends to explain.”

“I thought you and your power team claimed the ability to do anything,” Garai says.

“You’re the one always claiming millions of members,” Aislin replies. “Why don’t you have Cephas walk across the ocean on their backs?”

“Garai? Can you help us?” I ask calmly.

“If I choose to. I can get you to Africa in complete secrecy and have friends house you when you arrive, but I would need a week and it would be in a cargo vessel.”

“Perhaps if you told us the exact location of the time machine and how you obtained the information, we could be of more assistance,” Aislin says.

I just smile.

“Then I guess we’re done here,” I say. “I’ll end by saying it’s been a great couple of months, but I’m afraid it’s all been for nothing. If they succeed in killing me, nobody will remember these months even happened. That should suit all of you very well since, without the memories, you won’t have to feel any sense of responsibility or guilt.”

I shut off the screens and rotate my chair so I’m no longer facing the screens or Martha.

“This isn’t how I wanted to go. After my years of being The Cult Hunter, I’d hoped to build a different legacy. Even if just one person could think of me and say they were a better person for having known me, it would have been worth it. If this can’t be stopped, then my testimony will be erased from history and, in the eyes of the world, I’ll die as The Cult Hunter.”

I feel Martha’s warm hand on my shoulder.

“To think that even you’ll remember me that way, Martha - well, it’s enough to break a man’s heart.”

I turn the chair and see that tears are starting to well up and roll down her cheeks; so I stand and hug her.

“I’m not gone yet.”

“We can’t lose you, Cephas. We just can’t.”

Why does it always have to be ‘we?’ Why can’t it be that YOU don’t want to lose me?

Chapter Fourteen

Martha finds me again seeking consolation from the hummingbirds at Capon Springs, and sits next to me.

“I checked with all of my contacts inside Four. I can get you anywhere in North America in secret, but none of them can get you across an ocean.”

“Without help from Aislin and Garai, the only thing that can save me now is money. Lots and lots of money that we don’t have.”

Martha’s head snaps towards mine.

“Money? How can money save you?”

“Spoken by someone who never wanted or needed large amounts. This is still the world built by men. With enough money, you can hire a high speed transport and a crew that will take you anywhere, with no questions asked and no paperwork filed.”

“There’s another Four secret you need to know. Something I haven’t told anyone.”

“Are there members of Four that are super rich?” I ask.

“Only one.”

Martha looks away.

“Great. How quickly can we contact him?” I say.

“Immediately.”

She looks at the porch floor.

“What’s the problem?”

“I should have told you weeks ago...”

Please, not another fight over Four’s secrets.

“Go on.”

“It’s you, Cephas. The super wealthy member of Four is you.”

“Me? I’ve done well with books, but I’m hardly super wealthy. Besides, Henry froze all of my assets the day we escaped.”

“Do you remember giving me control over all of your affairs while you were on the Traveler’s Initiative? While you were gone, I moved every penny as soon as it came into your accounts, and from there made it disappear into accounts that I control. For the record, you did make a bundle on book sales while you were back in time, but that’s not where the bulk of your money came from.”

“I don’t understand. Where did money come from, if not my books?”

“Inheritance.”

Her eyes again drop to the floor.

“The only relative I know is Aunt Jennifer and she’s not dead.”

“Jocie revised her Will the day before you all time-travelled and she left it all to you.”

“She left everything to me and because estates are required by law to probate within seventy-two hours after death, you made it all disappear. But why would she leave everything to me?”

“Only she can explain that,” Martha says. “Her Will included a password-protected video message for you. The instructions say the password is your poem. What does that mean?”

“When we were training for Travelers, Jocie and I spent a lot of time together. I found out she wasn’t the person I thought she was. We spent evenings in my room discussing the Bible. I shared with her the end of a poem I wrote when I was eight and trying to cope with the death of my parents. I had no idea it had made such an impression on her.”

Martha looks hurt that I shared such personal information with Jocie.

“Jocie said you could look inside people and see their souls. It sounds like you shared some very special, intimate moments with her. Like you looked into her eyes the way you used to look into mine. Jocie wanted sex from you, but she got something much more special.”

My eyes begin to well up.

“So what did you tell Jocie about her soul that touched her so deeply?” Martha asks.

“I told her that inside her I could see just a tiny flickering spark. If she had known more about souls, she would have been insulted by it. I told her she could grow the spark into a flame by feeding it with kindness and caring for others. She heard Christ’s message, and just before she died, she told me I’d saved her.”

I feel a tear roll down my cheek, which Martha catches with her finger.

“You were trying to care for her soul? Someone like her?” Martha asks.

“Christ would say a wounded soul like Jocie’s needs our care the most.”

I can see Martha is feeling a little foolish that, even in death, she allowed Jocie to get under her skin again.

“All souls are special to the Lord,” I say. “But your soul is the one that’s far and away the most special to me. It has been for quite a while now.”

We stand there for a long while, until she looks at me brightly and stares into my eyes. I see a soul that’s like an inferno. At our fight in the woods, she said she still loves me, but I haven’t said it to her. I don’t know what’s holding me back.

“Would you like to see Jocie’s last message to you?” she asks.

“It’ll have to wait. We need to arrange for a transport to Egypt; but first we need to get from here to a major airport. You said you could get me anywhere in North America. How do members of Four get around without being noticed?” I ask.

“It isn’t the glamorous mode of travel someone with your wealth can afford. We figured out long ago that tube cars filled with cargo instead of people have very low security. They’re not comfortable, but they get you where you need to be. Those of us who are “on grid” tend to work for courier services and sneak members who are “off grid” into the cargo cars.”

“Couriers? What sort of things do they carry?”

“Anything that needs to be hand-carried but mostly valuable things for rich people and sometimes transplant organs.”

“What about papers?”

As we arrange our trip to Egypt, I send Martha’s cousin, William, on a mission to watch cargo cars coming and going from Washington D.C., and it turns out that the government is using couriers to move top secret papers around the country. They aren’t just any couriers though; Henry’s using cult hunters. William poses as a courier carrying a kidney for transplant and manages to look at one set of papers, when the cult hunter carrying them falls asleep. It isn’t good news.

“We have to tell Zip,” Martha says, when William finishes his briefing.

“I know,” I reply. “I just wish there was another way. You know she’ll use the information to kill as many cult hunters as possible.”

“Maybe not.”

I look up at Martha rather than replying and she sighs.

“We still have to tell her.”

“Make the call,” I reply.

When Zip’s image comes onto the screen, I force myself to look away from her fractal tattoo.

“I see you haven’t been erased from time yet, Cult Hunter. Too bad.”

“Time is the most complex puzzle of them all, and one we should all pull together to make sure Henry doesn’t break. Speaking of pulling together: we have information that says the Corps is laying traps using bait we didn’t think you’d be able to resist.”

“Let me guess. Somehow the home addresses of a few of the Cult Hunter Corps are going to slip out to the public. Once my team enters the house, it’ll find the house surrounded. I heard about the paper production and figured out the couriers myself. We’ll see who ends up in a trap.”

“A good trap is a lot like that fractal on your neck, Zip. Sometimes it’s the larger pattern that hides the tripwire. Please don’t make the same mistakes as your brother.”

I start to raise my hand to signal Martha to terminate the connection.

“Don’t pretend you know me,” Zip says. “You don’t know me or my family at all, especially Zach. If you did, you’d know that he’ll have the last laugh on you in the end.”

Of course.

I lower my hand.

I turn to look at Martha through the control room door.

“Martha, was there any nonsense code in the tracker program? Specifically, did the alphanumeric sequence ‘JER5024’ show up in a few random spots?”

“How’d you know that?” Martha asks.

I turn back to Zip, who is now looking uncomfortable.

“I never met your brother, Zip, but I knew him. Zach’s favorite verse was from Jeremiah 50:24: ‘I’ve laid a snare for you, and you are caught.’ Zach created that tracking program and you somehow gave it to Henry.”

“When we were kids, he’d say that verse every time he tricked me in some way,” Zip replies.

“Zach would be ashamed. You shared childhood memories and thoughts and opinions with him, but please believe me that, through his codes, I understand his passion and his faith in ways that you couldn’t. As I broke down his code, I could see his sense of humor, his boldness and even his fears. Those are the memories I shared with him.”

“A serial killer shares the memory of his victim’s last moments and I wouldn’t celebrate those memories either. If Henry is successful in changing the last few months, then I’ll never meet you, Cephas. Instead I’ll have nothing left of you but the wonderful memory of where I was when I heard my brother’s killer was dead. From my perspective, that’s the only memory of you worth keeping.”

As we walk to the Bethany command center in silence, Martha gently takes my hand. She starts to raise her hand to put her hair up into a bun, but relaxes her arm without any prompting from me. I see more than a few smiles at the sight of us entering the command center hand-in-hand. Blake calls Martha to his station, but when I try to follow, Amelia intercepts me.

“Not now. Blake needs a minute with Martha.”

“As long as it’s good news, he can have all the time he needs.”

Amelia remains stony-faced.

“Amelia?”

“We’ve all watched your meetings with the other Four houses and with the elders, and even the call you just made to Zip. She sends us each messages daily to join with her and I must admit she makes a pretty good case. For all of our lives, we’ve dreamed of striking back and she’s offering us a chance to do it. Blake is calling a staff meeting to discuss the future of Bethany House, and we’ve all agreed - that whatever we choose to do - we’ll make our stand together.”

“I take it I’m not invited.”

“Actually, Martha isn’t invited either.”

“He refused to explain the basis of the meeting?” I ask.

Blake asked us to leave for one hour; so Martha and I are throwing knives.

Martha’s throws enter the wood straight and perfect every time with a soft “whap,” while mine clang against the target sideways and end up on the ground.

“All he said is that he knows I’m under pressure to commit Bethany House to Zip’s combat brigade, and the staff wants to discuss relieving me of that burden.”

“Can they do that?”

“We’re not an army. If the whole house is determined to join Zip, then I should be the one to leave. I just can’t believe Blake is behind this. He isn’t exactly the coup d’état type.”

Whap. Clang.

Martha’s target looks like a porcupine. Mine looks like someone spilled a drawer full of cutlery on the ground in front of it.

“You’re not stepping into the throw and your release is sometimes too early, and sometimes too late,” Martha says.

I attempt another throw, while taking a better step, and miss the target entirely.

“I hope my life never depends on you throwing a knife,” Martha says. “Get into your throwing stance and let’s see what we can do.”

She steps behind me and lays her hand over mine so we’re both holding the knife then presses against my back to mimic my stance.

“You’re all hunched over so your hips are tilted forward.”

She grabs me around the chest with her free arm and pulls me up, while pressing her hips into me from behind to straighten me.

“Now begin your throwing motion slowly.”

As I begin, my butt shifts back a little and she applies pressure with her hips again to correct me.

“By hunching, you’re not getting a proper rotation or weight transfer. Start again and stop where you think you’d release the knife.”

I again begin to hunch and she again presses against me. I stop at my usual release point.

“You’re still just a little too early.”

We repeat the exercise again and again, until she’s satisfied; then says we’re going to try to throw together at low speed. The first two attempts result in the usual clang, but the third sticks softly in the target.

“Now full speed.”

“Together? Won’t that be pretty awkward?”

“If you do it right, we’ll be synchronized and you’ll never know I’m here.”

I line up for the throw, but as I step into it and release, my old habits return. Martha attempts to correct me, but we’re both off balance and start to fall. I try to twist out of the fall and end up on my back, with Martha on top of me. She shows no signs of leaving.

“I take it you’d rather go back to fighting with sticks?” Martha asks. “At least now I know what’s been throwing you off balance.”

No words come to me.

“You seem to have hit your target,” she says as she sits up, still straddling me.

I wonder what shade of red my face must be.

“Twice.”

I follow her gaze and see the knife I threw is in the bulls-eye.

By the time we're summonsed back inside the house, every knife I throw is sinking deep into the target, though my overall aim is still fairly random. Blake asks us to join the staff in the command center, which we again enter hand-in-hand.

"Martha, you've been a great team leader. In the months you've been here, everyone's skills have been expanded and sharpened. I'd even go so far as to say we're now Four's only combination technical and light-combat team."

"But?" Martha says.

"But we've come to believe there's more this house needs to accomplish than training and spying."

"If you're going to ask for new leadership, then you might as well do it in front of Zip," Martha says. "Get the whole Council up on the screen if you want."

Blake is flustered by the idea for a moment, but then sets his jaw and says "Fine." He doesn't contact the other houses, but he does find Zip and then uses the private frequency to contact Austin as well. Austin must be somewhere on the other side of the world because we can see the lights of a city skyline behind him.

"You're speaking for all of Bethany now, Blake?" Zip asks. "Good. It's about time that house gets off the fence."

"We just can't take any more of what we're seeing," Blake replies. "The Bethany staff has watched the conferences between Dr. Paulson and the Four Council and his conversations with the elders, and we know what needs to be done. We're ready to do whatever's needed. We're ready to fight the good fight."

"Excellent," Zip replies. "For some reason, Cameron, my best field commander, has been dying to move to Bethany. I can send him right away."

"I never said we're planning to fight for you," Blake says. "The time machine is a threat to Cephas and to all Christians, but you and the elders have hung him out to dry. Bethany is now unanimously dedicated to finding the time machine and stopping any government attempt to assassinate Cephas. You can cut us off from the Four network if you like, but we won't allow him to stand alone."

Zip cuts her connection, but not before everyone sees the sneer on her face.

"You have my full support," Austin says. "Does this mean you don't need a new team leader?"

"She doesn't always say what needs to be said, but we already have the best team leader we could ask for," Blake replies and the staff applauds.

Blake turns to me.

"The vote was unanimous. We're all prepared to take this hit for you."

Thank you, Lord, for sending me a flock to feed.

Chapter Fifteen

Although Aislin and Garai weren't helpful, it turns out Austin has contacts who can arrange anonymous transport to anywhere in the world - for the right price. Despite protests from the staff, Martha's hand-picked team includes three people from her first Four house in Nebraska. She assures everyone that all three can be trusted not to lead the rest of the Four network to Bethany to carry out my death sentence.

One of the three is a demolitions expert named Alfred, who carries enough explosives to ensure the machine is never used again. He's friendly and outgoing. The other two are fraternal twin brothers named Geoff and James who have studied everything known about the time travel device. As we prepare for the mission, I often catch the twins staring at me and I notice they stop talking to Martha whenever I enter the room. It's clear she has some history with them, but none of them will say what it is.

The transport is as high-speed as money can buy. Only a government space plane could get us there faster. Martha is so exhausted from the prep work, she passes out as soon as we're in the air, but I can't sleep. In my hand I hold the small storage device containing Jocie's final message to me.

"Cephas?"

I look up. Geoff and James are staring at me from the doorway, saving me from deciding whether or not to watch Jocie's final message.

You almost wouldn't know they're twins. Geoff has sandy blonde hair and a complexion to match, while James' is much darker. They do share sparkling blue eyes and both have light-up-the-room smiles. They've been so consumed by details for the mission, I haven't learned anything about them; but I already feel a certain familiarity with the way they work.

"Hey, guys. Please come in. Can't sleep either?"

"We were about to rest," Geoff says.

From what I've seen, Geoff is the more outgoing of the twins and usually speaks first, while James is prone to observation and thought before entering a conversation.

"We saw you were up and just wanted to say we've wanted to meet you for a long time."

"I heard you two accepted the offer to go on this crazy mission without any hesitation. You must've wanted to meet me pretty badly to sign up for this."

"You have no idea," Geoff says.

Geoff's lower lip is twitching slightly and he's interlocked his fingers so tightly his knuckles are white. James continues to watch me, but other than furrowing and relaxing his brow, isn't telegraphing his nervousness as much as his brother.

"Most members of Four who say they've wanted to meet me for a long time spent most of that time planning to kill me."

I smile and they seem to relax.

"We're definitely not on that list," Geoff says; then returns to silence.

"Are you all set for the mission?" I ask.

I watched them pack and repack, check and recheck earlier. If anything, they're both over-prepared.

"Everything we need is up here."

Geoff unlaces his fingers and points to his head, but his lip is still betraying him.

"Speaking of which - I sense there's something on your mind."

"There was something I was going to mention, but maybe now isn't the time. We should all just stay focused on the mission. We should get some rest."

Geoff turns to leave, but James continues to watch me.

“Come on, James. Let’s go.”

James doesn’t move.

“We’re your cousins,” James says. “Your mother was our Aunt Hannah.”

Now it’s my turn to stare at them.

It’s true.

“James. You’re named after my Father.”

Those eyes. I should have seen it before. My Mother’s eyes sparkled like that.

“I’ve never had a family before,” I say.

It’s amazing how a single sentence can be tinged with both past sadness and newfound joy.

“Yes, you have. You just didn’t know it. When we would celebrate holidays, Mother would always set a place at the table for you. She prays for you daily,” James says.

“I’ll bet she’s gotten used to just picking up the extra setting and putting it back in the cupboard,” I say. “You think she’ll mind if the plate gets dirty sometime?”

Tears are starting to well up in my eyes.

“She has longed to wash that plate for a decade now.”

Geoff’s lips move from twitching to a full-out quaver as he says it and tears form in his eyes as well.

“Is it just you two? Or do I have even more cousins?”

“We have two sisters. Annie’s a year older than us and Cindi is a month younger than you. Only Annie is on grid. We were born at home, and Cindi was born in a hospital and her death faked when she was two.”

“Cindi Stone. Your sister is Cindi Stone from my class in Colorado. I see the resemblance now. My own cousin was in the audience, and I never knew.”

“We knew when we saw the proposal to get close to you that both Cindi and Martha would go. They’ve been friends since they were toddlers. Martha is like another sister to us.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” I say. “I haven’t told Martha, but I have a feeling this mission isn’t going to go as planned. If things get rough, please promise me you’ll protect Martha. Will you protect her like she’s your sister?”

“Yes,” Geoff says, while James simultaneously says: “Your safety is the higher priority.”

They look at each other like only twins can.

“Thanks for telling it to me straight. Both of you.”

As we approach Cairo, the flight crew informs us our landing has been delayed. Our plan was to land at about three am local time to minimize the number of people we’d encounter. A delay isn’t welcome. Nervousness runs through the cabin as we all wonder if someone figured out who is on this craft. It’s even possible that, despite the high price we paid, the crew decided to turn us over and make even more money. The pilot insists he has no idea what’s happening.

We’re still at a high altitude. As we sit in the darkened cabin, it feels like you can see half of northern Africa. Everyone who is looking out a window gasps as everything below us goes dark and we’re left straining our eyes, trying to see any pinpoint of light in the immense void. Perhaps if the lights had gone out a few at a time, or even in large sections, it would not have been so shocking. To have everything darken at once made it feel like the entire world was somehow wiped out of existence beneath us.

The captain announces they just received word that Sunspot Reactors Two and Three were taken offline for a planned maintenance procedure and would come back shortly. Sure enough, just a moment later the entire continent blazes back to life. For those who were staring at the void; it’s just as shocking as when the lights went out and we instinctively close our eyes.

They used two reactors? It looks like the plan has changed.

“We’re too late,” I say. “Whoever they sent, they just left. They did it at night to minimize the effect of the power drain from the device. Most people just slept right through it.”

The captain knows people who have access to the tarmac and we’re ushered straight from the plane into a private bus. I’m wearing a hat and glasses, but it’s hardly a real disguise. The porter who is moving our bags onto the bus watches me as I pass; so I look away from him. He loads the last bag and just before the door closes, jumps aboard. Geoff and James produce stun guns from nowhere.

“Those will not be necessary. Austin sent me.”

“We never told Austin our destination,” Geoff replies.

“Austin knows many people. I’m sure he has all the cities in the region under watch.”

He looks past the others and addresses me directly.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Dr. Paulson. My name is Moshe.”

He’s wearing a simple shirt and pants. In much of the world, people wear traditional garb for that region. For a long time after Sunspot automated the world and everyone could have anything they wanted, people everywhere explored wearing whatever the movies told them was the current fashion. In time, people settled back into wearing what had worked for generations.

I remove the hat and glasses.

“It wasn’t much of a disguise.”

“On the contrary, Dr. Paulson, speaking for a people who have hidden their faith for thousands of years, sometimes the best place to hide is in plain sight.”

“We saw the lights go out. Someone’s gone back in time.”

“Yes. Austin says you believe the device is hidden somewhere nearby. I do not see how that is possible. We have watched over Egypt for countless generations and know all that happens here.”

“Then Austin sent the perfect person. Have you noticed any heavy equipment use that seemed wasteful or out of place? Anything you can think of would be helpful, but especially anything operating within a few kilometers of Giza.”

“There were an unusual number of people excavating for a new tube stop south of the city a couple of months ago. Robotic excavators can handle a job like that without anyone on site. We thought it was a dumb place for a tube stop, since there is another just three kilometers away. They must have agreed, because the work stopped after just a few weeks.”

“Can you show me on a map?”

Moshe orders a screen to pull up a general map of the city.

“It’s about here.”

He points to a spot along the Nile. To the west of the spot are the Giza plateau and the Great Sphinx.

“Where are the main power lines that feed Cairo?” I ask.

“They enter Cairo directly from Lake Victoria. They run underground about two kilometers from the Nile on the west side. About here.”

A tunnel dug west from the site of the “new tube stop” would intersect the power lines on its way to the Sphinx.

Cairo always has been, and still is, the jewel of northern Africa. It wasn’t hit by a nuclear strike during the Final Holy War, but was struck by multiple biological weapons that wiped out over ninety percent of its population. It lay in disrepair for decades while the city was gradually repopulated and then became a wondrous modern city of steel and glass when Sunspot Three came on line. Like their ancient ancestors who built the pyramids, the modern Egyptians embraced their unique art and culture in building the new Cairo. I wish I could spend a month here just being a

tourist, to soak in their amazing architectural feats. Unfortunately, it's upon one of their ancient wonders that I need to focus.

We had reservations to stay in one of Cairo's luxury hotels, but Moshe convinces us the spot is too high-profile. Instead, he arranges for us to have a modest apartment overlooking the site of the new excavation. We take turns sleeping and watching the site until the sun comes up and into the next day. He's correct that there's no excavation happening, but we see regular patrols of armed guards.

"That's pretty tight security for a hole in the ground," Martha says, as she watches through binoculars.

"I know Cairo is a culturally diverse city," I reply, "but every guard is a Caucasian dressed up in local garb."

"They seem to work in four overlapping shifts and I've counted at least twenty different guys. I don't see how the five of us are going to either sneak or fight our way into that facility," Martha says.

"That's because we're not."

"We're not?"

"No. I was wrong about their plan. The power use for time travel increases exponentially with an increase in the mass sent and the distance through time being travelled. It wouldn't take both Sunspot Two and Three to send someone back just a few months. Choosing Giza never made sense; but now I know why. They sent someone back much farther. I think someone was sent back to kill me during the Traveler's Initiative. We'll need to get to the time machine to be sure."

"You just said we're not going to fight or sneak in."

"That's right. We're going to find a different way in. If they sent assassins all the way back to Christ's time, they'll need a spot just like the cave they used for me - someplace where a travel arena has laid hidden all this time. That means there must be an unknown chamber under the Sphinx. In 2020, a chamber was found under the right paw that turned out to be a burial chamber for some minor princess. Then in 2032 a passageway was found that led from the princess chamber to some other small chambers under the Sphinx. I'm guessing they found a new chamber under there and set up a travel arena."

"I didn't know you'd also studied Egyptology."

"When we found the coordinates, I read everything I could find about the Sphinx. The best clue is that those chambers were closed for restoration not long after I returned from the Traveler's Initiative, which was also about the same time the excavation of the new tube stop began."

"But if an assassin was sent to a chamber under the Sphinx, he'd be buried alive just like you were, and would have no hope of digging himself out. The Sphinx was under tons of sand until Egyptologists excavated it. Besides, if an assassin breaks his way out of this new chamber, then wouldn't it have been found back in 2032?"

"We don't know that the Sphinx was buried in sand in Jesus' time. An assassin may be able to just walk out. You're right about breaking out of the chamber though; my hunch is that there's some sort of a secret door or panel that we'll need to find."

"That's a lot of guessing."

"Not guesses. Hunches."

I smile at her.

"Well I hope your hunches are right, because the longer we're here the longer we risk exposure, and the greater the risk they'll move the device again. We'll make a plan and check out the Sphinx tonight."

I'm not about to disagree. I look at the backpack I brought from Capon Springs. It's packed with special items for the adventure I'm now certain I'm about to undertake.

Chapter Sixteen

Martha leaves the room to inform the team of the plan and James takes his turn watching the dig site, so I go to an empty bedroom. I wish I could sleep, but I have a task that can't be put off any longer. I look at the small data device which holds Jocie's final message to me and sigh. For all of her faults, Jocie had become special to me, and in her last days I got to see just how beautiful she was on the inside. Watching her message will feel too much like saying the final goodbye I never got to say before she died. I don't want to do it.

I place an unregistered com in my ear, and instruct it to interface with the screen in the room and display the video file from the device. It prompts me for a password; so I say aloud:

"The boy in the armor, he is my core.

Without Him I wouldn't be me anymore."

The password is accepted and Jocie's face appears on the screen.

"Hello, Professor."

Jocie smiles and I reflexively smile back at her.

"Tomorrow we go back in time and since you're watching this, I'm thinking it didn't go so well. Let's see: I think the story I like is that my beauty drove the locals mad with lust and they dragged me away. You and Thomas, of course, fought valiantly and when it was obvious you would win me back, the local king killed me rather than letting another man have me. I could have played that scene perfectly."

Trust Jocie to desire a dramatic death. I'm sure the way she actually died would be a major disappointment to her.

"But since you're watching this, you made it back and I'm dead. I'm using this message to tell you all the things I should have told you before I died. I need to say that the last few months have been the best of my life, thanks to you. Henry gave me access to the Bible so I could study for the mission and even though I don't understand all of it, I understand enough. I'm leaving on this mission not just to represent the Christians; I'm going as a Christian, even if it's just a little spark of one. I'd rather have a little spark of Christian than a raging fire of atheist."

Your time with her was not wasted after all, Cephas.

"I've come to realize that I never had any real friends in the world, other than you; so I'm leaving you all the money. I trust you more than anyone to do the right things with it."

"Doing the right things brings me to the topic of doing the wrong things. I've done a lot of wrong things, Cephas. I'm ready to repent, but tonight I hope I did the wrong thing one last time for the right reasons. Henry came to my room to see me off. He saw Thomas first, and then you, and he was super drunk when he got to me. I gave him even more to drink, and I slowly got naked and got him to talk and talk. Never mind the details."

Thank you, Jocie. I'd rather not have that image in my head.

"Did you know his family manipulated the Jews and Muslims to start the Final Holy War? They'd hoped to have it all blamed on the Christians, but it didn't work out that way. It was Henry's grandfather who proposed the genetic studies to make a selective toxin to kill Arabs and give it to the Israeli military. They even knew it would kill Jews and Arabs alike, and never told the Israelis."

I knew it, but how to prove it?

"The Corps is working on a new genetic toxin, Cephas. All samples and knowledge of the original toxin were destroyed a century ago by international agreement, but somehow Henry found it again. Henry knows that lots of young Christians are living off the grid. If the Travelers Initiative

fails to get the result he wants, Henry's next plan is to release his new toxin and kill the Christian children.

One hundred and fifty years ago, they made a toxin that would attack people with a certain gene. Genetic therapy has come a long way since then; so this time he has a toxin that will kill anyone who *doesn't* have a specific gene. The toxin will look like some new disease, which will force everyone to be vaccinated; but in reality the vaccine is a genetic therapy that gives you a gene that neutralizes the new toxin. Young Christians living off the grid will have no way to get the vaccine without exposing themselves. Then when they die, it'll just look like part of a horrible natural disaster."

He'll wipe out millions. It's a Christian genocide.

"I hope I can be forgiven for everything I've done; but, again, I hope - just this once - I did the wrong thing for the right reasons. All that remains to say is I love you, Cephas, and on some level I think you love me too. I guess I'll see you on the other side."

I can't help it. Tears start rolling down my face and I sob a little.

She blows a kiss to the camera. The screen goes black - then springs back to life.

"There was one other thing. It may be nothing. Henry was drunk and goofy, and not making much sense. Every time I'd try to ask him more about the vaccine, he would start laughing about 'the tail' like it was the funniest joke he'd ever heard. He wouldn't say anything more about it; he'd just say 'the tail' and burst out laughing over and over."

The message cuts out again and this time stays dark. I hear a rustling sound behind me and turn to see that Martha had entered the room at some point, without being noticed. I make no secret of drying my eyes.

"How long have you been standing there?" I ask.

"Long enough to feel like a fool for being jealous of her. Long enough to think that if you can reach someone like her with the message of Christ, there's hope for everyone. Long enough to be scared."

"The message is unlocked. Send an encrypted copy to the Zip, Aislin and Garai. You should also assign people at Bethany House to scour all the public medical databases as information becomes available, and another to study how to make vaccine for ourselves."

Instead of setting herself to the task, she closes and locks the door.

"Is everything alright?" I ask.

"No, it's not. I don't trust Garai about much, but he was right about one thing. You know more than you're telling everyone, including me. And don't give me the excuse that it's just hunches, because James told me you think this mission is going to go wrong."

I don't reply.

"You don't have hunches, Cephas. You see things we can't see and you put the pieces together. You see the hits before the punch is thrown. You know what you're walking into, and you're going to just stand there and take the hit again."

"I've pieced together some things about what we'll find under the Sphinx tonight, but no man knows what the future will bring."

Unless, of course, he's already traveled to the past once to collect those pieces.

She stares at me until her eyes begin to water up.

Martha's chin hits her chest and she begins to snifle.

"I hate this," she says. "I hate that we're not free to live our lives as we choose. I hate secret missions and being team leader. I just want it all to end. Every day I review private videos that Four intercepts before they get suppressed or edited. For weeks now, the message from all over the world has been the same: 'We love you, Cephas.' I thought my role was to train you and to protect

you, but every time I see those videos, I ask myself the same selfish question: What about me? When do I get to love him?"

I walk to her and stand so close that our noses are almost touching.

"Right now. Your turn is right now. For this moment, there's no Four and no Elders. Forget about assassins, secret missions and holy wars. For this moment, I'm yours - and yours alone. Say what you think and how you feel, and I'll do the same."

She hugs me tightly. I understand how she feels. I want the world to shrink down until all that's left is the two of us, holding each other forever.

"Okay. Here goes. I need you to know I'm not acting the part of your student anymore and the real me isn't that perfect. Sometimes I get jealous, like I did over Jocie and Amelia. Sometimes I get mad when you're not perfect either. Mostly, I get scared about being in love because there are so many people who want to kill you, and you'll die if you think it's the right thing to do. I'm all those imperfect things, but this is the real me and I love you. I just hope you can learn to love the imperfect me as much as you did the actress."

I resist the urge to kiss her and continue holding her.

"Your turn," she says.

