

Puzzle Master: Missing Pieces

Puzzle Master Series Book Three

T.J. McKenna

Puzzle Master: Missing Pieces
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Dedication

You'd think a short dedication would be the easiest part of a book to write... but it's not. If you think about all the inspirations in your life, the dedication would be longer than the book itself.

So allow me to say this, I dedicate this book to everyone who reads the Puzzle Master Trilogy and wishes in their hearts that they were a member of Four, ready to fight the good fight, ready to take the hit for those they love. You know who you are...

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Prologue

My parents had been dead for just five days when Aunt Jennifer moved into the house. I had lived with Mrs. Pierce during those five days, hoping my parents would somehow walk through her door and announce that it was all a big mistake, but knowing it wasn't. I hardly knew Aunt Jennifer before she moved in, but it was like she already had a plan to erase all memories of my parents. Even during those five days with Mrs. Pierce, whenever I allowed myself to dream that they were still alive, Aunt Jennifer would somehow pop up on a screen to remind me that they were gone and there was no point in dwelling on what couldn't be changed. While anyone else would have regarded it a cruel way to treat an eight-year-old orphan, to Aunt Jennifer it was the only "proper" way to handle the situation.

On the day I moved back into the only house I had ever known, I felt like I should check the address. My parent's house was being transformed into Jennifer's house. Painting robots had already changed the color and a large garbage dumpster was sitting out front. Five hovering lift robots, that would remove anything that Aunt Jennifer told them to remove, were following her around like puppies. The furniture was the first to go, starting with the comfy old couch that Mom would tell me not to bounce on, but would smile and turn her back and let me bounce on anyway. Next was the soft rocking chair that had belonged to my great-grandmother on my mother's side. It sat in a sunbeam all morning, and no matter how many times the cleaning bots tried to clean it, if you hit it with your hand a wonderful cloud of dust would rise and sparkle in the light.

The video screens and kitchen appliances were allowed to stay, but I watched as the pots, pans and dishes were judged to be too old, and made their way to the dumpster. Aunt Jennifer stood and stared at the homemade incubator. I assumed she had never seen one before, and needed me to explain it to her.

"Can we keep it? It's called an incubator, and you can do really cool things with it. You can make yogurt and you can even use it to hatch baby chickens."

Aunt Jennifer cut me off with a raised hand and a disgusted look; then ordered one of the lift bots to take it to the dumpster.

"Yogurt and chickens? If you only knew what your vile mother was actually growing in that thing, maybe you wouldn't be so sad about her death," Jennifer said.

It was clear I wasn't going to win the argument. As the lift bot grabbed the incubator, something that had been stuck to the bottom fell to the floor. Although I'd never seen one before, I'd read descriptions and knew it was some sort of book made out of paper.

Aunt Jennifer beat me to it and flipped through its pages. Whatever it was, her face registered deep disgust, which only increased my interest.

"What is it? Can I see?"

She didn't bother to answer. She left the room and told the bots to pause, as she made a private call.

When the pictures started to come off the walls, I finally protested. I lost that argument too, but managed to sneak a framed picture of my parents up to my room. Most pictures were displayed in electronic frames that could switch images with a simple upload, but this one was an old-fashioned frame with a real printed picture behind glass. Somehow its permanence was comforting to me.

From my bedroom window, I saw my parent's clothing going out the door. I wanted to keep crying like I had for the last five days with Mrs. Pierce, but instead, I determined not to give Aunt Jennifer the satisfaction. I watched the lift bots making trips to and from the dumpster while counting off the seconds. In any given five minute period, there were always lulls of one minute when all the bots were inside the house. If I was quick, I knew I could rescue things from the

dumpster and hide them in the bushes until I could sneak them back into my room, or even hide them at Mrs. Pierce's house.

I hid in the bushes while the lift bots carried out the bedroom furniture from the guest room. It was big, old-fashioned, wood furniture, so the bots had to work as a team, giving me a perfect window as the entire group went into the house for the next piece. Climbing into the dumpster took longer than expected, and when I got inside I had no idea which box to rescue. The first two I tried were too heavy for me to throw up and over the side; so I settled on a light, medium-sized box and threw it over without looking at its contents. It didn't matter what was inside the box. This was more about winning symbolic victories than about obtaining stuff. I made it out just before the lift bots dumped a heavy wooden bureau and matching nightstands in on top of me.

I ran with the box to the back of the house and behind a bush, wondering what treasures might be inside. The entire box was filled with old silk neckties. Nobody had worn ties for decades, but since this is what I had rescued, I thought I'd start wearing them when I became older.

When I went back inside, the purge was about to proceed to the attic, but one of the lift bots informed Jennifer that the dumpster had reached its maximum weight. She decided to leave the attic for another day, and I watched as the dumpster filled with my childhood hovered down the street.

The lift bots now switched to the movement of Aunt Jennifer's things into the house. I watched the parade of her furniture and decorations enter. Everything was modern and cold, just like Aunt Jennifer. There would be no furniture to bounce on, and no cloud of dust in the sunbeam. The only exception to the modern decor was Aunt Jennifer's desk. It was very old and made of heavy, dark wood. She called my attention to it when she was done fussing about getting it into precisely the proper spot.

"Cephas, I want this desk to be your inspiration. This desk represents an important piece of history. Over one hundred years ago, sitting at this very desk, one of the greatest atheists in history wrote the book: *And Man Becomes God*. Isn't that exciting?"

"I guess so."

"I've read your school reports. According to your teachers, you are an extraordinary eight-year-old. I've convinced them to place you in an accelerated program, so you'll finish high school by the time you're ten and college by the time you're thirteen."

Her smile tells me this isn't just a suggestion.

"School is easy," I said. "They don't expect much."

"The school may not expect much, but I do," she replied with a warning tone. "Cultists are starting to communicate in other languages, so first you're going to learn ancient Greek, Latin, and Hebrew. The reports say you're gifted in languages; so it should be easy for you. It's like you were delivered to me specifically for the task of being a cult hunter. Oh, the irony of it all."

I said nothing.

"I intend to make you into something special, Cephas. Someday you'll sit at this desk and do great things for our cause. To do that, I'm going to teach you the art of influencing people to get what you want."

You mean manipulating people.

"It's not so hard," she said. "People love to talk and argue, and it's usually a simple matter to trap them inside a box of their own words. They never seem to notice that you've built a trapdoor in the bottom of their box, until just before you pull the pin - and laugh as they fall."

You mean I'm going to learn to destroy people.

After her speech about the desk, I retreated to my room rather than face my new reality. She was still fussing with the decorating and I wanted to get away from the smell. As the house filled with Aunt Jennifer's things, I noticed the air filling with the smell of Aunt Jennifer's perfume. I wasn't

quite sure how to describe it. It was like a floral scent, combined with wood chips, combined with the scent of a lovelorn muskrat.

Like Aunt Jennifer herself, in time the smell would permeate everything I owned. As I sat looking at the picture of my parents, my room was the only place in the house left untouched by Aunt Jennifer. When I heard her climbing the stairs, I sighed and hid the picture under my pillow because I knew even my room would not remain untouched for long.

“What in the world is all this junk?” Aunt Jennifer asked as she entered my room without knocking.

Looking back, my parents had encouraged me to make my room a monument to my own childhood curiosity. One wall was covered with projections of drawings that I had done myself. Most were fractals that contained patterns within patterns so complex that most people could stare at them all day and not uncover them all. Another wall was covered with projections of all the sites that I wanted to see when I grew up and traveled the world. The largest were of the Great Sphinx in Egypt and the Great Wall of China.

The third wall contained a large table covered with various puzzles that I had solved. Aunt Jennifer headed straight for this area - it was obvious that something had caught her eye.

“Cephas, what are these?” Aunt Jennifer asked, staring with fascination at two giant orb-like puzzles, each about the size of a beach ball.

“The one on the left is called ‘The Nearly Impossible Puzzle.’ It’s a dodecahedron made out of about ten thousand unique pieces. The one on the right is called ‘The Impossible Puzzle.’ It’s a sphere made of only about nine thousand unique pieces, but I guess it was a little harder,” I replied.

“Did you solve these puzzles all by yourself?” she asked, with wonder in her voice.

“Only nineteen people in the world have solved ‘The Nearly Impossible Puzzle’ and only eight have solved ‘The Impossible Puzzle.’ I’m just one of three to have solved both. I’m the youngest by over ten years and the other two admitted they used computers; so I guess you could say I’m the only one in the world to have solved them.”

I wasn’t even bragging as I said it. I just felt like I was listing facts out of an encyclopedia.

“They’re quite remarkable. They’ll make wonderful conversation pieces when I have guests in the living room.”

She picked one up without asking and headed for the door.

“Bring the other one,” she ordered; so I picked it up and followed her down the stairs and into my new world.

Chapter One

I am.

If I thought the words “You are” were the most troubling words to hear repeated over and over inside 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 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?

I’m thinking and praying in a private spot hidden inside a blackberry thicket. I ran headlong through this thicket a week ago. It was pretty silly, when I think about it. Who was I trying to run away from, anyway? God? The thorns tore me up pretty badly, but it turned out I tore up the thicket too, and created an entry to this spot. Like my world in general, I’ve found a small patch of soft grass - surrounded by sharp thorns.

My thoughts turn to one of the sharpest of those thorns - Henry’s biotoxin - which the media is now calling “The Plague.” Every day we receive an updated world map that shows the progress of the toxin and the number of people killed. 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 they 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 then were 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 that 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 in those countries, 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 by mobs before it was figured out.

Why don’t the experts see that 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 continue to 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.

What the maps and numbers can never capture is the faces of those who died, including Amelia. *Their faces, their hopes and dreams, their love. It’s all lost on a map filled with colors and numbers.*

After seeing her in a video from Indonesia - where she looked tired and feverish - there has been no more contact with Amelia. There’s been talk of having a memorial service for her, but Martha has been putting it off until we know for sure. Given the mass cremations of the dead, that confirmation may never come.

The only thing that is abundantly clear to me is that I have no clue what to do about any of it. I feel like God has asked me to sit in the middle of a blackberry patch and do nothing - and I don't know why.

But I will trust in Him.

As I leave my grassy retreat, I put a com into my ear. It automatically connects to Bethany House and reports that the computers are on a code "blue five" lockout.

Intruders inside the house.

I sprint as far as I dare; then move silently through the trees, until I can see the entrance to the east escape tunnel. I'm relieved to see William, who is caring for three house members who have each taken multiple stun gun hits.

"William, what's going on?" I ask.

"It's Zip. Half of us were at the training center watching a match, when she and a team stormed the west tunnel. We've got them trapped in the command center, but they have hostages. They say they'll kill them all, if you don't surrender."

I already know the answer from the look on his face, but I have to ask anyway.

"Who are the hostages?"

"Martha, Cindi, and Toby," he replies.

Normally Blake would be second in command at Bethany House, but he's at Capon Springs today; so my cousin James has stepped up. He has set up covered positions from which to shoot, should Zip attempt to break out; but he's at the command center door, talking through it to Zip.

"I told you, Zip; Cephas goes off like this sometimes. We don't know where he is!"

When he sees me, he looks like he's going to tell them that I've arrived, but I motion for him to stay silent. We whisper when I reach him.

"I take it she's not willing to negotiate," I say.

"She's made that quite clear," he replies.

"What else have you tried?" I ask.

"We tried to reverse the ventilation system to flood the room with a sleeping gas, but they somehow reversed the system and sent it back in our faces. Zip says if I try anything like that again, Cindi is first to die."

"So storming through this door is the only option left?"

I raise my stun gun.

Why does the world keep putting a gun into my hand?

"It wouldn't be if Martha had taken my advice and built another way out of the command center," James replies.

I reach out to the knob of the command center door.

"Don't try it, Cephas. It can't be done."

"Do you have a better plan?"

"No, but the math is simple," James says. "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," James says.

"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 another training exercise 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 this week? Seven?" I ask.

"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.

Martha looks at me.

"You're mad," she concludes.

"Why did you run a scenario like that?" I ask.

"You've spent a lot of time in the blackberry patch lately. I haven't told them where you go, but everyone is feeling your absence. I think everyone will be relieved to hear how you handled walking in on the middle of an attack."

"I mean, why did you run a scenario where there's a gun to your head?"

She pauses.

"I guess I didn't think about it. I mean, with the plague hanging over us, don't we all have guns to our heads?"

"I suppose so."

I say it solely to end the conversation. What the training scenario really did was reinforce the nagging feeling that I'll soon be forced to make a choice between what I want for myself, and what God wants for me. If that choice includes hurting Martha, I'm not sure I'll have the strength to choose God's Plan.

As the command center returns to normal operations, I look for an empty station I can use - and see, again, that I was too slow. It happens every day. Like a game of musical chairs, I'm the last one standing when the only station available is the one that everyone avoids: Amelia's old station. The top of the monitor sports a small toy lizard that Amelia flopped there, like it fell asleep. I'm sure it will turn gray with dust before anyone touches it.

As I begin to scan the news, the screen 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 downloads, 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, Cephias. 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!" I yell.

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. Look, 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.

“The same as every other Christian. Survive.”

After the call ends, the house erupts into a celebration over Amelia’s survival. I attend for a while; then slip away to pray. I need to praise God and thank Him. I’d like to return to the blackberry patch, but that’s already gotten me into trouble once today; so I’m in our room when Martha finds me.

“I heard you’d slipped out of the party,” Martha says. “I’d hoped you were spending time with the team. They need you.”

“I’m sorry. I guess I felt a little guilty.”

“Guilty?”

“I’d given up hope that we’d ever see Amelia again. I’d stopped praying for her to somehow survive. It’s hard to enjoy a party when you feel like you were faithless.”

“Nobody will ever accuse you of being faithless, Cephas. As far as we’re concerned, you’re the rock that the entire team is built upon,” she replies.

“Tell me, Martha. How can I be His rock in ‘Man’s Garden of Eden?’ When Jesus declared Simon Peter to be His rock, the world was seeking a savior. Peter and the other Apostles touched peoples’ hearts because their hearts were open and yearning to be touched. How can anyone be His rock in a world that barely understands love?”