"I'm the luckiest man in the world. I got to fall in love with you twice. You're afraid that the actress will continue to overshadow the woman I've come to love. I'll admit you were a master at hiding your identity when you were my student; but I need you to know that through the deception, it was still your soul that was shining through to me. It was always you, and I love you more now than ever before."

She squeezes me tighter, like she's trying to hold onto the moment with her arms.

Geoff knocks on the door to discuss the plan.

"My moment is over, isn't it?" she says. "I'm the team leader again, and the world is just as it was before."

My world will never be like it was before sharing that moment.

"Feel like blowing up a time machine, team leader?" I ask.

"I wouldn't miss it."

In 2025, the "Princess Chamber" was opened to the public through a narrow staircase about fifty meters in front of the Sphinx's right paw. When the new passageway was unearthed in 2032, a new, wider stairway was placed right between the Sphinx's paws. For a couple of dollars, tourists loved having their pictures taken right there, between the paws, as if they had just emerged from some dangerous archeological expedition. The truth is the chambers were all rather boring; only their location in the shadow of the Sphinx made them a tourist attraction. Just four years later the Final Holy War erupted, and for many decades afterwards, nobody came at all.

At a few minutes after two o'clock am, our group converges between the paws of the Sphinx and steals its way down fifteen meters of stairs carved into the sandstone. We're amazed to find no security cameras - just an iron-gate and padlock that both look like they've been standing guard here since the stairs were carved in 2032.

"I have some ancient technology to match the ancient lock," Alfred says.

He takes a small foil package out of his pack and applies some sort of loose putty to the lock.

"Everyone look away. This will be bright for a few seconds."

Alfred touches the putty with a thermal igniter. Even turned away, I have to close my eyes to preserve any night vision. There's a hissing and popping sound that lasts for only a moment, followed by a loud clang as the ancient lock hits the bottom of the gate. When we all look back, we see the burning paste melted through the top of the padlock, ending its guard duties permanently. Alfred swings the gate open, with a creak.

We all pass through and close the gate behind us, and start to descend using just one faint red light each to keep ourselves from stumbling in the darkness. We look like five demented lightning bugs swaying back and forth down the stairs. After another ten meters of carved stairs, we're deposited into an ancient hallway, carved long before Christ walked the earth. Now we dare to turn on brighter lights. The hallway is very plain and narrow, being just wide enough to pass single file, and then only by turning our shoulders sideways.

"Geoff and James, the Princess Chamber should be that way," I say, pointing to the left. "Take a quick look; then meet us in the chambers down here."

With Alfred leading the way, the rest of us head down to the small chambers that were unearthed later on.

"So you think there are more chambers down here that the public doesn't know about?" Alfred asks.

"That's my theory."

We reach the end of the hall and enter the first of two small chambers.

"When they unearthed these two chambers, they were filled with the usual burial items, but there was no mummy. The hieroglyphics say she drowned in the Nile; so everyone concluded her body was lost. But I think these are just the initial chambers to a larger crypt."

The small chambers have some modern reproductions of ancient artifacts to give the tourists something to look at, and bright modern frescos painted on the walls that mimic ancient drawings. There's even a small metal plaque bolted to the wall commemorating the filming of some modern horror movie involving mummies, and its equally forgotten sequel.

Jocie would have loved that we're on an old movie set.

"What are we looking for?" Martha asks.

"I don't know. Any sort of handle or pressure plate that could open a hidden door."

"This area is an old tourist trap and movie set. How could something like that have gone unnoticed?"

"Actually, I think it was overlooked *because* they made it into a tourist trap. In the 2020's and early 2030's, the Egyptian economy was in a shambles. They were doing anything they could to bring tourists and make money. They protected the major antiquities, but minor sites like this were sold to the highest bidder."

The ceiling in the second chamber is only about two and a half meters high, so I can reach the top of the wall. I feel and tap my way along the wall, hoping to hear a hollow space or find a misplaced crack. When I reach the spot on the wall opposite the entryway, my hands find a rough spot where the wall isn't perfectly smoothed.

Why are the walls so smooth? It's because this is modern plaster installed for shooting the movie - not the original surface.

The rough spot is near the ceiling. The guy who plastered the room knew nobody would ever notice if he got lazy near the top. The original sandstone is almost visible through the thin plaster and I can feel some ancient carvings. The plaster flakes away in chunks, until I can read:

μ μ π χ ρ δ

"Oh, no."

The words escape from my mouth before I can stop myself.

Why, Lord? Why would you ask me to do this?

Chapter Seventeen

“What is it?” Martha asks.

“These symbols are much newer than the hieroglyphics found during the time when this tomb was carved.”

“What do they say?” Martha asks.

I ignore her question. I don’t like what they mean.

“Look, there’s a dimple in the ceiling plaster where someone tried to cover a hole but it shrank in as it dried,” I say.

I start digging out the plaster with a small knife as Geoff and James rejoin us.

“The Princess Chamber is a dead end,” Geoff announces, “but you can see where they broke in through the ceiling and where the original entryway was before it filled with sand.”

I manage to free a plug of plaster as Martha explains to the others that I may have found something.

“What do the symbols mean?” James repeats Martha’s question.

For me, they mean I need to trust the Lord.

“They mean this is the spot.”

I poke my finger up into the hole and can feel a piece of wood that moves upward a little as I press on it.

“It’s some form of ancient lock. I’m pushing up on a pin that must lock a door, but my finger isn’t long enough to more than wiggle it. We need something that’ll fit into this hole.”

James leaves the room and returns with a crook and flail that were being held by a stuffed Anubis prop for the movies.

The handle of the flail is too big, but the crook fits the hole. With it I’m able to push upwards on the pin a couple of centimeters.

“Nothing happened,” Geoff says.

“This is just the locking pin. We must need to push the door open ourselves. Try just below the symbols.”

Geoff and James push and a vertical hairline crack appears in the plaster.

Martha takes a turn holding up the pin so Albert and I can add our weight to the effort. When a horizontal crack appears at about waist level we laugh, as we realize the door is smaller than a modern door and much of our efforts have been wasted against solid wall. We adjust ourselves lower and the door starts to move in earnest, pivoting on a central pillar. With one last effort, the door breaks free of the modern plaster and spins freely, opening to a room that shocks us as we’re bathed with bright modern lighting.

We all draw weapons, but there’s nobody in the area.

The chamber is larger than the two that we just left and is filled with artifacts that have been treated roughly by the modern intrusion. Most have been heaped against the outer perimeter; many appear to have been broken for fun as they were thrown aside to make way for modern equipment. The wall opposite us has a crude opening where the drilling robots must have broken through, which is now the entryway for dozens of power and computer cables.

The center of the room has a massive hole in the floor, and a familiar shape of lasers and tinfoil hangs above it.

“Remind me to never doubt you again,” Albert says.

“I’ll take you up on that,” I say. “Geoff, see if you can figure out the destination time of the last transport from that computer terminal. Martha and James, secure the opening in case someone comes back. Albert, get ready to blow this thing to dust.”

They all spring to action on my orders.

“Why the hole in the floor?” asks James. “Why not just transport from up here?”

“This room must have been full of too much stuff. They needed a spot that was clear of artifacts in both the present and the past.”

I look through the hole in the floor. On the level below, I can see two travel arenas; the one that was sent back in time and the one that stayed here to create the link.

Albert starts setting his explosive charges on the time machine.

“I’m sorry, Cephas,” Geoff reports. “It looks like you were right. Someone was sent back to a point three weeks before the Travelers Initiative.”

Plenty of time to travel to Jerusalem, find you, and kill you. So there can only be one reason why I’m still here.

Martha sees what I’m thinking.

“You’re still here; so their mission must have failed.”

Not quite. The pieces of this puzzle can only mean one thing.

“We need to blow up the travel arena too,” I say.

“I’ll go down and set the charge,” Albert replies.

“No. You finish up here. I’ll go down.”

There’s a smaller hole in the floor near where the drills broke through, with a rope leading down into it. I shine a light down and see why: The original stairs were made of wood and are sitting in a dry-rotted heap on the floor. As I lower myself, I’m glad the training I’ve done with Martha included a ropes course. When I reach the bottom, I kick over a pile of the old boards and let out a yelp as if I’ve fallen.

“You okay?” Martha asks.

“I twisted my ankle pretty badly,” I lie.

The lower chamber is smaller than the one above. On the far wall is a large stone sarcophagus that contains the original occupant. The top has been levered off and the mummy case removed. Whoever was buried here must have had money because it was a nice case. Unfortunately, it’s been marred by tomb robbers, who pried out the precious stones and gold inlays that, I assume, once adorned it.

I walk over to the travel arena and look up through the hole.

“Drop me the charge,” I call to Albert.

“It’s all set to go.”

He drops it down to me. I catch it and look at it in the dim light, then pull the wires out of the explosive.

“Albert. The wires came out.”

“Can you toss it back up?”

“I don’t think so. Send Martha down. This arena is taller than the one I used and my ankle hurts too much to jump. I’ll boost her up to set the charge.”

Martha glides down the rope with ease and joins me. She’s so light and strong, I know she can glide back up almost as quickly. I hand her the charge and she sticks the wires back where they belong.

“We’ve got company!” we hear James say in a muffled voice, followed by the sound of a stun gun.

Right on schedule.

His face appears in the hole above us.

“Set that charge. There’s going to be reinforcements soon.”

I boost Martha and she sets the charge; then runs for the rope. We can hear a lot more shooting above us. It sounds much more powerful than a standard stun gun.

“You go first,” Martha says.

I look up at the hole. I wish it was my escape route, but it isn't.

"You and I are leaving through a different exit. I'm sorry, Martha. I'm so sorry."

"Geoff," I yell up the hole. "We're not leaving with you guys. Martha and I need to go after the assassins. Set the time machine to transport us to a point a few days after they arrived and blow this cursed thing up as soon as we're gone."

Just over two weeks to get to Jerusalem. It'll be tight.

"No! If we do that, you'll be trapped back in time and we need you here."

"If we don't go back, they'll kill me. We're the ones who make their mission fail. Those symbols on the wall were in my handwriting, I carved them over two thousand years ago. I'm sorry, Geoff, but this is the way it has to be."

Geoff and Albert start to argue, but James stares down the hole and into my eyes.

"Trust me cousin," I say. "Send us, and blow this thing up."

"I'm sorry, Geoff," James says. "We're doing it his way."

Geoff growls and heads for the controls.

I look around. In a recess in the wall there's a small clay urn with an unbroken wax seal. On the wall beside it there's a stain where something was splattered over two thousand years ago. I smile and grab the urn.

"Albert, there's no time to explain. I'm tossing up an urn. Take it with you and open it when you're safe."

"Why do I need an old urn?"

"Don't doubt me," I say as I toss it up to him. "We're heading for the arena. Transport us and get out of there."

A small explosion rocks us as we dive into the arena. Albert must have had something up his sleeve to slow down the assault. Without a word, Martha and I take off our backpacks and start throwing out everything that contains any sort of technology that could explode in transport.

"Charging!" Geoff yells.

"Here they come," James yells, as we hear multiple stun blasts.

"One minute to detonation!" Albert yells.

"Pivot the door back when you go through. It'll protect you from some of the blast," I yell.

"Thirty seconds to transport."

"It's one heck of a ride," I say to Martha, then toss my light out of the arena and close the door.

"Ten seconds," Geoff's voice is now far away and there's constant stunner fire. The team must be standing at the pivoting door and trading fire until the very last moment to keep Corps agents away from the controls.

"There was an old saying that before you marry someone, you should take a long trip together - just to make sure you truly know each other," I say to Martha.

"I would've settled for a nice cruise."

"Five seconds."

"Geoff! James! Get out of there!" Albert yells.

"Are you ready to give up the rest of Four's secrets?" I ask Martha.

"Why?"

"Because we're about to spend a lifetime together."

This void, this being trapped between two ticks on the second hand of a clock while body and soul are transported through time, is something I could get used to. Since I've been through it, I know to reach out with mind to Martha. I know I should speak and make her aware of my presence, but I decide to just watch her think for a while.

She's thinking about her childhood, and I can see it all in my mind as she does. I see she has an older brother named Eddie she's never mentioned to me. Martha was raised off grid, while Eddie was raised on the grid. I see Martha felt lonely and isolated when she was growing up because she only got to play with other kids who were also off the grid; hence her close friendship with my cousin, Cindi. I see her having arguments with her brother over who had the better lot in life. She argues she feels like she can't even go outside, and he argues that being on the grid means he can be tracked his whole life - while someday she'll be free to come and go as she pleases.

Then I see a childhood scene I didn't expect. Martha is at my Aunt Kimberly's house for Easter. Even if I didn't feel who the woman is through Martha's thoughts, I'd know it's my aunt because she has the same ice blue eyes as my Mother. Martha is about to turn sixteen years old and is helping to clear the dirty dishes from a large table. In the middle of the table is the unused place setting my aunt had set for me. Martha and Aunt Kimberly are speaking about it.

"Aunt Kimberly? Why set a place for someone you know isn't coming?"

"To remind me someone is missing from our home, but is still in our hearts."

"Do you think you're in his heart right now too?" Martha asks.

"He doesn't even know he has a family; but deep down maybe he's looking for us."

"Cindi told me all about him. She says Cephass works for the F.B.I. now and they call him "The Cult Hunter" because he's hunted down so many believers. If he's looking for us, it sounds like he's looking to kill us. I turn sixteen next month and when I do, I'm joining Four. I'm going to learn how to strike back and hurt people like Cephass."

"Really? If he were to walk through my door, I'd welcome him to the table and forgive him," Aunt Kimberly replies.

"Not everyone deserves to be forgiven."

"How lucky for Cephass that you don't get to judge him."

Kimberly smiles and Martha is shocked into silence, but I can feel her anger.

The scene in Martha's mind shifts to where she and Cindi are joining the Four movement together, followed by memories of the intense training. Martha takes on every challenge her Four instructors throw at her, fueled by constant anger.

Cephass? Are you watching my memories?

Yes, Martha. I'm sorry.

It's okay. I want you to see them.

Even as she thinks it, I can sense her placing a mental barrier around her family and directing me to see other things. Although I'm sure I could break through the mental wall, I don't try to pry on her family. Considering the secrets I'm hiding from her, I'm in no position to pry.

Martha shifts to the day she and Cindi volunteered to move to Colorado Springs and infiltrate my class. Austin is briefing them on the mission.

"Dr. Cephass Paulson has done more to cripple the worldwide Christian movement than anyone," Austin says. "Thousands were lost in Rajid's organization due to intercepted communications, including Rajid himself. His organization has been taken over by his nephew, Garai. Even so, Paulson's writings are intriguing. He tries harder to understand Christianity than most Christians. Frankly, I have to wonder if Jesus isn't already at work in the man's heart."

"But what if that's not it all, Austin?" Martha asks. "What if he's just evil? What if he wants to understand Christianity simply to find and kill Christians? Is it worth the risk? Shouldn't we consider removing him?"

"It's not within Christ's message to kill someone who opposes us."

"I couldn't do it," Cindi says. "No matter what he's done, he's still my cousin."

"Your job is to attend his class - nothing more," Austin continues. "Ask him questions; get a feel for how he thinks. If we think his heart is right, we'll decide if we want to risk contacting him."

“I’ve been studying him and I already know how he thinks,” Martha says. “He thinks like a predator. Let’s see how he likes being hunted for a change.”

You really thought of me like that? I ask.

There’s more.

Martha switches to a conversation she and Cindi had during their mission to my class in Colorado Springs.

“I think Austin was right, Martha,” Cindi says. “He isn’t a hunter at all. He’s just curious and brilliant.”

“You’re blinded because he’s your cousin. I don’t care what Austin says. Being an observer isn’t good enough. I’m going to talk to him outside of class. We’ll see how innocent and charming he is once he’s off that stage.”

Her memory then skips to speaking with Cindi after Martha and I have dinner together for the first time.

“So, how was dinner?” Cindi asks.

“Innocent and charming. We passed by an abortion kiosk and he seemed, I don’t know, I guess the best word is ‘disturbed.’ It was like watching the end of a life hurt him down to his soul. After that, he said some things I never expected. He said he never wanted to hunt Christians; he just wanted to understand the Christian faith.”

“Whoa. That’s huge. You need to report everything to Austin.”

“I can’t report quite everything,” Martha replies.

“What do you mean?”

“I remembered what Austin said, that maybe Jesus is already at work in Cephas’ heart. By the time we were done eating, I knew Austin was right. Then, when we were saying goodbye, I looked in his eyes and - I don’t know why, but - I kissed him.”

“What do you mean, you kissed him? You mean on the cheek, like a friend, right?”

“No. I mean I *kissed* him. Full mouth, on the lips face-sucking.”

“What did he do?”

“He kissed me back. Did he ever kiss me back!”

The memory of that kiss will be with me for the rest of my life, I say.

I have no doubt, you seem to remember everything. It’s actually a little unsettling to experience the workings of your brain.

What do you mean?

Cephas, normal people don’t have your sort of observational skills or memory recall; so being here is overwhelming. It’s taking intense concentration just to block most of it out. Given the way you solve puzzles, I’d expect you to have great factual recall, but I never dreamed anyone could have your emotional recall. When we were remembering our first kiss just now, I could remember the feelings I had at the time... but you actually felt them all over again. Is that normal for you all the time?

Yes.

How I envy you that.

Don’t.

Why?

Because I’d give anything to be able to forget. How would you like to remember and feel again the day your parents died? Or maybe you’d like to re-experience how you felt as you read the reports detailing the last moments of the Christians you helped to murder? Don’t envy me this, Martha.

Cephas? Are you feeling my emotions as I remember things?

Yes.

Her memories switch to seeing the news videos where the media announces Jocie has a new man toy and showing pictures that seem to depict me groping Jocie.

Martha, the anguish was crushing you. Why are you making me feel this?

She switches her memory to an hour later, when the media covered the impromptu news conference where I left Jocie's private hover bus, the first man ever to refuse to have sex with her. The joy Martha felt seems limitless.

That's when I first admitted to myself I was falling in love with you, Cephas. The pain and the joy go together. The pain of losing your parents is a reflection of the love you felt for them. The remorse of being The Cult Hunter is a reflection of the joy you found in repentance, when you turned your sins over to Christ. Focus on the joy.

Thank you, Martha. Now it's your turn. Let me show you some things.

I show her my childhood with my Aunt Jennifer, where I was left for hours to study ancient languages as my aunt prepared me to be the greatest abolitionist ever. Unlike Jennifer, Martha gets to peer inside my heart and see how reading about religious history resulted in a thirst to draw closer to God rather than a desire to destroy religion, as Jennifer had hoped.

You had no religious instruction, and yet you found faith.

I found faith, but I didn't understand it.

Your faith is so pure. You have no doctrinal biases; you have no agenda. You spent all that time reading the Bible with nobody but God to mold your thoughts. It makes perfect sense that He chose you to go back in time - like He created you for the job.

If my faith is pure, it's because I have no religion; just belief in Jesus. But I'm glad you described me as having pure faith rather than a pure heart. My heart is as sinful as anyone's. Do you remember how I defined religion in my lecture?

You said it's an institution created by man to take power over other men.

That's right, but that isn't how Christianity began. The Apostles had no doctrines other than those given to them by Jesus. They didn't have religion, just faith. Religious division all came later - man's perversion of the message.

Before she responds, I move on to other thoughts. I let her feel the storm that raged inside of me as I helped the F.B.I. hunt down Christians, and the love that grew for her as we got to know each other. Even as I try to direct my thoughts and memories, I can feel her in the background, searching through my memories for things she wants to know. I'm the one who said time travel would be a lifetime together; so I stop trying to shield those memories and try to be an open book, without overwhelming her.

Well, almost an open book. There are a couple of things I'd rather not share, which Martha can sense. She wonders for a moment why the number eleven thousand three hundred and twenty-three is significant to me, but, thankfully, moves to things she really wants to see.

I'm surprised to find that she's still probing my memories of Jocie, as if she feels threatened by them. She reviews the times Jocie stood before me naked. Martha giggles in my mind when she sees how awkwardly I tried to look at anything but Jocie's naked body the first time I met her. Martha is awed by the battle of wills Jocie and I fought a few weeks later, as I locked eyes with her and refused to take even a glimpse, as she again stood naked before me.

She was considered the most desirable woman in the world; yet, in a way, she disgusted you... but there's more. I can feel there's something you don't want me to see, Martha says.

My mental wall is breaking around one secret, while getting stronger around another.

It's lust. Cephas, you are just full of lustful thoughts. Well, it's understandable, even if you were resisting her. Jocie had quite the body.

The only way to keep up one mental wall is to let the other one go; so I allow the dam to burst. Martha is flooded with images of herself: Her eyes, her legs, and the way her hair falls around her shoulders when she lets it out of a bun. All are images that have been burned into my memory.

Oh! Oh, my. It's me. Those lustful thoughts are all about me.

Martha. I try so hard to guard my thoughts when you're around.

I see that now. Cephas, I'm so sorry. I had no idea.

You have nothing to be sorry about. For you to be sorry is like saying a woman deserves to be raped for dressing too sexy. These are my uncontrolled thoughts. This is my problem.

I could cover up more. I could dress more modestly.

Where does that end, Martha? Muslim women used to wear robes from head-to-toe with just their eyes showing, and would still be beaten for having eyes that were too provocative. They tried to explain the coverings away as honoring God, but the practical truth is that it's mostly men who allow lustful thoughts to control them. Pagan women in Africa used to walk around topless and the men there thought nothing of it. The sin is either in your heart or it's not, regardless of what someone else is wearing. I'm sorry, Martha, but I have a sinful heart. It's why I need a Savior.

Chapter Eighteen

Martha slumps beside me inside the arena. We both remain conscious, but are feeling light-headed. The tomb we've invaded is cold, dark and musty. I feel through my pack and bring out two light sticks so we can see.

"Light sticks? You knew all along this was going to happen," Martha says.

"It was a hunch. And for the record, after spending days in a small dark tunnel, I developed a bit of a fear of the dark, so I don't go anywhere without light sticks anymore. All the pieces just made sense. Who else would know where to find me to steal the staff and return it with the coordinates of the time machine carved into it? Then, when the carving on the wall read 'μ μ π χ ρ δ,' I knew you were coming too."

"You got all that from 'μ μ π χ ρ δ'?"

"Sure. 'μ μ' are your initials and 'π χ ρ δ' are my initials, written from right to left, of course, as an ancient Greek would have written it."

"Yes, of course. If it was written from left to right, then it wouldn't make any sense at all. Honestly, Cephass, I just spent a lifetime inside your brain and I still have no clue how you put pieces together like that."

"Simple logic. Anyone except an Egyptologist would think it was just another hieroglyphic and an expert would think it was done by tomb robbers when Alexander the Great conquered Egypt. Speaking of tomb robbers, I see something I'd feared. The assassins are the ones who took the jewels and gold from the mummy case. I'd hoped you and I were the tomb robbers. This is going to be a lot more difficult without some form of money."

"You keep saying 'assassins.' How do you know there are more than one?"

"I didn't know it at the time, but I met them. They were dressed in Egyptian clothing, which they must have stolen when they arrived, and had scars on their arms and faces. I thought they had survived a plague or something, but they must be scars left over from having all of their enhancements quickly removed to travel safely through time."

"This is giving me a headache," Martha says. "If you escaped them the first time, then why did we have to come back at all?"

"The only reason I escaped them is because you and I are going to go save me. It's in both my past and my future, so to speak."

"Definite headache. Let's get out of here and get some fresh air."

"Not yet. I need to send both myself and Albert a message first."

I cross the room to the small jar sitting in a recess in the wall and break its seal. It's full of some sort of ointment. I can't help but laugh as I splatter it onto the wall to leave the stain that I'll see in two thousand years to give myself the idea of using the urn. From my pack, I retrieve a pencil and paper to write a note to Albert so he knows we arrived safely.

Thankfully, Martha doesn't ask about the contents of the note.

"I broke the wax seal on the urn, so I'll need to melt it back into place to help preserve the paper. Can you find a torch that still has some life in it? Or maybe some cloth so we can make one?"

Martha finds a useable torch that was left behind by the tomb builders.

"How do you plan to light it without a thermal igniter?"

"As Albert said, use ancient technology to solve an ancient problem."

I smile and bring a small paper booklet out of my pack.

"What's that?"

“It’s called a book of matches. Brill keeps a small museum of artifacts found at Capon Springs, so I stole it. These must be one hundred years old. Let’s hope they’re still good.”

The first three matches crumble to pieces when I try to light them, but the fourth sputters to life and is enough to light the torch. I melt the seal and place the jar back into its recess. We have no way to extinguish the torch, so we take it along with us. The stairs that will crumble at some point in the future are still usable, so we make our way to the pivoting door which was left wide open by my would-be assassins.

“I guess nobody told them to leave things as they found them.”

We close the door and I use my knife to carve the Greek letters in the soft sandstone in the wall. We walk down the narrow hallway until we reach the Princess Chamber. It, too, has been robbed of its gold. One favor the assassins have done for us is that they had to do some digging to escape the tombs. As we walk out of the tomb, I’m glad this time the work is done for me, until I realize Martha and I will need to rebury the tomb entrance to ensure it goes undiscovered until 2020.

We only need to do a minimal job. The entrance itself is hidden in the rock face and the natural process of sand drifts forming has already begun, but just barely. Over several thousand years, many tons of sand are going pile up in this area, burying much of the Sphinx and this tomb entrance alike.

“Our first priority is food and water,” Martha says as we finish moving sand.

I open my pack and toss her an old metal canteen and an apple.

“I have a ton of water purification tablets and a complete med kit, but not much food. More importantly, I have these.”

I produce my ancient toga and tunic, and reproductions in her size.

“Where in the world did you find a toga for me?”

“Brill’s Granddaughter, Ginny, made it for me. I told her I wanted matching outfits in case you and I ever went to a costume party together. I couldn’t get you reproduction sandals, so we’ll need to cover your shoes as best we can. I’m going to do the same thing. It’s hard to run fast in sandals. We’ll also need to cover these modern packs. We can use our clothing to make them look like cloth bundles.”

“You just said you didn’t know I was coming until you read the carving on the wall, and yet you conveniently have a toga made in my size?”

“I’d hoped that when I got into the arena you’d volunteer to come.”

She pauses for a long while.

“So, we’re all set to go to Jerusalem and save you?”

“It’s not going to be easy. We have no money to buy passage on a ship.”

Martha smiles sheepishly.

“That’s not entirely true. There’s something else from Jocie’s estate I’ve been carrying around that I should have given you earlier, but I didn’t. I guess I didn’t want you to have anything that would remind you of her.”

Martha fumbles around in her pack, then pulls out Jocie’s enormous gold cross.

“That’s a lot of gold,” I say.

I turn the heavy cross over and over in my hands while we walk towards the river. The Nile seems much closer than it was in our time frame and I wonder how many times the river’s path has changed over two thousand years.

“Are you sure you don’t mind giving up the gold cross?” Martha asks. “It’s the only keepsake you have left to remember her by.”

“It’s just a thing. Besides, she was a movie star. She would have loved the plot device. Here, take it off its chain and wear the chain around your neck - but keep it hidden.”

As we approach the river, we both stop short at the sound of voices. They're speaking in the local Egyptian language and I don't understand a word.

"Cover your head as best you can," I say. "You can bet they don't see many blondes around here."

When we creep closer, we see two men at the edge of the Nile, haggling over a basket of fish. The one who I take to be the fisherman has a small boat filled with nets that has been pulled onto the shore, while the one I assume is the buyer has a barge-like vessel anchored just a few meters from shore. There are two boys on the barge, sorting fish and laying them out to dry.

"That barge could be our ride to the nearest town," I whisper to Martha.

"How are you going to talk to him?"

"I'm hoping he'll know a little Greek or Latin. He seems to be a businessman, and Greek is the language-of-trade in the cities."

"How will you pay him? It's not like you can get change for the cross."

"I have no idea," I reply.

When their transaction is finished, the fisherman shoves off and moves back upstream, and Martha and I emerge from the reeds.

"Hello. Do you speak Greek or Latin?" I say in Greek.

"Some Greek."

"May we ride on your barge?"

"You ask?"

"We ask."

"Strange Romans."

"Strange?"

"Romans don't ask. Romans tell."

I start to laugh and so does he. I guess laughter is a universal language.

"Ride?" I ask.

"Yes. Cross."

He points to the opposite shore.

"Cross," I agree.

We all wade to the barge and I help Martha get on board. Our barge captain hauls up a stone anchor and starts to pole us away from the shore. He yells something in Egyptian to one of the boys, but before the boy can move, I grab a second pole and help.

"Strange Roman."

I'm surprised at how far into the Nile we're able to use poles. I thought the river would get deep within a few meters of the bank. When we do hit the deep channel, our host secures his pole on the deck and moves to a crude rudder device, then expertly catches the currents to move his craft towards the other side.

With no job to do, I spend some time looking around. The lowlands near the river are well-ordered farmland, enriched by the annual floods of the Nile. I can see irrigation systems and, higher up, beyond the Nile's reach, I can see small houses, barns and livestock. More importantly, I see the outskirts of a small city. Here and there, you can see ruins of older buildings that were probably built in the heyday of the Pharaohs. Someday, a great modern city of glass and steel is going to sit about here.

We reach poling depth at the opposite shore and I do what I can to help. I want to get off this barge and around the protective influence of Romans as quickly as possible. We reach a small dock that's little more than a series of poles connected by thin, wobbly planks, and the boys begin to offload baskets of fish. The barge captain pays us no heed as we exit his craft and follow the boys towards the town.

The boys lead us to a central marketplace that's bustling with activity. People are selling all manner of things, but haggling seems to stop as Martha and I pass. I haven't heard a word of Latin or Greek spoken. Invading armies have a tendency to conquer a city and take all the gold; then leave it to its own devices if the remaining citizens stay well-behaved. It appears the Romans conquered and left, though they probably show up every year to collect taxes.

"Back to the river," I say to Martha. "We need to find merchants who can take us down river, to Alexandria. Try not to speak and do your best to look submissive, but if you see a staff that could be used as a weapon, grab it."

Martha nods.

When we reach the river, I see what I'm looking for: a ship with a mast and sails. Although you could row against the current, the fastest way up the river is to catch a favorable wind and sail there. This ship is most likely owned by a merchant who comes up river to trade, and then takes the goods to the larger sea ports like Alexandria. The ship is too far off shore to wade to it, but onboard I can hear something that's music to my ears, sailors speaking in Greek.

"Ahoy!" I yell in English and then feel like a complete idiot.

"Maybe you should try 'arrgh, Matey!' next," Martha says.

I can't help but laugh. I may know several ancient languages, but ancient sailor lingo is not among them.

"Where's the captain of your vessel?" I ask in Greek.

"What's it to you? We owe no Roman taxes."

"I seek passage for myself and my servant."

There's muttering on the deck as they discuss the idea.

"What do you offer for passage?"

"We'll discuss it on your deck."

I'm trying to sound like a demanding Roman citizen that they'd better work with if they know what's good for them.

"Use the raft."

The man points to a decrepit old thing that's apparently available to the public. Martha and I pole over to the ship, though sometimes we spin in circles - much the crew's amusement.

The ship is smaller than I first thought. If crammed full, it would have room for just a few metric tons of cargo and a dozen or so crew.

"We're full. You'll have to sleep on the deck," a large, bearded Greek says.

He looks at Martha.

"But to pay for your passage, your servant can sleep below deck with me."

The sun is positioned such that Martha's face is lit, and her blonde eyebrows and lashes are visible. A few wisps of her hair have even managed to poke out. The Greek reaches out to pull back Martha's hair covering, but she catches his hand. Before he knows it, she has him in a painful finger lock that puts him on his knees. The other men in the crew begin to laugh.

"I find it's best not to touch the wild slave girls from northern Gaul," I say. "This one obeys me only because she was given to me by her father."

"You do not bed this slave?"

"Few men would survive the attempt."

"So much for submissive," I say to Martha in English. "Hiss at him when you let him go. It'll add to the effect, now that you're a wild slave girl from northern Gaul."

Martha hisses and releases him. I should have known submissive would never be her style.

"Since this slave won't pay for your passage, what will you give the captain?"

I reach out and expose the gold necklace Martha is wearing, and she hisses at me too, for fun.

"I have no coin. I'll sell this necklace in Alexandria and pay your captain four pieces of silver."

“Your slave wears your gold?”

“Would you like to try to take it from her neck?” I ask.

I smile and the crew laughs again.

The trip down the Nile, and on to Alexandria, is quick and easy. Twice, members of the crew look too long and hard at Martha’s blonde hair, and twice she hisses at them and they fall back into line. If that wasn’t enough, she insists she and I conduct combat training twice per day on the deck for all to watch. I fight quite well now, but I’m still glad Martha is on my team.

As promised, once we reach Alexandria, we take the gold chain to a Roman goldsmith and sell it. He’s impressed by the quality of the work and the purity of the gold, and pays us many times the value of the weight of the gold alone. I pay the river captain an extra piece of silver and he shows me a larger ship, with a skilled and honest captain, which regularly travels from Alexandria to Caesarea, a large port city in Israel built by the Romans. From there, we can either find a vessel that will take us south to a small port closer to Jerusalem, or travel with a caravan overland through Samaria.

Alexandria is an ancient marvel. Unlike the inland cities, Alexandria is a cultural melting pot due to its busy seaport. We see many Romans and Greeks, but also Turks, Persians, and central African tribesmen. There’s even a small Jewish population. I see no blonde heads other than Martha’s but, at least here, people of different cultures barely get a second look; so we walk freely through the city like two tourists, just taking in the scenery.

Late in the day, we go back to the goldsmith, this time to sell him the gold cross. We pried out all but one of the jewels with our knives and have stowed them in our packs for later use, if needed. The one jewel that wouldn’t come out looks like a ruby, though I don’t know if it’s natural or not.

When I show the goldsmith the cross, his eyes go wide.

“It’s too big to weigh on my balance scale and even if I had a bigger scale, I do not have enough coins to pay you its weight,” he says.

“Do you know anyone who would buy it?”

“Many of the powerful Romans here would like gold of this purity, but not in such an odd shape. It looks like a cross the Romans hang men on to kill them.”

And in a few weeks, this shape will change history.

“I could cut it up and buy part of it,” he offers. “For my labor, I get to keep the dust the saw makes. Deal?”

“Deal.”

He starts his cut to take off the top of the cross and leave a capital ‘T’ shape, but when he’s partway through, he gets an odd look on his face.

“The gold is hollow here, but no matter. It will melt all the same.”

He smiles and takes a closer look.

“Ah, I see. This is a place to hide things. Very clever.”

He starts to play around with the ruby, until a small compartment opens. A micro storage chip about the size of my thumbnail and a small piece of paper fall out.

“Yes, I forgot I put those things in there.”

I pick them up, as Martha and I exchange looks.

“The chip looks fine. Why didn’t it fry in transport?” Martha asks.

The goldsmith goes back to cutting, not understanding the odd language Martha and I are speaking.

“The gold must shield it somehow.”

“Read the note,” Martha says.

In small block print, the note reads:

“Jocie, had a wonderful time last night. What a fool Cephas was to reject you. Everything you requested is on the chip. Henry.”

“That chip could be important,” Martha says. “We need to go back to the Sphinx and put it into the jar for Albert to find.”

“We have plenty of time. Albert won’t open the jar for two thousand years. In the meantime, we need to protect it.”

I turn back to the goldsmith.

“Have you ever heard of a piece of gold jewelry called a locket?”

Chapter Nineteen

The next day, we depart Alexandria on the merchant vessel. The skies are fair and this time of year the winds are in our favor, so the captain brags we should make Caesarea in just three to four days. I smile when I think a direct tube could get you there in under an hour in my time frame.

Although we're paying passengers, we're still expected to work. Martha takes turns preparing food in the galley, and I help out by swabbing the deck and helping to mend a spare sail. The sailors are both amused and dumbfounded by how inept Martha and I are at performing such simple tasks.

In the late afternoon, both Martha and I get some time off. I find her sunning herself.

"You did say you wanted a cruise, didn't you?" I ask.

"This isn't what I had in mind."

As she laughs, the hood on her tunic slips down and her golden hair is caught by the breeze. Also caught by the breeze is her toga. Togas are pretty much made to fall off and her leg is exposed nearly to her hip. I can't help but stare.

"Does the slave girl need to hiss at you again?"

"I'm sorry. I just--"

"I know, Cephas, I'm just teasing. We've been in each other's heads, remember? It's quite flattering, you know - I mean the fact you were able to reject Jocie, but you're so attracted to me."

"It wasn't just Jocie. I've never felt an attraction for anyone like I feel for you. I assume it's because I'm in love. I want to share my life with you and that means sharing everything, including our bodies."

"But you won't, because it's a sin."

"That's right. God created the heavens and the earth; so that means He created sex between a man and a woman too. It's something He wants us to have, but we have to do it God's way."

"You mean we need to be married."

"Yes, we need to be married."

"Then I'll stand here now, before you and God, and declare myself committed to you forever. I'll become your wife today."

"I know you would, Martha, and I'd pledge myself to you forever too. But I don't know if that would make us married in the eyes of God. If we're going to truly be Christians, then we need more than just a commitment to each other. Bill and Wendy understand. They've been committed to each other for decades, and yet they know they're not married before God. Marriage is more than just making a commitment to someone else. It's entering into a holy covenant that's witnessed and sealed by God."

"I understand, and I'm ready," Martha says. "So, let's get married before God."

"How? In our time marriage didn't exist and now that we're here - well - marriage in the sense we know it doesn't exist here either."

"If we're stuck in this time, we'll just have to go with what we've got. Jews and Romans get married, don't they? Why can't we do whatever they do? Better yet, we're on a ship, so let's have the captain marry us."

Martha smiles brightly.

"But what they do in this time isn't a covenant before God."

People say when I've made up my mind on a subject, I tighten my jaw and get a resolute look on my face. Martha sees it and the smile leaves her face instantly. She jumps to her feet.

"I don't care!"

When Martha yells, the deck hands all turn to watch.

“You brought me here to save your life. You’re not going to get me stuck in the past and keep me as your little slave girl for the rest of my life.”

“But-”

Martha holds up her hand.

“But-”

She hisses at me and the crew laughs, so she turns and hisses at them too.

“If you want a wild slave girl instead of a wife, then you’re going to get a wild slave girl.”

I start to stand.

“Touch me and you’re going into the water,” she says.

The sailors all make way as she stalks to the stern. They don’t understand what she said, but apparently “angry woman” is another universal language.

I sit near the rail and watch the sea slide by. Maybe I should let her throw me into the water.

Into the water. Of course!

I leap to me feet and run to the stern.

“Martha!”

She turns to face me, still angry despite the huge smile on my face. The sailors nudge each other and find places from which to watch.

“What do you want of the slave girl now, oh master?”

“Into the water. That’s the solution.”

“I’m not going into -”

“Oh, yes you are,” I say. “We’re both going into the water to be baptized. After the resurrection, the Apostles start to baptize people in the name of Jesus. We’ll ask one of them to marry us in the name of Jesus.”

“So you’re saying-”

I cut her off with my hand and get down on one knee.

“I’m saying, I’m asking - I’m begging. Martha, will you marry me?”

It’s like the fair skies and favorable winds want to share our happiness; so the trip to Caesarea goes even faster than the captain predicted and we make the trip in just a few days. Caesarea is a Roman city through and through, with many Romans walking about in togas and soldiers ensuring everything stays well-ordered and peaceful. I even see a couple of blonde heads, all of which belong to slaves the Romans brought from the north.

Martha and I visit several goldsmiths and sell off the rest of Jocie’s gold cross in pieces, but we decide to hang onto the jewels. We purchase water skins and enough food for a week, but nothing else. Martha thinks we should also arm ourselves with swords, but I convince her an armed blonde woman would raise too many eyebrows. We each find a sturdy staff instead.

We have a decision to make. Will we go overland from Caesarea to Jerusalem, a walk of about one hundred and twenty kilometers through Samaria? Or should we catch a ship to a more southern port, such as Ashdod and cut the walk to about sixty-five kilometers? Samaria is a more dangerous route, because there are often gangs of robbers that lie in wait for travelers. We should only use that route if we can travel with a Roman guard. The sea route is shorter, but has fewer Roman caravans to offer us protection. We sit on a wall overlooking the seaport, discussing the advantages of each plan, when the answer walks right in front of me.

“We’re going the overland route with a Roman caravan.”

“How’d you make the decision?”

“Because that man is Marcus Varius. He’s taking goods from Venice to Jerusalem and will have a Roman guard. I bought this toga from him, and his caravan made the journey without any problems.”

“You’re like having my own personal crystal ball.”

“How much do you know about horses?” I ask. “Can you judge their age and fitness?”

“Sure. There’s a place not far from Capon Springs where I would ride every summer. The owners taught me some basics.”

“Good. We’re going to need to buy a couple that can keep up with the caravan.”

The caravan turns out to be much larger than just the wares of Marcus Varius. Marcus’ wagons are just a few among a large shipment of weapons and supplies the Romans are sending to support their troops in Jerusalem. Rumor has it the caravan includes the Roman payroll as well.

Guarding the caravan are two hundred new troops being sent to Pontius Pilate to ensure the region gets no ideas of rebellion. I marvel at the physical strength of these men. They march for ten to twelve hours per day in full armor and packs, with little food or water, and yet, other than the sweat on their faces, none of them will betray even a hint of fatigue. If Martha and I didn’t have horses, we would’ve been left far behind on the first day.

On the second night, the caravan halts and makes camp near a small stream so all the livestock can drink their fill before we push through some drier country. The majority of the soldiers are bivouacked in two camps on either side of the caravan, but others form a loose picket around the wagons to keep out any unwanted visitors.

Sometime after midnight, Martha wakes me.

“Cephas, wake up. Someone is trying to sneak inside the Roman line. Look up the ridge.”

It’s just a few days after the full moon, so there’s a fair amount of light. I watched the Romans set up their positions at dusk and we’re about one hundred meters from the nearest soldier. I see nothing at first, but as I watch along the ridge, I get occasional glimpses of outlines as they’re silhouetted in the moonlight before disappearing behind a boulder or shrub.

“If they’re coming to rob the caravan, they must be insane,” I whisper. “The Romans will slaughter them.”

“Insane? Or desperate?” Martha replies.

It takes the shadows a half an hour to cover the last twenty meters to where I saw the Romans set the guard. I expect to hear someone raise the alarm, but none comes.

By the time the shadowy figures are fifty meters from us, it’s clear there are just three of them. Martha and I are camped near a rough stockade where we tied our horses and the men are aiming for a nearby wagon. They’ll miss us by thirty meters or so.

“What should we do?” Martha asks.

“That wagon is full of weapons. If they watched the caravan come in and saw the Romans eat, they know which wagons have food. They’re not desperate or starving.”

“They’re going to reach the shadow of the wagon. We’re the only ones who can see them now,” Martha says.

I hear her pick up her staff.

“Follow me.”

If we can cross just ten meters of moonlight, we can reach the line of wagons and stay shadowed ourselves. Then we can work along the line until we reach the one being robbed. There’s no way to tell if the robbers have set a lookout. We’ll just have to risk it.

Martha moves as quietly as a cat. Although I’ve come a long way in my training, I still hear the occasional grinding of a rock under my foot or scrape of a stick off my tunic. Nobody else would hear it, but I’m sure Martha does and is planning some additional training in silent operations. We reach the shadows without any indication we’ve been spotted, then move along in a low crouch.

The men are at the second-to-last wagon in the line. I can hear the occasional clink or metallic ring as swords are removed. There are two at the back of the wagon taking the swords. The third is indeed acting as lookout, but his gaze is focused outward, towards the Roman line.

With a yell, Martha leaps forward and her staff takes the one closest to her behind the knees, sweeping him off his feet. I don't want to be too close to her swinging staff, so I head for the lookout. He turns before I can reach him and I see the glint of a short sword in the moonlight. I have a large advantage in reach, but he holds a deadlier weapon.

He must know time is on my side due to Martha's yell, but I yell "thieves" in Latin to make sure the alarm is raised. Out of the corner of my eye, I can see Martha was unable to sweep the feet out from under her second opponent, but he is limping. The first man has regained his feet and the two of them have cornered her against the wagon. She's also keeping them at bay only with the longer reach of her staff.

Behind the lookout, I can see torches coming to life as the Romans respond to the alarm. The lookout decides to charge me with his sword raised high, so I block with my staff and hope it doesn't snap like a twig as his sword crashes down on it. It does snap in two, but saves my life in the process.

With the two halves in my hands, the only thing I can think to do is turn and run straight at one of Martha's attackers. He never sees me coming, as I hit him in the temple with the heavy piece of wood. I'm running too hard to stop, so I crash into the second man and we both fall to the ground. Martha takes the moment of relief and swings hard at my pursuer, catching him on the wrist of his sword hand, forcing the weapon out of his grip with a clatter.

There's now shouting among the Romans and the torches are approaching. The would-be robbers have had enough and decide to run for it.

"What's going on here?" asks a soldier with a torch in one hand and his sword drawn in the other. I recognize him as the 'squad leader' who was in charge of the men patrolling the line.

"We caught three men trying to steal the swords from this wagon."

He looks at the two halves of the broken staff that I still have in white-knuckle grips in my hands and at the pile of swords on the ground behind the wagon. We both look at Martha, who looks like a wild woman with blazing yellow hair and a dirty face. I wonder if she's going to hiss for good measure, but she doesn't.

I think he's going to thank us, but instead he looks worried. He was in charge of the men who allowed the robbers to slip through the line and must fear punishment for the failure in security.

"Of course, when I say we caught them I mean that we accidentally interfered with the trap you laid to catch them in the act. I'm sorry. I'll explain this all to your superior and ask him to forgive me for my mistake."

The man smiles with gratitude, but before he can respond, a voice behind him speaks from the dark.

"That should be an interesting tale, as all good lies are."

He walks into the torchlight. It's the Centurion.

He looks at me with my broken staff, then he looks with great interest at Martha, who doesn't flinch in the slightest.

"Did you get her in Gaul?" he asks me.

"Yes, Centurion."

"Remarkable women, aren't they?"

"Yes, Centurion."

"You're a Roman citizen. What's your name?"

"I'm called Petrus, Centurion."

"You're not one of my soldiers, Petrus. You may call me Antonius."

Just then a soldier from the line runs up to talk to the squad leader and appears scared when he sees the Centurion.

“We cannot find the three men.”

I’m not sure how, but Martha senses what the man is saying.

“They’re looking too far out,” Martha says. “The one I hit in the leg is limping and is hidden somewhere inside their perimeter.”

The Centurion continues to assess this wild woman.

“What did she say?” he asks.

“She hit one man hard in the leg with her staff and hobbled him. She says you’ll find him hiding inside the line of sentries.”

The Centurion barks some orders that send men scurrying and, within minutes, the soldiers have found the hobbled man. The man I hit in the temple is found hiding among the livestock, but the one with the sore wrist has escaped. The two who were captured are taken to the Roman camp.

“Antonius. About my ‘tale’ that we interfered with a trap, I—”

He cuts me off by raising his hand.

“It’s no crime, Petrus, to have mercy on a young man who made a mistake. It’s how he will learn.”

Antonius sighs.

“Far too many of this lot have not seen battle and need to learn. Explain to him how you caught the robbers, where he failed.”

I turn to the young man.

“Your men were posted in the low spots overlooking the stream. With the moon setting, this gave the robbers long shadows to hide in as they came down that ridge, and made them harder to hear due to the gurgling of the water. From our higher vantage, Martha saw them as they first stepped into the moonlight. Your sentries were well-positioned at dusk, but should have been moved at midnight as the moon moved.”

The young man nods.

“You were a soldier,” Antonius says.

“Actually, Martha is the greater soldier. I’m a simple observer of the world.”

“A slave that thinks and fights like a soldier, and is also so beautiful. Would you sell her to me?”

“No, Antonius. When my business in Jerusalem is over, I intend to free her and marry her.”

“I understand. Please. Come have breakfast with me.”

As he turns to lead us to his tent, his foot hits the sword Martha knocked out of the lookout’s hand.

“You bested him and you have no sword. Why don’t you claim his?”

“No, thank you. He who takes up the sword, will die by the sword,” I reply.

Jesus himself is going to say that to Simon Peter very soon.

Chapter Twenty

When we set out, we're invited to ride in the center of the caravan instead of behind it. Antonius rides with us from time to time, as his duties allow. In the late afternoon, we stop near the town of Bethel. The road is flooded with people making their way to Jerusalem for Passover and, although they move aside as the Romans approach, they've slowed our progress to the point where we can't make Jerusalem by nightfall. Antonius decides to encamp here for the night and enter Jerusalem after dawn.

Although they're an occupying army, the Romans also represent a major source of commerce for the people of Israel, so vendors start to wander to the edge of camp to sell things. Martha and I take a small amount of money and put the rest of our belongings into the care of the Centurion's guards then, make our way to the vendors.

"We have plenty of food. What do you want to buy?" Martha asks.

"The last time I was here, I found that sometimes it's best to look like a Roman, while at other times it's better to blend in a little more. I thought we should get some local cloaks so we can cover our togas when need be."

The Romans never buy the local garb, so none of the vendors are selling any and we end up entering the town to seek what we need. Most people buy cloth and sew their own clothes, so all we find are weavers. I've been asking people in the street if anyone sells cloaks, when a voice over my shoulder calls out in Aramaic.

"Perhaps the Roman wolves should buy sheepskins to disguise themselves, instead of Jewish robes?"

I turn to see a man I've never met. He's surprised I understand Aramaic. His right wrist and hand are tightly bound. There are three men behind him and more joining to see what's happening.

"Or perhaps these are the sheepskins that are allowing us to hide among the Roman flock?"

My response prompts a look of curiosity.

"She broke my hand."

He nods to Martha.

"It'll never be right again," he says.

"I'm sorry for that, but doesn't the hand that steals deserve to be broken?"

"You dress like a Roman, but you sound like a Pharisee."

The people who have gathered laugh.

"They tell us to appease the Romans, and grow fat in the great temple while we starve."

"So the Romans are poor at feeding your body and the Pharisees are poor at feeding your soul? Were you stealing the swords to kill Romans? Or Pharisees? For which do you carry more hate: government or religion?"

"Government and religion are the same. They're inseparable."

Two thousand years from now, this man's words will have come full circle. The government in my time is a religion: the religion of atheism. If Aislin and Garai get their way, it will become a government of Christianity and nothing will have changed in over two thousand years. Religion will have been used, once again, as a means to take power. If the separation of church and state means 'religion out of the government,' then it must - by necessity - also mean 'government out of religion.' The two must be separated, including unmasking atheism for the religion it's become.

"I agree. They must be separated," I say. "I'm going to Jerusalem to see a man who understands we must pay to Caesar the things that belong to Caesar, while we give to God the things that belong to God. I think you should come to Jerusalem and meet Him. His name is Jesus

of Nazareth and He'll teach you to give your heart to God, instead of Pharisees. Once you do that, you'll see the things of Caesar are not important."

The man with the broken wrist seems to have softened his heart, but those around him still have eyes full of malice. We still look like two helpless Romans surrounded by angry residents, and many seem to be spoiling for a fight. Martha can sense the mood of the crowd, even without understanding what has been said, and is preparing to fight.

"Petrus," comes an angry voice from behind the crowd.

People make way and a small contingent of Roman soldiers march into view. It's the young leader whose lines were penetrated by the robbers.

I'm sure a look of relief floods my face, but he erases it with a slap across my face hard enough to rattle my teeth.

"Petrus. You and this woman are under arrest. You will follow us."

The crowd parts for the Romans and the townspeople laugh, assuming that we're to be imprisoned for something.

As we pass back through the Roman lines, the young soldier turns to me.

"You wouldn't believe how many friends I've arrested to get them out of a crowd. The Centurion has asked for you."

"What's your name, soldier?" I ask.

"Cato."

We wait outside the Centurion's tent, expecting to be summoned inside, but instead he emerges.

"Petrus, Martha, follow me."

He's a man accustomed to having his orders obeyed without question, so we fall into line behind him.

We walk to the edge of the camp and stop where the two robbers we helped catch are tied to posts. People from town have come to watch, including the man with the broken wrist.

"I'm told you speak Aramaic, Petrus. While some of the people here understand Greek, I would prefer for you to translate my words into their language."

"I'm authorized to determine their punishment," Antonius yells to the crowd. "I can be lenient and just have them whipped, I can order their thieving hands cut off, or I can order them killed. It all rests on my command. These men were caught with the help of this Roman citizen and his slave, so I'll consider his advice in my decision."

My advice? That's strange.

I explain the situation to Martha. We both feel like we're part of some game the Centurion is playing. Is he trying to put the ire of the Jews onto us? Or is he trying to find a way to be merciful, without appearing weak?

"What's the purpose of this punishment?" I ask in both Latin and Aramaic.

"To teach the price of stealing from Caesar," he replies.

"If they're killed, then what have they learned?"

Antonius smiles at my question.

"I never said it's only these two thieves who must learn. Their deaths would teach others."

"When you teach your men to fight, which is the more effective teacher?" I ask. "Watching a fellow soldier die from his mistakes, or watching a fellow soldier who lives? Is the man who lives the better teacher? Or the one who dies?"

Antonius smiles again.

"Ask these men why they want to steal Roman swords."

I walk to the man I hit in the head. The spot is purple with blood and looks very painful.

"The Centurion asks the question: 'Why do you steal Roman swords?'"

He tries to spit on me, but refuses to speak. Antonius orders a nearby guard to give the man several tastes of the whip.

“Why do you steal Roman swords?” I repeat.

“To cut your Roman throats.”

There are muted grunts of approval in the crowd.

When I report the answer to Antonius, he laughs.

“Your point is well made, Petrus. Shall I let these men live and make them better teachers of their hate? Or shall they die and teach hatred no longer?”

Wow. That’s not the path I was trying to go down. Antonius made it look like my argument was intended to condemn the men. I need to find a different approach.

“Centurion. When you were a boy, did you ever steal something at the market when the seller was not looking? Perhaps a piece of fruit? Or maybe a sweet treat?”

“Of course, Petrus. All boys do these things.”

“And did you ever get caught?”

“Yes. My own father caught me.”

“And yet you still have ten fingers. Why were they not cut off?”

I hear some murmurs of approval in the crowd.

“My father paid for the bread I stole.”

Antonius smiles. He’s curious to see where I’m going.

“And the seller had mercy?”

“Of course. But I was just a boy, while these are grown men, and there was a way to pay for what I stole. You cannot just pay gold when you steal from Caesar.”

“And what of the mercy? Did the bread seller give it to you freely?”

“He did not. I received mercy only because the debt was paid for me.”

Antonius gets a curious look on his face.

“Petrus? Why are you crying?”

I touch my cheek and feel a cold tear.

“I was thinking of someone who once paid a great debt for me so that I might find mercy in His father’s eyes.”

I pause for a while, as I think of what to say next.

“These men owe two debts for their crime, neither of which can be repaid by gold. First, they owe a debt to Caesar.”

“What is the second debt they owe?” Antonius asks.

“They owe a debt to their God, for it’s written in their own Law of Moses: ‘Thou shall not steal.’ Administer Caesar’s justice as you see fit, Antonius, because it’s the second debt that they should truly fear, rather than the first. Let them pray for a savior who can pay their debt to God for them.”

“But I will not pray for these men,” I add. “Instead, I will pray for Caesar, that he never confuses which debt is owned by Rome, and which debt is owned by God.”

“Twenty lashes each. Leather only.”

As Antonius strides away, there’s a great murmur in the crowd because everyone knows this is a light punishment.

As Martha and I leave, we can hear the screams of the men as they’re whipped. From our perspective, it’s hard to think of this punishment as light.

There’s no trouble during the night, and Martha and I wake at dawn as the army starts to clatter about.

“What now?” Martha asks after we eat breakfast.

“Now things get trickier. We need to find the assassins and deal with them without being seen by either them or me. Right now, I’m outside of Jericho on the other side of the river. Tonight I’ll sleep against a tree near Bethany, which is when we need to steal the staff.”

“So we need to follow you, and protect you.”

“Like two guardian angels.”

We walk to the edge of the camp, where the vendors have again set up to sell to the Romans. The men who were whipped are still tied to their posts. Their backs have stopped bleeding, but are oozing and raw, and covered with flies. There are women who are set to treat the wounds, but the soldiers are keeping them back until they receive orders to the contrary. The man with the broken wrist is standing at a distance, watching.

I approach the guards.

“Are these men to be released?” I ask.

“Yes, Petrus. When we march, we’re to leave them here.”

People are learning your name. That’s not good.

I see a bucket of water with a ladle.

“May I?”

He nods, so I pick up the bucket and walk to the whipping posts.

“Drink,” I say in Aramaic.

I hold the ladle to the lips of man who yesterday tried to spit on me. He can only open his eyes as far as narrow slits, but I’m sure he recognizes me. His lips look dry and cracked from thirst, and he takes the water greedily.

“The Romans will be gone soon. Your debt to them is paid and you’ll be freed. Your debt to God will not be so easy.”

He looks at me and speaks in a rough whisper.

“The priests ask us to do this. They say to resist the Romans is the will of God.”

For the next two millennia, every major religion, including Christianity, will be twisted at one time or another so that men can excuse murder by saying: “I did it for God.”

“Then the priests will someday pay this debt alongside you,” I reply.

I give the other man water, and return the bucket to the soldiers without a word. A dozen or more people, including Martha, watched me give the men water in silence. The man with the broken wrist moves to block our path back to the camp.

“You are no Romans.”

“You’re correct.”

“That man - the one who spat at you yesterday - is my brother. You said he owes two debts, but I believe he owes three. You saved him with your words to the Centurion and he owes you his life.”

“Would you like to pay this debt for your brother?”

“I am no man’s slave.”

We shall see about that.

“Of course not. Here is what I ask. On Monday, go to the great temple in Jerusalem and seek a teacher named Jesus of Nazareth. Listen to Him and ask Him to heal your broken hand. If you see me in the city by myself, do not speak to me. If you see me with Martha, then speak to me.”

“That’s all? Listen to a man teach?”

“One other small thing. Please tell me your name.”

“My name is Yared. On my brother’s life, I’ll do as you ask and listen to Jesus of Nazareth. And I also have these for you.”

He takes what looks like a bundle of rags off his back. The rags turn out to be two hooded cloaks.

“They’re old and worn, but getting cloaks seemed important to you.”

“Thank you,” I reply. “From here, it’s important we travel unnoticed and these will help a great deal.”

Chapter Twenty-One

Martha and I part ways with the caravan as it enters Jerusalem from the west, then travel along the outer wall until we reach the road to Bethany. As I point out the various sites, I notice Martha is in a very happy mood.

“What?” I ask.

“You’re just so excited to be here again. You’re almost giddy.”

“I guess I’m excited to be here with you. I feel like I’m showing you my hometown or something. In a sense, that’s a good description, since this is where I grew up spiritually.”

The horses are well-rested, so we make very good time and are halfway to Jericho, when we see Jesus and the crowd that’s following Him come into view. One hundred meters in front of us, I spot two blind men standing on the side of the road, waiting for Jesus to pass them.

“Cover your head and face,” I say. “I’m in that crowd. It’s where I first saw the two assassins. They were working their way to me through the crowd and I gave them the slip when Jesus stopped to heal those blind men.”

“We’re too visible on these horses,” Martha says.

Martha dismounts and puts the hood of her cloak over her head.

“Take them over that small hill and watch from up there. I’ll watch the crowd pass from here and keep the assassins off your back.”

It’s a good plan, so I hide the horses and watch.

As the crowd approaches, the two blind men beside the road start shouting to Jesus and asking Him for mercy. The crowd tells them to be quiet, but they only shout all the louder.

“What do you want me to do for you?” asks Jesus.

“Lord, we want to see!”

I spot myself in the crowd and see my head tilt as I first see the two assassins. I follow my own gaze until I see the two assassins, along with Martha just behind them, waiting for them to make a move.

There’s a great shout of joy near Jesus when the two blind men have their sight restored. As the crowd surges forward to see, Martha trips the lead assassin and they go tumbling, along with a dozen other people. I can’t help but laugh. She saved me and I never knew she was there. I never even noticed there was a commotion right behind me.

The assassins untangle themselves and manage to stand, but I’ve moved closer to Jesus and out of their reach, so they fall back into the crowd. I wait for Martha to return to me and the horses, but she doesn’t. Instead, she also works her way closer to Jesus. At one point, she was standing right behind me in the crowd.

She must think she’s funny.

The crowd moves on, so I retrieve the horses and travel parallel to the crowd a few hundred meters from the road. When I catch up to Jesus, everyone is stopped near the tree where I’ll spend the night. I can see myself at the edge of the crowd, holding the large pack of a man with a crippled hand so he can worm through the crowd.

Jesus heals the man’s hand and the man yells: “Heal my friend the mute, make him speak!” and he points at me. The crowd parts for me and many of them are pushing me forward. Chief among those pushing is Martha. She doesn’t understand the language, but she must think this is when Jesus healed my throat.

I can’t hear the man with the restored hand from this distance, but I remember what he said to me. He said: “Your faith will make you well.”

I see that Martha is the one who gave me one last push so I’d be standing before Christ.

You can push a body, Martha, but you can't push someone into faith. They must find it themselves.

I remember all too well what I was thinking. I was thinking that to be healed would mean everything I knew, or thought I knew, about the world would be wrong. I was afraid to stand before Jesus and ask for healing because, deep down, I knew He was the son of God, and I was afraid of giving up my sinful and faithless ways.

I watch myself turn from Jesus and walk away. I look like a deflated balloon.

Martha is standing just a few meters away, looking just as deflated. She stands like a statue, staring at me as I sit down hard against the tree. The crowd moves past her, bumping and jostling her as she remains dumbfounded. I see the two assassins pass by along with the crowd, unable to see me because I was sitting.