“I don’t know - but it’s not like Simon Peter knew what he was doing either,” she says. “Sometimes he was a major mess-up. He fell asleep, and then ran at Gethsemane when Jesus was arrested; and then he denied Christ three times.”

“If Jesus is in the habit of picking major mess-ups, then He has the right guy again this time,” I say.

“God doesn’t expect you to be perfect, Cephas. He picked you because you’re you, and so did I.”

She kisses me to drive the point home.

“Do you want me to go back to the party?” I ask.

“It would be good for both you and the team, but that’s not why I came looking for you. We broke through the encryption on the chip that Jocie hid inside the gold cross.”

“Please tell me there’s something useful,” I say.

“There isn’t any scientific information about the toxin or vaccine; but you need to look at it personally.”

“Why? What’s on it?”

“It’s just a few files. It’s everything The Corps collected relating to the tube car accident that killed your parents.”

“My parents? Why would Jocie ask Henry for the files on my parents?”

“I don’t know. I only read a little, but I bet you’ll find some things your Aunt Jennifer never told you.”

As Martha and I approach the command center, we have to wonder if the party for Amelia has moved in there. The entire house has crowded in and everyone is chattering loudly. When we enter, we look to the big screen. Michael somehow escaped the dragnet The Corps placed around all of England, and is now standing in the Mississippi river somewhere outside of New Orleans, baptizing people.

For the moment, Bethany House is able to forget the plague - but not me.

I find a screen in a quiet corner and bring up the information that was hidden inside Jocie’s gold cross. I recognize the smaller document as the official report from the Department of Transportation that was released to the public. I read it a dozen times when I was young, trying to make sense of how my parents were with me one day and gone the next. It’s primarily a detailed engineering document that meanders from one part of a tube car to another, focusing on a design flaw in the lift system that resulted in failure due to excessive parts’ wear. The report concludes that the unprecedented tragedy was accidental, and outlines new protocols to be taken to ensure no similar accidents would occur in the future.

A classified report from the F.B.I. is new to me. It begins with an agonizingly detailed description of the “remains” found at the scene. When the car disintegrated, the people inside were virtually liquefied. Bone fragments, hair, skin and blood were smeared over ten kilometers of tube line. The report notes that some of the victims had few or zero enhancements; so the only way to identify them was through comparison of the liquid remains to the national DNA database.

I look through the list of names, and find the final inventory of my parents’ mortal remains. For each of them, positive identification was made by DNA recovered from hair and blood samples. DNA from each of them was also recovered from skin samples; but in each case the yield was low and had some anomalies which were assumed to be from the cross-contamination of fluids from other victims.

The next part of The Corps report contains a detailed engineering analysis, but focuses on just two parts of the tube car: a stabilizing rod and a sensor that would slow the car down if a problem was detected. Normally, the stabilizing rods are inspected and replaced by maintenance robots as often as weekly. The part The Corps found after the accident was not only old, but had been purposefully weakened to fail as soon as the car exceeded eight hundred miles per hour. The sensor had been sabotaged to continuously send out a signal indicating the stabilizer was operating perfectly.

Despite what was told to the public, The Corps concluded that the ‘accident’ was, in fact, murder. The investigation was closed when The Corps was unable to determine which of the many victims the intended target was. There’s even a comment written by Henry Portman, who was then the Deputy Director for Cultic Affairs. He informed the Director that The Corps had done detailed background checks on each of the victims, and found no evidence that any of them were Christians, or that the sabotage was related to cult activity.

An official lie. Henry knew it was some sort of Christian dispute. Maybe he even found evidence in the debris.

The last file contains Henry’s “eyes only” personal notes that confirm he lied to the Director in his official report. He secretly conducted searches of the victims’ homes and found ample proof that some of the victims were part of a Christian group. Henry was particularly concerned with one

woman whose family was connected to his own. She was considered an ardent atheist because her great-grandfather was the scientist who created the genetic toxin technology used in the Final Holy War. The woman's name was Angela Ralph.

A Christian working in a high security job right under The Corps' nose? Or a cult hunter spy?

He notes the number of Bibles and religious artifacts observed during the searches, but the only thing The Corps took was from the home of Angela Ralph: a back-up copy of her work in genetic toxins and synthetic virus vaccines.

My parents are also mentioned by name in Henry's file. The search team found the empty incubator my mother built, and concluded it was used for growing viruses as part of the vaccine research.

So there it is: the proof that mom and dad were conspiring to kill billions.

Henry notes that, in view of the evidence, my parents' Will was to be declared void and I was to be placed in the custody of my Aunt Jennifer.

Martha walks behind me and gives my shoulders a squeeze.

"That's the saddest look I've seen on your face in a long time," she says. "Why don't we get out of here, and go see Bill and Wendy. Maybe planning their wedding will cheer you up."

"Yeah, let's go," I reply.

But I guarantee we won't be discussing weddings. They have bigger secrets to give up than their secret to a long term relationship. Much bigger.

Chapter Two

As always, Wendy seems to know we're coming before we arrive. As we approach, I can see her behind the house, standing next to a pile of empty water bottles that Brill sent. This time she's baked a variety of potential wedding treats for us to sample. Martha digs in like I've never seen her eat before, but I'm not hungry. Bill helps himself to a plate loaded with sweets, despite Wendy's disapproving look.

"You're positively glowing today, dear," Wendy says to Martha.

Martha pauses for a moment, reflecting on the observation.

"I know why you and Bill want to be married," Martha says. "Everything's better when you feel like you're right with the Lord."

"Yes, I'm sure that's what it is," Wendy replies, then turns to me.

"Marriage doesn't seem to be making you glow today, Cephas. Is something troubling you?"

"Yes, something is troubling me very much. We came into possession of a classified report about the tube accident that killed my parents."

Bill stops eating. Wendy gives him a sideways glance.

"Bill, I read the files you gave me on the accident. Your files included a detailed description of every passenger on the car, right down to where it's thought everyone was sitting before the car imploded and they were all shredded to little bits."

Bill gets a faraway look in his eyes - but says nothing; so I continue.

"It must have been pretty hard on the forensics team: a little bit of you mixed with a little bit of me - like a human meat grinder. Is that why your files are missing an entire person? Why don't you tell me about Angela?"

Wendy already knows what I'm talking about, but Martha is puzzled.

"Angie was my sister. She was killed along with your parents; but that's not who you want to talk about, is it?"

"What's this all about?" Martha asks.

"This is all about my great-grandfather, the creator of targeted genetic toxins," Bill replies. "You know him as the man whose work killed over three billion people around the world."

"Mitchell the Monster?" Martha says. "He was tried and given the death penalty in absentia in eighteen countries."

"He was no monster. His system was designed to carry gene-targeted medicines, not toxins. He changed his name and spent the rest of his life trying to help the few who survived the toxin. Somewhere in there, he became a Christian and went to his grave expecting to be thrown into hell for eternity. I'd say he even welcomed it - like eternal torture would somehow atone for his creation."

"Maybe it's not too late for him to atone," I say. "Our government is working on a new generation of his work. Did your great-grandfather leave any notes after he left government service? Any secrets that will allow us to counteract this new toxin?"

"You're the historian, Cephas. You know the world wanted to bury its dead and its past. So that's what he did. I just wish everyone in my family had felt the same way."

"I have a feeling I know what's coming next," I say.

"Do you? Are you so sure?" Bill asks.

"Your sister, my parents, and a bunch of other Christians were all on the same tube car," I say. "That wasn't a simple prayer meeting. It was something big. I think it was Christians who were fed up and wanted to do something. I'm betting they wanted to do something with your great-grandfather's gene-targeting delivery system."

“Never,” Martha bursts in. “They were Christians. Christians would never release a weapon designed to kill millions.”

How I wish that were true.

“I believe your sister created the new version, with my mother’s help,” I say to Bill. “She thought her path to redeeming your family was to wipe out the atheists who modified and unleashed your great-grandfather’s invention. An eye for an eye.”

“I’ll admit; Angie had a twisted sense of redemption.”

“My family tree has some rot too, because my parents were mixed up in the plan,” I say. “One of them must have had the data on the car with them and Henry found something in the wreckage that tipped him off. He searched your sister’s house, and found her notes, and recreated the work. I’m sure he loves the irony of it all.”

“Just stop it!” Martha bursts in again, and Wendy places her hand on top of Martha’s to calm her. “There’s just no way a Christian group was planning genocide.”

“How about the cold-blooded killing of one individual? Would it be okay if the reason was righteous enough?” I ask Martha.

“No. Of course not.”

“When you were recruited to move to Colorado Springs and get near to me, you told Brill it might be best to eliminate me for all the things I’d done to hunt Christians. You even offered to do the job. I killed a man in Bethany just for looking at you the wrong way. Am I any different from my parents?”

“It’s not the same. You’re talking about genocide.”

“Some might say it’s easier to kill a million with your eyes closed, than to kill just one, while watching as the lights go out of their eyes forever.”

Everyone sits in silence for a while. No one is hungry for wedding treats anymore.

“Did your sister ever tell you their plan?” I ask Bill.

“They were an apocalypse cult. They planned to vaccinate everyone who believed in Christ and unleash the toxin on everyone else. They were planning a small production facility that would go unnoticed - maybe just a quarter million doses per year. It was going to take them years of secretly vaccinating Christians before they could release the toxin. She had drawn up plans, but was killed before the facility could be built.”

“But not everyone was on board with the plan; so probably either Garai’s uncle or Aislin took them all out and thought the technology died with them,” I say. “But that leaves some unanswered questions: where did they plan to secretly produce the vaccine, and is the site still there?”

The log cabin once again becomes our headquarters, and we spend the next week searching all leads around the world that might tell us where Henry is producing either the vaccine or the toxin. He knows Christians will eventually become desperate enough to steal the vaccine from him; so he’s quickly learned to give us no electronic clues that would reveal his plan.

I spend a portion of my time searching through decades-old documents that might give a clue as to where my parents - or those who died with them in the accident - planned to hide a vaccine production facility. I dig into the life of everyone who died alongside my parents, with no success.

This time, there isn’t going to be a staff with Roman numerals carved into it to point the way.

Zip is also staying busy. After the success of her initial assaults, the Corps withdrew its people to safe houses, and now uniformed cult hunters are only seen in public as fully armed, ten-member kill teams. First, Zip ambushed three of those teams and wiped them out without losing anyone. Then, when public patrols stopped, she bombed a safe house with a kill team inside. Zip’s not interested in taking prisoners.

Each time Zip attacks, the plague responds with another major jump. It spread across the major islands of Indonesia, where it hit all the larger population centers, but spared many of the smaller islands. When Zip massacred three kill teams in two days, the plague appeared first in Malaysia, then in the Philippines. When the safe house was bombed, the plague jumped many kilometers of ocean to hit isolated cities in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Thailand. Henry is also not interested in taking prisoners.

I'm reading a new report from Amelia, while Martha sleeps on a small bed on the far side of the cabin. In the report, Amelia disputes the official projections regarding death toll. She thinks there'll be one million dead in the city of Makassar alone. With the entire island affected, she's now able to leave the city; but when she attempts to travel to the smaller towns and villages, she's turned away at knifepoint. People in the isolated areas are all healthy and fear that outsiders will bring the plague to them.

Why would Amelia, and people in isolated places, be spared?

"The toxin is being distributed through the water supplies," I say aloud, waking up Martha.

"What?" Martha yawns and rubs the sand from her eyes.

"Henry can't use airborne distribution because he needs to control the spread to make it look like a disease. The easiest way to do that is to put the toxin into the water. It would explain why villages outside the city water supplies aren't getting sick. Amelia's a tourist; so she's probably drinking bottled water."

Martha sits up.

"So what do you want to do?" she asks.

The afternoon sun is shining in on her and she looks radiant.

"We need a water sample. We need to stop this, and we need to get proof and show the world who's behind it."

It's not just the sun that's making Martha look radiant. She seems to be actually glowing.

Martha sighs.

"You're the only person in history who got to see it twice, and still witnessing the miracle of Christ's life hasn't taught you anything. You're like one of the masses who followed Jesus in order to get a free meal of fish and bread, rather than to hear His words."

I feel like a child who's been lectured to, complete with hurt expression.

"Don't worry about the toxin, Cephas. That's a puzzle you've already solved."

"Already solved? Martha, what are you talking about?"

"Do you remember what Christ said to you in the garden? He said your moment will be the time when the power of darkness reigns. He needs you to start a fire to pierce the darkness. That's the true puzzle for you to solve."

"Martha, I don't understand."

"It's hard to see the puzzle when you're one of the pieces, Cephas. Have faith that He wouldn't set a task before you if He hadn't first given you the strength to complete it. Speaking of which, shouldn't you be working?"

Martha nods to the cabin's fireplace, which has been lit and is burning fiercely. On the hearth I see a hammer, tongs and a familiar piece of metal; so I pick them up and start working the metal like a blacksmith. The piece is almost round, and I start hammering the glowing end to form it into a point. I remove it from the fire and dunk it into a bucket of water, resulting in a loud hiss; then remove it to admire my work.

It's still glowing brightly near the head end where it should be cool, and when I look at it, the spot is glowing in the shape of a large letter "C."

A "C" for Christ. I'm forming the nails that will hang Him on the cross.

I drop the nail and it hits the hearth with a loud clang.

I wake with a start, my heart pounding fiercely. Martha is still asleep on the bed, with the afternoon sun shining on her. I had fallen asleep at the desk, with my head down on the report Amelia sent from Indonesia. I scan it and realize that the conclusion I reached in the dream is accurate: The toxin is in the water supplies.

Was that a dream, or a vision?

I have little time to think about it, because Martha screams: “Cephas!” in her sleep; then bolts upright in bed, looking like she’s seen a ghost. She realizes that she was dreaming and runs to me, holding onto me with a grip like death.

“Do you remember our wedding vows?” she asks.

I’ve never heard Martha’s voice sound frantic before.

“Of course I do.”