The man whose hand was healed comes to retrieve his pack and speaks to me, breaking Martha's trance. She looks around, and sees me on my horse and makes her way to me. She mounts her horse without a word and without looking at me, and we ride away in silence.

We ride into a deep ravine where the horses can graze and drink. We dismount and sit against separate trees. It takes me a minute to find the courage to break the silence.

"Part of me wishes you hadn't seen that. But another part is glad you did."

"You rejected him."

She releases the angry thoughts that have been penned up inside her.

"You turned your back on *the Lord* and walked away. He was disappointed, but not surprised. I could see it on His face. He wanted to heal you. He wanted you to believe in Him and you chose to deny Him. How could you?"

We sit in silence for what seems an eternity.

"The man whose pack I carried so his hand could be healed - do you want to know what he said to me when I was sitting against the tree? He asked me: 'Were you afraid your faith is not strong enough to give you your voice back? After you saw my hand was healed, you still did not believe? Your faith is truly weak then, isn't it?' Well, he was correct."

Martha remains silent, so I continue.

"Then, like he could see through time and see hundreds of years of Christianity, he said to me: 'Imagine all those who have not seen what you have seen and yet believe anyway. They are the ones who truly have faith.' He's right, of course."

"Right now, I'm over those hills sitting against a tree, finding faith, and there's nothing you or I can do to help me. I had to reach that place on my own. Right now, against that tree, I'm thinking of you. I'm remembering how, in class, you declared that when I have something to say, nobody can shut me up. And I'm thinking that God made me mute, because shutting me up was the only way He could get me to listen to Him."

I've been making this speech with my eyes closed and with tears running down my face. When I open them, I see Martha is staring at me, with tears on her cheeks.

"Jesus knew you were going to reject Him."

"Yes," I say.

"And it made Him sad, but He's willing to wait for you to come to Him."

"He has time. He'll wait for the entire world to come to Him. But for me, He only needs to wait a little while longer. By tomorrow morning, I was - and will be - ready."

"Then let's go watch over you."

"You're going to miss seeing Jesus enter Jerusalem riding on a donkey. Would you like to ride ahead so you can see it? I'll stay here."

"Could I?" she asks. "I'd love to do that. But how will we find each other again?"

"You'll have plenty of time to come back and meet me right here," I say. "I sat against the tree through sunset and slept until mid-morning. You can get back here by sunset. We'll take the staff

after dark and be on our way. This time, I'd like to get inside the temple early so I can see Jesus turn over the tables of the money changers, rather than just hearing the crashing."

I take up my post on a hill where I can see myself sitting against the tree, while Martha gives me her pack and trots off on her horse. My eyes linger on her back and I find my mind straying back to lust and, again I force myself to control my thoughts. I laugh when I look down at myself against the tree. Here we are, two versions of Cephas. The one against the tree is struggling to find faith, while the one on the hilltop is struggling to live with it.

By an hour after sunset, I find myself watching the horizon for someone on horseback more than I'm watching over myself against the tree. Martha should have been here hours ago. There's no way she got lost. She's just too aware of her surroundings for that to happen. Even in the dark, she has the skill to return to this spot.

I rack my brain, trying to remember if I watched the stars from under the tree or not. I can't get caught stealing the staff, but I don't want to wait any longer to search for Martha. Using all the skills of moving silently that Martha taught me, I begin my slow descent to the tree. I make a few mistakes with snapped twigs and rolled rocks, but nothing loud enough to wake someone who is so emotionally exhausted that he fell asleep sitting up against a tree.

In the last ten meters, I see myself start to stir in my sleep. The staff is standing up against the tree and my arm moves and knocks over the staff, causing it to fall to the ground with a hollow clatter. I wait to see if the noise woke me up, but the sound of my own soft breathing indicates it did not. I want to laugh when I realize that by knocking over the staff in my sleep, I made the job of stealing it easier for my future self.

I travel the last three meters in absolute silence and pick up the staff with just a soft scraping sound as I lift it from the rocks. When I've backed off ten meters, I can't handle the slow pace any longer and risk making more noise. By the time I'm fifty meters away I've forgotten about stealth and break into a jog to get back to my horse and search for Martha.

The moon is still high in the sky, so I ride a course parallel to the road. If anyone is on the road, I'll see them pass in the moonlight. I reach Bethany without seeing anyone. Somewhere in this little town Jesus is resting tonight, so I ask for His help.

"Jesus, please help me find her," I pray.

As if in answer, I hear a soft whinny of a horse that's in some shrubs twenty meters off the road. I nudge my horse towards the sound and find that it's Martha's horse, abandoned. I feel like my heart may stop beating. She could be unconscious in a ditch and I'd never see her in the moonlight.

Worse, everything around me seems to be getting darker by the second. I look up and see some clouds are passing in front of the moon, making it all the harder to see. I'm tempted to curse Jesus for giving me the opposite of my prayer, when I realize the darkness is allowing me to see something I couldn't before. There's a tiny pinprick of light coming from a house a half kilometer in the distance. No other house has any light at all.

Why is someone awake in that house?

I walk the horses towards the light and tie them to a tree before their clapping can alert whoever's awake in there. The light is coming from under a poorly fitting door, but there's also light coming from the far side of the house, where a window is open. I pass around to listen and hear the rough voices of several men.

"That Roman she-devil is rich enough to have a horse, so why didn't she have any money? You said she'd have money," one voice says.

"How should I know? Maybe she spent it," another voice replies.

"I told you we should've followed her instead. She hid it somewhere and would have led us right to it," a third voice says.

“Well, I know how she’s going to pay us,” the second voice says. “She’s very pretty. She’s going to pay me quite a few times tonight.”

“The way she fights, it’s not going to be easy. We’re all going to have to hold her down for you. My head still hurts where she hit me,” a fourth voice says, “and Gershom isn’t going to be getting any payment from her tonight - considering where she kicked him.”

“Gershom should consider himself lucky she dropped her knife, or she might’ve done a lot more than just kick him down there,” the second voice says and laughs.

I risk a look through the window. There are five men inside the one-room shack. One of them is curled up in the fetal position on a rough bed. That must be Gershom. Three of them are standing to block any escape by Martha, while the fourth is sitting in a corner, holding some sort of pillow against his head. Martha’s knife is sitting on a table behind the men.

Martha is backed into a corner. Her cloak is missing and her toga has been ripped open. She’s made a futile attempt to rewrap what’s left of it, but remains exposed in ways that must be driving these men mad with lust. If I were not so angry, I might have similar thoughts. Instead, my desire is to cut these men’s eyes out for what they’ve seen.

As I move around to the door, I draw my knife and place the blade in my right hand and hold the staff in my left. This staff seems to have a way of showing up in the right place at the right time. I’m certainly going to need it to fight these men.

“We’ll all rush her at once,” the second voice says. “Ira, stand up and help. Once I’m done, you can go second. Maybe it’ll help your headache.”

That’s all I need to hear. I kick through the door on the first try, its brittle wooden bolt snapping into pieces. As the surprised men spin to face me, I throw my knife. It sails past the head of the man in the center and sinks into the wooden wall behind them.

I don’t wait for an invitation. I cross the room in two steps, running right past Gershom on the bed, and swing the heavy end of the staff at the man closest to Martha. He raises his arm, which wards off a blow aimed at his head, but likely breaks his right ulna in the process. I use the other end of the staff to sweep his legs out from under him.

The man on the right moves forward and I have to back up so he can’t get behind me. The man in the center pauses to grab for a staff I couldn’t see propped up against a support post. Gershom has struggled to a sitting position on the bed, so I hit him in the head with the staff, removing him from the fight.

The remaining three regroup, while the one with the broken ulna has backed into a corner and looks like he wants no more of this staff. The one that Martha gave a headache is standing, but also looks unsure. They all look to the man with the staff for direction.

Take out the leader and the rest will fold.

“She leaves with me now, and nobody else will be hurt,” I say in Aramaic.

The one with the staff turns out to be the second voice, the leader.

“She’s not going anywhere, Roman. She owes us all a good time.”

He seems to have an instinct for how to provoke people, and he’s succeeding. My anger is fueled by his words.

“That makes you mad, doesn’t it, Roman? The thought of her with another man? Especially a Hebrew?”

“All we want is to leave.”

“You’re a terrible liar, Roman. What you want is to kill us all. That’s what Romans do.”

He’s right. That is what I want to do. How can I have these murderous thoughts, and still be a Christian?

Chapter Twenty-Two

“The only one leaving is you, Roman.”

The leader of the group lunges forward with the staff and I back up.

“What would you do if I were to leave this woman here alone with you?” I ask the leader.

“I would rape her and kill her.”

“Then, you’ll have to kill me first.”

“That’s my intent - but, don’t worry, I’m not going to kill you right away. I’m going to make you watch. And I’m going to make sure it’s as unpleasant as possible for both of you while I do it.”

He lunges again, and when I back up, I’m against the table. He senses the opportunity to catch me off balance and swings his staff. I block, then pivot to put the table between us. As the other two men move up to flank me, I glance down at Martha’s knife on the table.

“That knife won’t save you, Roman. You couldn’t even hit me with the first one when my back was turned.”

“I wasn’t aiming for you. I was aiming for the wall.”

He figures out what I mean a half-second too late. As he turns to look, Martha opens a large gash across the back of his hand with the knife from the wall and he drops his staff. Martha steps back, but I lunge around the table and hit him in the temple with the heavy end of my staff, and a moment later he’s unconscious on the floor.

The two injured men move to back Martha into the corner again, but the man on my left uses the opening to rush me, which throws me back into the table and makes me drop my staff. I’m much bigger than he is, so I throw him backwards and use the moment to grab Martha’s knife from the table.

He takes a step back and I hurl the knife. It enters his right eye socket, cutting out his eye - just as I said in my heart that I would do to these men. I rush forward and grab the knife hilt, giving it a slight twist as I withdraw it, just to increase his agony. The man hits his knees, with his hands over his right eye, and I move in for my opportunity to claim his left eye.

“Stop, Cephas!” Martha says. “It’s over.”

Her voice brings me back to my senses. I look around. The leader and Gershom are both unconscious. The one with the headache and the one with the broken ulna have surrendered and backed into a corner, with Martha’s knife pointed at them. They’re petrified with fear. As I retrieve my staff, there’s a moan and a soft thump as the man I blinded hits the floor, dead. There’s a growing pool of blood forming around his head.

“You didn’t need to kill him,” Martha says. “These two ran for the corner and he was just trying to get out the door.”

I look behind me to find that I was, indeed, blocking the doorway.

“You don’t know what they were saying. They were going to rape you - all of them - over and over again.”

“I don’t need to speak Aramaic to know that.”

Her voice is remarkably calm, which helps me regain control of my emotions.

Her torn toga is hanging on her in tatters. The stress of the situation allowed her to forget she’s still exposed, but now the mention of the word rape makes her conscious of her appearance and she tries in vain to cover herself, while keeping a wary eye on the cornered men. For months, I’ve wanted to see what’s under the toga, and now my only desire is to cover her up. I step over the two men on the floor to help her.

“You.”

I point at the man with the broken arm, who is the smaller of the two.

“Give her your clothes.”

His arm is so pained that his friend has to help him disrobe.

“I wish you’d let us leave. Your friend didn’t need to die.”

I hear a scraping sound behind me and sigh because I know what it is. The leader of the group is awake and is picking up his staff. I spin as he leaps to his feet and prepares to lunge. He’s easy to trip and send back to the floor. I put the head of my staff against his neck and press lightly. He stares at me with pure hatred, but doesn’t try to move.

There’s something familiar about this man.

“Get up and move closer to the light,” I say.

I gasp when I see his face.

“Turn your back on evil and repent to God, I beg you.”

“Why? Are you a prophet? God can keep his prophets. I’d rather have profit.”

“The rest of you. If you follow this man, you’ll end up like him.”

I point to the dead man.

“You’ll kill us all?” asks Ira.

“Not me. God.”

Their leader just laughs.

Martha and I back out of the little shack with our knives still pointed at the would-be thieves and rapists.

“Remember what I’ve said.”

I lead Martha through the dark to the horses, and we take off at a gallop.

The Romans lock the city gates of Jerusalem at night and I don’t want to risk running into myself or Esther on the Jericho road in the morning, so I have no idea where to go. Worse, the moon will set soon and leave us in pitch-blackness.

“The gates may be locked, but let’s head towards Jerusalem,” I say. “Maybe we can find a barn to sleep in.”

We make our way through the darkness and soon see the lights atop the city walls and watch towers. The silence between us is as dark as the night. The longer the silence persists the darker my thoughts become. The woman I love just watched me murder a man. There’s no righteous justification possible for this act. I killed him as part of an angry rampage. Part of me wonders if she’ll ever speak to me again.

We reach a city gate that’s closed tight. I’m so lost that I’m not even not sure of which gate it is. To our north and east, I can see what appears to be a wooded hill. The place just has a safe feel, so I head for it, again in agonizing silence. We’ll just have to sleep under the trees until dawn and then look for an inn.

We find a flat spot with soft earth where we can lie down for a while. We unload the packs from my horse without a word.

“We’re safe now,” I say.

It’s like the words are the key to open a floodgate of emotions in both of us. Martha clings to me, sobbing. Every now and then, she pauses and I think she’s going to speak, but the sobbing starts up again. I’ve never seen her like this. She’s a natural-born fighter, but here in my arms, she feels like a helpless child that I need to protect and comfort.

“I’m sorry, Martha. I’m sorry I brought you back in time. I’m sorry I left you alone.”

She cries all the harder.

“Do you remember the first time we went out together? When we went to the Lebanese restaurant near campus?”

“Of course, I remember every moment,” she replies.

“Do you remember how I said that once you have a glimpse behind-the-scenes of who I am, you’ll see a very different story compared to what the public sees?”

“I remember.”

“I want to marry you, Martha. I want to love you forever. But right now, even I have to wonder if I’m anything more than the monster you first took me to be.”

“What are you talking about?”

Her voice is loud enough that it feels like it echoes through the trees.

“You’ve seen enough to reach that conclusion. When we could see each other’s thoughts you saw the lust-filled animal; yesterday you saw the faithless denier; and now you’ve seen the murderer. How many more faces of this monster do you need to see before you run and never look back?”

She clings to me all the tighter.

“That man’s death is my fault,” she says, and starts sobbing again. “But that’s not even the worst part. The worst part is that it’s also my fault that you have another horrible memory that you can’t escape.”

“It’s not your fault.”

“Yes, it is. I was careless. My head was in the clouds after seeing Jesus. I broke a branch and laid it on the road for Him to ride over. When He rode over it, He looked right at me and smiled. He knew me. He knew my every thought. I collected some of the leaves from the branch and when I was riding back, I just wasn’t paying attention - or I would have seen those men.”

“It’s not your fault. He sent me to save you, and to save those other men. When I found your horse, I prayed to Jesus for help and clouds covered the moon so I could see the light in the house.”

“What do you mean - He sent you to save the other men?”

“The man that you cut - the leader of the group who I asked to stand in the light so I could see his face - I think I was sent to give him a last chance to repent.”

“Then maybe he will.”

“No, he won’t. He’s the thief that’s going to hang on a cross next to Jesus and refuse to repent, even then.”

I wake to the sound of happy birds singing as they flit about the trees. Martha and I slept all night with her cuddled against my side, with her head on my chest and my arm protectively around her.

The perfect scene I can see is like something you’d see in a computer-generated virtual reality video in my time. The sky is a deep blue, without a cloud to be seen, and the horses are standing in a green field fifty meters away, grazing.

“I’ve been waiting for you to wake up,” Martha says.

She turns her head to look at me, and her eyes match the sky this morning.

“Have you ever seen anything so beautiful?” she asks.

“No, I haven’t.”

She blushes when she realizes I’m not talking about the scenery.

“I know where we are now,” I say. “Welcome to the Garden of Gethsemane.”

“You’re joking.”

“Nope. That’s real Gethsemane dirt in your hair.”

“I must look terrible.”

“I was just thinking that Gethsemane dirt is a good color on you.”

“So, what’s the plan now?” she asks.

“Find a Roman bathhouse and wash out the Gethsemane dirt.”

With dawn, the gates of Jerusalem are wide open to allow merchants to enter the city. I guide Martha straight to the section of the city where Pilate has a house. As luck has it, I see the young leader, Cato instructing some men on their duties for the day.

“Cato! It’s good to see you.”

“Petrus. What has happened? You do not look well.”

“Martha was attacked and nearly raped by five men near Bethany. We seek a bath and a place to rest.”

“Roman citizens attacked on the road? The centurions will want to hear more about this.”

“Of course; but first, Martha was treated quite roughly. Do you know of a place we can go?”

“Wait here.”

He issues orders to a runner.

We wait for ten minutes before the runner reappears.

“You’re in luck, Petrus. The centurions are meeting in the officers’ baths and have invited you to join them. This man will take you there and quarter your horses in our stables.”

When I was here before, part of me came to think of the Romans as cruel occupiers, but now they seem like some of the friendliest, most generous people I’ve ever met.

The runner escorts us to the stables and then to the baths. I’m not permitted to enter the ladies’ bath area, so I request an attendant be sent to receive my instructions.

A young slave woman arrives. I’d guess she’s from Spain.

“This is Martha. She doesn’t speak Latin, Greek or Aramaic. She’s been attacked by thieves on the road. Her toga has been ripped, and her tunic and cloak stolen. Do what you can to repair or replace her clothing and I’ll pay whatever expense you incur.”

I’m getting better at commanding. Asking a slave, rather than commanding her, would not look right. I turn to Martha.

“This girl is going to attend to you. Stay in the baths until I send for you, okay?”

“I’m not going anywhere alone again.”

I enter the men’s area of the baths. I’d love a shower, but it’ll be some time before that’s invented. In Rome, I’m told there are massive public baths, but here there are just six bronze tubs the Romans have carried in to create a makeshift officers’ bathhouse. An attendant directs me to the tub nearest Antonius and begins to undress me when I realize I’m still wearing modern underwear as well as socks and shoes covered by rags. This could be difficult to explain.

“I prefer to undress myself.”

The officers look at me curiously.

“I’ve become accustomed to being attended by Martha,” I say, and the officers all smile.

I remove my clothes and hide all the modern items in my pack. I ask for everything else to be washed and mended. The water is surprisingly hot, considering it must have been heated somewhere else and brought here in buckets. The four officers in the bath laugh as I settle into the water with a deep sigh.

“All the comforts of home, Petrus?” Antonius says.

“It’s not quite all the comforts of my home - but right now, it’s close enough.”

There’s a brush and a cake of soap, so I start scrubbing every square inch of my body. I even dunk my head under and wash my hair, which brings more laughs and comments about how hard everyone tries to wash off the stink of Jerusalem when they first arrive. Only when I reach the point of just relaxing in the water, do the centurions turn their conversation to me.

“Petrus. We heard Martha was robbed and kidnapped near Bethany and you found her and killed ten men before they could rape her. Tell us the tale.”

I laugh.

“I only killed one and hurt four, and even the one didn’t need to die. They should have done as I commanded and let us go.”

“You lied when you said you’re not a warrior,” Antonius says. “When you told me you intend to marry Martha, I could see in your eyes you would kill to protect her.”

“I think I would’ve killed them all, if Martha hadn’t stopped me.”

“You should have,” a centurion named Regulus responds.

“My wife would have insisted that I do,” adds the centurion named Festus.

“Why did she stop you?” asks a thoughtful-looking older centurion named Cornelius. “And why was she by herself in Bethany?”

“She stopped me because Martha is a woman of great compassion, even in the face of evil. She was in Bethany to see a teacher who also teaches great compassion: Jesus of Nazareth.”

“I’ve heard of him,” Cornelius says. “He caused quite a stir when he came into Jerusalem. Some are calling him the ‘King of the Jews.’ Many believe he’s their long-promised Messiah.”

“You should go hear Him teach,” I say.

“I wish I had the time,” Cornelius says. “With Antonius here to relieve me, I’ve been reassigned to Caesarea. Perhaps one day I’ll hear more of him.”

From there, the centurions turn to military matters. They ask me about the mood of the people in the countryside; the numbers of men I’ve seen; and whether I’ve seen any weapons. I think the Romans would be content to sit in the bath and talk for hours, but we all have duties to which we must attend. The slave returns with my clothes, which have been cleaned and mended. The toga is still a bit damp, but it’s a warm morning, so I don’t mind. I send a messenger to let Martha know I’m ready.

The centurions take much longer to dress, since they’re putting on their armor, but I choose to wait for them because I need to speak with Antonius.

“You’ve been most kind since we first met, Antonius. I have an errand that needs to be done, but I promised Martha I would not leave her alone.”

I dig through my pack and bring out the gemstones Martha and I pried from Jocie’s cross.

“I need the help of a trustworthy jeweler.”

We all walk out of the officers’ bath together, and when we reach the turn for the ladies’ bath, our heads all turn in unison. Martha is standing in a sunbeam, dressed in a brand new toga, and her blonde hair is virtually glowing in the light.

“Like a perfect statue of Venus,” Festus remarks.

“I can’t believe you killed just the one, Cephias. When I was young, I would’ve killed one hundred for her,” Cornelius says.

Antonius claps his hand down onto my shoulder.

“Were I not married, you might need to kill me next,” he says. “Come translate. I’d like to say ‘hello.’”

Chapter Twenty-Three

The officers find Martha so enchanting they offer us the use of a room in a small guest house where we can keep our things. I note - with some blushing - that there's only one bed. Once our things are stowed, I tell Martha to get her Jewish cloak because we need to walk about in the city. We conceal our faces with the hoods, and climb to the temple. Several hours ago, I again missed seeing Jesus turn over the tables of the money changers, but He should be in there right now teaching the people. If we hurry, we can see Him healing my voice. After all the darkness she's seen, I want Martha to witness this.

"Are we here to hear Jesus teach?" she asks once we've entered the temple and I've found a spot where we can watch.

"Just watch. Look, there I am getting closer to Jesus."

"The two assassins are right behind you; let's go."

I take her hand and hold her back.

"Not this time. Just watch."

When I get to the front, Jesus is turned away from me as He heals a blind woman. I remember how it felt to be so close to Him. I wanted to reach out and touch Him like the woman who had faith she would be healed, if only she could touch His garment.

Jesus turns and faces me. I chuckle when I see the surprised look I had on my face.

"This is just one of many gifts you've been given," Jesus says, then looks up into the crowd, directly at Martha and me. "Return to your people and use your gifts."

He's saying it to the 'present' me as much as He is the 'past' me.

We watch as He touches my neck, and I say: "I will use my gifts for You Lord," in a clear, perfect voice.

Jesus then looks at the two assassins.

"Go now in peace. Your faith has made you well."

We watch as I leave the crowd, with the assassins following me.

"Would now be a good time to save you?" Martha asks.

"Keep watching."

We watch as I stop, not knowing then that they were sent to kill me. As they reach me, their eyes are scanning everywhere, but they walk right past, like they no longer recognize me.

"That's weird. It's like they couldn't see you anymore."

"Jesus said: 'Go in peace.' He meant it."

"Can we stay and listen to Jesus teach?" Martha asks. "Will you tell me every word?"

"We'll need to be careful. I followed Jesus and listened to Him teach all week, so we'll risk being seen."

"Do you remember seeing us?"

"No."

"Then I guess we're going to be successful."

I consider starting a discussion of time paradoxes, but think better of it.

We listen to Jesus teach, and to the whispers of the Pharisees in the corners of the room. They're trying to convince anyone who'll listen that Jesus is a fraud. We leave before they start clearing the temple. I don't want the Pharisee I encountered last time to see me twice.

As we leave, we're spotted by Yared, the man whose wrist Martha broke when he tried to steal swords from the caravan.

"Hello, Petrus and Martha."

He bear-hugs us both.

“Petrus, you carry many cloaks. I saw you in the temple without Martha, so I did not speak with you, just as you instructed.”

“That’s good, Yared. Have you listened to Jesus teach, as I asked?”

“Yes. Look at my wrist. It’s healed as if it was never broken. I’m going to Bethel now to bring my brother to hear Jesus too.”

When he’s gone, Martha and I sit in a quiet spot in the shade of the temple.

“Thank you for bringing me here today,” Martha says. “Seeing you healed and becoming a Christian was such a beautiful thing.”

“I thought you’d like it. It’s a nice counter to seeing all the ugly things inside of me.”

“Do you ever think about your last name?” she asks, unexpectedly changing the subject.

“Not really.”

“Paulson. Son of Paul.”

She practically sings it.

“Paul wrote over half of the New Testament, but who remembers what he was before he gave his heart to Jesus? He was a monster. As a hunter of Christians, he makes you look like a rank amateur.”

“So?”

“So, God has a history of finding the people who most need to be found and using them to spread His Word. After all, who has a greater voice of praise for God than someone who’s been forgiven much?”

“After all I did, I don’t feel forgiven.”

Martha snorts a laugh.

“Do you really think God has to wait for *you* to *feel* forgiven before it becomes a reality?” she asks. “You’re forgiven for this, and a multitude of other sins, no matter how you choose to feel about it.”

We spend the next three days just like I did the first time: listening to Jesus teach whenever we can, just to drink in His presence. We see both my past self and the assassins often. They stalk the edges of the crowd along with the Pharisees, looking for opportunities. Each time my past self leaves the protection of the crowd, Martha and I follow. Twice we cause minor delays for the assassins, which allow my former self to slip away, but generally I didn’t need much help because the assassins aren’t trying very hard.

“Does it seem like they’re waiting for a specific time?” I ask.

“We’re not even married yet and we’re already thinking the same thoughts. But what time?”

“Well, they know the location of the arena cave, and roughly when I sent each note to the future. Wouldn’t it be easiest to just wait at the cave? I’d be all alone.”

“When do you go back to the cave next?”

“Saturday morning. That’s when you and I are going to thump the assassins and give back the staff. It was the last time I saw them or us.”

“Is that the trip to the cave when you sent the note with the hidden message?”

“Yes, it is.”

“It took a day before anyone noticed, but that hidden message spurred Four into worldwide action. What if their plan is to kill you on the way to the cave and send a different note? They have plenty of writing samples to generate a forgery.”

“I just remembered something,” I say. “When you and I ambushed the assassins in Bethany, I saw you take their knives and money and a couple of leather bundles, but also a piece of paper which we read. I bet it was a forged note.”

“What were the bundles?”

“I couldn’t tell. I guess we’ll find out on Saturday.”

We get back to our small room in what Martha has taken to calling “Roman Town,” after the way big cities in the United States are often still separated into different ethnic areas. She’s become a regular customer in the ladies’ bath, and the attendants are happy to see her because I’ve been giving them bronze and silver coins for treating her so well. When Martha leaves, I grab my coin purse and head to the Roman headquarters, where I hope to find Antonius.

The young Roman guard at the door smiles when he sees me. I’ve been coming daily and the entire staff seems to know what’s happening. There’s something about his smile that tells me this is the day I’ve been waiting for.

“Does Antonius have a moment for me?”

“He said if you showed up, to have you enter immediately.”

I give him a broad smile and clap him on the shoulder the way Romans seem to do when they’re happy.

Despite the permission, I give a light knock and enter the “office” respectfully. Antonius is a military man and deserves the deference to his authority. I find him at a desk of sorts, writing a message. Who would’ve thought that even two thousand years ago, officers would spend so much of their time doing paperwork?

“Antonius?”

He raises his hand to command me to wait while he finishes the message and places a wax seal upon it. When he’s done, a grin crosses his face.

“I have them.”

He waves me to his desk.

From a pocket in his tunic, he brings out a small leather pouch and hands it to me. I dump the contents into my hand. There are two plain gold wedding bands, but also something new to this world; the jeweler has set a single large, square diamond from Jocie’s cross onto a ring for me. The setting is crude and heavy compared to modern techniques using laser welders, but it’s beautiful none-the-less.

“These are perfect,” I say.

“Explain the diamond ring again.”

“It’s called an engagement ring. Where Martha comes from, this ring can be used to signify the promise to marry.”

“The Gaul’s have strange customs. Why not just take her as your wife and be done?”

“You can do it that way, but the ring will make her happy. I’m going to present it to her tonight.”

“I’m not sure who it’ll make happier - her or you. I don’t think I’ve ever seen a man so in love.”

“There’s a special spot where I want to present it to her. It’s a pretty garden outside the city. If we stay too late, is there a way to get back inside after the city gates are closed?”

Antonius shakes his head and sits back down, where he writes and seals a note we can give to the guard at the gate.

“Now, what do I owe the jeweler - and you - for your help?”

I take out my coin purse.

“Since you provided the gold and the jewel, the jeweler asks one silver coin for his labor. To me, you owe only a promise to have a happy life together and to have many fine Roman children.”

“Here is the coin for the jeweler, and here are two gold coins to buy food and wine for your staff. I want them to share my joy with a feast!”

When I get back to the room, Martha's waiting for me. She's wearing her toga with her midriff showing, and the bath attendants have put her hair up in a twist like I see many of the Roman women wearing. She looks perfect. Rather than lust, I'm thinking about how I'm going to ask her to marry me later.

"What's going on?" she asks. "That's a sillier grin than wearing a toga usually earns."

"I've never seen your hair up like that. You look so *Roman*. I'd like to go for a walk. Will you join me?"

I grab our cloaks and extend my arm.

Although it's getting late, I convince her to leave the city walls and we walk across the small valley to Gethsemane. The place just has an air of being special and safe.

"Isn't this place perfect?" I ask.

"It is, but I don't want to sleep here again. Shouldn't we get back to the city?"

"We will soon, but I wanted to come to the perfect place to ask the perfect woman to marry me. I know I've already asked once, but I have something to make it official."

I bring the engagement ring from my pocket. There's just enough of the setting sun filtering through the trees that she can see the sparkling diamond.

"Diamond engagement rings aren't going to be invented for centuries," I say. "This one is technically the first in history. So, may I slip it onto your finger?"

She holds out her hand and as I slip it on, she leaps into my arms and just says: "Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes."

I stop her for just a moment by kissing her, but she breaks the kiss to return to saying "Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes," and even tries to keep on saying it as I kiss her a second time.

"Shall I take that as a 'yes'?"

"Seventy times seven yeses. So, do you plan to make your bride-to-be sleep in the dirt again?"

"It's okay. I know the hall monitor and he gave me a pass to stay out after curfew."

Martha looks over my shoulder in our embrace.

"Cephas. I think the hall monitor sent someone to look for us."

I turn and look across the small valley. There are many men with torches heading this way.

"Did Antonius arrange for an engagement party?" she asks.

I turn to Martha with a look of horror on my face.

"I was so happy when the ring came and I made plans to come here that I forgot."

"Forgot what?"

"It's Thursday night. That's not a party looking for us. That's the temple guard coming to the garden to arrest Jesus."

We move quietly through the gardens until we see a torch marking where Jesus and the disciples must be waiting. Judas knows where to go to find Jesus, but we should beat him there by several minutes. We come upon the camp, but from our hiding spot in the shadows all we can see at first is the disciples sleeping. Then a little way off, we hear Jesus say: "If this cup cannot be taken away until I drink it, You will be done."