“You vowed we’d always stand side by side, no matter what. Your joy is my joy; your pain is my pain. Remember? Did you mean it?”

“Every word. What did you dream?”

“I was at Bethany House and I couldn’t find you; but I could hear you screaming in pain. I got to the old door where I hung the “Beware of monsters” sign, and I could hear you behind it. I opened the door and inside was a torture chamber. You were being tortured and I wanted to help you, but you wouldn’t let me. You took all the torture, even though I was begging you to share it with me. You broke your vow. Promise me we’ll always stand together, no matter what.”

I hesitate, trying to put our respective dreams together.

What’s behind that door anyway?

She grabs my face to look into my eyes.

“Promise me!” she says.

“We were married in the name of Jesus. He brought us together and we’ll stand together - as long as that’s the Lord’s Will,” I say.

I hope to see the fear drain from Martha’s eyes, but it doesn’t. She puts her head on my chest and holds me limply.

“Cephas?”

“Yes, Martha?”

“You’re not going to keep that vow.”

I start to move back so I can look into her eyes, but she clings tighter. She doesn’t want to look into my eyes right now. I feel a warm, wet tear hit my arm.

“You’re going to leave me,” she says. “The only thing Henry wants more than ending Christianity is to get his hands on you. You’re going to sacrifice yourself.”

“You’ve been inside my mind, Martha. You know I’ll sacrifice myself to protect you and the baby that’s growing inside you.”

Now it’s my tears that are hitting her arm.

“Cephas Paulson, I love you - but are your powers of observation going to ruin every surprise I plan for you for the rest of my life?”

She’s half laughing and half sobbing. Now she backs off and looks me in the face with red and puffy eyes.

“Yes, I think perhaps they are,” I say, “but maybe I’ll be able to surprise you, from time to time, instead. Have you figured out her name yet?”

“It’s too early to start picking out names...”

Martha’s head snaps up to meet my eyes.

“Wait! Why’d you say ‘her’ name?”

“Surprise! Remember the presence you felt during the return time travel that I couldn’t sense? She was only a few days old. No heartbeat, no neurons. Your experience is testimony to the fact that

we receive a soul at the very beginning. She was probably only about eight cells, and yet she could feel your memories, and she named herself 'Jocie' from them."

"Jocie." Martha repeats back to me. "It's perfect."

When we return to Bethany House, most of the staff in the command center are watching the latest report on Michael. We have no idea how he managed to escape the Corps in England without help from Four, but we're glad he's here - spreading both the good news of Christ - and hope. Since appearing in New Orleans, he's popped up here and there in small southern towns, baptizing people. Reports of his appearances make the news, but he always seems to disappear before he's arrested. We've started a map of where he's been reliably sighted. He's moving in a zigzag pattern through the south, but seems to have an overall northerly track. I have no doubt he intends to fulfill his promise to baptize in McIntosh Lake.

There's only one screen that has my attention though, the one at Amelia's station, as I wait for her prearranged call time. It's been hours since I realized the toxin is distributed through municipal water supplies. What if this call is too late? I imagine Amelia waiting by the computer for the call time to arrive, and looking at the faucet in her room - thinking she's thirsty.

The icon only blinks once before I select it and Amelia's face appears on the screen. I scan her features and exhale when I see she's fine.

"You look stressed, Cephas. Is everything okay?"

"It is now. Just do me a favor and don't drink the local water. That's how the Corps is distributing the toxin: through the water. That's why people living in the villages have been spared."

"That makes sense for them, but I must have been exposed. The food is prepared in tap water; I brush my teeth with tap water; and I'm sure I've used the water fountains here in the hotel. How did I escape?"

"Maybe you got there too late. Maybe the system had flushed itself out, or it's only effective for a short time after it's put into the water. I don't care how you escaped. Don't drink the water."

"Soon, we'll all be able to drink without fear," she says. "Look at the notice I received."

She forwards a notice that came in over her com, telling her she's scheduled to receive her dose of vaccine tomorrow.

"The hacked com I'm using says I'm a registered woman named Clara Clayton. I was caring for Clara when she died last year; so Four buried her and kept her identity alive. The system tracked her as being on vacation here, so her dose was automatically shipped to meet her."

"Won't someone watch you take it?" I ask.

"I doubt it. The cult hunters have mostly pulled out to cover other hot spots. Even if they do, watch what I've been practicing."

She shows me a white pill in her right hand, which she raises and lets the pill drop into her mouth. She swallows; then opens her left hand to reveal the pill.

"Are you sure you want to do that?" I ask. "If you take that dose, you'll be protected. This could be your only chance."

"My mind is made up, Cephas. Once they record Clara as vaccinated, I'll be cleared to travel, and I'm bringing it back to Bethany House for analysis. There's really no choice."

That's one heck of a big hit to take.

Chapter Three

Bethany House comes alive with hope and excitement as we wait for Amelia to arrive with the precious dose of vaccine. My cousin Geoff arrives, along with the demolitions expert, Albert. After helping me in Egypt and at the cave outside Jerusalem, they didn't dare go near any of the Four safe houses controlled by Zip.

Just knowing me was enough to make them homeless.

Martha and Cindi immediately set to work modifying the room everyone calls "The Laboratory." This is the place where they work on new gadgets to get around government tracking, write new hacking programs, and generally try to create new ways to live off the government grid. The modification consists of a corner that's set up as a crude chemistry and genetics lab. Once the sample arrives, Cindi, Blake, and Amelia will do their best to figure out how Henry's toxin works, and how to produce the vaccine ourselves.

Martha finds me reading reports and brooding about what to do next. My head wants to continue to work on the vaccine puzzle until I find a solution; but more and more my heart and thoughts are being drawn to answering the question of what Jesus meant when He said my moment would be when darkness reigns.

What could be darker than the plague?

"You need to clear your head," Martha says. "Let's go spar."

"I've already told you: I'm not going to hit my pregnant wife."

"Being pregnant doesn't mean I'm made out of glass. Stop acting like I'll break."

I look at my beautiful wife. She looks no different, but knowing she's pregnant makes me want to protect her more than ever.

"Sorry. I can't do it," I say.

"Fine. Then I'll just hit you for a while. Maybe that'll clear your head."

I change the subject.

"I have a question. Who's doing more work for Christ: Me or Michael? He's baptized hundreds and is inspiring others to baptize thousands. I've done nothing except sit and pray in a blackberry patch."

"Who says sitting in a blackberry patch and praying is the same as doing nothing?" Martha asks. "Be still in the presence of the Lord, and wait patiently for Him to act."

I smile.

"Psalm 37, Martha? Aren't you the Four agent who talked to me outside of class when she was ordered to just observe, and then mounted a rescue mission when she was supposed to be on a suicide mission to kill me? I don't see you biding your time in the blackberry patch."

She gets so close our noses are almost touching.

"You're you, and I'm me," she says; then kisses me. "We're each called in our own way, Cephias. Your role in God's plan may be very different from what you think it is. You thought the Travelers Initiative was to prove Christ a fraud. At one point, I thought my role might be to kill you - and look at how that turned out."

She rubs her still flat stomach and the growing life inside and I smile, because she's doing it subconsciously.

"Even so, I need to do more than sit here and read reports," I say. "Gathering information and putting pieces together isn't going to be enough. I've got to convince Aislin, Garai and Austin to act. Maybe my role in all of this is to unite them."

Austin is once again unavailable; but Aislin and Garai agree to a short conference.

“You’ve seen the reports and studied the data for yourselves,” I say. “It’s pretty clear the plague is the result of a biotoxin rather than an infectious disease.”

“Agreed,” Garai replies. “We should have listened to you.”

“A classified government report estimates about two million will die,” Aislin adds. “However, this is all being done off the books. There’s no proof our government has anything to do with it. If this goes public, it could just as easily be blamed on Christians. Specifically, it’ll be blamed on the most technologically savvy Christians - namely, you and the Fours.”

“We believe the vaccine is being made in a dozen locations worldwide under tight security,” Garai continues. “Short of an armed attack, there’s no way we can get the millions of doses needed to vaccinate everyone who was born off the grid. We haven’t been able to obtain even a single dose. Have you?”

Don’t trust them.

“According to our information, the doses are coded all the way down to the exact person to which they’ll be administered,” I reply. “The only way to get a sample is to find someone willing to sacrifice themselves by not taking their assigned dose.”

“Then I suggest we all begin stockpiling water,” Garai says.

“It won’t matter,” I reply. “Once everyone is vaccinated, Henry can just send it airborne to mop up any survivors.”

“We’re all in this together now,” Aislin says. “I’m sorry it took so long to see the need for cooperation. I’ll send you all the information I have.”

“As will I,” Garai agrees.

They both sign off, but Garai’s image pops back onto the screen a moment later.

“Cephas, there is another matter I need to bring to you. There was no need to bother Aislin with it. Several messages have been passed upwards through my organization and have reached my desk. They came on paper and all say the same thing: ‘Remind Cephas that his father’s belongings are in my attic.’ Each one is signed ‘Aunt Jennifer.’ What do you think this means?” Garai asks.

It means that it’s time for a family reunion.

Ten minutes later, I’ve convened the Bethany House staff.

“It’s a trap,” William says.

My cousins Geoff, James and Cindi agree with nods of their heads. Martha looks distracted, like she isn’t listening.

“Probably - but, what if it isn’t?” I ask everyone around the table. “What if there’s some data about the toxin or the vaccine in my father’s old stuff? Isn’t it worth the risk?”

“It’s not worth risking you,” William says. “We can send a team to search her house.”

“Sorry, William, but you’d never find whatever it is. Whatever is going on, it’s personal. She wants this to be between just the two of us.”

“There’s no way you’re walking into this alone,” Geoff says.

“Then how about if I just give her a call?”

The group starts to look back and forth at each other. Nobody can think of a reason why I shouldn’t speak with her, but William is still nervous.

“If she’s working with the Corps, as soon as a com link comes in from you they’ll start to trace it,” he argues.

“Then the call won’t come from me,” I say. “Do we still have the chip we took out of Henry Portman?”

Rigging a chip together with a com is the sort of technical shenanigans the staff in Bethany House live to do. They argue over how to do it for about thirty minutes and then get to work. The

coms this team created for impersonating people like Bill and Wendy were primarily a programming issue, requiring little more than people willing to give us their personal identification codes. They're good enough to fool simple identity scanners, so we can use the tube and hover systems or other low security public services, but little more.

The team needs an hour to get everything together; so I slip away to find Albert, the demolitions expert. I find him just as he's returning to the house with a large box, and stop him in front of the old metal door that says: "Danger! Keep out."

"I'm curious about something, Albert. If we were to find Henry's toxin production facility, would there be a way to blow it up and keep the toxin contained inside?"

"Maybe, if it's an underground facility. If it's aboveground, it would be nearly impossible to guarantee one hundred percent containment. Get me building plans and I'll give you an opinion."

"If we can find it, you'll be my first stop. Do you even have enough explosives for that sort of job?"

"It would depend on the building, but I do have quite a bit."

"Really? Where do you keep it all?"

"In my room."

I can't help but chuckle.

"You sleep with explosives?"

"I don't have anywhere else to store them. On the bright side, I get a room to myself."

"Why not in here?"

I point to the ancient metal door that blocks off the abandoned tunnel.

"It's already marked with a danger sign and everything."

"I wasn't raised here, but I'm told that staying out of there is the number one rule kids learn. Besides, there's no key. I heard Brill or Austin had one once, but lost it years ago."

Martha yells my name from the entry to the tunnel and I reply; so she joins us.

"What are you two doing down here?"

"Talking about explosives," I say.

"Why are boys always fascinated with explosions?"

Martha rubs her stomach subconsciously again. I think she's glad we're having a girl.

"The com is ready," she says.

The chip, combined with a hacked com, is a hardware marvel. They've integrated the chip we removed from Henry into the com; so it can pass multiple verification checks. I could probably walk straight through security at Corps headquarters itself with this thing.

"Call Jennifer Paulson in Kenilworth, Illinois," I instruct the com.

"Just a second," my Aunt Jennifer says over her com, but the screen remains dark. There's a lot of rustling sounds; then the screen comes on.

"Henry, I was just thinking about you," she says.

The woman I've always known for her hawkish features, with her hair pulled back in a tight bun, is on the screen wearing a revealing negligée, with her long hair hanging loose around her shoulders. It's hard to say whose eyes bug out the most when we see each other. I guess it must be hers, because she lets out a little gasp.

"Aunt Jennifer, basic training at The Corps includes desensitization exercises. They want Corps members to be numb to even the most disturbing elements of our present culture, but that was too disturbing," I say, as I regain my composure and she covers herself with a sweater.

Many of the Four staff are watching on a remote screen in the next room, and I can hear them laughing.

She attempts to muster some dignity by throwing her nose into the air and pretending the whole thing never happened.

“I’m so glad you’ve called, Cephas. I do hope this means you’re seeking the help you so desperately need.”

“Don’t waste my time, Jennifer. We both know the only thing I may need therapy for is what I witnessed just now.”

There’s more laughter from the next room.

How is it that this woman always brings out the worst in me?

“Fine. I trained you too well to play these games. Tell me what you know, and I’ll do the same.”

Somehow her return to her true personality is comforting to me.

“Here are the highlights,” I say. “The disease in Asia is a modified genetic toxin. It was created by a Christian group, of which Mom and Dad were members. When he was investigating the tube accident that killed them, Henry got his hands on it and completed its development. Once he’s vaccinated everyone else, the toxin will kill all Christians living off the grid, thus turning their greatest advantage against them. Your turn.”

She’s not in the slightest surprised that I have this information.

“Your father kept a journal, and I have it.”

The notebook that was stuck underneath the incubator.

“Henry even got the idea of putting the toxin into drinking water from your father. James was brilliant, he just had horrible taste in women. Your mother and her fish head friends led him into a conspiracy to commit mass murder, and now their plan is going to be turned against them.”

“Why would you give the journal to me?” I ask.