He stands up and walks to the apostles.

"Still sleeping? Still resting? Look, the time has come. I, the Son of Man am betrayed into the hands of sinners. Up, let's be going. See, my betrayer is here!"

The apostles are awake, but still groggy with sleep as Judas and the mob arrive.

Judas walks straight to Jesus and kisses Him on the cheek.

Jesus responds by saying: "Judas, how can you betray me, the Son of Man, with a kiss?"

We watch as the temple guards, supported by the mob, surround Jesus even though He makes no move to escape.

Simon Peter draws a sword and tries to free Jesus from their grip by slashing at one of the guards, clipping his ear clean off.

“Put away your sword,” Jesus commands him, followed by: “those who use the sword will be killed by the sword.”

We watch as Jesus reaches out and touches the man’s ear, and heals him.

“Am I a dangerous criminal that you have come armed with swords and clubs to arrest me? Why didn’t you arrest me in the Temple? I was there every day.”

Jesus is turning as He addresses the crowd to make eye contact with many individuals. When He reaches the end of the arc, His eyes lock with mine.

“But this is your moment, the time when the power of darkness reigns.”

He’s speaking to me, with a smile. Martha gasps next to me. She doesn’t understand Aramaic, but she knows Jesus just spoke to me personally.

The apostles and others who had followed Jesus here are overcome with fear. It spreads among them like a contagion until they all start to skitter into the woods like rabbits. The overwhelming emotions of dread and doom reach us in our hiding place. Martha turns to run, but I hold her hand and we cower together. Then I turn to run, and she holds me back. The temple guards are laughing, like it’s a new sport.

I see Yared, dressed in only a linen nightshirt, cowering like a frightened animal. The mob tries to grab him and they tear off his nightshirt, forcing him to run away into the woods naked, amid much laughter from the crowd.

The last to run is Simon Peter. His face is so twisted with torment, that as he tries to stand firm in the face of the terror, he no longer looks like himself. He looks like he’s half man and half beast. When the terror wins out, he runs straight at Martha and me. He can’t see us in the dark and I trip him. He tumbles a few meters and I leap on him and clamp my hand down over his mouth. He struggles fiercely, his eyes full of terror, and only begins to calm when Martha joins me and soothes him with her voice.

By the time he’s himself again, the mob has moved away.

“I’m Cephas and this is Martha, my betrothed. Rest a moment.”

“What shall I do? They’ve arrested Him.”

“We know. We saw everything.”

“Where are the others?”

“Scattered.”

“Thank you, Cephas and Martha. I must go to Him.”

“We know.”

But you’re going to have a rough night, between now and when the rooster crows.

Chapter Twenty-Four

We have no trouble getting back inside the city, thanks to the scroll from Antonius. When we return to the house where we're rooming, there's a guard waiting for us at the front door.

"There are many waiting inside for you."

Oh no. They're having the feast I requested. How can we feast now?

I turn to Martha and sigh.

"This is going to be difficult. I gave Antonius gold and suggested he have a feast for the staff to join in on the joy of our engagement. I don't think we can get out of it. Do you think you can fake happiness, in light of what night this is?"

She turns and takes both of my hands into hers.

"I'm happy to be engaged, Cephas. Really I am, but my heart is just so--"

"Heavy? I know. Believe me, doing this a second time isn't going to make it any easier. Right now, we know He's being beaten and tortured. What we need to hang onto is that He's enduring it all because He loves the world so much. They think they're winning, but they're fooling themselves. With every lash of the whip and every drop of His blood that's shed, He's getting a little closer to His victory. Can you hold onto that?"

"I think so."

When we enter the house, a yell goes up and the well-wishers rush at us to give us claps on the shoulders and hugs. Very little of the money I gave to Antonius went to buy food. Most of it bought wine, and nobody drinks like the Romans do.

With me translating, Martha charms every Roman in the room. She laughs and jokes and teases the men, while asking the married women for advice. To everyone else, she's the happy-go-lucky life of the party, but I know better. Her eyes speak volumes to me that nobody else sees. The sparkle is gone from them, and they're distant and brooding. I wonder if every drop of wine that's consumed reminds her of His blood that's being shed as we speak.

Hours later, we manage to excuse ourselves to get some sleep. Many of the young men follow us to our room, hooting and howling. To them, there's no difference between an engagement and a marriage, so they must presume we're leaving the party to consummate.

Martha and I curl up on the bed together, fully clothed and completely exhausted.

"You did a nice job acting, but you were thinking of Him the whole time," Martha says.

"How could you tell?"

"Your voice. You have one of the most expressive and animated voices I've ever known, but tonight it was flat."

"For you, it was your eyes. I've never seen your eyes look so distant."

We lay together in silence.

"I'm sorry I messed up our engagement, Martha. I wanted to remember this night as a joyous occasion, and now all we'll remember is that we partied - as Christ was being beaten. What's even worse is this is the second time for me. Right now, my past-self is in a nearby barracks, drinking with Flavius and his men."

"Well, we'll never forget the night you proposed," she replies.

"There's also the matter of tomorrow."

"The scourging and the crucifixion," Martha finishes my thought.

"You need to know up front that it's horrific. The crucifixion is removed from us by two millennia and we casually say, 'Christ died for us,' like He passed away in His sleep or something. It's not like that. He isn't going to just die tomorrow. He's going to suffer humiliation and pain that people from our century can't imagine. When you see it, you'll be willing to take a knife and plunge

it into His heart as an act of kindness. But, of course, you can't. He must die the way He was meant to die."

"You don't want me there," Martha says.

"I do want you to be there. It's the only way I can go through it again."

Martha and I agree to sleep for a few hours and then go to Pilate's house. My past-self won't arrive until just before Jesus starts the walk to Golgotha, and will then follow Jesus as He carries His cross. If we're careful, we should be able to avoid an encounter. Martha and I sleep in the same bed, though still fully clothed. We start the time curled up with each other, but soon both drift into a fitful sleep - full of dreams both good and evil.

I dream I'm back in a blacksmith's shop, hammering and forming a square piece of metal into a cylinder. I get a sense the work is important, but I don't know why, so I keep hammering.

I wake up first and find Martha twisted in the blanket, with an arm sticking out here at an angle that looks painful and a tuft of blonde hair poking out there. The sun has not yet risen. By now, Jesus has been tried by the priests; handed to the Romans; sent to Herod, who refused to judge Him; and is now back in the hands of the Romans. I try to let Martha have a little more sleep, but I'm unsuccessful in escaping the bed unnoticed.

"You look like you had a rough night. I'm sure the Romans will give me the credit," I say.

"From the looks of you, I gave you a good run for your money. Is there time for a quick bath?"

As if in response, we hear a crowd yelling: "Crucify, crucify!"

"We aren't far from Pilate's house. Pilate just declared Jesus has done nothing to warrant death, and is going to have him scourged next in an attempt to appease the crowd."

Martha sighs.

"Then let's go."

We're recognized as Roman citizens, and the guards let us walk freely in the public areas of the Roman compound. I recognize many of them from the engagement party, and they smile and nod as Martha and I pass. We're able to find a spot on an upper balcony, overlooking the courtyard where prisoners are sent to be scourged. The only "decoration" in the area is a short stone pillar fitted with rings where a prisoner can be chained. The courtyard itself is set with gray cobble stones, but the stones around the pillar are stained black with the dried blood of those who were scourged before Him.

When Jesus is brought in, Martha whimpers slightly. She's only ever seen Him smiling and happy as He entered the city and taught in the temple. Seeing Him now, after He's been beaten by both the temple guards and the Romans, is unsettling. One eye is nearly swollen shut from being punched. She's not ready for what's yet to come - but then - neither am I.

Jesus is led to the pillar and a Roman orders Him to kneel. When He doesn't comply quickly enough to suit the Roman, His legs are kicked behind the knee. Next, they chain Him so that His hands are above His head. The courtyard itself is filling with onlookers, including priests from the temple. The Romans do not scourge in private. The process is meant to be as publicly humiliating as it is painful.

Once He's in place, they strip Him to the waist and two soldiers get into position and await the order to begin. These don't look like regular Roman soldiers. The soldiers I've met are professional men, with flawless discipline and calm demeanors. These two look more like former outlaws, who got the job because they enjoy inflicting pain.

Each man holds a flagellum in his hand - a short, multi-thong whip where the thongs have metal balls tied onto their ends. When they're given the signal to begin, the men alternate whipping Jesus. Each time they whip Him, they take one or two steps of "wind up" so they can land the blow as hard as possible.

On the first blow, Martha lets out a whimpering gasp that's so loud, several people in the courtyard below turn around and look up at us. We're wearing Roman togas and tunics, so they probably assume we've never seen such a spectacle. Most ordinary Romans have never witnessed a scourging because it's considered too cruel a punishment to be inflicted on a Roman citizen. The process may even be considered too cruel for a Roman horse or mule.

The first few lashes cut only through the skin, but produce an immediate oozing of blood and plasma from the capillaries of the skin. What's less obvious is that, as those initial blows fell, the balls of lead struck with such force that they produced large bruises in the deeper layers of skin and muscle.

Martha flinches and gasps beside me as each blow falls. I manage to hold in my own gasps, but I can still feel each blow land in a deeper place inside of me.

As the leather thongs continue to cut deeper and deeper towards the subcutaneous tissues, those early bruises now break open with a spurt of blood. Some in the crowd cheer, like the first Roman to cause blood to spurt has scored a goal in some sick sporting event. The crowd understands that causing blood to spurt means the Romans have worked their way through the skin, and are now drawing blood from the veins and arteries of the underlying muscles. They may not understand the medical significance, but they know how to keep score in ancient blood sports.

Martha buries her face in my shoulder, but it doesn't stop her from flinching at the sound. I close my eyes and flinch along with her. Under Jewish law, the maximum punishment would be thirty-nine lashes, but the Romans have no such limitation. I don't bother to count. All I can do is trust God will stop the scourging at His appointed time.

I open my eyes again when the sound of the lashing stops. The two Romans are breathing hard and are covered in sweat from their efforts. Jesus is hanging by the chains on His wrists, writhing and moaning from the pain. His back is an unrecognizable mass of torn and bleeding tissue, some of it even falling away from His body in long ribbons. They drag Him away.

"Next, they'll take him back to Pilate," I say.

We leave the balcony and make our way to Pilate's house along with other Roman citizens. Last time, I watched Pilate from the courtyard and saw the event from the perspective of a Jew. This time, I'm seeing it from balconies, from the perspective of a Roman. The Roman citizens around us are speaking of all the Jews with contempt. To them, Jesus is just another member of the rabble who are causing trouble and refusing to accept the utopia offered by Rome. I feel like I could throw a com in their ears and transplant them into my time without them missing a beat. Humanity has been living one man's idea of utopia after another for two thousand years.

"My past-self is down in the courtyard crowd. Cover your head and stand in the shadows," I say to Martha. "See - there I am."

I'm standing in a toga near Flavius and some other Roman soldiers. We can see the Pharisees working the crowd to ensure the outcome they want.

"You were hiding," Martha says. "Just like the Apostles."

Seeing myself from this perspective, it's clear she's correct. I was afraid and was using the Romans for protection. I can't deny her observation, so I stand in silence.

When Pilate comes out of the house, the crowd quiets, but there are still murmurs. I know the murmurs in the crowd below were mostly rebellious comments about the Roman occupiers and disappointment that Jesus didn't drive them out. Here in the balcony, the murmurs from the Romans are about the Hebrew "dogs" in the courtyard below.

Pilate says a few words, then reminds the crowd of the generous "Roman tradition" of releasing one prisoner during the Passover celebration. The murmurs in the balcony are that it's an overly generous tradition, and that all the prisoners should be run through with swords.

"Which one do you want me to release to you, Barabbas, or Jesus who is called the Messiah?"

He then sits to hear the response of the crowd. As he sits, a messenger comes out of the house and speaks in his ear. Pilate gets a curious look on his face, but stays silent in thought.

The Pharisees are moving through the crowd now. I can hear them saying: “Ask for Barabbas” and “Crucify the other.”

“Which of these two do you want me to release to you?” Pilate asks again.

With the Pharisees leading, the crowd shouts “Barabbas.”

“But if I release Barabbas, what should I do with Jesus who is called the Messiah?”

“Crucify Him!” the crowd shouts.

“Why? What crime has He committed?”

Pilate gets no explanation, the crowd just yells louder and louder for Jesus to be crucified. Pilate goes back into the house, but returns a few minutes later.

“I am going to bring Him out to you now, but understand that I clearly find him not guilty.”

Jesus is ushered out of the house by Roman soldiers. He’s wearing a purple robe and there’s a crown of long, sharp thorns pressed into His head. His hands are trembling and His eyes look glassy from the pain.

“Here is the man!” Pilate says.

The priests and the Temple guards start the chant again: “Crucify! Crucify!” and the crowd goes back to its frenzied state.

Pilate’s face frowns with frustration. He wants an explanation of why Christ should be crucified, but he’s getting nowhere.

Many of the Roman soldiers now have their hands on their sword handles, ready to draw their weapons at the first sign the crowd is going to turn on them next. The crowd of Romans in the balcony leans forward, perhaps hoping for just such a bloodbath. Having gotten what they wanted, the Pharisees now work to calm the crowd, and the tension begins to ease.

Pilate speaks to a servant and a few moments later a bowl of water is brought out. Pilate washes his hands for the crowd to see. As he does so, a woman dressed in a Roman toga dumps a bucket of dirty bath water from an upper balcony, dousing several Jews in the courtyard. The Romans around us laugh at the sport of it.

“I am innocent of the blood of this man. The responsibility is yours,” Pilate says.

When the hand-washing is done, the Hebrew servant who brought the bowl dumps the water used to declare Christ’s innocence with the same look of contempt as the Roman woman with the bucket. I’ve now stood in both the balcony and the courtyard to witness this event and listened to Romans and Jews alike declare themselves the victors. Martha and I watch as my past-self slips his Hebrew cloak on and blends in with the crowd again.

The Romans around us praise their system for meting out “justice” so another Jew could get what he deserves. The Jews, and their Pharisees below us, also praise their system, which they used to condemn a sinless man in order to retain their power. In my time, people praise our system of atheistic theocracy disguised as a Republic, but the truth is that little has changed in two thousand years.

Martha turns to leave, but I’m staring at Pilate, who is standing between two columns speaking to someone.

“What is it?” Martha asks.

“Pilate. He tried his best, but it didn’t matter. I am Pilate and he is me - just two small pieces in a large puzzle. Two millennia from now, I’m going to stand between two columns in a toga, playing my part just like Pilate did this morning. Will my part make any more of a difference than his?”

Chapter Twenty-Five

We decide to go straight to Golgotha to ensure we're not spotted by my past-self. We avoid the precession for Jesus and the celebration for the gloating Barabbas that I encountered last time, but we can hear the crowd following Jesus, as they insult Him and cheer at His suffering. I thought we'd be the first to reach Golgotha, but we're not. A dozen people that I don't recognize are already there, presumably drawn by morbid curiosity.

As the crowd approaches, I spot my past-self following Christ, step by painful step.

"It's like you were trying to use your body to shield Him from the mocking and insults," Martha says.

"I don't remember doing that."

Martha reaches down and takes my hand into hers.

"You didn't ruin our engagement," she says.

Once Christ gets closer, I feel Martha's grip on my hand tighten. I want to remain strong to help Martha through what she's about to witness, but it may turn out to be her who helps me.

Christ is thrown back onto the rough wooden beam, and soldiers hold His arms as the one who is to drive the nails steps forward. Christ looks at the soldiers with His kind eyes.

"He's forgiving them," Martha says. "I just know He's forgiving them."

When the soldier with the hammer strikes his first blow, my past-self lets out a loud cry, like he's the one being nailed to the cross instead of Christ.

Why shouldn't a Christian cry out? Isn't that the point? Isn't it our sins being nailed to the cross?

Martha also lets out a loud whimper and buries her head in my chest. I try to console her by whispering Bible passages to her.

As the soldier drives the nail through Christ's other wrist, I become aware of the crying out of the two thieves, as they're nailed to their crosses. The last time I was here, I was so focused on Jesus that I paid little attention to them.

After the soldiers nail a sign above Jesus and move off to throw dice to see who gets His robe, I watch as my past-self moves to the back of the crowd. I take Martha by the hand and lead her to the front. She thinks we're going to see Jesus, but we're actually going to see the man being crucified to His left. It's the leader of the men who tried to rob and rape Martha.

Not long ago, I wanted this man dead. I had such anger and hatred for him that I wanted to cut out his eyeballs. Now I'm not sure what to feel about him, though I certainly pity him his fate.

"I'm sorry," I say.

"Got what you wanted, didn't you?"

"This isn't what I wanted. Killing your friend isn't what I wanted either. We just wanted to leave in peace."

He heaves heavily upwards and gasps for breath. He'll be doing this for hours.

"We came to say we forgive you."

The next sound he makes appears to be an attempt at laughter, but comes out as more a cough.

"I suppose our forgiveness seems like nothing right now, but soon you'll be dead and I hope it'll be worth something when you stand before God."

"Here's what I think of your forgiveness," he replies.

He tries to spit at me, but his mouth is too dry to manage it. A drop or two drool out of the corner of his mouth and down his chin.

Three times I open my mouth to reply, but can find no words. I look him straight in the eyes and search for even a flicker of repentance and find - nothing.

"Save your forgiveness for yourself, murderer!" he says.

A few heads turn from watching Jesus to seeing what this new commotion is about.
“You’re next! Your cross is coming, murderer!”

He continues to yell at my back as I lead Martha into the crowd. Luckily, the crowd has heard all manner of things said by those hanging on a cross, so their focus returns to Jesus.

“What was he telling you?” Martha asks when we reach the far edge of the crowd.
“The truth.”

Except for the rasping of His breath, Jesus has been silent for an hour, so when He speaks, everyone goes quiet. They probably expect Him to beg for mercy as they’ve heard over and over in past crucifixions. Instead of begging for Himself, He begs for the world to receive mercy when He shouts: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

There they are. Some of the best known words Jesus ever spoke.

Martha and I watch as my past-self walks from the far edge of the crowd and speaks to Jesus. It’s now my turn to squeeze Martha’s hand. Watching this is going to be painful

“What were you doing?” Martha asks.

“Jesus said: ‘Forgive them, Father, for they know not what they do.’ It occurred to me that everyone else here has that excuse, except me. As a time traveler and a believer, I know what’s happening here. Even worse, I thought about all the times in my life that I knew something was wrong with the world, and yet did nothing to stop it. I went to Him to ask if I could be forgiven too.”

And in a moment, He’ll nod His head and forgive me. But did I deserve His forgiveness? What did my former-self learn? I went back to my time and continued to feel uncontrolled lust for Martha in my heart. I continued to feel hatred, to the point of killing a man with a knife. How broken of a person am I that Christ can personally forgive me, and yet I learned nothing?

We see Jesus nod and my past-self melts back into the crowd. I think my knees might collapse beneath me at the thought of how I’ve let Him down since that simple nod of forgiveness. When I look at Him again, I realize Christ is now staring at the ‘present’ me. I return His stare and He nods His head again. I feel tears running down my cheeks.

That’s what my past-self didn’t learn. His forgiveness isn’t limited to our past sins. He knows we’re broken and will sin again, but He forgives us for those sins too, if we repent.

“You have looks of joy on your face - both then and now,” Martha says.

“What you just witnessed was the moment I finally understood something. On Sunday morning, we’ll all take great joy in His resurrection. It’s His triumph over even death. What you just saw me figure out is that I need to take equal joy in His death, as I do in His life. Would you like to know what both the past and present me are thinking about right now? We’re thinking about the two white roses you gave me; one that says ‘life’ and the other, ‘death.’ We’re thinking about the choice they represent and the choice Christ is making right now on that cross. And we’re both overjoyed He’s choosing to die for us.”

The crucifixion wears on for many hours. Like last time, I’m amazed to see how long the crowd is willing to stand here and watch men die. After the first hour, even the Pharisees get tired of mocking Jesus, but like the rest of the crowd, they’re hanging on, waiting to see if something will happen. In fact, it appears they’re hoping something will happen. I think they’d like nothing better than to see an army of angels descend and lift Christ from His cross, and watch Him start killing Roman soldiers with a golden sword, as their new king.

Such are the shortsighted hopes of humans. They don’t understand the real purpose of Christ. They want God to send another human hero or king, like David. They forget that those heroes and kings of the past all eventually died, and their children squandered the gift God gave to them. They

stand here watching, hoping to find a man to lift them out of the temporary oppression of the Romans. They can't see that Christ wants to lift them to everlasting life in heaven.

Like last time, the sun goes dark even though it's directly overhead and there are no clouds in the sky. I can feel the excitement in the crowd as we stand in the eerie, undefined twilight that allows us to see each other and the three crosses, but not much more. Everyone is anticipating that something will happen soon, but we end up standing and sitting in silence for hours, listening to the sounds of the three men moving up and down on their crosses and gasping for air.

When the silence is interrupted by the clear voice of Jesus saying: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" the crowd jumps back to life. Moments later, Jesus says: "I am thirsty."

The crowd murmurs some more and a boy tries to give Him sour wine soaked into a sponge by putting it onto the end of a hyssop branch.

Someone in the crowd says: "Leave Him alone. Let's see whether Elijah will come and save Him."

They're still hoping something miraculous will happen.

We wait another minute, listening to the breathing, when we hear Jesus say: "It is finished," and with a long, low breath, His body relaxes, and it's apparent He's gone from us.

As the last of His breath expires, we start to hear - and then feel - a low rumble in the ground that increases to become a great shaking. I envision the shroud in the Great Temple being torn from top to bottom.

Welcome to the new covenant.

Chapter Twenty-Six

After the shaking stops, the crowd calms down and the sun returns to normal. People wander away, trying - in their own minds - to make sense of what happened here today. My past-self is asleep on the ground, exhausted from the experience.

“Shall we go?” I ask.

“I think we’re still needed here,” Martha replies.

I follow the line of her sight and see the two assassins standing at a distance. From the motions of their hands, they appear to be arguing about something.

“They’re probably deciding if they should kill me now or kill me later.”

“They don’t know there’s anyone here who understands English,” Martha says. “Let’s get closer and listen.”

With the crowd dispersed, we stick out like a sore thumb, but we’re able to get to within ten meters from them without them even glancing at us. I wish I could pull back my hood to hear them better, but if they see two of me, I have no doubt there’ll be trouble. Martha and I kneel, as if praying, and listen.

“He’s asleep. Let’s just kill him now and be done. What’s it matter if it’s now or at the cave tomorrow?” the smaller of the two says.

“It matters because that’s the deal. The deal is, he writes the note tomorrow and then we kill him,” the big guy replies.

“What do we care about Henry’s deal? The money is already waiting for us when we get back, if he writes the note or not.”

“If we’re going to break the deal, then I’m ready to break the whole thing. This hit just doesn’t feel right anymore. We watched Jesus heal people for three days. Doesn’t that count for anything? And today the sun went dark and the earthquake hit, just when Jesus dies. I’m thinking I want to talk to this Cephas guy more than I want to kill him.”

“If you try to back out on me, I’ll kill you both. We’re getting enough money to live like kings for life. We let them rip out all our enhancing and came back two thousand years for this job, and I’m not letting an earthquake change that.”

“Okay. But we’re not killing him here and I’m talking to him before we kill him. And after that, we’re going to hang around at the tomb and see what happens.”

“What do you think you’re going to see at the tomb? An angel?”

“Maybe.”

“The only angels I want to see are the women I plan to buy with the money we make. Fine, we’ll let him sleep and then we’ll start tailing him. It’ll make the cave easier to find anyway. We have time, let’s eat.”

They walk back towards the city.

“Our next appointment is in Bethany, early tomorrow. Are you ready for that bath and a little nap?” I ask Martha.

Our “little nap” turns into about eight hours of sleep for me, and almost ten hours for Martha. I use the time alone to carve the Roman numerals into the staff. I don’t know why I didn’t do it earlier. Lately, I’ve felt like the whole world has a timing to it, and it just wasn’t the right time to carve the numerals until now.

It would be difficult to leave the city unnoticed, on horseback in the middle of the night, so we leave on foot through a small walking gate the Romans leave open, but guarded at night. We reach Bethany an hour before dawn and start sneaking around in the shadows, watching the barn where

my past-self is sleeping right now. Martha is first to spot the assassins. They, too, are watching the barn.

Just before dawn, the woman of the house comes out and starts to tend the farm animals. She has some old bread she's breaking up and feeding to the chickens. When she gets to the last large chunk, she tosses it to the flock, but then picks it back up and takes it into the barn, where I'm sleeping.

I can't believe I ate that.

A while later, I see myself emerge from the barn and resume my trek to the arena cave. Martha and I wait until we see the assassins leave their spot in the shadows, then we start following them. After several minutes of careful tailing, Martha taps me on the shoulder.

"You have no clue you're being followed. What tipped you off?"

"I should hear them running up behind me soon."

"Why would they start running?"

"I don't know. I just heard the footsteps behind me."

We watch as I continue to stroll and the assassins continue their quiet pursuit.

"Are there any dangerous snakes around here?" Martha asks.

"A few. Why?"

Without a word, Martha picks up a snake that was hunting for rodents, grabbing it behind the head. She flings it at the assassins, then grabs my hand and pulls me into the shadows as the snake hits the bigger of the two in the back. He lets out a little yelp when he sees what hit him and starts to run. I watch myself look over my shoulder and start to run from the assassins.

"Through here," I say.

We run between two buildings. I can see the alley where my past-self will soon double-back to escape the assassins, and position myself and Martha on either side of the narrow space where I'll emerge. Seconds later, we can hear me running down the alley and, at the last moment, I stick my staff out and send myself tumbling onto the ground.

Martha and I then press ourselves flat against the buildings and wait for the two assassins to emerge. The smaller guy gives an ugly smile when he sees my past-self on the ground. The sound of my staff whizzing through the air makes him glance in my direction just a split second before the staff hits him square in the mouth. I use the other end of the staff to sweep him off his feet, and then whack him across the temple, which leaves him stunned senseless.

I move back to a fighting stance to help Martha with the bigger assassin, but it's already too late for him. He was caught off guard, so Martha stunned him by boxing both ears. As he doubles over in pain, Martha lands a knee to his face, followed by a kick to the groin which sends him to the ground, where he rolls over and vomits his breakfast.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see my past-self inching away from us.

"Stop," I command myself gruffly in Latin, while pointing the staff.

Martha checks the possessions of the assassins and comes away with two coin purses, several knives, two objects wrapped in leather bundles, and a sealed modern envelope. She opens the paper and smiles as she reads.

She and I exchange a look and nod. I toss the staff to my past-self.

"Run," I say in a gruff voice, then I watch as the old me sprints back through the alley and down the road towards Jericho.

The would-be assassins are easy to tie up, using their own Egyptian clothing. Underneath, they're still wearing modern shirts and pants.

Martha hands me the envelope she found in the big guy's pocket. Her guess was correct, the note is a perfect forgery of my handwriting. We heard them say yesterday that I would get to write a

note today, but then they would kill me. That means this note is meant to replace the note I sent as I traveled to Galilee.

My original note said:

To the People of the World:

Jesus was crucified, but by the time I reached the tomb everyone was gone. I have followed his apostles and have seen neither his dead body nor him risen from the dead. Although I'm eager to return to our time, I must complete my mission, so I'm following the apostles to Galilee to get final proof. Check for notes daily starting in one week.

The forgery reads:

To the People of the World:

I saw Jesus crucified and saw where he was buried. I watched the tomb all night, and saw the apostles steal the body while the guards slept. The guards made up the story about the angel so they wouldn't be punished. Although I'm eager to return to our time, I think it would be best to get physical proof that the body was stolen. I'm following the apostles to Galilee to find out where they buried him. Check for notes daily starting in one week.

"So the plan was to kill me and send back a forgery. Then, when I disappear, it'll just be assumed the apostles caught me in the act and killed me. Simple and effective."

"Why let you send the note today?" Martha asks. "The one you send today has the hidden message to Four. Why would Henry want that note to come forward through time?"

"You said that note caused Four to become more active worldwide. Maybe he wants you active. Maybe he thinks it'll be easier to find you and wipe you out? Let's ask these two when they wake up."

"What's in the two leather bundles?" I ask.

Martha starts to unwrap the bundle closest to her.

"No way! Why didn't the tech in this thing explode?"

She holds up a handgun and two clips of ammunition. I take the weapon from her and inspect it.

"It's because these are almost two hundred years old. It says on the side that it was made in 2023. That's a decade before electronics were required to be incorporated into projectile guns. It doesn't have all of the modern computer-assisted target identification software on it, but it will still blow a large hole in things."

I unwrap the second gun and hold it. Physically, it feels natural to hold a gun - and I'm sure I could be as accurate with it as I am with a stun gun - but for the first time, a gun is giving me an uneasy feeling.

"Now I wish we'd brought the horses. We need to get these guys moving before the neighborhood wakes up," I say. "I have an idea. Don't speak in English. Let them think you're from this time."

"How will we talk to each other?" she asks.

"I don't know. I guess we'll have to just act like a married couple and communicate without speaking."

We poke, prod, and slap the men until they stop groaning and regain their senses.

"On your feet, boys. Time for a little walk."

The two failed assassins stumble along with their hands tied. The town of Bethany is stirring and we're seen by many, but apparently having two foreigners marched off by Romans is either a common sight or considered none of their concern. We direct them into a ravine where there are no houses, and sit them down in the dirt. I speak a few commands to Martha in Aramaic and she does a passable job of pretending she understands.

“Sending someone to kill me is low, even for Henry,” I say in English.

“Now I wish he’d listened to me and killed you when he had you on his tube car,” the smaller one says.

“What are your names?”

I get a defiant look from the small one and silence from the big one.

“Okay. Here’s a more interesting question. Why are you going to let me send a note forward in time today, but replace the next note with this one? Why not just kill me today?”

“That was the deal,” the big one replies. “And my name is Michael and his is Francis.”

“Shut up,” Francis says.

“Can I call you Cephas?” Michael asks.

“Sure, Michael. In your line of work, I bet you don’t get to be on a first-name basis with your targets ... at least not for long.”

“It’s like this, Cephas. You know more about the Bible than anyone. Since we got here, I’ve seen some things that make me wonder. I saw people healed, including you. I saw the sun go dark and I felt the earthquake when Jesus died. Not much scares me, but now I’m scared of going to hell.”

Francis continues to glare at Michael.

“You should be afraid. You didn’t even know you had a soul, and now you find you have the responsibility for caring for it.”

“I’ve done some really bad things. Is it too late?” Michael asks.

“You’ll have to answer for your sins, but it’s never too late. Francis, you don’t look convinced. Early tomorrow, Christ will rise from the dead. Would that convince you?”

“Sure. Why not?”

“So what shall we do all day?” I ask.

“Don’t you have a note to send forward?” Francis replies.

Good. They haven’t figured out that there are two of me.

“Yes, but I can’t leave you alone here with her. She’d likely kill you before I get back.”

They give Martha nervous glances.

“And if I take her with me, you’d most likely escape.”

“Then I guess we all go to the cave,” Michael says.

“I guess so.”

I can’t take them onto the road, because my past-self will be walking back to Jerusalem and we can’t risk running into me. Instead, I take them up and down the hills. With their hands bound the walking is very slow, but that’s my objective. As we walk, I tell Bible stories. I tell them about Moses and Saul. I tell them about Jonah, Samson, and King David. Michael is very interested and asks many questions - like a little kid. Francis is inventing new and unusual excuses to fall down, and each time, he scrapes the crude ropes that are binding him along the rocks to fray them.

I call a rest break in a small valley. The arena cave is less than a kilometer away.

“This is as far as you guys go. I hid the entrance well, and I’d rather not lead the two of you straight to it.”

Francis gets a curious look on his face. I can’t tell if he already knows the location of the cave or not. I suspect he’s worried he can’t find it on his own.

“What do you care if we know where the cave is?” he asks.

“Why would the location matter to you?” I ask. “You can’t have come here through the same arena. You must have another cave around here somewhere that’s your route back.”

Francis smiles.

“Let’s take something off the table right now,” I say. “The part of your mission where you send this forgery is over.”

I take the note from my pack and rip it in half, then stuff it back into the pack.

“I hope you’ll call off the part where you kill me, once you see Christ risen.”

I pretend to instruct Martha in Aramaic. She babbles back at me for fun. We even pretend to argue about something.

“She promised not to kill you - but, just the same, I wouldn’t make any sudden movements.”

I head off in the wrong direction, then double back towards the arena cave. I watch my past-self bury the cave entrance and walk away towards the road. I open the envelope that contained the forged “Note to the World” and remove a smaller piece of paper that went unnoticed by Martha. It’s just a corner of a sheet that has been ripped from a notebook page, but contains a short note to Henry, explaining the assassination plan and promises details to follow. Then I tear a corner from my notebook and write a note of my own, dig out the cave entrance, and place it inside the envelope my past-self just left in the arena.

When I get back, the two men are saying any number of strange things to Martha and watching her reaction.

“Where’d you pick her up, anyway?” Francis asks.

“I saved her life. She belongs to me.”

“Really? I’ve been watching her eyes as we’ve been talking. I think she knows some English. And that cloak you’re wearing isn’t the same one you were wearing before, and you both seem to be wearing modern shoes.”

“Francis Guttman,” I say, and he smiles. “You were at the Bureau when I did a seminar on observational skills. You sat in the back and scowled the entire time, but I see you were paying attention.”

“How’d you get here?” Francis asks.

“Same as you, the arena under the Sphinx. We came to keep you from killing me. I hate to tell you guys this, but the whole thing was blown to bits after we left. We’re all stuck here together.”

Francis smiles again.

Thank you, Francis. It’s just as I suspected.

“Cephas?” Martha says and Francis laughs when she speaks in English. “Now that we’ve saved you, can’t we all just use the arena that’s in the cave right now?”

“Care to take that one, Francis?” I ask.

He turns to Martha.

“How? We can’t get pulled forward during the Travelers’ Initiative because the whole world is watching that arena. We could get pulled forward after the Traveler’s Initiative is over - but before the machine is moved to Egypt - but there isn’t anyone on the other end who expects us to be in the arena, so there’s no reason to activate the device.”

“Cephas was sending secret notes to Henry, along with the messages to the world,” Martha says. “We could send him a note telling him to do another pull a week after Cephas returns.”

“That would pull us forward in time to a point before we left,” Francis responds. “Since none of us remember the power going out all over the world a week after the Traveler’s Initiative, that creates some form of a causation paradox. We became stuck here the moment you blew up the machine in Egypt.”

Francis is a very good liar.

Martha is still trying to think of a scenario that will get us home, but I cut her thinking short.

“Since the timeline is safe, and you no longer have a reason to kill either the ‘present’ me or my past-self, I guess there’s no need to leave you two tied up.”

I take out a knife and cut their ropes.

“Let’s head back to Jerusalem. Since this is our new home, it’s time for you two to get right with God.”

Chapter Twenty-Seven

All the way back to Jerusalem, I tell Michael and Francis about the books of the New Testament and how they fulfill the prophecies set out in the Old Testament. Michael continues to ask me questions about salvation through Christ, and is excited to watch the tomb and see Christ risen. Francis remains silent.

I ask Martha to find a strategic spot where we'll be able to observe the tomb without being seen. She picks a perfect spot on a low rise where Michael and Francis won't be able to see where I was concealed in the rocks the first time around, and interfere - in any way - with the timeline. More importantly, she picks the exact spot where I saw someone carrying a body, and where I collected a blood sample that turned out to be human. We're in the perfect spot to know the truth of what I saw.

We agree to meet here at midnight, and part ways.

"Aren't we taking a big chance by letting them out of our sight?" Martha asks when they're gone. "What if they disappear and make a mess of time?"

"You take a chance every time you allow someone to make a choice. Giving mankind free will was a heck of a chance on God's part; but one person who chooses to believe is still more valuable to Him than millions who are forced against their will. They'll be here tonight."

Martha and I arrive at the spot just after midnight. The night is very dark, but we can see the torches the Temple guards are using, as they stand watch at the tomb. Four hours later, Michael and Francis still have not arrived.

"I was afraid of this," Martha says.

"They may just be in the wrong spot."

"Actually, I've spent all night trying to convince Francis to come," Michael says from behind us.

"I'm glad you made it," I reply.

"Tell me what the Gospels say is going to happen."

I spend the next half hour explaining what the Gospels say, and answering his many questions, as we watch the tomb.

"Story time's over," I hear Francis say from behind me, followed by a sharp pain on the side of my head.

When I regain a groggy awareness of what's happening, I can feel a knife pressed against my throat.

"Find them and hand them over, or he dies right now," I hear Francis commanding Martha.

Martha is rummaging through my pack.

"Here. Take them and go."

I feel the knife release from my neck and hear the sound of Francis backing away, followed by the sound of him checking the clips in each gun, then chambering rounds.

"Take this one, Michael," he says.

"You're going to miss it," I say.

"Oh, good, you're awake," Francis replies. "Both of you - get your backs against that rock."

He makes us sit with our backs to the tomb.

"You're going to miss it."

As if someone was listening for my cue, Michael and Francis' faces are bathed in a soft white light that's getting steadily brighter. They're no longer looking at us, so Martha starts to shift her

weight to attack. Either one of us could disarm Francis. I think about the feel and power of having his gun in my hand and realize it's a false comfort. I put my hand onto hers and shake my head.

On this night of nights, my comfort will come from the Lord alone - not a gun in my hands.

"Michael. What's happening?" I ask.

"It's an angel. He's as bright as a torch and he's heading for the tomb. Now he's rolling back the stone with one hand and the guards are all fainting. It's all just like you said."

"Francis? Now what do you think?"

His face is lit up, but you can almost see his heart go dark.

"I don't care. I don't care if angels are real, and I don't care if Jesus is the Son of God. I'm killing you, and I'm going home and I'm getting the money. I'm going to have a big house, and women, and drugs. Lots of women and drugs."

He points the gun at my head.

"Those things are only temporary. Losing your soul is forever," I say.

"Yeah, well, that's my choice."

"It always is."

"Goodbye, Cephas."

I hear the safety click off.

Everything I saw the first time I was here now makes sense. What I mistook as a crack of thunder was a gunshot, and the blood on the ground that I sopped up and took back must be my own. It was my body that I watched Michael throw over his shoulder and carry off - not Christ's. It was a lot of blood, but I could have survived it. The fact that there was only one pool of blood must mean Martha survives, at least for a while. As I stare my own death in the face, I'm comforted in knowing the blood did not come from Christ. He died and rose again. I smile at the thought.

The bright flash and loud boom of the gun shock the calm of the night. I feel no pain, so I wonder if I'm already dead. I must not be quite dead yet, because I can still feel the rock against my back, so I open my eyes.

Francis is dead on the ground in front of me, with a bullet through his head. Michael is standing over him with a smoking gun in his hand. He drops the gun and sinks to his knees, with his face in his hands.

"It's too late for me, it's too late for me," he says.

I move to him and start shaking him.

"Look, Michael. Look at the tomb!"

We all look at the tomb. The angel is sitting above it and pure white light is pouring out of the entrance.

"We're all broken, Michael, but nothing is beyond His power to heal - not even death itself."

I see a figure emerge from the tomb and look up at the angel, but in an instant they both disappear, and we're plunged back into complete darkness, except for the guard's torches.

We pass the next few minutes in silence, until we hear a guard trying to wake up his fainted comrades. One enters the tomb, but re-emerges just a moment later. We can see his hands gesticulating about the absence of a body, and within seconds they're all running towards the city.

"We need to leave," I say. "We can't be here when the Pharisees come."

Martha secures the two guns in my pack.

"What about Francis?" Michael asks. "We can't just leave him here."

Michael is right. Francis wasn't a believer, but we're still obligated to give him some form of burial. Besides, even a dead body has the potential to change the timeline. While Michael heaves Francis over his shoulder, I take one last look at the tomb. There are three women with jars making their way towards the entrance.

“Sorry, Cephas,” I whisper at the spot where the former me is watching us. “You’re going to have to live with a little doubt for a while.”

The poor are often buried in public graveyards that are little more than slit trenches, so we decide to take Francis to one that I spotted near Golgotha. We cover his head so there’ll be no questions about the strange wound that killed him, and I run ahead to make the arrangements, while Michael carries him. The man who digs the trenches will let us bury Francis for five bronze coins. I pay him, and he shows me a spot next to a recently covered grave, where an older woman is kneeling and crying.

When Michael and Martha arrive, the old woman gives us room to work, but otherwise pays us little notice. She looks up occasionally when we speak in English, but continues to cry just the same.

“You knew him best. Do you want to say anything?” I ask Michael when we’re done.

“Just that I’m sorry.”

We’re all looking at the ground in silence, when the old woman speaks.

“Was that your brother?”

“No. I just met him yesterday.” I say.

“This is my son, my only child.”

She pats the ground where her son now lies.

“I wish he’d had a friend like you. Maybe he’d have had a better life.”

“I’m sorry for your loss. How did he die?”

“The Romans hung him on a cross two days ago,” she replies and I feel chilled.

“He was hung next to the one called Christ?”

“Yes.”

She sobs, and I swallow hard.

“Was he hung to the left or the right of Christ?”

I take a deep breath, not wanting to know the answer.

“On the left.”

As she says it, I exhale.

“You knew my son.”

“I met him once. I begged him to turn his back on evil and repent to God, but he laughed at me. The one we just laid beside him was the same way. It was the undoing of them both.”

She slowly and unsteadily rises to her feet, like she’s suffering great pain in her joints, and embraces me.

“Since the mother of that one is not here; I’ll speak for us both - and for all mothers. Don’t give up trying. Some of our sons may be willing to listen to you, and make a different choice.”

Martha and I return to our room among the Romans and I pay the stable men to let Michael sleep on the hay. He doesn’t speak their language, but it turns out he enjoys helping them with the horses. Every afternoon, Martha and I meet Michael for prayer and Bible study, which I do from memory. When we hear that many of the remaining eleven apostles have left for Galilee, I insist that Martha and Michael must come to Galilee to see Christ risen. I buy a horse for Michael and we set out to follow the footsteps of my past-self, who is only a few hours ahead of us.

When we’re between Bethany and Jericho, I notice Michael staring up into the hills, towards the cave with the arena.

“I won’t show you the cave.”

He jumps at the sound of my voice, then looks at me.

“You knew. You knew all along,” Michael says.

“Knew what?” Martha asks.

“That there may still be a way home,” Michael says.

“How?” Martha asks. “We blew the time machine to bits and we can’t get pulled back during the Traveler’s Initiative, without creating a paradox.”

“There’s another time machine,” I say. “They built a smaller prototype machine. I saw it when I was training at NASA. It was how Michael and Francis were supposed to get home.”

“Then let’s go!”

Martha’s excitement pains me, because I know I’m going to have to crush it.

“Tell her the bad news, Michael.”

He gets a disturbed look on his face, that I already know the plan before he says it aloud.

“We had one transport time. We were supposed to kill Cephas the day after the crucifixion, and today we would have sent the forged note saying he was going to Galilee. Our transport time was going to be at noon tomorrow.”

“So let’s be in the cage at noon tomorrow,” Martha says.

“There’s no point,” Michael says. “There was another note in the envelope with the forged note Cephas ripped. It explained the assassination plan, including how to get us home. After we killed Cephas, we were supposed to send that note, along with the one with the hidden message to Christians.”

“But isn’t that a paradox too?” Martha asks. “You never sent the note, so the assassination plan should never have been set in motion. None of us should even be here.”

“It would be a paradox,” I say, “except that I went to the arena cave the day after the crucifixion and sent Henry the plan. I set it all in motion.”

“You ordered your own assassination?” Michael asks.

“Apparently the assassination was my idea from the beginning. The note was in my left-handed handwriting to disguise it. Sending it was the only way to avoid the paradox.”

“Since you sent the note, why can’t we be in the cage at noon tomorrow?” Martha asks. “It shouldn’t change the timeline because we’d get pulled back after the Traveler’s Initiative is over. All the loops would be closed.”

“I’m sorry. I thought the same thing, but we can’t allow Henry to pull any of us back and learn why the assassination failed. The future with the truth told is too important to risk.”

Martha closes her eyes and sighs.

“And the only way to protect the truth is for us to stay here. I wish you’d never gotten my hopes up. I’d come to terms with the time machine being destroyed and living out my life here.”

She prods her horse into a trot so she can be alone.

I’m sorry too, Martha. Sometimes it seems like I can solve any puzzle set in front of me, but the reality is that I’m the master of none. God alone must be the master of time and this must all play out according to His timeline, not ours.

We reach the Sea of Galilee a few days later and set up a camp in the hills, out of sight of where the apostles are camping and fishing. Each day near dawn, we sneak down to the shore and watch. When we reach the shore on the fifth night, the apostles are all in a boat a few hundred meters off shore.

“This is the day,” I say to Martha and Michael.

The boat has lanterns on the front and back, which bob up and down as the boat rocks in the gentle waves. We’re all focused on the lights, when out of the corner of my eye, a figure appears out of nowhere. I hear a man’s voice say: “Friends, have you caught any fish?” and the apostles in the boat say: “No.”

“Throw out your net on the right-hand side of the boat and you’ll get plenty of fish!” instructs the man on the shore. I hear the splash of the net, and soon after the sounds of happy men straining at a net full of fish.

“It is the Lord!” exclaims one of the men in the boat, and we see someone dive overboard and swim to shore. Once again, there’s no doubt that it’s Jesus standing among them. Just like last time, it takes every bit of willpower I have to not join their fire and eat breakfast with them. Again, I want to put my fingers on the scars on His wrists and side, but I know I can’t.

As if in answer to my thoughts, Michael asks, “Can we go talk to Him? Can we touch His scars?”

“You don’t need to touch Him in order to believe,” I reply.

We move to a spot above where my past-self will soon conceal himself in the bushes, and wait. Right on schedule, we see me hide just fifty meters in front of us. I can’t help but look over my shoulder to see if a future version of me is hiding even further up the hill, watching us all. I’m relieved when I can’t see anyone, and hope it’s a sign this will be my last journey through time.

When I look back towards the shore, I can see Jesus is looking at me, Martha and Michael in our hiding place and laughing at us, as he walks with Simon Peter.

Jesus stops not far from where my past-self is hidden and bids Simon Peter to sit with his back towards us all.

“Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?” He asks Simon Peter.

“Yes, Lord. You know I love you,” replies Simon Peter.

Again, I find myself saying the words along with Simon Peter, just as I know my past-self is doing in his hiding spot.

“Then feed my lambs,” Jesus says.

“Simon son of John, do you love me?” Jesus repeats the question.

“Yes, Lord. You know I love you,” say Simon Peter and I a second time.

“Then take care of my sheep,” Jesus commands.

“Simon son of John, do you love me?” Jesus asks a third time. Simon Peter is distressed that the question has been asked again.

“Lord, you know everything. You know I love you,” replies Simon Peter, with his head bowed down.

There’s no mistaking His intent as Jesus looks up from Simon Peter and instead looks the former me straight in the eyes.

“Then feed my sheep,” He says to both of us.

Jesus places His hand on Simon Peter’s shoulder, then bids him to stand and they walk further down the shore. As Simon Peter stands, Jesus looks at me, Martha, and Michael one last time and grins.

Beside me, Martha exhales like she’s been holding her breath the entire time.

“It’s just like you described,” Michael says. “He told you to feed His sheep. He really did.”

“That’s right, Michael, and you’re going to help me. But there’s something we all need to do first, and I hope Simon Peter will help us.”

Chapter Twenty-Eight

We wait a few hours after my past-self has started back towards the arena cave, so it will appear to the apostles that I've met Martha and Michael on the road, then doubled back. Jesus isn't with them, so we all ride down on horses and enter their camp. Only Simon Peter is there. He's praying; so we wait, for some time, as he finishes.

"Petrus? I thought you'd left to return to your people."

His gaze lingers on my horse, undoubtedly noticing it's different from the one he last saw me riding, but he says nothing about it.

"I'll be leaving again soon, but first I wanted to speak with you. You've met Martha, and this man is named Michael. We all saw Jesus crucified and risen from the dead. We've come to ask you to baptize us in His name."

"But you're Romans. Baptism in the manner of John is for Jews."

"It's said that John baptized all, including publicans and soldiers," I reply. "It's said some of them were gentiles seeking forgiveness for their sins."

"I don't know. I'll speak with the others when they return and we will pray for an answer to your request."

Peter turns his back to leave.

"Our Lord said that if you followed Him, He would make you a fisher of men," I say sternly. "Simon, who our Lord named Peter, you will pull these three fish from the waters."

Simon Peter stops dead in his tracks, then turns to face us, with his mouth agape. I'm sure he wants to ask a dozen questions, but instead, a look of understanding comes over his face.

"Follow me."

He walks straight into the Sea of Galilee. I follow, and Martha and Michael follow me without hesitation.

The water is cold, but the anticipation of being baptized is keeping me warm, as I enter up to my waist.

"Who shall be first?" Simon Peter asks, and I relay the question in English.

"You first, then Michael," Martha replies and I relay the order to Simon Peter.

"What's your father's name?" Simon Peter asks me.

"His name was James."

Simon Peter moves beside me and places one hand on my shoulder and the other on the top of my head.

"Petrus, son of James; In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, I baptize you for the forgiveness of your sins."

He pushes gently downward on my head and shoulder. I expect to come back up immediately, but his strong fisherman's grip stays steady on my head. When someone is holding you underwater, the natural instinct is to tense and prepare to fight your way to the surface, but instead I find myself relaxing, trusting. Just as I feel fully relaxed, Simon shifts his hand to under my armpit and lifts me. I feel like I am a fish being pulled from the water by a strong line. Simon Peter has truly become a fisher of men.

When I burst through the surface, Michael and Martha are smiling with joy. When Michael emerges through the surface a minute later, I see why. His face has a look of peace and contentment that can only be described as radiant.

Simon Peter moves towards Martha, but she puts her hand up.

"I want you to baptize me, Cephas."

"Me? Are you sure? This is *the* Simon Peter offering to do it."

“I’m sure. He’s not the only one here named ‘the rock.’”

I explain Martha’s request to Simon Peter and he smiles too.

I place my hands on her head and under her arm. I’m glad I’m soaking wet, with water dripping off my face, to disguise the fact that tears are also rolling down my cheeks.

“Martha, daughter of Susan; I baptize you in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ,” I say in English and gently push her under the water.

I hold her there for a moment, thinking about how much I love her, then give her a gentle lift under the arm. She bursts through the surface with the same radiant look that I saw with Michael. I’ve never seen her look more beautiful.

At first, the sight of Martha emerging from baptism leaves me speechless, but then the one thing that’s foremost on my mind pops out of my mouth: “Marry me.”

“Oh, I intend to,” she says, as we join hands and walk towards shore.

“No. I mean marry me right now. This minute.”

“Do you think Simon Peter will do it?” she asks.

“Right now, he’s our only hope. Marriage in the sense we understand it is centuries away. The Jews of this time require a sort of contract between me and your father, and the Romans of this time consider it a secular arrangement between families. In this time, there’s no such thing as marriage vows, wedding cakes or wedding rings.”

“Then what are you waiting for? Ask him already.”

Simon Peter has been watching the happy exchange with a smile on his face, knowing we’re discussing something that makes us laugh, but not knowing what it is. He’s also looking out over the water at the sail of an approaching vessel.

“Why are you laughing?” he asks.

“We’re laughing at the absurdity of our situation. We want to be married according to the old customs of our people. Under those customs, a marriage is a holy covenant in the eyes of God. Unfortunately, our people have chosen to turn their back on God, so there are few left who believe, and none to perform a marriage ceremony.”

“That is indeed sad,” Simon Peter replies. “Throughout our history, the people of Israel have turned their backs on God many times, always with disastrous results. I’m curious, Petrus. You said ‘God,’ rather than ‘gods.’ Are you not Roman? Don’t you believe in many gods?”

How on earth do I explain to the man Jesus declared to be “His Rock,” that Martha and I are the product of two thousand years of his work?

“We do not believe in the Roman gods. We’re brothers to the Jews, in that we believe in the one true God, the God of Abraham and Moses. But we’re different from Jews, in that we’re also seekers of the prophesied Messiah. Now that He has come, our search is over and we’re followers of His teachings.”

“I’ve never heard of such a people. You must be from very far away.”

Not so far as you might think.

“Peter? You follow our found Messiah. You believe He’s the son of the one true God. You could help us. You could marry us.”

“I’m not a priest.”

“What’s a priest, Peter? Those men in the temples who teach the word of God to gain the admiration of men? Or someone who loves the Lord and follows God’s laws, even if it causes men to hate him? Among our people who still believe, your love of Jesus qualifies you to marry us.”

“So there’s no contract between you and her father?” he asks, trying to understand what I’m asking.

“That’s correct. Our contract is read only by the eyes of God,” I say, and hope it makes some sort of sense to him.

“Then what is my role?”

“It’s much like a baptism. You simply bless our marriage in the eyes of Jesus, and we are married. Your authority comes from your love of Him.”

“That’s a strange marriage.”

“Where I come from, your form of marriage would be strange. Will you do it?”

Simon Peter doesn’t answer, but seems to contemplate the issue as he looks out over the water. The vessel is heading straight towards us. On the deck, I can see some of the apostles returning, along with other followers. I can see a number of women among them. I wait for his answer, rather than interrupt his thoughts.

“If I can pronounce you baptized by the love of Christ, I guess I can pronounce you married as well.”

I turn to translate everything for Martha, but my smile says it all.

When the women from the boat find out we’re to be married, they insist on being a part of it, but are confused by the ceremony we’ve requested. Under their customs, I would have a contract with Martha’s father, and I would make a place ready in my father’s home to receive my bride. Once my father decided all was ready, I would go and get Martha, and the marriage would become final, once we consummated it in the bedroom.

Nathanael insists on taking the role of my father. I show him where we’ve been camping and he shakes his head at how unsuited it is to receive a bride. Luckily, he has a tent that can be used and he spends hours searching for the perfect place to set it up. He settles on a beautiful little flower-filled meadow with a stream running through it. He then borrows blankets from everyone and fills the tent with them to create a soft bed. Then he cuts flowers and fills the inside until the tent smells like I’ve become the world’s first florist. He still isn’t happy, but admits it’s the best he can do under the circumstances.

“It’s perfect. Martha will think so too. Let’s go.”

“Slow down, Petrus. The place may be ready, but you’re far from it. Take off your clothes and wash in the stream. I’ll attend you.”

Now that you mention it, one of the greatest inventions in human history is probably going to be underarm deodorant.

Nathanael produces some sort of crude soap and instructs me to wash everything, including my hair, while he washes my clothes. I was still wearing modern socks and underwear. He doesn’t say anything, but I see him testing the elastic waist band like a kid fascinated by a new toy.

When I’m done washing, he makes me lay on the soft grass while my clothes dry, and then he rubs me down with some sort of sweet-smelling oil. I must admit, I do feel fresher.

When he deems me fit to be seen, he hands me a ram’s horn and instructs me to blow it so they’ll know I’m coming for my bride. My first attempt sounds like the call of a rabid moose, but by the third try, I produce a note long and clear enough that he’s satisfied. Soon we hear the sound of men laughing as they walk to meet us, and we proceed as a group to the shore, with me blowing the horn as we go.

When we reach the shore, I see that another tent has been set up, and from within I can hear the giggling of women as they do their final preparation. I think about what a difficult time this is for Christ’s followers - persecution by the Pharisees has already begun in Jerusalem - and wonder if a makeshift wedding is a welcome distraction for them.

Women start to erupt from the tent like clowns pouring out of a ridiculously small car. They’re all smiling at me and my eagerness to see Martha, and are enjoying making me wait.

If I had indeed never seen her look more beautiful than when she surfaced after her baptism, then I now stand corrected, as Martha emerges. Her hair has been washed and brushed to the point

that it looks like braided gold, interspersed with tiny little white and blue flowers. I can smell that she was washed and rubbed with the same oil that Nathanael applied to me, and it's making her skin glow. Her toga has been transformed into a makeshift wedding dress by pinning it with brooches at the shoulder and the hips. She's even holding a bouquet of flowers, though how she managed to convey that request is beyond me - until Michael walks over and sticks a flower into my toga as a makeshift boutonniere.

The onlookers follow with curiosity as Martha and I walk together towards Simon Peter, who has built a small stone altar at my request. He only has one line, so he stands to the side, while I speak first in English and then repeat everything in Aramaic.

"In the old traditions of our people, Martha and I will first say vows of faithfulness to each other."

"Martha, whatever our journey through life may bring: I promise to love you; to stand by your side no matter what trials we may face; to share both your joys and your sorrows, so that I may give you strength when you are weak and rejoice with you when you are strong. Your joy is my joy, and your pain is my pain, now and forever after."

When Martha has repeated the vow, I reach inside my robe and pull out the two gold wedding bands. Martha is surprised at first, but then just shakes her head and smiles.

"Where we come from, these rings signify our endless circle of love," I announce to the crowd as I turn to Martha.

"Martha? Do you take me as your husband?"

I hold the ring at her fingertip.

"Yes! Seventy times seven, yesses."

I slip the ring onto her finger, and translate my question and her response to the crowd, which makes them laugh.

When I've also said: 'Seventy times seven yesses' and received my ring, I nod to Simon Peter so he can say his line.

"Petrus and Martha, in the name of Jesus Christ, you are now husband and wife."

The people look back and forth at each other over Simon Peter saying such a strange thing, but he bids them to clap, and they do so - politely.

We're just standing and smiling, when Michael clears his throat to get our attention.

"Kiss your bride."

We smile and laugh at each other for forgetting.

Martha looks at me with those sparkling eyes, then pulls me in for the most passionate kiss I can imagine. I thought the first spontaneous kiss was exciting, but it has nothing on our first marital kiss. The people again murmur at our strange traditions, and not knowing what to do, decide to clap politely again.

"Should I throw the bouquet?" Martha asks.

"There are some of our traditions that are best left in the future," I reply.

"Cakes and gowns, old, new, borrowed, blue. It was all pretty ridiculous wasn't it?" Martha says. "The only part that's important is that we just made a covenant with God and that was the part everyone eventually chose to ignore."

"Lead your bride to the place you prepared," Nathanael says, with a smile.

I take Martha by the hand and begin to lead her through the trees to the tent in the little meadow. The wedding guests grab the items they'll need for a feast and follow us, blowing the horn the entire way.

When we reach the meadow, the guests start setting up the feast, but Nathanael holds open the tent flap for us and closes it behind us.

"Aren't we going to the feast?" Martha asks.

She reaches to open the flap and exit. I grab her hand and stop her.
“This is awkward,” I say. “Under their traditions, there are certain - shall we say - ‘expectations’ the new bride and groom must fulfill to complete the marriage.”

I still didn’t think it was possible, but again Marsha blushes, when she realizes what I’m saying.
“Oh, it gets worse.”

“What are they going to do? Cheer us on?”

“Worse.”

“Cephas?”

I pick up a white cloth that’s been set on top of the soft bed Nathanael prepared.

“We’re expected to provide proof: Of our both our consummation, and your virginity.”

“I’m *not* putting on that kind of a show.”

Martha again heads for the tent flap.

“If we don’t, they’ll stone you to death in the morning,” I say.

“What?”

I try to hold a straight face, but I can’t manage it for long and burst out laughing.

“Just kidding about the stoning.”

Martha looks angry for a moment, then bursts out laughing too.

“When I vowed ‘Whatever our journey through life may bring,’ I had no clue what I was getting into.”

Nathanael left us some food, including some red berries, so I crush a couple of them onto the white cloth. In the waning light outside, nobody should know the difference. A cheer goes up when I leave the tent and hold the cloth up for the crowd to see. I duck back into the tent.

Martha looks relieved that my trick fooled the wedding guests. She crosses the tent to stand toe-to-toe with me.

“Do you remember our first kiss? The one after we had dinner together?” she asks.

“I told you; the memory of that kiss will stay with me for the rest of my life.”

“I want you to forget that kiss ever happened.”

“Why?”

“Because I want you to remember this kiss.”

She gently takes my face in her hands and engages me in a kiss that might be enough to make me forget my own name, much less the earlier kisses.

“That’s a marriage kiss,” she says. “Now, you’d better eat the rest of those berries. You’re going to need the energy.”

Martha smiles and releases her toga.

I do need the energy, because waiting for marriage makes the experience that much more special. Coming from a society where public sex with a complete stranger is commonplace, I now see how ignoring God’s plan has reduced man to little more than just another animal. I think about all the opportunities I had when I was The Cult Hunter. I could have had sex with Jocie or Janet or dozens of other women, but I didn’t, because somewhere inside me, I knew He was saving me for someone much better.

As we gaze into each other’s eyes, I find myself awestruck not by the physical act, but by how the mutual decision to share ourselves and love each other in this way is part of God’s plan for us.

Through marriage, God’s plan was to take something normal and transform it into something sacred and beautiful.

As always, God’s plan is perfect.

The next morning I rise early and start packing our stuff onto the horses. Michael is up early too.

“You missed a great party, Cephas. These folks really celebrate weddings.”

“We had a private party,” I reply.

He notices what I’m doing.

“Why are you packing up? We have no place to be.”

“Where we need to be is away from here. The baptisms and the wedding were unspeakably selfish acts on my part. Either one could damage the timeline. According to the Bible, the Roman centurion Cornelius is the first gentile to be baptized by Peter. Since I told Peter that we already believe in the God of Abraham and Moses, I hope he didn’t consider us as converts, but we risk causing a change in the Bible with every interaction. We need to just go.”

“Do you want to say goodbye?”

“No. We need them - and history - to shrug their shoulders and forget we were ever here.”

Chapter Twenty-Nine

I push the pace back towards Jerusalem, and we reach Jericho quickly. The horses are tired, but we need to be back in two days, rather than the three days it took my past-self to do it on a horse that could do little more than trot.