“Because even though it would serve them right, this all goes too far and I don’t want the deaths of millions of people to be our family legacy. No matter what you think, Cephas, the average atheist isn’t without a conscience. Most of our guiding principles are no different from those of other religions. We choose to do good things because we believe kindness and cooperation are in man’s self-interest - not because some spirit-being will throw us into a fiery pit if we don’t.”

“I’m glad you recognize atheism is a religion. That’s a start.”

“How interesting that you would choose to preach. I thought you hated preachy religions.”

She’s been watching my lectures.

“Send me the notes over this com signal?” I ask.

“Done,” she says, and the files begin to download.

“Anything else?” I ask.

“Believe it or not, I’m still proud of you, Cephas.”

“Believe it or not, I’m grateful to you, Aunt Jennifer. Whether you want to believe it or not, you played the role that God chose for you perfectly.”

She opens her mouth to respond, but thinks better of it.

“Goodbye for now, Cephas, though I’m sure we’ll meet again.”

She gives me the knowing smile I remember from my childhood.

It’s the look she’d give just before someone fell into one of her traps.

Amelia arrives at Bethany House to a hero’s welcome, but gets little rest before she and the other scientists set to work analyzing the precious dose of vaccine and water samples. It seems like everyone takes to their tasks with new energy. The data team is sifting through even the smallest clues that might show the location of a vaccine production facility; Geoff and James work up tactical scenarios on how to raid such a facility, once it’s found; and Martha is watching over everyone - interspersed with naps and throwing up occasionally, which she blames on a stomach bug.

When they’re not working, the talk around Bethany House is focused on Michael’s journey. His path has continued north, with daily appearances in small lakes, streams, and even swimming pools. In yesterday’s newscasts, he was in Iowa, baptizing in small towns that sit along the Raccoon River.

There are few explanations of how he's avoided arrest; so we assume that years of criminal activity have taught him how - and when - to disappear.

Even more of a mystery is why his appearances haven't been blacked out of the international news. The stories have even reminded viewers of Michael's promise to baptize people in his hometown in South Dakota, so crowds have already started to gather in McIntosh to await his arrival. I'm certain that a fair number in the crowd work for the Corps, and Michael will have little chance to baptize in McIntosh Lake before he's either arrested or forced to disappear again.

I'm sitting in the command center, when someone says: "Put it onto the big screen."

The screen shows a long shot of Michael standing in Lake McIntosh, with a long line of people waiting to be baptized. The voiceover is an interview with a witness who claims that Michael appeared, standing in the lake where nobody had been standing only moments before.

The entire house is captivated by him, and within hours we estimate that he's baptized one hundred. Hour after hour we watch him, tirelessly baptizing. He hugs each person and wishes them love and peace in Jesus Christ. I once told Jocie I could look inside her and see her soul, but now it seems that Michael's the one with that gift. We see him look into people's eyes and cry with them, and for them, as he tells them of Christ's love for them and encourages them to sin no more.

"How did he do it?" I ask.

"Do what?" Martha replies.

"Yesterday, Michael was over three hundred kilometers from McIntosh. He can't have walked that far overnight, and he can't have taken a tube without being detected. So how did he get there?"

"Must everything be a puzzle with you, Cephas?" Martha asks. "He's there, and he's openly baptizing people while the world watches. Isn't this exactly what we've always dreamed about? Why question it? It's making you sound envious."

Martha's rebuke hurts, but I press on.

"Why hasn't he been arrested?" I ask the room, but nobody answers.

"Look at the aerial shots of the town," I continue. "Before he even arrived, McIntosh was quietly ringed with Federal agents."

The screen switches to shots of the crowd.

"Computer, freeze the image," I say; then walk to the screen.

"Cult hunter, cult hunter, cult hunter," I say, as I point to the members of the Corps who are trying to blend in with everyone else, but sticking out to my eye. "Believe me, they have enough agents inside McIntosh to arrest him anytime they like."

"There's a ring of Christians around Michael at all times," Cindi says. "Maybe the Corps is just waiting for a better opportunity. Maybe they want his arrest to be low profile."

"The Federal site commander has threatened to arrest everyone inside city limits," Geoff says. "The people being baptized just laugh. They know he can't arrest thousands of people at once, and even if he could, they know life in Federal prison isn't much different from life at home."

"They're missing an important fact," I say. "The Corps is still allowing people to pour into McIntosh - but they're not allowing anyone to leave."

"The Corps is trying to get as many Christians as they can into one place," James concludes. "They're all stepping into some sort of trap that's bound to end violently."

"Get a message to McIntosh," I say. "Tell them to keep a careful eye on the comings and goings at the municipal water supply."

If there's anyone who doesn't have enough to do, it's me. I go through every word of my father's notes, which Aunt Jennifer sent to me, and don't come up with anything. In fact, there's nothing in the notes about toxins or vaccines at all. I want badly to find some hidden message that dad left for me, but it just isn't there. Most Christians begin teaching their children how to hide their

religion before they can even speak. I know they couldn't trust an eight-year-old with their plans, but why didn't Mom and Dad trust me enough to tell me about their faith? If they had, maybe there would be something helpful I could dredge up from my childhood memories.

I'm reviewing Dad's notes, when changes on another screen catch my eye. It's the map of North America showing the general location of other Four houses. Normally, all of the houses are marked in green, with one occasionally switching to red when a house goes offline for maintenance. My attention was drawn first to a light switching to red near Dayton, Ohio, and then to another near Boston.

"James? Can you come here?"

He walks to the screen without a word, which is generally his way.

"Isn't the house outside of Boston a big one?"

"Yes. It's called Galilee House. Geoff's been there, and he said it's one of the best equipped houses he's ever seen because half of their gear was thrown out by M.I.T. and Harvard."

"Have you ever seen it go offline?"

"No. It has enough back-ups that if one computer needs maintenance, another would have automatically come online."

"It's offline now, and before that, the house near Dayton went red."

As we watch, a light near Los Angeles flips from green to red, followed by one in Oregon, and then one in Georgia.

I look at James, hoping for answers.

"Those are all big houses," he thinks aloud, as two more lights turn red. "They shouldn't be going down."

Geoff enters the command center.

"The main upload server just crashed. Five houses hit their panic buttons at the same time. What's happening?"

"All we know so far is that seven large houses near major cities have gone down," James says, as he continues to watch the map.

More and more people are coming into the room to discuss what could be causing the problem. Nobody notices, as I separate myself from the group. Their minds start to wrap around possible technical problems and they ignore me, knowing that I'm not on their technical level. As they brainstorm, Martha sees me sitting alone and breaks away from the discussion to see what I'm doing.

"Computer, bring up all files recorded in Shiloh house in the last five minutes before they hit the panic button," I order through my com.

A file list comes up. It's full of all the everyday things the people at Shiloh House were doing and saving. There's nothing remarkable.

"Show me the last image recorded on each surveillance camera."

Shiloh House has twelve cameras, most of which are around the perimeter, but three of which are inside the house itself. Shiloh must be located in a wooded area and there's nothing to see on the last image anywhere outside. Inside the house, there are two cameras showing Four members in a control area. One seems to be running. The third inside camera shows a Four member sprawled on the floor - unconscious or dead.

"Run camera number eight backwards."

The footage shows twenty seconds of the person lying on the floor, at which point we see a member of a cult hunter kill team stepping backwards over the body; followed by the Four member being shot at point blank range with a stunner. Prior to that, he was on his feet, with his hands raised in surrender. He was unarmed.

"Monitor our outside cameras!"

I yell it to no one in particular.

“The Corps is attacking those houses.”

My command to the group ends their technical discussion, but I give them a new task.

“Seven houses near major cities have been found by the Corps. Figure out how,” I say.

As the group returns to technical discussions, I try to think about the various theories that are being thrown around, but I can’t concentrate, with all of the voices speaking at once.

Is this my moment of darkness? Wait! Darkness...

Chapter Four

“Computer, replay the video and freeze at the moment the Federal agent steps over the body.”

On top of the agent’s head is a pair of night vision goggles.

“Computer, what’s the most likely reason the camera stopped recording?”

“The camera stopped recording due to a power failure,” the pleasant voice replies.

“Shut off the power!” I yell.

Everyone looks at me.

“They’re locating the big houses through the power they’re stealing.”

The team scrambles to start turning off individual devices, but I see Albert run out the door toward the escape tunnels. He’s heading for the main power switch. He reaches it a minute later and everything goes dark, followed by emergency lighting switching on automatically.

“Do we have enough battery power to send a message to all the remaining houses?” I ask, and Cindi confirms that we do.

“Tell them that the big houses are being found via their power usage, and they should shut down until they can find alternate power sources, or are using power disguised as being legitimately drawn from the grid.”

“Of course,” James says, as we stand in the dim light. “Even though power is free, every house and business has a meter that detects how much electricity each property is using in order to help the system run more efficiently. If you start accounting for all of the authorized uses, eventually you’ll see the unauthorized drains. The big houses use enough power to become visible, but they’ll never find the small houses that way. There’s too much noise and rounding error. We should be able to run a few lights and computers without being detected.”

But how did they know that Four was organized by houses, and that they all use escape tunnels? Is there a spy inside Four?

“A couple of computers per house still effectively blinds us,” Geoff says.

“The first time I traveled back in time, I ended up mute when the chips in my neck exploded,” I say. “I always thought my strength was my voice; but when I lost it, I found that God had silenced me so that - for once in my life - I would shut up and listen. The strength of Bethany House has always been to lie quietly and watch. Maybe it will take being blinded in order to finally see,” I say.

Geoff and the others don’t look inspired by my speech. If anything, they look deflated. The pattern of their lives has always been to overcome problems using superior technology, and they can’t see beyond it.

Lost Sheep.

James has always been an organizer; so Martha assigns him to monitor energy use, while Toby and Blake organize team members to watch the woods for signs of intruders. James allows two computers to come back online - as long as there are no lights running. One computer is dedicated to monitoring government communications for any indications Bethany House has been found, and it quickly becomes apparent that it hasn’t.

In all, eight houses were found before the rest went dark. Through regular news, we find out that at least one hundred buildings were raided. Most were people who were simply using large amounts of power, such as an elderly lady with a very large - but uninsulated - hot tub in Maine; and a man in Idaho who insisted on keeping his twenty eight pet alligators warm at all times.

Most of the Four network appears to be hobbling along, just like us. We see lights flash from red to green for a short period, while a house downloads information, and then returns to red. It reminds me of Colorado prairie dogs who stick their heads up to look for danger and dive back into

their holes at even a hint of trouble. A few stay green all of the time. Those are the small houses, and houses that are disguised as ordinary homes or businesses.

The loss of power is funny and novel for about one day. Brill finds candles and allows us to charge headlamps at Capon Springs, but the number of toes stubbed in the dark quickly causes moods to turn sour. The staff of Bethany is accustomed to working on multiple screens at a time, and being reduced to taking turns on a shared computer leaves them squabbling like children over each second they're allotted.

Geoff is using his time on the shared computer, when I walk into the command center and hear him arguing with Zip.

"You don't need to get Martha," Zip says. "I'm sending a recorded message to all remaining houses. Just make sure the entire Bethany staff sees it."

"We're recording this. Give us the live version," I say, as I walk up behind Geoff.

"Fine. They say you're good at solving puzzles; so I'm sure you've already arrived at the same conclusion anyway. Four is dead in the water, and we're all going to be literally dead if we don't take action and get our hands on the vaccine to protect us from the plague. I'm calling on all members of Four to arm themselves and head for McIntosh."

"What's your plan?" I ask.

"Half of your old friends from the cult hunter Corps are there. We plan to wipe them out."

"The town is full of unarmed pilgrims. If you attack, the Corps will slaughter them."

"I already have half a brigade on the inside," Zip says. "The cult hunters are drooling for the chance to massacre Christians, but they're the ones who are walking into a trap. I should thank you, Cephass. You provided the perfect bait."

"Michael," I conclude.

"Did you think he'd have reached McIntosh without help? We provided plenty of kind strangers along the way to give him rides and food, and send video feeds to keep him in the news. We'd never have lured so many cult hunters into one place without him."

"How does killing hundreds of cult hunters get you vaccine?"

"I said I have half a brigade in McIntosh. The other half will capture one of the vaccine facilities. With half of his guard dogs dead, Henry won't be able to stop us."

"A vaccine facility? We searched around the clock and came up empty. How'd you find it?" I ask.

"I have friends who have friends."

"You're playing right into his hands," I say. "He'll paint Christians as a violent cult that needs to be destroyed once and for all."

"Luckily for me, Cephass, the winners write the history books."

We replay the exchange with Zip to the entire staff; then everyone leaves to decide for themselves what they want to do next.

I'm not surprised, an hour later, when Geoff calls a staff meeting to talk about our situation.

"Four, in general, and Bethany House, in particular, can no longer function in any meaningful way," Geoff says. "Even the smaller houses have started to give up. I hate to be the one to say it, but it's time to abandon Bethany House."

The group looks to me - but I say nothing; so James picks up the conversation next.

"Cephass, nobody wants to say it out loud, because nobody wants to disappoint you; but without technology, we have nothing left. We're even running out of food."

So my status has gone from 'rock star' to 'rock bottom'? Good. That means the timing is about right.

"What does food even matter?" Blake asks. "Without the vaccine, we're all dead in a couple of months anyway."

One by one, I look at the grim faces of the group. In their hearts and minds they're already beaten. Martha breaks the silence.

"Cephas, you have to say something," she says.

"I have no wisdom of my own; so I'll ask you all the question that Jesus asked two millennia ago - 'For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?'"

Their faces soften somewhat, but only for a moment.

"I've killed once before in my life. I may not have the solution to this puzzle, but joining Zip and killing cult hunters isn't the solution either."

Geoff's ears heard what I said, but he isn't listening with his heart. My question came from the Word, but he's still too focused on the world.

"Look around you, Cephas. Our base and our network are empty shells. I just want to live my life free to pray and draw closer to the Lord. I've never wanted to kill anyone either; but maybe sometimes it really does come down to a choice of us versus them. My decision is made. I'm going to McIntosh to fight."