“I hope the Romans will give us the same bed back,” Martha says. “I’m exhausted.”

“Me too,” I say.

I direct my horse off the main road and down a narrow sheep path leading into the hills.

“Where are we going?” Martha asks, as she and Michael follow.

“To a soft bed and hot food.”

After ten minutes, I see a small house, with my old hobbled horse standing outside a small barn structure. The man who saved its life and sold it to me delivered it to Esther after all. I also see four lambs outside the barn and a fifth being held by Esther’s youngest son, Seth. When he sees me, he puts down the sheep and runs towards us.

“Cephas. You must come speak to my uncle. He is very mad at mother, and sent her away with the flock she bought with the money you gave us. He says mother must have sold herself to you to get the money, and she is now dirty. He tried to take her flock, but she and Eli would not let him, so he took the horse you sent. I tried to get away too, but uncle stopped me.”

I look up and see a short but sturdy-looking man come out of the house, followed by a shorter and sturdier-looking woman. They both have ugly looks on their faces.

“I heard all that. Come back for more, did you? She’s not here. She’s in the hills, living on the ground with other dirty things.”

When I get down from the horse, he can see that I’m over a foot taller than he is and he looks frightened. His wife has to push him forward to confront me.

“I’m Cephas. I’m the one who gave Esther, Seth and Eli money and that horse. If you have an accusation to make against me, make it now, to my face.”

“Esther said - well - she said she met a man alone in the hills, and-”

“And what?”

“And you gave her money, so you must have-”

“Be very careful how you finish your sentence. Insult my honor and you’ll die where you stand.”

Seth has a grin on his face, as his uncle begins to shake.

“Seth and Eli found me bleeding beside a pond where the sheep drink, and Esther bound my wound.”

I point to the scar on my neck.

“Esther gave me food and water, nothing more. She showed great kindness to a stranger and I gave her money out of my gratitude.”

“Of course, you could see how I might think-” the uncle stammers.

“Yes. It was just a misunderstanding.”

I soften my voice and my stance.

“And of course, you see how a man such as myself would be insulted to have my generosity repaid by such foul accusations.

“Yes, of course.”

He’s still visibly shaking.

“Now, you will take my horse and find Esther. You will beg her forgiveness and welcome her back into your house. My wife and I will be sleeping in your bed tonight, and your wife will attend to us with a hot meal.”

His eyes go wide - first with surprise, and then with anger.

“For this kindness, I’ll pay you each one piece of gold.”

His eyes turn from anger to greed, and he sets off.

Esther’s sister-in-law prepares us a fine meal, and Martha and I finally get to spend a night as husband and wife in a real bed. All we do is sleep.

I awake at dawn to see Martha is watching me sleep again. It looks like she’s been crying.

“I always dreamed of living in a world where I’d be free to pray as I please. I guess it’s true; you need to be careful what you wish for. What do we do now, Cephas? We can’t join the disciples. Do we just find a quiet place to live out our lives, without changing the timeline?”

I start to smile, but I’m interrupted by the sound of the door banging open and Esther yelling, “Cephas.” She blushes and turns around when she sees I’m in bed with Martha.

“It’s good to see you again too, Esther. This is my wife, Martha.”

Esther closes the door as we get dressed.

Her brother-in-law earned his gold coin. He was out all night, getting scratched by bushes as he searched in the dark for Esther and her flock. His wife doesn’t look much better, having slept on a mat on the floor.

When we’ve eaten breakfast, Michael starts to saddle the horses, but I tell him to stop.

“Thank you again, Esther. I’m sure you’ll have a fine and healthy flock. Would a few more horses make them easier to tend?”

The jaw of everyone in the family drops with surprise.

“Eli. You are old enough to own property. I give you these three horses as payment for the staff you gave to me. It saved my life more than once, and may do so again.”

I grab my pack and walk towards the hills, with Martha and Michael in hot pursuit and everyone wondering what just happened here.

“Did you just give away our horses?” Martha asks.

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m tired and want a hot shower, followed by a night in a decent bed.”

I’ve been picking up the pace as I walk.

“Cephas, slow down! Where are you going?”

“Me? I’m going home, of course. The arena cave is over that hill and halfway up the next one.”

Martha and Michael stop dead in their tracks.

“You said you couldn’t allow us to be pulled forward in time. You said it was too risky,” Michael says.

“No. I said I couldn’t allow *Henry* to pull us forward in time. Being pulled forward by Four - that’s different.”

“The message you sent to Albert in the ointment jar under the Sphinx!” Martha says.

I shrug and try my best to look innocent.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Martha asks.

She swats me gently in the arm.

“It all came together piece by piece. When we got word the time travel device had been moved, the message also said a smaller device had been set up in the cave. The informant assumed it was a fake, but I suspected it was the prototype because they said the arena had been left behind. I didn’t know for sure if it was the prototype or a fake, until Francis smiled when I told him there was no way back. By then, you’d adjusted to the idea of staying here. Besides, I didn’t get you a wedding gift, and this seemed like a nice surprise.”

She swats me again.

“Now, we have work to do,” I say. “The first note said a detailed description of the plan will be waiting in the arena, but that Henry must wait exactly twenty-four hours after my past-self returns from Travelers. The timing will allow Martha and I to escape his tube car before he gets it.

I produce a piece of paper from inside my tunic.

“We need to have this inside the arena in two hours. We leave one hour after that.”

“It seems to me there must be at least one paradox in all of this,” Martha says.

Martha gets a look of concentration on her face, as she tries to sort out the timeline.

“Don’t think too hard about it, Martha. Working through potential paradoxes has been giving me a headache for days.”

The spot marking the entrance to the arena is easy to find, since my past-self buried the entrance just a day ago. It sticks out like a freshly dug grave. With no shovel, we take turns moving the two meters or so of loose soil with our hands to expose my old tunnel.

“We have fifteen minutes before this letter needs to be pulled forward. Before we go down there, Michael, I need to tell you how sorry I am. This letter contains all of the details of the assassination plan, including using the prototype device and to look under the Sphinx for the arena. It also specifically lists you and Francis as the assassins. This letter is his death warrant and condemns you to kill him. I wish I could erase your names from this letter. If I could, it would erase your memory of what happened here.”

Michael looks aghast at the suggestion.

“Erase these memories? I saw Christ crucified and risen. I saw an angel, and was baptized by Simon Peter. I’m Christian now. Despite all the bad things that happened to get me here, I’d rather die than give that up.”

“Cephas? I do have one question,” Michael says. “You figured out everything from little clues along the way. Did you know, ahead of time, that Francis was going to die?”

“No. I knew a lot of blood was going to be spilled on the ground at that spot, but up until you shot Francis, I thought the blood was mine.”

Michael says nothing more, so I snap three light sticks, say “this way home,” and slither into the tunnel.

When we arrive in the cave, I place the note in the arena.

“You dug that entire tunnel in the dark and little oxygen, with just a tiny shovel and that case for hauling dirt?” Michael asks. “The news reports didn’t do it justice. You are one tough cookie.”

I describe for them the battle of digging out and what I thought as the notes from “The World” arrived.

“Henry should take the bait very soon,” I say, when my story is over.

Within a minute, we’re blinded by a flash and the note is gone.

“We’ve been here for weeks, and you seem to be keeping track of time to the second,” Martha says. “How are you doing it?”

I reach into my robe and pull out a pocket watch.

“Why didn’t it fry in transport?”

“It’s mechanical - just springs and gears. It must be four hundred years old and still keeps perfect time. I swiped it from Brill’s museum too.”

When the note is pulled forward, we spend some time outside in the fresh air. When it’s time to move to the arena, I turn to Michael and let out an audible sigh.

“It’s okay Cephas. I already know.”

“Know what?” Martha asks.

“The prototype device is smaller than the other one,” Michael says. “It wasn’t designed to handle the mass of all three of us. I’m the biggest, so I need to wait for a second pull. Trouble is, they don’t know if it has two trips left in it.”

“Then you go first,” Martha offers.

“Sorry. Cephas is too important to risk, and he won’t go without you.”

A tear rolls down Michael’s cheek.

“Besides, my life has never meant anything to anyone. I want to do this for me.”

“You’ll make it back, Michael. I promise.”

The world needs you too much. I need you too much.

Martha and I enter the arena and sit on top of our packs, facing each other.

“Do you think time travelling as a married couple will be more intimate?” I ask.

“Whatever our journey-” is all Martha gets out before we’re sucked again into the void.

Chapter Thirty

I think perhaps time travel is more intimate when you're married. Martha and I show each other thoughts and memories like another couple might have a casual conversation. The difference is, we can't easily hide memories from each other. I again need to build mental walls and misdirect her to keep secrets from her, and I sense she does the same.

I look through her memories to see how I looked when I burst into the house of her kidnappers in Bethany and it's painful to watch myself. I expect to see my face twisted with rage, as I see myself throw the knife that killed a man, but there's more. There's also a clear hint of glee. I was happy to kill him.

There are some memories better off left alone, Cephas.

We can try to ignore them, but He sees them all. Maybe I need to see this part of myself. Maybe seeing it is the first step to purging it.

He does see everything, but you're only looking at the bad. This is what He will also see.

Martha shows me what flashed through my own mind the second before I kicked in the door. In that instant, I thought about love. In a way, I even set priorities. I set the love of Jesus first, by asking His forgiveness; second was my love for Martha; third, I prayed for the souls of the kidnappers. My own safety was - at best - and afterthought.

You thought of everyone but yourself, and you gave them a chance to let me go in peace. You were even willing to sacrifice yourself for me, if it had come to that.

For you, of course I would-

It's not just me, Cephas. You essentially sacrificed yourself to tell the world the truth at the press conference; you nearly sacrificed yourself to save Michael at the tomb; and then there's Jocie.

Jocie doesn't count.

Oh yes, she does. You've tried to hide that memory, but we both know she nearly broke your will. You chanced losing yourself to save her soul. It's just another hit taken for someone else.

The phrase "another hit taken" causes a momentary lapse in her own mental barriers. It's like a window opens and gives me a brief view into whatever it is she's hiding. I see a glimpse of her parents and her brother hugging her goodbye as she leaves on the mission to infiltrate my classroom, followed by a view of me just before the first time she spoke to me outside of class.

She isn't hiding the memories from me; she's trying to keep them pushed aside so she doesn't think about them herself. I realize that I'm doing the same thing.

Martha, when you thought about taking hits, I saw your family. Why?

I get more images, including Austin warning Martha, Cindi and Hope about the consequences of exposing themselves, then of me in my house, when I realized she was a member of Four and burst the information out loud in front of Corps listening devices.

I took your family from you. When I exposed you as a member of Four, you couldn't go back. They had to erase you from their lives as if you really did die when you were an infant. And it wasn't just you. Cindi and Hope had to do it, too.

I'd rather not think about it - just like you're refusing to think about the number eleven thousand three hundred and twenty-three. Can we both just drop it?

But you gave up your families. Talk about taking a hit.

Wait. Cephas, do you hear that?

I wake up with Martha slumped against me, like we fell asleep after choosing to cuddle here. My cousin Geoff is trying to lift her off me and out of the arena.

"The whole world knows we're here now. We've got to go," Geoff says.

Geoff is yelling, but it's not just to get through the cobwebs in my brain. The area is under an intense thunderstorm, with heavy wind and rain.

"Recharge it," I say.

"What? Why?" Geoff asks.

Martha is still unconscious, but I lift my bride like she's a feather and step out of the arena.

"Just prepare for another pull. Lock on one minute after you pulled us."

"Three crystals fried. We barely got you. What are we pulling?"

"An assassin. Just try."

"Then stand back."

I carry Martha out of the relative protection of the cave towards the amphitheater. Just a couple of months ago, this place was the center of the Travelers Initiative and the place already looks like a sports stadium that was abandoned following some now-forgotten victory. There's a layer of dust, dead plants have been blown in by the wind, and spiders have made their homes where they please. At the far end of the amphitheater, I see the security team that Four tied up and blindfolded when they took control of the area.

The cold rain wakes Martha up.

"Come back," she murmurs.

"We're back."

"I know, and now I can't hear it anymore. Did you hear it, Cephas?"

Her eyes are still closed, like she's trying to focus on something.

"Hear what?"

"There was another voice in my head. It was like a whisper."

"I didn't hear anything. Martha, you need to wake up. As soon as Michael gets back, we need to get out of here."

"Almost charged," Geoff yells over the storm.

Another crystal blows out with a sizzle and a puff of greenish smoke. There are a half a dozen members of Four in the area, and they start looking nervous and back away from the device.

"I think it's going to fry," Geoff says.

"Do it!" I yell over the wind and thunder.

There's a bright flash in the arena, followed by two more crystals burning up, but I see what I want to see, the figure of Michael slumped in the arena. Team members move in to help him up. One of them is Albert.

"Albert. Did you arrange everything as I asked?"

"The team is in place and the explosives are ready. I need ten minutes to get everything we need together."

"Then do what you do best. Get what you need, then rig the explosives and make this place a crater. Henry messing with the timeline ends here."

I look at the government team.

"Don't worry, Cephas," Albert says. "They're outside the blast radius. They'll all be fine."

As the rest of us begin to walk into the desert, I look over my shoulder and see Albert packing items that look like large laser pointers into boxes, while James downloads software and packs up some sort of power conversion unit.

Ten minutes later, we've walked into the desert to the top of a hill where an unregistered transport will pick us up, with no questions asked. We can see the site of the cave from our position, including Albert's and James' headlamps as they rig the explosives. A large cargo transport has already landed to pick them up. Geoff figured we'd get at most thirty minutes before a government team shows up to investigate the power drain, so the timing is going to be close.

Our transport lifts off and moves us into a commercial flight path to avoid further suspicion. We watch as a series of bright flashes light up the desert around the arena cave and amphitheater, followed by rising smoke.

“No more time travel,” Martha says.

Her voice has a twinge of sadness.

“I thought time travel gave you a headache.”

I breathe a second sigh of relief when I see the large transport with Albert and his team has gotten away safely, and is now leaving our flight path to return home by another way.

“Are you sure you didn’t hear another voice when we were in transit?” Martha asks. “I just can’t get it out of my head.”

“Quite sure. Tell me what you heard.”

“It wasn’t like when you and I were speaking together through thoughts and memories. It wasn’t anything specific. There were no memories at all - just a presence. I know this’ll sound weird, but the name “Jocie” kept popping into my mind, like it wanted to tell me its name.”

“Could there be something of Jocie left in there? Like an echo?” I ask.

“Or like a ghost?” Martha replies.

“That’s creepy. Maybe she wanted to congratulate you on our marriage.”

“I don’t think so. One other thing kept popping into my mind, like it wanted me to pay attention to a particular memory.”

“What memory is that?”

“It was the night when Jesus was arrested in Gethsemane. As He spoke to the crowd, He kept turning until, at the very end, He was speaking directly to you rather than the crowd. Do you remember that?”

I say nothing.

“You remember what He said,” she concludes from the look on my face. “What did He say to you? I need to know.”

“It’s straight out of the Bible. As He looked at me, He said: ‘But this is your moment, the time when the power of darkness reigns.’”

“Why would He want to say that to you, Cephas? Why would your moment be a moment of darkness?”

“I believe it had a clever double meaning. To the crowd, it sounded like He was admitting they had physical authority over Him. But because we already knew He was going to be crucified and rise from the tomb, I believe He was sending a whole different message to me. Christ came when He did because the timing was perfect. He came in a time of darkness because that’s when a light shines the brightest to pierce the darkness. I think He was telling me that the moment in which I can make the biggest difference is the moment evil appears to be at its most powerful.”

“What do you think you’ll need to do at that moment?” Martha asks.

“Follow Him.”

I say it to give Martha comfort.

Follow Him, by sacrificing myself for the sake of others.

To avoid leaving any suspicious electronic footprints, it’s going to take over a week to return to Bethany House. That’s fine by me, because we stop in Paris, London and Miami, and take a few days in each place to rest. Martha, Geoff and Michael enjoy being tourists, but we decide it’s too risky for me to walk around on the streets.

In Paris, I decide to catch up on the news. The power outages caused when first the assassins, and then Martha and I went back in time from the Sphinx were explained as planned maintenance, followed by a human error in reinitializing the grid. The blackouts caused when we returned were

closer to the truth: the Bureau claimed a group of Christian cultists tried to steal the time machine, but were thwarted by a government security team.

The story goes on to say that when the Christians found themselves surrounded, they committed suicide with a bomb that also blew up the time machine. From the image on the screen, I see that the dead “Christians” were actually the blindfolded security team. Henry killed them for their failure. Additional articles argue the mass suicide is further proof religion is a form of mental disorder.

Once I’ve caught up on recent events in this century, I start to look at biomedical news. Each article, by itself, is innocent enough, but as always, I see them as puzzle pieces that are coming together to make a picture. One story out of New York is an alarming piece on how there’s been a worldwide decrease in the birthrate, coupled with a sudden spike in infant mortality.

Apparently more and more people want their children off the grid.

Another, written in Tokyo, describes a decrease in enhancement surgeries and an increase in the number of enhancements being removed. A third, written in Oregon, laments the drop in profits at assisted suicide centers.

I smile when I read the last one. Isn’t it ironic that a government-sanctioned “assisted suicide” is sane and sensible, while the “suicide” the government claims happened at the arena cave is labeled a form of insanity?

Then I find the article I’ve been seeking. A man living on a small island in the South Pacific died of an unknown disease that caused unusual pox-like symptoms similar to those seen in the Final Holy War. Scientists are baffled, because all such diseases were thought to be wiped out long ago. Before he died, the man was transported to a medical center in the Solomon Islands, where a local health worker seems to have contracted the disease and is now in isolation. Treatments have not worked, but specialists flown in from around the world vow the cause will be found and a vaccine developed, with a minimal loss of life.

It’s Henry’s first test of the new toxin.

“I must admit, it’s a good plan,” I say aloud to myself.

Henry knows that once or twice per generation there’s some sort of a scare about a new disease, or a new form of an old one, and everyone lines up to be vaccinated.

The last time it happened I was eight years old, not long before my parents died. For some reason, I didn’t go to my regular school doctor and I had to line up with a bunch of kids I didn’t know in some weird old warehouse on the first day of a school vacation. The vaccine was just a clear, tasteless liquid and I was given a piece of candy afterwards. It was good candy, but it didn’t make it worth missing a half-day of vacation. The worst part was the vaccine had a side effect of making one in one hundred thousand people who took it sick, and I was lucky number one hundred thousand. I had a high fever for several days and ended up missing the entire vacation.

If Henry creates such a scare, everyone on the grid will be vaccinated, while those living off the grid will either need to reveal themselves or die when he releases the toxin worldwide, like it was during the Final Holy War.

When Martha returns from sightseeing, she’s bubbling over to tell me where she’s been and what she’s seen in Paris.

“We need to find you a disguise so you can come out, too. It’s subtle, but I didn’t need your observation skills to see it. I saw one woman with crosses painted on her fingernails. At a café, I saw a man bow his head before eating. I even saw a group silently breaking bread and sharing wine. They’re doing it quietly, but people are starting to pray again.”

“I read there’s a huge black market for private data storage that isn’t connected to the net. I bet people are accessing the Bible and storing it where the government doesn’t have control,” I reply.

“I also saw the number Four painted all over the city. I even heard somebody hacked and reprogrammed the robots that go around covering graffiti to ignore any form of the number,” Martha says, “but that’s not even my favorite. Look at this.”

She instructs her com to interface with the room computer and display an image she took when she was out. It’s a graffiti-rendering of me painted onto an old wall, with my arms spread wide into a cross. There are flowers on the sidewalk below it.

“It’s not a bad likeness of me,” I say. “But it looks a little too much like a shrine for my taste.”

“Maybe so, but what it says to me is you need to get back to lecturing. People want to see you and hear you. We have friends in London. We’ll hack your old lectures again when we get there.”

Many kilometers outside London, on the edge of a centuries-old estate surrounded by rolling green hills, sits a little stone house whose original foundation is estimated to be eight hundred years old. On the rocks, there are mosses and lichens that look to be almost as old as the house, and there’s a layer of ivy so thick you wonder if it’s the only thing holding everything together. Underneath is Joppa House, Four’s local high tech bunker.

Geoff stays in London, but Michael comes to Joppa house with us. It’s nearing dusk when we follow instructions to enter through a hidden entrance in the woods and are greeted by a face I’ve wanted to see again since I first found out who she really is.

All I do is open my arms, and my cousin Cindi runs to me with tears in her eyes and melts in my embrace. Until a few weeks ago, I didn’t know I had cousins and now I can’t help but cry whenever I meet a new one. When we traveled through time, Martha’s memories showed me how much these strangers longed to meet me and love me. Even when I was working for the Bureau and hunting down Christians, they were ready to forgive me and take me into their home as one of them.

Martha stands behind us, crying too.

“Hello, cuz,” I whisper in Cindi’s ear. “It’s nice to meet you.”

“Let me in on the hug!” Martha says.

We grab her and hug her too.

“Enough crying,” Martha says to Cindi after a minute. “Are you ready to jump up and down instead?”

Martha holds up her hand, showing Cindi the engagement ring and wedding band. I follow her lead and do the same. Cindi’s jaw drops for a second, then she squeals.

“No way! How? Where? Wait a second - maybe I should ask when?”

She’s jumping up and down, just like Martha predicted.

“Simon Peter; at the Sea of Galilee; about twenty-two hundred years ago,” Martha replies.

“Hey, I didn’t think of that. We’ve only been married a few days, but technically it’s already the longest marriage in history.”

“I’ve got to tell Mom. Please let me be the one who tells Mom,” Cindi says.

“Only if she can keep a secret,” I say. “Martha and I should be the ones to tell her parents.”

“Rats!” Cindi says. “Mom is as good as any Christian at keeping secrets, but not from Aunt Susan.”

“Aunt Susan?” I ask.

“That’s what we call her. She’s like an aunt, just like Martha’s like a sister.”

Cindi notices Michael, who has been standing quietly through the family reunion.

“You’re Michael the assassin,” Cindi says. “I’ve done a lot of research on you over the last few days.”

“That’s an old title I’d prefer to leave behind,” Michael replies. “I’ve been reading about the Apostle Paul. I know it’s possible to put the past behind me, through Christ.”

How did such a gentle spirit ever become an assassin?

“I’m sorry,” Cindi says. “I didn’t think about how it sounded before I said it.”

“It’s okay. Paul had to work hard to overcome his past, and I’m ready to face mine.”

Chapter Thirty-One

We get to the business of hacking my old lecture. Dr. “Talks-a-ton” has been enjoying a regular lecture schedule since I’ve been away, so we know exactly when to hit. She’s due to start a late morning lecture on Christianity very soon.

We bring up the live feed and there she is, looking and acting as smug as usual. For someone with so little understanding of the world, she sure has a lot of things in monotone to say about it. Martha smiles and shows me the attendance counter. Only five people are watching the class.

“I think we can get the count up a little, don’t you?” Martha asks.

We break in on the feed and Karen’s eyes go from surprise to anger to defeat.

“Karen, so nice to see you’re still holding down the fort for me,” I say. “I’m sure the five students watching won’t mind if I add a word or two.”

By the time I finish the two sentences, the number has doubled twice. Cindi told me there’s a communication chain in place that spreads the word whenever we hack in. Karen Talkington walks off the stage and yells at her tech people, and the tracer program starts up to locate the physical location of the relay computers.

“Where do I begin?” I say. “The world’s not filled with fools, so let me confirm what many of you already suspect: the recent power outages were indeed the result of more time travel. Two assassins were sent back to kill me, so I would never bring back the truth of Jesus Christ, and then I went back with a member of Four to stop them. The good news is there will be no more time travel. The better news is that two more people have witnessed the crucifixion and seen Christ risen. I want to introduce one of them to you now.”

I beckon to Michael to join me on camera.

“This is Michael, one of the two assassins sent back in time to kill me and erase the truth of the Travelers Initiative from history. I want you all to hear his testimony.”

The viewer count has jumped to over ten thousand and the tracer has locked in on the coordinates for the Fort Collins computer, which was moved since we last used it.

“Umm. Hi. My name is Michael. I umm, I was sent back in time by the Cult Hunter Corps to kill Cephas, umm, I mean Dr. Paulson.”

I nod to Cindi and Martha, and they start an additional feed filled with information about Michael, including a substantial criminal record. There’s no point in denying the truth of Michael’s old life.

“Well, anyway,” Michael continues, “we got there, umm, the other assassin and me got there and umm, oh - his name was Francis. So anyway, we got there and we watched Jesus because we knew we’d see Dr. Paulson if we did and umm, I saw Jesus healing people. There was this one guy who was carried in on a stretcher and his legs were just these shriveled little sticks that were all bent the wrong way, and I watched them bend back right and he got up and walked. And there were blind guys and people with diseases and all kinds of stuff that nobody here has ever seen. So I started thinking maybe Cephas, um I mean Dr. Paulson, was telling the truth and maybe I didn’t want to kill him, no matter how much money Henry was going to pay us when we got back.”

The viewer count tops one hundred thousand and is now jumping a thousand at a time. The tracer locks in on a computer that sits in an old warehouse in Montana.

“So anyway, we went to the crucifixion. Wow. I’ve seen some torture before, but a crucifixion is something you don’t ever want to see. It’s something horrible. It got real dark for hours, without any clouds or eclipse or anything too, and when that was done, Christ died and there was an earthquake. I thought I was going to get judged right there, but now I know why He did it. He died for me and everyone else to take away my sins, and yours.”

Michael is sort of babbling, but I don't care. It's real testimony from his heart.

The tracer locks a third time and I notice it's the Fort Collins location again. I look up at Cindi and Martha, and they smile.

"We're bouncing it back and forth between those computers twenty times. If they get through that, we're set to bounce it around a loop of about ten computers and after that around some old satellites. Michael can talk all day if he wants."

"It was the next morning that I got to talk to Dr. Paulson. He told me lots of stories from the Bible and convinced me to come with him to watch the tomb. I saw a real angel come down and roll back the stone, and I saw someone walk out of the tomb. Then we went to Galilee and I saw Jesus alive, and I knew right there it didn't matter what happened, for the rest of my life, I'd be a Christian. And we all got baptized by Simon Peter and that's about the end of my story. That's what happened. Do you have anything to add to that, Dr. Paulson?"

I rejoin Michael in front of the camera.

"It's your testimony, Michael. I wouldn't add a word to your experience. I'm just glad you were there with me and that you're here with me now. Are there any questions for Michael?"

The viewer count tops one million for the first time ever, and just keeps climbing.

Questions for Michael start pouring into the system and I let him run with them. He takes questions about time travel and what each of the apostles looked like. He even takes the question about what happened to Francis, to which he simply responds: "He died and we buried him," without elaborating further.

A young woman in Sweden says she has a question for both of us.

"Go ahead," I say.

"Michael said you were both baptized by Simon Peter in Galilee. Would one of you baptize me?"

"I'll do it," Michael says without hesitation. "I was born and raised in McIntosh, South Dakota. I'll meet you there and baptize you in McIntosh Lake."

I choose not to point out that publicly announcing where he's going to be is a big mistake.

When we get back to London, it's time to pack and catch a private flight to Miami. The crew that's taking us does a regular run between London and Miami for some wealthy client, so the flight plan will be nothing unusual.

I knock on Michael's door and he tells me to come in. It's not like any of us has many possessions, but it's clear he hasn't attempted to pack.

"We need to catch our flight," I say.

"Geoff is staying two more days. I talked to him, and he said I could stay in London and fly back with him."

"Are you sure? Miami's pretty nice this time of year."

"I'm sure. A whole lot's happened in a short time, you know? It's pretty hard to take it all in, and there are still things I need to sort through in my head. A couple of days by myself will be good for me."

"They say I'm a pretty good sorter," I say.

"I know you are. I just think I need to do my own sorting right now. Besides, James says that now we've been seen on the media together, we should travel separately anyway."

"Okay, but do me a favor and contact me before doing anything risky, okay?"

"Of course. You do me a favor too, Cephas. I've lived my life up until now not trusting anyone. I know you want to trust people - it's just in your nature - but it's going to get you killed. The Bureau can reach anyone and buy anyone, and someday they're going to buy someone you trust, and they'll have you. Don't trust anyone, Cephas."

“So we’re agreed then,” I say. “We’ll only fully trust the Lord?”
“It’s a deal. You and me, we’ll only fully trust the Lord.”

The flight to Miami is much bumpier than expected due to a hurricane forming in the Caribbean. Martha spends the last part of the flight looking green, running to the bathroom, and saying that English cooking is only slightly worse coming up than it was going down.

We arrive in Miami in the middle of the night and move to a luxury room in a resort for some rest. After sleeping until noon, Martha feels much better; so she runs to a shop to buy herself a new bathing suit. While she’s out, I comb through news for reports on the toxin.

“You’re not going to get much beach time,” I say when Martha returns from shopping. “The schedule has been bumped, so instead of staying two days, we’re catching a midnight tube back to Winchester.”

She just smiles and disappears into the bathroom. When she comes out, she’s wearing a very flattering bikini.

“Do you like it?” she asks.

“Oh, yes. I like it very much.”

“What would you say is your favorite part?”

She starts turning so I can see her from all possible angles.

“It’s no contest.”

I smile and walk over to her. I take her left hand and point to her wedding band.

“Of the entire ensemble, this is my favorite part.”

“You are smooth, Cephaz Paulson. Very smooth.”

“You’re not going to hit the beach right away, are you?” I ask with raised eyebrows.

“Beach? I never had any plans to hit the beach today.”

We’re definitely getting better at the whole “flirting” thing.

As I’m trying to think of what to say next, Martha starts staring over my shoulder. I left the screen on but muted, playing the world news.

“Cephaz.”

I turn to see a shot of Michael that was recorded in London several hours ago. He waded into the Thames and offered to baptize anyone who wanted to repent of their sins and receive the love of Christ. A crowd of hundreds grew around him in minutes. He baptized for about an hour, before local cult hunters were dispatched and the live camera feeds were cut off. Even private feeds of people recording the event using their coms are jammed.

There are conflicting eyewitness reports of what happened next. Some say Michael walked out with the crowd, while others say he dove beneath the waters and never came up again. One bystander is quoted as seeing a bright light, after which Michael disappeared, though London authorities are quick to point out that one of London’s oldest remaining skyscrapers, known as “The Walkie-Talkie” building, often causes bright reflections at that time of day.

Then, even those reports are blacked out, and any news about Michael is buried beneath endless stories about two new sex-heightening drugs that have been released onto the market. Henry’s attempt to bring the masses back to the mindless state where he wants them is thwarted by Four, as they hack all major channels. We see videos showing that some of the hundred or so who were baptized by Michael are now back in the Thames, where they’re baptizing others.

I’m sure Henry’s grandfathers would have been proud of the patience and restraint he’s shown since my speech between the marble columns of the Department of Energy. He couldn’t arrest everyone who raised their arms into a cross, so I imagine he took a longer view and hoped the newfound faith was just a temporary spark that would soon burn out.

When Four shows the world what's happening in London, Henry's patience ends. The kill teams take to the streets all over the world, to "ensure public freedom from unwanted religion." Even in London, there's no resistance as the Corps members march through the streets in twos and threes. As I watch the news coverage, I can see it in some people's eyes. The cross is kept safely in their hearts and can't be taken away from them.

Zip uses the opportunity to strike. The first murder of a cult hunter happens an hour later, in Germany. Surveillance cameras show he was travelling home at night on a hover bus, when it jerked to a stop. He was watching something on a tablet computer, so he didn't even notice when three people dressed in black, with their faces covered, entered the bus. One of them simply walked up to him and shot him in the head with a stun gun at point blank range. At full power, it was lethal. Another took out a paint stick and wrote a large number "four" on the window above his corpse. Starting a war with the Cult Hunter Corps took Zip less than thirty seconds.

It's no different from when I was The Cult Hunter. I haven't personally killed any of them, yet my decisions make me responsible for all of it.

Within hours, even that story is buried, because the mysterious "disease" that started with one man in the south Pacific somehow escaped quarantine in the Solomon Islands. The first new case was in Kendari, Indonesia, but every major population center on the island of Sulawesi is showing the initial symptoms. The fatality rate is nearly one hundred percent, which means hundreds of thousands will die. The only bright spot is that a few large cities are showing lower infection rates, and some rural areas have been spared completely, though nobody knows why. World health officials announced they can't even find the infectious agent causing the outbreak, so all treatments have been ineffective.

The first test of the toxin was one person, now thousands. How many next time?

Chapter Thirty-Two

The tube ride to Winchester, Virginia in the middle of the night is fast, but quiet. Martha and I usually have an endless stream of topics of conversation, but tonight we're both absorbed by our own thoughts, and worried that public tube cars may now have listening devices, so we watch the news in silence.

Although the media has squashed the story, Zip can't help but brag about her success by hacking footage into the broadcasts. It's been decades since anyone so much as talked back to a cult hunter, and now there are two dozen dead worldwide. Some were killed in their homes in front of their families, some were killed in the street, and two were even killed as they guarded the front door to a Corps recruiting station. A painted number four accompanies each body.

Once we reach the old electric bus that will take us the last few kilometers to Capon Springs, we feel safe enough to speak again.

"Both you and the timeline are safe, we're married, the Word of God is spreading around the world; so what do you want to do this weekend?" Martha asks.

"Oh, I don't know. Hang out in the pool, read some books, save the world from a war and a deadly new bio toxin. You know, whatever."

We look at each other with serious stares for ten seconds or so, then bust out laughing to break the tension.

Whatever our journey through life may bring.

The gold locket we got in Alexandria is hanging around Martha's neck. The tiny data chip is still inside it, and as far as we can tell, it didn't fry on our return trip through time. We haven't dared try to read the data anywhere along the way, as it needs to be opened on a computer that's isolated from all other systems. Martha sees me staring at the locket.

"Think it has all the answers?" she asks.

"I'd settle for just a couple of good pieces of the puzzle," I reply, "but I'm ready to be disappointed. Jocie may have been able to get Henry to tell her things when he was drunk, but I doubt he would give her a chip containing the secret formula for a bio toxin."

She moves next to me and puts her hand on my leg.

"I don't know. We women can be pretty persuasive. I bet I could get state secrets out of you."

"Really? How would you do that?"

She kisses me like only a wife can kiss.

"Given the cruise you booked in Egypt, I think I should be in charge of the honeymoon, and I say it starts tonight. Did you know Capon Springs has a honeymoon cottage?"

The honeymoon lasts three days, which is longer than I'd dared to hope. Most people wouldn't count combat training with Martha and reading news reports as a honeymoon, but any time at her side counts in my book. Honeymooning seems to agree with her though, as our training sessions have been shorter, and she's been sleeping later.

The Bethany house team found out why we were in the honeymoon cottage and left us alone for three days, but eventually even they couldn't shield us from the escalating war and the demands from the elders to speak with us. I intend to make receiving any intelligence they can provide on the toxin our first order of business.

Martha has prepared the screens for the meeting, but we're a bit early, so she comes out of the control room to chat.

"Look at my rings."

She holds out her hand so I can see the gold has been polished to a high shine.

“It turns out Blake knows some chemistry, so he whipped up a jewelry cleaner. Give me yours and he’ll polish it while you’re on the conference.”

“But I’ve never taken it off,” I reply.

She reaches out for my hand.

“Is that some old superstition?” she asks. “How about if I’m the only one who’s allowed to take it off you?”

“I’d rather keep it on. It looks fine.”

She continues to hold my hand and leans in close for a kiss, to which I respond. The kiss is getting quite intense, when we hear someone clear his throat. It’s Garai watching us on his screen.

We still can’t catch breaks.

“Am I early?” he asks.

“Not at all,” I reply. “You may not have heard, but after we were baptized, Martha and I asked Simon Peter to marry us.”

I hold up my hand to show him my wedding band, but it’s not on my finger. I look up to see Martha holding it up to her eye to peer at me through it; then she leaves the room with it. I guess my ring is going to get polished after all.

Aislin comes onto her screen, with a sour look on her face.

“I’d like to start with any information you’ve gathered on Henry’s new genetic toxin,” I say.

“That’s not the purpose of this call,” Aislin says. “We’re here to find out why you went back in time, when we agreed your mission was to destroy the time machine, why you brought back an assassin, and why that assassin is now causing trouble here.”

“Let’s see. Due to lack of support from you two, by the time we arrived, Henry had already used the time machine. We therefore went back in time to save my rear end and keep the timeline from being changed. We brought Michael back with us because he converted to Christianity and didn’t belong in that time frame any more than we did. And if baptizing qualifies as causing trouble, then I’m all for him causing as much trouble as possible. Does that about cover it?”

“Who gave him authority to baptize? Was it you?” Garai asks.

“I don’t have that sort of authority. I guess I’ll have to go with Simon Peter on that one. Why do you consider Michael baptizing people so troublesome?”

“He’s not following any sort of doctrines. He’s just out there telling everyone to believe in Jesus and not giving the people any structure.”

“You mean he isn’t part of any hierarchy. Specifically, he isn’t part of either of your hierarchies.”

“There must be order!” Aislin says. “The faithful must be brought into a fold. It’s the only way to control the situation.”

Control the situation? Or control the people?

“Can we talk about Henry’s toxin?”

“Why?” Aislin asks. “It’s not a credible claim. We have the word of a dead movie star, who got Henry drunk and claims he did some paranoid rambling in exchange for sex. He probably gets drunk and tells different stories to women every night. He doesn’t even have missiles in which to deploy a toxin around the world in the first place.”

“So you haven’t looked into it at all?”

“There’s no reason.”

“Which brings us back to you, Dr. Paulson,” Garai says. “You’d have us running around, wasting our time on imagined plots, when we have real work to do for our respective organizations. The time machines are gone and your testimony has ignited a worldwide revival. We think it would be best if you were to step back and let us use our expertise in leading the people.”

Time machines? The government hid the fact that the prototype machine was involved. How did Garai find out there was more than just one?

“So you’ll take it from here? I can just go back to lecturing, like I suggested in the first place?”

“Even that might be too prominent a role for you,” Garai replies. “Like Michael, your lectures lack structure.”

You two still want your own religion. An institution created by man to take power over other men.

“I’m sorry, but I’m not headed to a quiet retirement yet. I’ve watched Christ crucified twice. I saw Him risen, and He commanded me to feed His sheep. Do you really think God wants me to obey you rather than Him?”

They don’t dare answer the question.

“Then it seems we’re moving in different directions,” Aislin says. “Perhaps we should all take time to consider our options, and meet again in the future.”

“Yes,” Garai agrees. “There’s much to think about.”

“In the meantime, Dr. Paulson - you once said you have no intentions of participating in, or interfering with, either my activities or Garai’s. I suggest you maintain that policy.”

I walk slowly to the command center, not sure of what to do next. I find that Martha has assembled the entire Bethany House staff. It’s apparent they were all watching my exchange with the elders on the main monitor.

“Nobody here is ready to retire either,” Martha says. “We’re all with you. Just tell us what you want.”

“The very first thing I want is my ring back on my finger.”

I hold out my hand. The women in the crew all clap and the men at least smile. Martha produces the ring, which has been cleaned and buffed to a high shine, and slips it back onto my finger amid more claps.

“Don’t ever let anyone but me take it off you,” Martha says.

Normally, all information on illness becomes available to the public so anyone with expertise can aid in the efforts. The few remaining doctors and researchers love that sort of access, just to have something interesting to occupy their brains once and a while. With this new “disease,” no information has been made available.

“They’ve blacked out the databases,” I say to nobody in particular in the command center.

“We know,” Martha replies.

“We need to switch gears. Our best hope is to get our hands on samples of both the toxin and the vaccine so we can reverse engineer them.”

“We know that too. The team started working on it while we were in the honeymoon cottage.”

I give her a hopeful look.

“They hacked every communication they could think to hack, including Aislin’s. There’s no sign of where either is being produced, so they came up with a more direct plan and sent a team member to Indonesia to analyze blood samples from victims and those who get the vaccine.”

“Find another way,” I say. “Going into the hot zone is a death sentence.”

“It’s too late. She’s halfway there.”

“Who is it?” I ask.

“It’s Amelia. I know it’s not what you intended, but you really taught her how to take a hit.”

I go for a walk to clear my head. I leave Bethany and stroll through the woods, trying to do my best to soak in the wonder of God’s creations, rather than thinking about the fact that Four and the Corps have declared war on each other.

I return to Bethany House through the east tunnel, and stop when I see my initials carved into the hard dirt. I look over the other initials that are carved here along with mine. There are dozens

and dozens of them, including members of three different generations of Four members who have called this place home. I run my hands over the initials, trying to connect with the people who carved them. The oldest sets are carved at eye level, with newer initials carved above and below them. Many have the year carved next to them as well.

I find Amelia's initials. They look like they were carved by a little kid, because she first came here when she was ten years old. She's not likely to come back.

Another death on my head.

I blow away some dust and cobwebs, and see "ADB" and "BDB" carved side by side, with the year 2190. The old twins Brill and Austin carved their initials here when I was just six years old. Near their initials, I see someone has carved "JC." I smile as I wonder if someone carved it to signify Jesus Christ is watching over this place.

I blow hard again at the cobwebs and gasp, when the "JC" turns out to read "JCP," along with the date.

"James Cephas Paulson," I say aloud.

These are my father's initials. The letter P is even stylized a little, the way he used to write it when he signed his name. It's all that's left of him.

Is this all that'll be left of me when the toxin is released into the air? Just initials carved into a wall?

I'm working in the command center, when William speaks to me from across the room.

"Cephas? Are you expecting a communication from Zip?"

"No, but put her through to this monitor."

"Hello, Cult Hunter," Zip says. "I received a message from your friend Amelia that you'll want to see."

"Why'd she send it to you?"

"She didn't. She couldn't use the government network, so she somehow bounced it off an old satellite and we picked it up."

The quality of the video is poor, but shows more detail than I want to see. The camera is pointed at her face, and shows dark circles under her eyes and beads of sweat on her forehead.

"Bethany House, are you receiving this? Okay, if you're receiving this, I know I don't look good, but I'm fine. I think it's just a local flu. It sounds ghoulish, but I've taken some blood samples from the dead, and so far my analysis proves this is not an infectious agent or a chemical attack. I was coming for more samples and I wanted you to see this."

Amelia turns the camera so we can see she's taking the shot from behind a eucalyptus tree. Medical workers in isolation suits are carrying bodies and stacking them against a wall. She zooms in on the dead to show that their skin is covered with open pox-like wounds and their faces look twisted in pain.

"That's enough" a man's voice says from off screen.

Amelia zooms back out to show a man in a cult hunter uniform approach the pile without an isolation suit or other protective gear. He takes a paint stick from his pocket and writes a large number four on the wall next to the bodies. Before he walks away, he kicks one of the bodies in the head and laughs.

"Get a shot of that so the fish heads get blamed, then burn them," he says.

He looks in Amelia's direction and says "Hey! You there." The video ends and Zip comes back onto my screen.

"That's no flu, Cult Hunter. You sent her into a death trap."

I say nothing.

"Do you still think peaceful resistance is enough, now that you're losing members of Bethany House?"

“What are you going to do?” I ask.

“I’m going to show them that a pile of bodies isn’t so funny, when they’re all wearing cult hunter uniforms. And I’ve already picked out which cult hunter is going to top off the pile.”

She nods to someone and in the lower corner of my screen, scrolling numbers appear, just as they lock on the final two digits.

“That’s the location of Bethany House. I have other priorities right now, but someday soon you’ll be seeing me personally, Cult Hunter.”

Chapter Thirty-Three

Now that we're married, Martha and I share a room. Bethany House had never included a double bed before, but the staff carried one all the way here in pieces for us. I lie on the bed, trying to think, but I can't get Amelia's tired face - or Zip's words - out of my head.

That's no flu, Cult Hunter.

Martha finds me and stands in the doorway.

"What's happened?" I ask when I see the look on her face.

"War."

There's a screen in the room, so Martha orders her com to display a news broadcast. There's drone footage of what looks like a quiet neighborhood, with a voice-over explaining that the house belongs to a cult hunter station commander. The house was invaded by members of Four, but the station commander had gone home alone, as part of a trap. I can see dozens of Corps kill team members surrounding the house, readying for an assault.

The screen goes black and I look at Martha.

"We think Henry's plan was to show a live massacre of a Four team, but the official feed cut out there to hide what really happened next. Zip just hacked this into the evening news."

The screen comes back and shows that, seconds before they were to assault the house, the kill teams came under heavy fire from behind. They had set a trap inside of a trap. The footage shows Zip and a few others walking casually out of the house and stepping over the bodies of dead cult hunters. Before she disappears into the dark, Zip kicks one of the bodies in the head. Her meaning is clear, there will be an eye for an eye.

"It would seem that Zip does have an appreciation for larger patterns within patterns," I say.

"Here's Henry's response."

The next newscast shows that Henry has somehow spread his toxin from Sulawesi to the population centers of Borneo, though we still don't know how. Drone footage of various cities show the chaos, as people try to survive in any way they can. Most are wearing masks and locking their doors. If you look carefully, you can see cult hunter teams still walking around without any protective gear.

Then, all channels are interrupted for a special worldwide announcement from the director of the Center for World Health in Atlanta.

"The CWH is pleased to announce that a first-generation vaccine for the disease currently ravaging Southeast Asia has been developed."

Right on schedule.

"Production will commence immediately, with distribution going first to the affected areas to produce a protected curtain around the region. In order to ensure that everyone receives vaccination, we will be working closely with the bureau of international census and records. It's our vow that we will not miss a single registered individual on planet earth."

"And the rest of us die," Martha concludes, as she turns off the broadcast.

"I did this," I say. "It's the same as last time, but with more zeroes."

"What are you talking about?"

"My life story. I make choices and people die. I pretend that I was just a kid solving puzzles, but I always knew the Corps was using me. I always knew what was happening and did nothing to stop it when my work murdered thousands."

"There was nothing you could have done."

"Yes, there was. Zach's final code was nearly perfect. It was the most beautiful puzzle I ever solved. A thousand computers couldn't have solved it - only me. Nobody would have known if I'd

just kept the secret to myself, but I was too proud to let anyone think there was a puzzle that the legendary Cephas Paulson couldn't solve. I held the lives of the entire Christian world in my hands, and I was too arrogant to stop the killing."

I can't look up at her.

"So I wrote the decryption code, and you know what I did? I hid the words "Thou shalt not kill" in it. Then I gave Henry the code and watched my work break that commandment eleven thousand three hundred and twenty-three times. That's what the number represents. It's the exact number of people killed by my pride over the week of terror that followed. And now, because of me, the number will reach into the millions."

Martha says nothing, which is more painful than words.

"What do you think of your prophet now?" I ask.

"I think your life is like a fractal pattern that even you can't comprehend."

I walk out the door and Martha follows me, until I reach the end of the escape tunnel, where I turn to face her.

"You need more? He told me to feed His sheep. He trusted me and I've let Him down. How am I supposed to figure out who I am and His plan for me, when the entire Christian world has forgotten who they are? How am I supposed to find His sheep?"

I begin to walk away.

"You are making the best choices you know how to make," she says.

Those words again: "You Are."

I turn and face her again.

"You'd lecture me on choices?" I ask.

I dig two dried and battered roses from my shirt pocket and throw them at her feet.

"You wrote the words 'Life' and 'Death' in those roses. They traveled through time with me, twice. I would have carried them for the rest of my life because I was fool enough to think Christians still believe it. When you were about to kiss me on the forest floor, one of the thorns stuck me right above my heart and reminded me to choose wisely. Keep the roses. Every choice I make leads to destruction and death."

I leave as she bends down to pick up the roses.

Right now, I want Bethany House, and the war it represents, far behind me; so I begin to run.

Run, Cephas. Run like the disciples ran at Gethsemane.

I could slow down and run without leaving a track, but I pay no attention, as I crash through bushes and intentionally crack down on every dead twig in my path. I run until it feels like my heart will burst out of my chest, but right now it's preferable to thinking or feeling.

I approach a small stream and run headlong into a thicket of blackberry bushes without slowing down. The overripe fruit smears itself on me, staining me purple, as the sharp thorns claw at my face and clothing, but I burst through and keep on running.

Those thorns cut deep. They'd make a good crown.

About a kilometer later, I recognize where I am. There's a steep embankment coming up, and I'm going to keep running and launch myself into the air. Call it a leap of faith. Maybe Jesus or an angel will catch me so I don't break my neck on the rocks below.

I increase my speed and prepare to go airborne off the edge.

Do not test the Lord your God.

When I hear the words in my head, I try to skid to a stop, but end up sliding over the edge and tumbling down the steep bank anyway. Luckily, the area is covered with fir trees and the soft needles cushion me as I roll to the bottom. I open my eyes and sit up. I'm just centimeters from a series of large, moss-covered boulders. If I'd jumped, I might very well have reached them and broken my neck.

I sit with my head in my hands and try to figure out the puzzle my life has become. There's a light snap of a twig twenty meters behind me. Martha snapped the twig on purpose so I would hear her, but I continue to sit with my head down.

"Cephas?" she says from ten meters away.

When I don't respond, she takes a few cautious steps towards me.

"Can we just talk?"

She closes the distance in silence.

"Cephas, I love you, but I don't understand what's happening. Please speak to me."

She sits beside me on the soft ground. I leave my head in my hands. Martha puts her hand on my shoulder. Her hand feels so warm, so right, and yet so - "You Are."

"Martha, who am I?" I ask.

"I don't understand."

"For my entire life, it feels like the world has been whispering, "You Are" in my ear to tell me who I need to be. 'You are' The Cult Hunter; 'You are' the next puppet President; 'You are' a religious figurehead. It's always the same. It's always: "You Are."

I raise my chin to look at her and she seems taken aback by my gaze. I probably look a little crazy right now, and part of me wonders if I could be on the edge of insanity.

"Even you, Martha. The sound of your lips saying 'You Are' echo the loudest. So please - tell me who I am."

"Cephas? Are you okay? There's a cut on your forehead."

She reaches out and removes a long, curved blackberry thorn that's still stuck in my skin.

"I wish I'd asked the last man I met who had thorns stuck in His forehead," I say.

"Asked Him what?"

"I wish I'd walked up to Jesus in the temple and asked Him outright: 'Who am I, Lord?' And I wish He'd told me, because I certainly don't know."

The spot where she removed the thorn sends a trickle of blood running down the side of my nose. As she reaches out to stop it, I catch her wrist. She tries to pull away, but I have her in a firm grip with both my hand and my eyes.

"It's the question the whole world is asking, Martha. Every time someone loses themselves in drugs or mindless sex or even killing themselves, it's the question they're asking. He gave me two chances to ask it, and I blew it both times. How can I possibly lead anyone to Him, when I don't know something so basic about myself?"

She's starting to look frightened, but it's not clear if she's frightened of me or frightened for me.

"Cephas, you are -" she can't help but begin, then stops herself.

I release her hands, but not her eyes.

"I'm what? I'm the person meant to fulfill a prophecy? How can I be? If I was, then Jesus would have healed me all the way instead of just healing my voice."

"All the way?"

"The Corps took pictures of every Christian they killed. I saw the reports. Those images are still burned into my brain. Every tortured face, every bit of pain that I caused is a part of me that I'll never be able to escape. Why didn't Jesus take that away when He forgave me? Why would He only half-heal me?"

"Half-healed? Cephas, how can you not see that this is a beautiful thing?"

"How can a brain filled with ugliness be a beautiful thing?"

"Let me ask you: when Jesus healed people with leprosy, do you think all of the scars were taken away too? Or did they still have the scars?" Martha asks.

"I don't know. I suppose He could have chosen to leave them or not," I say.

“What about in the book of John, after Jesus has been resurrected? He had Thomas touch the scars on His hands and side. Why would Jesus choose to leave the scars on Himself and others?”

“To help us remember,” I whisper, as I understand what she’s getting at.

“Yes, Cephas. Like a leper looking down at his scarred hands, you should never want to forget the gifts of healing and forgiveness you’ve been given. The scars are part of the gift too. And I still believe that gift was given to you for the purpose of saving us all.”

What would you have me do, Lord?

“I can’t do this, Martha. I can’t stop a war. I am only one man. I am...”

I am. Not, ‘You are.’

She looks over my face intently, as if I suddenly look like a different person.

“I am,” I say. “All this time I’ve been listening to countless voices who tell me: ‘You Are,’ but there’s only one voice to listen to. The voice of truth, the voice of ‘I am.’”

The time in which the words ‘you are’ can define me, are over.

“What have the puzzle pieces come together to tell you now?” Martha half laughs and half cries.

“It’s clear now who’s going to stop this war...”

I take her face gently into my hands and whisper the answer.

“I am.”

I am.

Dear Reader:

I AM

It's the answer to so many important questions you can ask of yourself. Who's responsible for spreading the Word of God? *I am*. Who's responsible for loving his neighbor as himself? *I am*. Who's loved by Christ no matter how we may try to wear masks to hide ourselves from Him? *I am*.

On the other hand, does Cephas really think he's going to stop a war by himself? Or does he recognize that his role is just one piece in the puzzle of God, the great "I am?"

Epilogue

Once when I was six years old, just after he'd returned from an overnight trip to his job in Washington, D.C., my father did something he'd never done before, he sat and watched me as I put together an antique jigsaw puzzle on the floor in the living room of our house. He'd seen me put together puzzles in the past. He'd even watched me for short periods of time, but this was different. He watched me for over an hour, while pretending to read something on his small computer pad.

Actually, that isn't quite correct. He was pretending to pretend to read something on the pad, like he was doing a puzzle inside of a puzzle. I say this because the pad wasn't even turned on, so whatever he was reading was flat and he was hiding it behind the pad. I decided to do my own puzzle within a puzzle, and observed him as I pretended to give my full attention to putting pieces together. He must've read whatever he was hiding a dozen times as he watched me, and when he was done, I heard it make a slight wrinkling sound as he slid it into his pocket. I'd never seen paper before, so I didn't know what to make of it.

"Cephas?" he said, to break the long silence. "What do you want to do when you grow up?"

"Most people don't do anything when they grow up. Most people sit at home and watch shows all day. Is there such a thing as a professional puzzle solver?"

"You could be a scientist, like your mom. Making discoveries is like solving puzzles."

I wrinkled my nose at that idea. I didn't like technology.

"Archeologists solve puzzles by piecing together the past," I replied. "And chefs piece together new recipes and F.B.I. agents piece together crimes. Any job can involve puzzles, if you look at it the right way."

"I suppose you're right, but you don't enjoy just any sort of puzzle do you? You only like puzzles that are hard for you. What would you do if you found a puzzle that didn't seem to have a solution?"

"I'd create a new solution," I replied without hesitation.

Dad was sufficiently surprised by my answer that he gasped under his breath.

"But--"

Dad's voice trailed off. It was something he always did when he wanted to choose his words carefully.

"But wouldn't creating a new solution make it a different puzzle?"

"Not if the whole point of the puzzle was to create a new solution in the first place."

I said it without looking up, and heard him gasp again.

"Okay. What if your new solution included throwing away a couple of the original pieces?"

I never looked up, but somehow I knew that his eyes were closed as he asked me this.

"That's okay. Maybe being thrown away was always their job in the puzzle. That's a cool idea to make the puzzle harder. Maybe I'll get a puzzle like that someday."

"I'm sure you will, Cephas. Someday I'm sure you will."

Sneak peek at Puzzle Master Trilogy Book Three: Missing Pieces

Chapter 1

I am.

If I thought the words “You are” were the most troubling words to hear repeated over and over in my head, it’s only because I had not yet heard “I am” echoing through my mind.

I am the world’s best hope for stopping a war, but I have no army.

I am the one who can see pieces of the puzzle, but even I can’t put them together.

I am Christianity’s best hope for survival, but that hope is fading.

I am the new rock on which His church will continue to be built.

Is it really possible that I’m part of God’s plan? Or is this just my own ego talking? If I am part of His plan, why must it be so hard to see?

It’s a lot to contemplate when you’re in the middle of a mission, but somehow thinking about the big picture sharpens my focus on more immediate issues.

I reach out to the knob of the command center door.

“Don’t try it, Cephas. It can’t be done,” my cousin James says.

“Do you have a better plan?”

Of course he doesn’t. Zip and a combat team stormed Bethany House and are holding three of our people hostage behind this door, demanding my surrender in exchange for their lives. This is the only way in or out. We tried to reverse the ventilation system to flood the room with a sleeping gas, but they somehow thwarted us and even sent much of it back in our faces, leaving a direct assault as our only option.

Why does the world keep putting a gun into my hand?

“The math is simple, Cephas. There are ten of them, all with guns pointed at this door or at the heads of the hostages. Your stun gun has a maximum fire rate of five shots per second so even if you could hit all ten targets in under three seconds they’ll still have time to execute our people.”

“Don’t say ‘our people’ like you’ve never met them. My wife and your sister are two of the hostages,” I say.

“It doesn’t change the math.”

“Then I will. I’ll double my fire rate.”

I grab his stun gun from its holster and kick in the door with a gun in each hand. My first two shots hit Zip and a member of her team who are indeed holding their guns to the heads of Martha and Cindi. Next down is a man holding a rifle, followed by a woman who shoots and hits the door frame next to me. Number five is hit as he dives for the cover of a table and six when he raises his gun to shoot Cindi. The next two reveal their positions when they shoot from shadowed spots in the corners. I’m already moving forward so they miss, but I feel the electric charge race past before I disable them both. Number nine drops his gun and surrenders and number ten follows suit.

“I knew you could shoot left-handed!” Martha says.

“You also knew I’d do anything necessary to end this and keep our date tonight.”

“Zip,” who was being played by Misty gets up from the floor.

“You two do realize that these things still hurt, even on the lowest setting, right?”

“Sorry, Misty. How many times does that make today? Seven?”

“You lose both count and feeling after three.”

“Thanks everyone,” Martha says. “Be ready to practice a new assault scenario tomorrow.”

“Okay, but you get to be Zip next time,” Misty says.

The command center returns to normal operations and I look for an empty station I can use. The only one available is the one everyone avoids, Amelia's old station. After seeing her in a video from Indonesia the general assumption is that she's dead. There's been talk of having a memorial service, but Martha has been putting it off until we know for sure. Given the mass cremations of the dead, confirmation may never come.

I sit and review a map of the progress of the toxin that killed her which the media is now calling "The Plague." The map also shows areas where the Center for World Health is "vaccinating" as they attempt to get ahead of outbreaks. The CWH shipped its first batch of vaccine to Borneo after half of the population was already infected. The vaccine only works if taken before a person is infected, so riots broke out at the airport when the cargo planes landed. Anyone who looked sick was stoned by the crowds to keep them back. Kill teams from the Corps were assigned to protect the vaccine and shot hundreds more as they tried to storm the planes.

The reason is no puzzle. The Corps is keeping tight control of the vaccine to ensure it stays out of the hands of Christians who are living off the government grid. We received a report of a family that had walked four days in the jungle to reach a clinic, but were denied doses and arrested for fraud because three of their five children were not on the grid. As far as we know, they weren't even Christian, they were off grid simply because they lived in a remote area. The last report said the entire family was killed by the toxin.

Tight control of the vaccine also allows the Corps to control the level of fear. As the tension eased on Borneo, the plague showed up in Java and Sumatra and the cycle started all over again. Vaccine had barely arrived there, when Malaysia saw its first cases. Adding to the confusion is the fact that in rare cases the vaccine itself causes a high fever that mimics the plague. Several people who had received their dose were killed before it was figured out.

Why don't the experts see this isn't acting like a disease? It's acting like a toxin that's being selectively distributed.

CWH scientists are being heralded as heroes for stemming the death toll, but there's going to be a lot more death. Henry wants people to take the vaccine without question so the plague will be made to look like an unstoppable wave traveling around the world. Everywhere the disease goes, the vaccine will arrive just in time. There'll be enough death to keep everyone scared and controlled.

The screen I'm using goes dark except for a small blinking icon in the lower corner that looks like a stick with a snake coiled around it. I select it and some sort of code starts downloading, then prompts me to select the stick again to complete a remote link. I know enough about technology to understand this is some sort of hacking and that I should purge the new code before anyone can gain remote access. I complete the link anyway.

"Thank God," Amelia says as her face comes up on the screen.

She's wearing an isolation suit, but has the hood off.

"I knew it would be you, Cephas. You're the only one there who would see the backdoor I wrote into my station for downloading medical texts and not delete it as a hack."

"You're alive!"

Finally, some good news.

Heads come up all over the room at my shout followed by people crowding around the station.

"Why wouldn't I be?"

"We got the video you made of the pile of bodies. You looked like you had the plague."

"I told you I was fine, whatever it was it passed in no time. I can only hold this link for a minute, so here's my report. I'm in Makassar, Indonesia, but you'd think I'm on the set of a horror movie. This entire city is going to be wiped out. My hotel got converted into a hospital, so I'm

volunteering as a nurse to collect more samples. I even flirted with a cult hunter who said he'd been vaccinated and got a blood sample from him."

"Did you find anything?"

"I'm sure they're doing this with a genetic toxin just like Jocie said, but it breaks down too quickly after a patient dies for those samples to be of any use. I ran the cult hunter's vaccinated DNA through a sequencer to try to locate the artificial sequence that's designed to counteract the toxin, but the human genome has over three billion base pairs. It's a needle in a haystack."

"If you're working as a nurse, can you get access to the vaccine?"

"They didn't bring vaccine to Makassar. They set up a perimeter to keep everyone inside, then wrote the city off as a loss. A few people tried to get out early on and were shot. Now the entire island is quarantined and they're using drones to blow up anyone who attempts to leave by boat. From the roof of the hotel you can see a dozen or more explode and burn at sea every night."

"So what's your next move?" I ask.

She pauses then looks into the camera. I've never seen her eyes look so tired.

"The same as every other Christian living off the grid. Survive."

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