Geoff stands, as do Blake and twenty others, and begin to file from the room. Geoff's twin, James, remains seated, along with almost a dozen others.

"James? Cindi?" Geoff says to his siblings from the doorway.

James is usually the more stoic of the twins, so when he has something to say people listen. At first it doesn't appear that he can even find the will to speak; but he manages - with his voice cracking at the effort.

"Geoff, do you remember when we were twelve and we first heard about the Four movement? Do you remember how we said we'd been called by God to do important things in His name? I always thought we'd been called together. I thought we'd stand side-by-side, always defending each other like brothers until the end. Until now. I can't come with you. My place is here. At least for now."

Cindi nods her head in agreement. She's staying.

Geoff can't believe it.

"Isn't blood thicker than water?" he asks.

"Yes, it is," I say. "The complete saying is: 'The blood of the covenant is thicker than the water of the womb.' They're not betraying you, Geoff. Like you, they're doing what they feel the Lord has called upon them to do."

"Stay then," Geoff says. "If you think that's what the Lord has called you to do, stay here and die in the dark."

The next day, Martha, James, Cindi and I watch from the end of the east escape tunnel as Geoff and the others melt into the woods in twos and threes, on their way to join Zip.

I turn to Cindi.

"How's work coming on the vaccine sample?"

"We're working on a very complex virus in a cave, in the dark. We're weeks from fully understanding it, and months from production."

"Then I'm glad we have our best people on it."

My face betrays what I'm thinking.

"I know it's not fast enough, but it's the best we can do. Maybe we can save a few people. Maybe it'll be enough to let us start again."

Cindi and James walk back into the tunnel, leaving me alone with Martha.

"The wolf descended and the flock is scattered," I say.

The few of us left at Bethany House will be hanging by a thread. We gave most of our food stores to those who chose to leave, and without electricity, we'll spend both days and nights in the cold and dark, as Cindi and Amelia work on analyzing the vaccine sample. The others use their ample free time to train, and I wonder how many are still thinking of leaving to join Zip's assault teams.

After a week, Cindi calls a meeting of the remaining staff.

"The good news is that we can replicate the vaccine," Cindi says. "The bad news is that it'll take even longer than we originally thought."

Henry wiped out over a million people in Indonesia just to prove the power of the toxin. Time is not on our side...

"I know it's being used for a gruesome purpose; but the technology is fascinating," Cindi says. "The toxin itself is similar to what was used in the Final Holy War: a small chemical agent combined with a highly specific DNA targeting agent. Together they were harmless; but when they bound with a very specific target DNA, the toxin was released, causing damage to most of the major systems in the body in a way that mimics a disease rather than a poison."

"The new toxin is different, Amelia adds. "It has a non-specific targeting agent; so it will affect any human body it enters. The clever part, this time, is the vaccine. It employs a completely synthetic virus to deliver a gene therapy. It's much smaller than naturally occurring viruses - so small, in fact, that it can enter and leave cells without damaging them. Most naturally occurring viruses simply deliver their own nucleic acids into the nucleus of a cell and force the cell to make new copies of the virus until the cell bursts open. This one uses the cell to replicate itself, but it also rewrites the host human DNA to create a new synthetic enzyme specifically designed to quickly break down the toxin, and thus save your life if you're exposed."

As their technical briefing moves into the specifics, I start to zone out. Science has never been my thing; but the real reason I can't focus is that my mind is troubled by the one possibility this puzzle is presenting - a possibility I'd rather not think about until I see more pieces.

"Blah, blah, pass through cell membranes; blah, blah, attach to phosphate backbone in DNA," is all I hear Cindi say.

"Blah, blah, DNA binding; blah, blah, virus coat protein and transport," Amelia says.

My vision is getting hazy around the edges. I just want to put my head down and sleep.

"Blah, blah, adenine and protein folding; blah, blah, glutamine and active site."

Maybe I could pretend I need to use the bathroom, and not come back?

"Blah, blah, compete protein code and structure; blah, blah, blah." Amelia flashes information onto the screen.

I try to focus my vision on the screen. The three-dimensional structure of the protein looks pretty much like a blob, and I try to make a picture out of it, like you can when you look at clouds; but even that proves impossible. The protein sequence is just a string of letters.

"Any questions?" asks Cindi.

It's music to my ears. Maybe the meeting is almost over. Some of the others ask what I'm sure are very insightful technical questions. Cindi looks to me.

"Cephas? You look a little bewildered. Any questions?"

"I'm sorry, but you weren't speaking in any of the languages I know - and that definitely isn't written in any language I know."

I point to the DNA and protein sequences displayed on the screen.

"It's grade school science," Cindi says. "These are three-letter codes for amino acids. String the amino acids together and they make a protein. Fold the protein into its proper shape, and it does whatever job it's meant to do."

Maybe if I just ask something, the meeting will end.

"Then why is the DNA longer than the protein?"

Cindi rolls her eyes over the fact that I don't understand such things, so Amelia points to the structure and explains.

"This three-letter code in the DNA is called a stop codon. It tells you that the protein stops here. This extra DNA tail doesn't code for anything, it's probably an artifact from when the DNA was first synthesized. As a matter of fact, they should have gone back and cut it off, because it seems to be getting in the way of proper splicing into the host DNA."

My smile drops, and everyone instantly picks up on it.

"Did you say the bit on the end is called the 'tail'?" I ask.

Jocie said that when Henry was drunk, he would say the word "tail" and laugh hysterically.

"Yeah. So?"

"What do those tail codons code for?" I ask.

"I just told you. They don't code for anything. They're after the stop codon; so they aren't part of the protein."

"Humor me."

"Okay," Cindi replies.

She brings the amino acids onto the screen.

"The tail is made up of thirty-three bases in the DNA, which would code for eleven amino acids. If they were translated, the code would read: Threonine-Tyrosine-Cysteine-Glutamine-Leucine-Glutamate-Glutamine-Asparagine-Alanine-Arginine-Aspartate."

I stare intently at the screen as I try to find some kind of pattern.

"Cephas, it's just some junk DNA. Why are you so interested?" Martha asks.

I continue to stare intently at the screen. Henry found these codes funny, and there must be a reason. The others start to whisper, and even giggle, about my fascination over DNA that doesn't code for anything.

"Is there any other way to express amino acids?"

"Sure," Cindi says. "Computer, restate the sequence after the stop codon in single letter code."

The scientists don't see it right away, but I gasp when the code comes up on the screen. The code reads:

T-Y-C-Q-L-E-Q-N-A-R-D

"Tyco Leonard," I say. "Henry's grandfather."

"There isn't an amino acid that uses "O" as its abbreviation; so a "Q" was used in its place," Amelia says.

"What's it mean?" William asks.

"Henry put his grandfather's name into the gene therapy. If you want to live, you get his family name written into your very DNA. No wonder he laughed so hard about the tail. He's created the ultimate family legacy."

We all sit in stunned silence for a moment.

"You said that we needed proof of who's behind this. I'd say you have it," James says.

"Henry doesn't care. He wanted us to find this. Most leading atheists have read the Bible because quoting the Bible, in order to criticize it, gives them an appearance of authority. He's daring Christians to not take the vaccine. He's not content to kill just Christians living off the grid. He wants us all."

"I don't get it. How's a harmless little snip of junk DNA daring us to not take the vaccine?" William asks.

I look at William.

"What you call a harmless snip of DNA is what others may call "the mark of the beast."

Chapter Five

As if on cue, the news reports that the plague and “the mark of the beast” vaccine have spread to isolated spots in Eastern Europe and North Africa. It now hardly matters if the ‘disease’ spreads any farther. Henry has succeeded in scaring the world, and people are gladly lining up for their dose of the vaccine. Reports from Aislin indicate vaccine production has been ramped to the point that there will soon be doses for everyone on the planet, but distribution will continue at the current pace as the Corps works to ensure that only those people who live on the grid receive a dose. Each dose is now being packed in an individual container with the recipient’s name on it, and government personnel watch to make sure you take it yourself. It’s a miracle Amelia secured a dose in Indonesia.

An hour later, I again find myself praying in the blackberry thicket. Only Martha knows about this little retreat; so when I hear soft footsteps approaching, I know it’s her. She allows me to finish my prayer in silence. I’m praying for her and the baby. I’m praying for my family. I’m even praying for Henry. But, more than anything else, I’m praying for God to help me by revealing how to save us all from the plague.

I open my eyes and see instantly that Martha is upset.

“What’s happened?” I ask.

“It’s begun. Zip ordered her attack.”

“And?”

Martha’s jaw tightens, and she simply shakes her head.

When I reach the command center at Bethany, I understand. Martha doesn’t come in with me; she doesn’t want to see it again. The screen is showing a large building exploding in a massive fireball, followed by dozens of smaller explosions in the surrounding area. The cameras zoom in to show that the secondary explosions are missiles being fired from drones, targeting members of Zip’s combat teams. The only one watching is Martha’s cousin, William.

“That was the vaccine facility that exploded,” William says when I join him. “It was hidden in an old building on the edge of Maggie Valley, North Carolina. The whole thing was a deathtrap, even though the official report says it was blown up by Christians. There was even a vaccine production crew working at the time, and they died alongside Zip’s people.”

“Did anyone survive?”

“Nobody inside two hundred meters of the building. If Zip had a reserve force holding back, they might have escaped.”

“What about McIntosh?”

William changes to another feed and I see a live shot from McIntosh.

“Zip got her wish. She massacred hundreds of cult hunters.”

The screen shows lines of dead men and women in Federal uniforms; then jumps to a shot of street fighting between Zip’s teams and Corps people wearing plain clothes. Zip managed to secure a perimeter and is massacring all cult hunters trapped on the inside. The remaining Corps members aren’t even attempting to help their trapped people. Henry wants to show the massacre on the news as much as Zip does.

“Look at this,” William says, and switches to a different feed.

The shot shows a line of crouched believers standing in Lake McIntosh, waiting to be baptized by Michael, who is standing up tall and continuing to baptize - even as stun guns are being fired around him.

There is a man who fully trusts the Lord.

“I’m glad I didn’t go,” William says. “I’m glad I wasn’t a part of Zip’s massacre. I don’t see ‘cult hunters’ in those uniforms anymore. I keep looking at their faces, and I don’t see monsters or demons. All I see are people who never had a chance to know the Lord.”

The shot widens so that I can see the outskirts of McIntosh. I thought it would be bombed and burning, but it looks like a peaceful little town, where nothing out of the ordinary is happening.

“Henry could flatten it, but he hasn’t,” I say. “Has the news said why?”

“You missed his press conference,” William replies. “Henry has declared himself the ‘New Prince of Peace.’”

Like Martha, I choose not to watch the videos and the official government commentary more than once. As Zip said, history books are written by the victors.

I stand in the doorway to the lab, where Cindi and Amelia are continuing to work on the vaccine. Cindi’s movement is unsteady and she knocks a beaker full of some liquid to the floor with a crash. The look on her face tells me that she’s barely keeping herself from shouting some very rude words.

“What was it this time?” Amelia asks.

“Just shut up!”

“Maybe you should take a break,” Amelia says.

“And maybe you should...”

Cindi stops herself when she sees me crossing the room towards her. She just stares at me with those amazing ice blue eyes that remind me of my mother. By the time I reach her, she’s crying, and when I take her into my arms, she begins to sob.

“It’s going to be okay, Cuz,” I whisper into her ear, but it doesn’t stop the sobs.

“I saw what happened to Zip,” she says. “They blew their own vaccine facility to bits; so now it’s all up to me and Amelia. Everyone’s counting on us, but there’s no time. We need a minimum of a month to do the preliminary set up and testing, and another two or three to scale up for production. That, of course, assumes we can get our hands on the equipment we need and the power to run it.”

And then many more months to distribute it secretly to Christians worldwide. I understand Zip’s desire to simply steal vaccine from the government with an armed strike force; but even that approach was too little, too late.

“I don’t want to be responsible for saving the world,” she says.

Cindi continues to cry; so I hold her away from me and make her look me in the eyes.

“This isn’t your burden, Cindi,” I say. “The Lord may choose to act through you, but saving the world is His job.”

Lord, whatever you have in mind, I hope you do it soon.

I return through the darkened hallways to the room where Martha and I stay, hoping to find her. She isn’t there, but in the beam of my headlamp I notice that my computer pad has been moved from where I usually keep it. I check to see if Martha used it to leave me a message. She hasn’t; so I put it into my pocket, and then search the rest of the house for Martha, without success.

I find her sitting in my secret spot inside the blackberry patch, praying. I don’t want to interrupt her; so I sit down to pray as well. When I do, the computer pad is uncomfortable in my pocket. As I remove it, I notice that it’s been activated by my movement and the screen is showing the scanned images of my father’s notebook. I’ve read them dozens of times and can find no hidden secrets that will tell us how to produce the vaccine faster. In fact, the vaccine isn’t mentioned at all. Still, it’s odd that the pad would activate; so I start to read the page again.

“How many times does that make?” Martha asks.

“I’ve lost count. I tell myself that if there was something important in dad’s notes, then Aunt Jennifer wouldn’t have sent them - but something tells me to keep trying.”

“You said that blinding Bethany House by taking away our technology might help us to see. Have you tried Braille?”

A non-Christian wouldn’t understand the reference. Virtually all types of blindness are correctable through surgery; so the use of Braille died generations ago. When looking for secret ways to communicate, Christians - for a short time - looked into Braille, but ultimately opted for encoding messages instead. I don’t admit it to Martha, but I already had the scans checked for unusual bumps in the paper, and found none.

I look at the screen and wish I had the real notebook instead of scans, so I could feel for Braille myself. Somehow, touching the paper that dad wrote on would help me to feel closer to him compared to just reading it on a screen. I smile as I think about the fact that dad was among the first to switch back to paper in order to keep his thoughts hidden from electronic government eavesdroppers.

“Computer, display the last scanned page from the notebook,” I say.

Since the notebook is small, it was scanned two pages at a time. On the last scan, there’s writing on the left-hand page, but the right-hand facing page is blank. The left-hand page is filled with ideas dad had regarding how to reach people with Christ’s message, along with a crude drawing of some sort of machine parts. There’s no useful information about toxins or vaccines.

Something on the blank page catches my eye for the first time.

“Computer, zoom in on the upper-left hand corner of the right-hand page.”

At the very top, there’s a tiny triangle that’s fuzzy on its lower edge. It’s a small piece of paper that was left behind when someone tore the last page out of the notebook.

Do Aunt Jennifer and Henry have the missing page? Or did dad tear it out? If dad tore it out, did they even notice a page is missing? That’s it! Don’t look for the raised bumps of Braille. Look for indentations left behind when dad pressed down to write on the missing page.

“Computer, scan the right-hand page only, and enhance contrast by fifty percent.”

The page goes bright white, except for a single line about three-quarters of the way down the page. On that line, there are some black dots.

“Computer, focus on the line where the dots appear. Now, extrapolate the effect of a light shining across the page at five degrees, relative to the original surface.”

This time I see what I was hoping for. The low light angle is enhancing the microscopic shadows created by indentations made on the page below when dad pressed his pencil down on the page that’s been torn out.

“Enhance contrast to maximum.”

The words jump out. It’s crude, but I can read “distribute it through the water” in dad’s script.

It takes a moment for the significance to fully sink in. Dad must have torn out the page to remove the evidence, and Henry must have read the indentations like I just did. That’s why Aunt Jennifer said Henry got the idea to put the toxin in drinking water from dad.

But why did he write only on a line three-quarters of the way down the page? I scroll back through earlier pages. Here and there are other pieces of paper that were stuck down into the notebook by tape. The missing page must have had something taped onto it - but what? Whatever it was, it appears that Henry doesn’t have the information either.

I reread dad’s last note: “distribute it through the water.” There it is - in his own words. Dad was part of a conspiracy to commit genocide.

What did you do, dad? Why didn’t you tell me? Why did you leave a ten-year-old puzzle for me to figure out?

I look at Martha. A sunbeam has somehow penetrated into the thicket and is lighting up her hair. It reminds me of how she glowed in the dream where she said I'd already solved the puzzle of the toxin. It was also the day I figured out the toxin was distributed in water supplies.

"The water," I say.

I've already solved the puzzle. A puzzle is completed just as much by the first piece you place as it is by the last piece. The piece that completes the puzzle was placed first. It's never been a question of what dad did when I was eight-years-old. I'VE been the missing piece all along.

Chapter Six

Martha knows that something is weighing on my mind, but instead of asking, she decides to distract me by taking me on a supply run to Capon Springs. We run all the way there, but plan to use Brill's decrepit electric bus to get part of the way back to Bethany House with our loads of food. This time, I think the wheels really will fall off the bus because it's loaded with containers of Capon Springs' water to the point of groaning under my added weight. Brill is overseeing the effort.

"First Tuesday of the month," Brill says. "You mind holding a container or two on your lap?"

"Why don't you build a pipeline?" I ask.

"It's only forty-thousand liters - give or take. I've been shipping it this way the first Tuesday for nearly ten years. No point in fixing something that isn't broken."

Ten years?

"Where's it all going?" I ask.

"All over the world. We have people everywhere who help us," Brill replies.

Another piece falls into place.

"The timing. The water. It all fits," I say under my breath, but Martha hears me.

"What fits?" she asks.

"Huh? Forty thousand liters fit on the bus."

Martha knows there's more to my whisper, but Brill smiles at me and continues describing his system.

"A lot of it goes to wherever Austin is hiding out, and you never know where that might be," Brill continues. "He says it gives him a little piece of home. That reminds me: he asked for a jar of homemade apple butter."

He runs off to get it and returns with a small jar.

"Careful, Brill," I say. "That little jar might just be the straw that breaks this old camel of a bus's back."

I've enjoyed teasing him about this ancient bus many times before and he's always been good natured about it. Today he gets a serious look on his face instead.

"If it makes you feel better, I'll hang a 'danger' sign on the front," he says. "But I heard that what really comforts you is a 'Beware of Monsters' sign. I'd never have pegged you for the type to avoid monsters though. I've always thought you were the type to go looking for them."

Is that yet another puzzle piece?

William is waiting for us when we reach Bethany House.

"We received a transmission."

That's all he says; so we drop our heavy packs of food and water, and head for the command center.

"I haven't shown it to anyone else," he says, and plays it back for us.

Zip is on the screen. She's smudged with dirt and her hair is a mess. In the background we can hear weapons' fire.

"To any and all Four houses that receive this message. McIntosh is completely cut off. We've attempted three breakouts, but can't get through. We need immediate relief from any remaining forces. So far, the cult hunters are only using stun guns; so our numbers are largely intact and we've been able to hold a perimeter, but our supplies are low. Please help."

William pauses the video.

“There’s more,” he says. “She attached a list of the dead and missing. Everyone from Bethany House is listed as missing from the initial assault on the Maggie Valley vaccine facility, including your cousin Geoff. I’ve haven’t told Cindi or James.”

“Don’t,” I say. “They have enough on their minds. I’ll tell them, when the time’s right.”

I leave Martha in the command center and move quietly through the darkened halls until I reach Albert’s room. He’s not there; so I quickly slip inside and turn on my headlamp. He’s not kidding that the place is full of explosives. I have no idea what I’m looking for; so I take a chance and grab the backpack he carried to Egypt and back, hoping he carries standard supplies on every mission. Jackpot. I find a little foil packet and a thermal igniter. I guess stealing will now be added to my list of sins.

The escape tunnels are empty, and I quickly reach the old metal door to the abandoned escape tunnel where Martha once hung a “Beware of Monsters” sign. There doesn’t seem to be any trick to how this stuff works; so I apply the putty to the top of the old padlock and hit it with the igniter. It turns out the trick is to close your eyes, because the instant the putty ignites I’m blinded. I turn and stumble away.

After a moment or two of hissing and popping, I hear the lock hit the floor. I can almost make out a glowing orange spot on the floor that must be the remains of the lock, but otherwise my vision is nothing but blue and white spots. I feel around until I find the door handle and give it a hard pull. The door opens with a groan, but only enough for me to squeeze through. I kick the glowing orange spot through the opening and pull the door closed behind me.

I’m now alone with whatever monsters lurk in here.

As I sit against the door and wait for my vision to return, I hear Martha on the other side - calling my name. It’s just like her dream: I’m on this side, not allowing her to help me. If my suspicions are correct, this room will indeed be a personal torture chamber ... but not the physical kind. I hold my breath until I hear Martha leave. I’ve passed the first mental torture this place has in store.

When there’s only one large blue spot left in my vision, I turn my headlamp on and find I can see well enough to move around safely. I’m in a rough-hewn entryway that opens to the ancient chamber where Austin and Brill broke through over ten years ago. The floor is dirt and rock; so at least I don’t need to worry about rotted wood giving way beneath me. However, I still test every step before putting down my full weight. I’m only twenty meters into the area when I see what I’d both hoped and feared I’d find.

“You don’t look like you’ll hold a very big monster,” I say, as I pick up the small, bottomless metal cage. “I guess looks can be deceiving. You’re the monster that saves us all, but you ask a steep price in return, don’t you? You ask me to sacrifice my parents. You ask me to sacrifice my life too, or at least the life I could have had with them. Okay, little monster. Let’s get it done.”

I turn and walk straight back to the door, using exactly the same steps as I used to enter. I give the door a careful push, but as I squeeze through, two headlamps come on.

“It looks like we caught a monster trying to escape,” Albert says. “You didn’t really think you could burn my putty without me smelling it, did you?”

“I assume there’s a good explanation for this,” my cousin James says.

“Under the Sphinx, I asked you both to trust me, and you did everything I asked without question. You even brought back pieces of the time machine, and neither of you have said a word about it. You must be curious.”

They look at each other.

“Cephas? Are you saying...?”

“I’m saying that we’re going to violate every thought I’ve ever had regarding messing with time. I’m saying that we’re going to put it back together. I assume you double-checked everything once you got it back here to Bethany House?”

“I just finished doing that,” Albert says. “We brought back everything that was salvageable, but I don’t see what good it’ll do. There just isn’t enough left to rebuild it. Getting some bars from the arena was a good idea; but it’ll take months to figure out the exact composition and make enough to build a new arena. Even if we can build an arena, there are only a few crystals left that didn’t fry.”

“This is a bad choice,” James says.

I bring the old cage out from behind my back.

“There is no choice, James. The decision was made twelve years ago.”

In the dark, the remaining staff of Bethany House never notices the missing lock or the dust that Albert, James and I track out onto the floor, as we spend more time in the old tunnel. It only takes a few days to reassemble a tiny version of the prototype time machine; but James and Albert need a few more hours to create a second small arena from the alloys recovered outside Jerusalem. I find them carefully bending and welding pieces of metal together.

“I still say it would be a lot less work to just use the dusty one we found here,” Albert says. “Cephas said it’s a one-way trip, so it’s not like we need two of them.”

“We can’t. Somebody needs to make the cage. If we don’t make it, it’ll be a paradox,” James replies.

“You mean that cage is this cage?” Albert asks.

“That’s right, and that cage is only here because we’re going to make it and send it back; so keep working.”

“That’s crazy,” Albert says.

“I know. I argued for an hour with Cephas about it, until he showed me where you and I put our initials on it ... or will put our initials.”

“What if we choose not to put our initials on it? Will they disappear from the old cage?”

James makes the same face everyone seems to make when they think too hard about time and paradox.

They look up briefly to confirm who’s entered the area, but return to their work, as I carefully clear some electronics tools to make a small area on their workbench where I can write.

I’ve started this letter a dozen times already, and burned all of the earlier attempts. I’m not usually a person who finds himself at a loss for words; but I’ve also never written a letter like this one before. I don’t know what to say, much less how to say it; so I sit and stare at the blank sheet of paper.

I’ve set a difficult task in front of James and Albert; but neither one of them would trade roles with me for what I’ve planned. They’ve watched in silence at my last three attempts to write, including crumpling up paper in frustration and shedding more than a few tears. My cousin James is usually a man of very few words, and for that reason I listen carefully when he begins to speak.

“Cephas. When Martha’s trying to keep everyone’s morale up, she sometimes lists all of the ways you’ve sacrificed yourself for others. Are you thinking this sacrifice is just one too many?”

“Sacrifice makes us all who we are, James. The difficult part isn’t sacrificing myself. It’s knowing the chain of events I’ll cause, and all the other people who’ll be sacrificed because of me. When I meet them in Heaven one day, what will I say to them?”

“I know exactly who you’re talking about. I never met your parents, but I know that when you meet them, they’ll understand,” James replies. “Sacrifice is just part of being a Christian.”

God sacrificed His only Son for me... I must carry this plan through, and trust in Him.

“Cephas?” James returns to his pragmatic self. “Just get it done. This is one of those times when sacrificing yourself is also the only way to save yourself. When I was a kid, I thought I’d never meet you. In Giza, I thought I’d lost you. I refuse to lose you again.”

I start writing the letter that has caused me such turmoil. If writing such a letter is considered the hardest thing I’ve ever had to do, it’s only because I’ve never had to receive and read such a letter. My parents received such a letter when I was six-years-old, and I can’t imagine how they bore it.

With the letter finished, I go to my room and search through Martha’s desk until I find the gold locket that travelled back with her from ancient Egypt. Then I go to the laboratory to speak with Cindi and Amelia. I’m surprised to see them relaxing in the far corner of the lab, rather than hard at work, as they usually are.

“How’s the vaccine work coming along?”

“We’re on schedule,” Cindi says. “Amelia and I just finished cutting off the DNA tail that Henry added, re-purifying it and cloning it back into the virus.”

She holds up a small vial.

“This sample has around a half million active copies of the synthetic virus. If we can set up a production facility, we can start growing more at any time.”

She sets the vial down in a rack.

“I also have the copies of all the data on the toxin and vaccine that you wanted; but why did you want a copy converted to a ten-year-old format?”

She hands me two small data chips.

“Some of the smaller houses use very old computers. We want everyone to be able to read the data.”

She cocks her head to one side, as she scrutinizes my statement.

“Martha and I brought in a load of smoked ham and fresh baked bread. I thought you two might like a lunch break.”

“I’d love a sandwich,” Amelia says.

“Me too. I’m famished,” Cindi adds.

We all head towards the control area, where food is stored.

“I’ve already eaten, and Martha and I plan to send information on the vaccine out for the world to see. Enjoy your lunch.”

I watch them walk down the darkened hall. When they’re out of sight, I go back into the lab.

It’s time...

Chapter Seven

James agrees to shut down everything else at Bethany House so I can use power to have a conference with Aislin and Garai. I don't tell him the call is also timed so we can hack in on my old lecture in Colorado Springs one last time, and transmit data on the toxin and vaccine.

The conference with the remaining Christian Elders doesn't start off well, as we discuss what to do with the information that the gene therapy "marks" your DNA.

"What would you have us do? Die?" Garai demands when I suggest that Christians avoid taking the vaccine. "What good is a martyr's death, if there is nobody left alive to remember it?"

"We're already looking at losing all the kids who were raised off-grid because they can't get a dose. You're basically asking everyone who can legitimately receive a dose to commit suicide," Aislin adds.

"I'm asking you to have faith," I reply; "but let's come back to our personal decisions later. What about the rest of the world? Doesn't everyone deserve to know that they're being marked? Even a staunch atheist should be mad about having their DNA rewritten like this. Shouldn't everyone have a choice?"

"It's just some junk DNA. If you give them the choice, then every Christian who chooses to take the vaccine in order to live will look like a faithless fool," Garai says.

"Of course," I reply. "That's exactly the choice Henry knew we'd all be forced to make. You're either dead, or a hypocrite. He can't lose."

"Then why are you suggesting playing right into his hands?" Aislin asks.

I'm not playing into Henry's hands. We're all playing into God's hands.

"Because I'm tired of hypocrites. I'm tired of this faithless generation. But most of all, I'm tired of the two of you."

I end the transmission.

"Ready to hack?" I ask Martha in the control booth, as James enters behind her.

"Karen 'Talks-a-ton' is right on schedule in Colorado Springs," Martha says.

"You wanted to see me?" James asks me.

"Did you and Albert finish?"

"Yes. Everything's in place and ready to go."

"I finished the package we discussed," I say, and carefully hand him a package wrapped in brown paper and tied with a string. "Can you deliver it for me?"

He looks at the package in his hand and I can tell he's dying to ask what's in it, but he knows I won't say. We all agreed that the less he and Albert know, the better.

"You mean right now?"

His eyebrows go up.

"Give me five minutes. We're starting a hack on my old lecture. It won't take long. We're transmitting the data we have on the vaccine and hoping that the information is picked up around the world. Monitor the hack, and go ahead as soon as the data is sent."

"You got it," he says, and leaves.

"What's that all about?" Martha asks, as she brings "Talks-a-ton's" lecture onto the screen.

"Oh, you know ... boys and explosives."

Martha rolls her eyes.

We break in on the lecture as Talks-a-ton is explaining how the founding fathers were coerced by the church to include freedom of religion in the Constitution.

"Hello, Karen," I say.

I signal Martha, and she transmits a data stream containing all of the information we've gathered on the toxin and the vaccine, including the part about the "tail."

"Hello, Cephas!"

Karen is bubbling with more arrogance than usual; so I know something unpleasant is about to happen.

"I was hoping you'd drop in again. I have a special guest who wants to teach you the true meaning of sacrifice. Class dismissed."

There's a moment of delay as Talks-a-ton speaks with her technical people, which is just enough time for our vaccine data to finish downloading to the world.

"Hello, Cephas."

Henry Portman's face appears on the screen.

"This conversation isn't being broadcast; so class is canceled for your former students today. You, on the other hand, need to learn a lesson."

I see Martha start to work on her computer.

"Of course, Henry. It's always such a pleasure."

He looks away for a moment, as he reads some information on a nearby screen; then gets a look of surprise and disappointment.

"I see you've transmitted your discovery that the vaccine contains some harmless extra DNA. It appears that what I think of as a fitting tribute to my family, you call 'the mark of the beast.' I'm flattered, but it really is cruel of you, Cephas, don't you think? Giving people hard choices is cruel by its very nature. They're so much better off just enjoying their sex, drugs and videos."

"In the end, the right choice should always be easy to make," I reply.

"I'm so glad to hear you say that. As it turns out, I'm here specifically to give you an easy choice. There are thousands of baptized believers in McIntosh, South Dakota, including hundreds of well-trained and well-armed members of Four. As much as I'd like to flatten the place, it's just too useful to show the world dead Corps agents who were killed holding nothing but a stun gun."

"You know I don't lead them. What do you want me to do about it?"

"I have the place surrounded. I also control the waterworks. Surrender yourself to me, or McIntosh will be the first spot in North America wiped out by the plague. Sacrificing yourself to save so many others might even earn you sainthood."

"Don't do it, Henry."

The lights in the studio dim; then come back up.

Henry looks to one side, as if someone off-screen has gotten his attention.

"You're rebroadcasting this conversation on another channel," he says.

I glance into the control room and see that Martha looks pleased with herself for redirecting Henry's feed, just as he admitted the plague is due to his toxin rather than a virus. Henry's feed goes mute for a moment, as he pounds the table in front of him and barks orders at people who're off-camera.

The lights start to flicker.

"You'll find I'm full of surprises too. You brought this on yourself. The deaths of everyone in McIntosh are on your head."

Henry finishes just before the power goes out entirely.

The first puzzle piece is in place.

"What have I done? I've killed everyone in McIntosh," Martha says.

William runs into the studio.

"There was some sort of massive power surge, and then the power was cut entirely. It must be some sort of tracker the Corps is using to find illegal power taps. We've got to get out of here."

The small staff of Bethany House grab essential possessions; then break for the exits. As Martha and I run through the tunnels, I see James and Albert emerge from the area marked with the danger sign. Looking down the tunnel, I see that the power is still on in that area. James gives me a thumbs up; then runs to confirm that everyone is out.

“Ready to make another crater?” I ask Albert.

“It’s the best part of my job,” he says, and picks up a heavy pack. I have no doubt that his most prized possessions include explosives, but I’m surprised to see the curved end of what must be about a two foot metal bar sticking out of the top as well.

With all those explosives, why does he need a crowbar?

When it became clear that we were going to use the time machine, it was also clear that doing so would be the end of Bethany House due to the massive amount of power that would be used. Since that day, Albert found several old airshafts into the ancient mine that we’re walking above. James and I lowered him in so he could explore them and set enough explosives to collapse the mine and take Bethany House down with it.

Albert stops me at the tunnel entrance.

“Get to the meeting point and get a headcount. We’ll be right behind you,” I say to Martha, and she runs off.

“Hold these while I hit the fail-safe,” Albert says, as he drops a dozen small, greenish crystals into my hand.

I raise my eyebrows at him when I see what they are.

“We agreed to destroy these,” I say.

“They might come in handy in the future,” he says; so I stuff them into my pocket.

I can see a remote detonator in his hand, but trust Albert to also install a second mechanism to ensure destruction. Hidden in the shadows - just inside the tunnel entrance - are two small boxes, each containing a simple on/off switch. The boxes are far enough apart that two people are required to activate them.

“Are you sure?” he asks, as he hands me a box.

“There’s no going back now,” I reply.

“No pun intended, I’m sure. Okay then. We need to activate the switches simultaneously. Count down from three,” he says, and I nod. “Three-two-one, go.”

We each click our switches and red lights start to flash on the boxes.

“We can disengage here for the next four minutes. Once we cross that line, it’ll blow a minute later - no matter what,” he says, and we run for the rendezvous point.

Martha and William meet us halfway, and confirm that everyone is accounted for.

“Was all data backed up and sent to another house?” Martha asks.

“I hit the button as I was leaving,” William says. “If there are any houses left to receive it, they’ll have it by now.”

We reach the meeting spot, to find that the group has instinctively formed a small perimeter. Everyone expects to hear government aircraft closing in and to see armed troops creeping through the trees at any time.

“The vaccine sample,” Cindi yells when she sees us. “It wasn’t where I left it, so I assumed Amelia grabbed it, but she doesn’t have it either. I’ve to go back in and get it.”

“Albert?” I ask.

Albert looks at his watch.

“We’ll never make it. We cross the fail-safe line in about ninety seconds.”

“There’s no time to retrieve the vaccine sample that might save every Christian in the world? What fail-safe line? What happens in ninety seconds?” Cindi asks.

“We rigged the house to blow up, just in case we were discovered,” Albert says, “which it’s going to do in just over two minutes. You’ll never make it.”

“But it’s our only sample!” Cindi starts to run towards the tunnel, but only makes a few steps before I catch her arm and stop her.

“Let me go!”

Cindi kicks me in the gut and prepares to throw me with a Judo move, but I hold fast.

“Don’t wait for the fail-safe. Blow it now,” I say.

Albert pushes the button on his remote without hesitation.

We feel the explosions before we hear or see them. They’re sequenced to go off deep underground first and work their way up. The low rumble starts the small house vibrating until all of its ancient glass windows first crack and then shatter. Next, dust pours from the windows like the house is a hot tea kettle releasing steam. We all expect the house itself to blow upwards, but when the rumble stops, the house is still standing.

The staff smile and laugh that their home away from home is not so easily destroyed - until we hear the sound of cracking timbers and the groaning of walls. We watch as the house first falls in on itself in slow motion, and then falls into the hole that two generations of Four members had lovingly burrowed out beneath it. If the detonations worked according to Albert’s designs, the majority of Four’s secrets now lay deep in the ground.

What have I done? Mom? Dad? What have I done?

“I’m sorry, Cuz,” I say to Cindi, and finally release her arm.

But not for the reason you think.

“That was our only sample. Why did you have him blow it early?” Cindi yells.

“Because I knew you’d try to run in for it,” I reply. “We can get another sample, but we can’t spare a single saint.”

I can tell from the looks on their faces that the group needs to mourn the loss of Bethany House. Some of them first visited that house when they were young enough to play hide-and-seek in its tunnels, and are going to have a hard time letting go of the memories. They want to walk to the edge of the hole and grieve, but Albert warns them off, saying the ground may be too unstable to hold their weight.

“Is there anything else we can do to ensure there’s nothing left for Henry to find?” I ask Albert.

Albert is a guy who anticipates multiple ways to destroy things, and produces a red can that I assume is full of some sort of flammable liquid.

“They may not have been Christians, but the Vikings really knew how to throw a funeral,” he says. “There’s enough wood from the house to burn for a while, and if we’re lucky, it’ll work down to some of the coal that was left behind and burn for weeks ... maybe even years.”

“I love it,” Martha says. “An eternal flame for Bethany House.”

Heads nod in agreement; so Albert carefully works his way to the edge and empties the contents of the red can into the hole and onto the wooden frame. He waits a moment or two; then tosses in the entire can and a thermal igniter. He barely makes it away from the edge, when a yellow fireball erupts into a small mushroom cloud.

“Trust Albert to send Bethany out with pizzazz,” William says, and everyone cheers.

The cheer doesn’t last for long, as everyone’s thoughts turn to what this place meant and where we’re going to go from here. The exception is my pragmatic cousin, James. James is checking the time and watching the skies for the first appearance of Federal drones.

“We’ve got to go,” James says. “I can’t believe they’re not here already.”

“Go? Where are we supposed to go?” Cindi asks.

“How about away from the explosion, for starters?” James replies to his younger sister as only an older brother can.

I look at the faces of the small flock that remains. They're trained in high tech espionage and hand-to-hand combat for self-defense; but this is the first time they've truly had to run from Federal agents. Living off the grid has made them feel hunted in the virtual electronic world, but not one of them has ever felt hunted like an animal in the real world before, and they're scared.

Lead them, Cephas.

Splitting up would be the better course, but - without asking - I can see they want to stick together and continue to mourn the loss of Bethany House. They need this time together.

"Break into groups of two or three and follow me in a wedge pattern - keeping the group in front of you in sight at all times. Run when I run, and crawl when I crawl, so we all stay together. I'll be zigzagging because we need to stay under canopy at all times to avoid the cameras on drones."

I'm relieved to see their faces change to those of people who have a purpose again.

Without another word, I turn and run, with Martha on my heels and the group following.

We're six kilometers away, when we hear the first government aircraft circling the smoking remains of our old home. I come to a stop under thick cover at the edge of the tree line. Everyone is breathing hard and needs a rest.

"If they haven't already, their next action will be to deploy enough drones to start a search pattern," James says.

I can see the faces going back to concern.

"The backup for Bethany is an abandoned place called Timber Ridge Camp," William says. "It's at least ten kilometers from here. Capon Springs is a little closer, but the terrain is tougher and you've been leading us the wrong way to go to either place. Did you even know which direction you were running?"

In fact, I didn't. I just ran in the direction that somehow felt right to me.

"A man's heart plans his way, but the Lord directs his steps." I quote Proverbs 16:9.

I look over the faces of the group. They look like rabbits being chased by wolves and here we are, huddled like so many rabbits in a thicket - afraid to move. This thicket is on the edge of a field, where we know Federal drones might spot us as soon as we step out from under the canopy.

"It's only a few hours until dark, and then their heat sensors will see us right through the canopy," James says.

Their faces again show that they're losing hope. As I look at them each in turn, I'm reminded of the perfect love and perfect patience of Jesus Christ. When even His Apostles continuously expressed doubt and unbelief, He found ways to gently guide them and rekindle their faith in Him.

I bow my head and pray, and sense them all doing the same.

"Is everyone ready?" I ask, when I hear their breathing has calmed.

There are nods of recognition. I know they're still thinking we can't outrun the aircraft that are searching for us; but they also look at peace. Despite the odds, they've placed their trust in the Lord.

"I present to you a temporary safe house that I think we should name 'The manger.'"

I pull back a limb so those in the front can see the barn that sits beside Bill and Wendy's house. Wendy is outside feeding her horses, but seems to be watching the tree line more than her work.

How does that woman always seem to know?

"Everyone into the barn - two at a time," I say, as Martha and I check the sky for drones and send Cindi and James sprinting across the pasture. We hold up the group every time we see anything suspicious in the sky; but soon Martha and I are the only two remaining in the thicket.

"Before we run, I want to know something," Martha says. "A week ago, when you told me who's going to save us and the world... did you say 'I am' as in Cephas Paulson is going to save the world? Or did you say 'I AM' as in 'tell them that I AM has sent you' is going to save the world?"

I smile, then grab her hand and run.

Chapter Eight

When we reach the barn, the group is standing around, chattering about where to go from here.

“There’s no way this old roof will hide us from heat sensors,” William says. “I still vote that we break into groups and run for it.”

I look at the barn and realize that he’s correct. The walls are made from thick wooden beams covered with planks. The roof joists must have been updated along the way because they’re made of some sort of composite and what appears to be the original beams are stacked along the back wall of the barn. The roof itself appears to be wood covered with some sort of rust-resistant sheet metal. The federal drones will see heat signatures right through it.

“The sun will set in two hours. How big will their search perimeter be by then?” I ask.

“At least twenty kilometers - maybe as much as forty,” James replies.

“You’re a fast runner, but you’ll never make it that far in this kind of terrain,” I say to William.

“Martha, where were sword thieves able to successfully hide when we were in Samaria?” I ask.

“Inside the Roman perimeter, because the Romans assumed they would run.”

“Bill, how old is this barn?” I ask.

“The walls are a hundred years, at least, but the floor and foundation are older,” he says.

I drop to my hands and knees, and start knocking.

“What are you doing?” asks James.

“Trying to find a cellar; but since I’m on my knees anyway, I’m also praying.”

Soon everyone is doing the same.

“This board sounds hollow,” Amelia yells from the far side of the barn.

“Sweep away the hay and look for hinges or a pull-ring, or anything else that looks like a trapdoor,” I say to everyone, as we move to that side of the barn.

“I think I found it,” calls a red-haired girl named Meg, and we converge on her.

Using two large inlaid hinges as guides, we sweep out the cracks marking the outline of a trapdoor, but find that the spot where the handle once stood is empty.

“The fifth stall is my workshop,” Bill says. “I have an old crowbar you can use to pry it open.”

“That’s okay, Albert carries one,” I say. I turn to Albert, but the bar is missing from his pack.

“I guess it fell out as I ran,” Albert says.

When I reach the stall to find Bill’s crowbar, I see Bill’s workshop and am amazed to find containers filled with thousands of liters of water from Capon Springs.

Bless you Brill. That’s exactly what we need.

We pry the door open and discover that the current barn floor was laid directly on top of an even older floor, making a total surface of about ten centimeters thick.

“James. Can heat sensors see through the roof and wood this thick?” I ask.

“Maybe. They can see right through the insulated walls of a house.”

“Bill and Wendy, we need to borrow your water stash and a lot of your hay,” I say. “Everyone, move the water from the stall to the floor directly above the cellar; then heap as much hay on top of it as you can. The water and hay should act as insulators and absorb all the heat we give off.”

Wendy asks me to help her carry food and blankets from the house to the barn. In truth, she has a question she needs to ask me in private. When I get back, the water is in place and the hay pile is already a half-meter thick and growing. When I carry the first load of blankets into the cellar, I find Martha spreading hay on the floor for us to sleep on.

“Nesting instinct?” I ask.

“We might as well be comfortable.”

As the sun starts to dip low in the sky, the hay stack on the floor is well over a meter tall, and Martha has lined the cellar with another half-meter. The last of the light sticks that I've always carried since being trapped in the Traveler cave are the only source of light.

"Cover the door once we're all down. Then put the horses into their stalls and get your house as hot as you can stand to distract the sensors," I instruct Bill.

Sometime late in the night, we hear a drone buzz in and hover low near the house. Thirty minutes later we hear a vehicle stop and a man's voice talking with Bill. Nobody enters the barn. After that, everyone seems to sleep soundly.

As I'm lying in the hay, trying to get back to sleep, I think about what I've done. Even being trapped in a dark, cramped place again isn't bothering me. My part in this puzzle is complete.

In my sleep, I hear the sound of a hammer striking metal. I'm having the dream about the blacksmith shop again. I walk to the forge and pick up the hammer, and continue to work my piece of metal. As I strike it, the letter "C" continues to glow brightly, and no matter what I do, I can't remove the letter from the nail. I dunk the nail into a bucket with a hiss, hoping the "C" will go away. Instead, when I bring it out of the water, it's been joined by an "H" glowing next to it on the shaft.

I wake from the dream with a light gasp and a jolt. "CH" - the first two letters in Christ's name. There's no escaping that in my dream, I'm forging the nails to crucify Christ, and my work isn't done yet.

I thought my part in this puzzle was completed yesterday. What am I supposed to do next?

I'm so lost in my thoughts that it takes me a moment to realize that Martha and Cindi are whispering beside me. I remain still and listen. They're lamenting the choices they each made yesterday. Martha is talking about Henry's threat to wipe out McIntosh, saying: "It's my fault. I killed them all," while Cindi claims that misplacing the vaccine sample will cause many more deaths in the long run. They both sound completely lost and empty of hope.

I roll over in the soft hay and curl around Martha, placing my hand directly onto her belly where our Jocie is growing.

Is that a small bump I feel on her previously flat stomach?

"Lights shine brightest in the darkness," I whisper to them. "I need you both to be lights of hope in the face of evil. Besides, crying is bad for the baby."

I feel Martha's body stiffen against me.

"Baby?" Cindi asks.

"Great," Martha says. "Mr. Observation figures out I'm pregnant; he figures out it's a girl and she wants to be called 'Jocie;' but he somehow misses the fact that I haven't told anyone?"

"Baby?" Cindi repeats. "You've got to let me be the one to tell Mom."

"Nobody! You're telling *nobody*," Martha says. "I won't have everyone treating me differently."

It must be dawn, because we're interrupted by the sound of Bill removing the hay and water from the trapdoor, while Wendy takes the horses back to the pasture. We emerge from our hiding spot to view a spectacular sunrise.

"There's a screen in my shop," Bill says. "Sometimes I watch it while I putter around in there. You might want to watch the news."

The screen is currently featuring an aerial shot of the smoking hole where Bethany House used to stand. The hole is a little larger than it was when we saw the house crumble, and is shaped like a teardrop, rather than a circle. The burned remains of the house are at least one hundred meters down.

"Authorities believe members of the cult group, Four were attempting to cut into a primary power line, causing the temporary loss in power that blackened parts of Virginia and West Virginia,

and igniting a gas explosion in an ancient coal mine located under the area,” the newswoman announces. “No survivors have been found.”

Bill pokes his head around the corner.

“That’s news too, but it’s not the big story.”

We try another channel and quickly find the big story: “Plague strikes South Dakota town.”

“Government sources deny the rumor that a toxin is responsible, and blame the disease on the man known as “Michael the Assassin” for bringing it back through time travel,” an announcer - who is neither clearly a man nor a woman - explains; then continues.

“Fortunately, a complete government quarantine of the town is in place, and vaccine is on the way to protect the surrounding area - and eventually the entire country. Essential government personnel nationwide have already been vaccinated; however, armed militants are preventing them from entering the quarantine area to help the sick and dying. In the meantime, government health officials ask everyone who has traveled to South Dakota to report to the nearest hospital if any of the following symptoms occur...”

The shot switches to images of “plague victims” to illustrate the progression of the “disease.” The plague begins with profuse sweating and fever, and a pronounced metallic taste in the mouth. Within an hour, the victim usually experiences pain in the lymph nodes, particularly in the armpit and groin. By the twenty-four hour mark, there are usually sores inside the mouth and bleeding in the digestive tract, combined with vomiting and diarrhea. The fever and pain continue through the second day, when skin lesions start to appear. They look nothing like the historical pictures of chickenpox or smallpox. These lesions look more like the victim has been burned with a blowtorch until their skin burst open from being boiled on the inside. When the announcer casually mentions that the victims are in pain, it’s almost like a bad joke. You can see the agony in their eyes, despite receiving extraordinary amounts of painkillers.

The others gather to watch, but Martha walks away because she’s beside herself with guilt and grief. I find her at the back of the barn, sitting on a hay bale.

“This isn’t your fault.” I sit down on the bale and hold her. “Evil doesn’t need an excuse. He would have done it anyway.”

“You don’t know that,” she says through red and puffy eyes.

“Yes, I do. Henry’s plan is to wipe out anyone who doesn’t take his vaccine. He said it himself. He warned that McIntosh would be first, unless I ...”

Surrender. That’s the next step in God’s plan. He wants me to surrender...

“Cephas?” Amelia calls to where Martha and I are sitting in the hay.

“I think the message reached them. When I was in Indonesia, nearly one hundred percent of the people were hit by the toxin in the first few days, but in McIntosh they’re reporting less than five percent have been affected.”

“They were watching the water works and knew the toxin had been added,” I say; “but how long can they hold out without water?”

“It depends. If the toxin is only being added at the water works, then they could drink the lake water. They’d just need to boil it or treat it with chemicals to kill any microorganisms,” Amelia replies.

“Then there’s hope,” Martha says, through teary eyes.

I’m relieved that she’s too distracted to make me finish my earlier sentence. She’d never go for a plan in which I surrender myself to Henry.

“Always,” I reply. “And today we’re going to spread a little more.”

“Any sign of drones?” I ask William, late in the afternoon.

“Nothing in the air for the last two hours,” he replies.

“Then let’s do it,” I say.

The eleven of us who fled Bethany House walk out of the barn in single file and straight for the little pond. I walk in first and don’t stop until I’m waist deep. Everyone else waits at the edge.

“Everyone who has not been baptized in the name of Christ who wishes to be, please join me,” I say.

Since Martha was baptized in Galilee, she walks back to the barn, while the other nine wade into the water.

“My cousin James, son of Clifford: I understand that you and Geoff wanted to be baptized at the same time, and I’m sorry he isn’t here. I hope that one day the three of us will be together and we can do that.”

James nods. There’s a sadness in his eyes, telling me he suspects his brother is dead.

“I baptize you, my cousin, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

I gently push him under the water; then pull him out like a fish, as Simon Peter taught me.

“Cindi, my other beloved cousin...”

My voice starts to crack as I say the words.

“You have no idea what a pleasure this is for me. When Martha and I were time-traveling, we could see each other’s thoughts and memories. I could see that you loved me and defended me, despite the horrible things I did as The Cult Hunter. You never lost faith in me - even when I had none in myself. I baptize you, my cousin, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

I go through them all, sharing my observations and praise of their work. Albert is last, and everyone laughs when I praise him for “making craters for Christ.”

When we’re finished, the nine form into two lines flanking me, and we all face the barn. Martha is standing outside, with her hair clipped up, looking radiant. She has a basket in her hands, and when I nod, she starts to sprinkle flowers onto the ground as she walks towards the pond. When she reaches the edge, Bill and Wendy emerge from the barn. He’s wearing an old suit and Wendy is wearing an ancient wedding gown.

I wince a little when they continue into the muddy water wearing such prized family clothing, but this is what they wanted. They proceed up to me.

“Beloved of Christ, we’re here to baptize this man and woman, and stand witness to their marriage in the eyes of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,” I say. “Bill, you’ve asked to be baptized first, and then you’ll baptize Wendy.”

When they’re both baptized, we proceed to the wedding.

“The only wedding I’ve ever attended is my own, and this is the first I’ve been asked to perform one. I’ve read about some of the strange wedding traditions that Christians had in this country two hundred years ago, and I’m happy that most have been left behind. I think all too often things like cakes, bouquets, and Champaign toasts obscured the meaning behind getting married in the eyes of God. You - Bill and Wendy - are an example to us all. In a world where people switch partners as easily as they switch their shoes, you have remained true to each other, acting as husband and wife in all ways. The government may no longer recognize “marriage” with their scraps of paper; but man was fooling himself when he thought he had any true say in who could - and could not - be married before God in the first place. That’s God’s domain, and His word on the subject is final. So, as your minister, I declare you married in the eyes of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.”

Bill and Wendy stare into each other’s eyes with a love that should be the envy of the world. I know, because I felt the same way in Galilee.

“There is one old tradition I rather like,” I say. “It’s the one where I say: ‘You may kiss the bride.’”

As we walk from the pond, Wendy laughs with joy at her mud-covered, never-to-be-white-again wedding gown.

“On this day, my bride, nobody makes a better-looking you than you,” Bill says.

For the remainder of the afternoon, we allow ourselves to forget the dark cloud of Henry’s toxin that hovers in our minds and, instead, celebrate with Bill and Wendy. One way Wendy kept the house warm to confuse the heat sensors was by staying up most of the night baking bread and treats for the wedding feast.

Eventually, I quiet everyone down, and begin to speak.

“Although we think of today as being about Bill and Wendy and their love, today is truly about God’s love for us all. I asked all of you to trust in the Lord, and pray for His will to be done. Now let me ask you all to pray again, and to ask God to work His will through each of you. When you hear His call, follow it without question.”

Bill clears his throat.

“Wendy and I have a little wedding gift for all of you that I hope Cephas will help us with. As we’re seeing in McIntosh, water that you know is safe is going to get tight. I want you all to drink a toast of this water with us, and then I want you to carry as much of it as you can to wherever you go next. Don’t save it for your selves though. Whenever you find the faithful, give them a drink and tell them it’s holy water blessed by Cephas himself. Spread this water as the symbol for the day when the whole world will drink from the well that will allow them to never thirst again,” Bill says. “Cephas? Would you?”

I turn to the stacks of water that are still partially buried in hay.

“Lord, I ask you to bless this water and protect those who carry it, so that it may become a blessing to all who drink of it. Amen.”

“Amen,” everyone responds.

They all stand there, watching me expectantly with smiles on their faces. They’re ready for me to lead them. They’re ready for me to say something inspirational. They’re not ready for what I say next.

“I love you all, and because I love you, I have to leave you now.”

Chapter Nine

I pick up my pack as the group looks at each other in disbelief.

“We’ve lost Bethany House, but we haven’t lost our way,” I say. “We’re all still on a walk with Christ. Remember Christ’s words to his disciples in the book of Matthew: ‘I’m sending you out as sheep among wolves. Be as wary as snakes and harmless as doves.’ So I ask you all to go out in twos or threes, and baptize others as you’ve been baptized. Seek out new locations and build a new Bethany House, and tie into the Four network if you can. Avoid contact with Garai and Aislin. Know that you’re all loved - and needed.”

I begin to go through the group, giving hugs and kisses.

“You’re not going anywhere without me,” Martha says, and begins to gather her things.

“No, not without you...”

Not this time anyway.

Cindi is last in the line and hugs me tightly, not wanting to let me leave.

“You don’t have to break my ribs, Cuz. You’re coming with us,” I whisper to Cindi. “Martha is my best protector. You know about the baby, and I need you to be hers.”

Within minutes, the staff is breaking apart into groups and saying short - but tearful - goodbyes. William and Albert decide to go to Timber Ridge Camp and establish the replacement for Bethany House. The others intend to travel in twos and threes, and baptize all who want to know Jesus.

The only exception is James, who won’t say where he’s going. I pull him aside.

“We both know where you need to go,” I say.

“You agree I should go to McIntosh? I thought you’d be the first to stop me.”

“I don’t know that Geoff will be in McIntosh,” I say.

Without thinking, I close my eyes.

“What? Cephas, what do you know?”

“The transmission from Zip included a list of the missing from the raid on the vaccine facility. Everyone from Bethany House was on it,” I say.

“Who else knows?” he asks.

“Just William and Martha.”

“Keep it that way. If they’re only missing, then God has called upon me to find them and bring them home. I’ll follow that calling without question.”

“Then I’ll make sure I’m always ready to perform a double baptism,” I say.

James smiles.

“Then it looks like I’m going to McIntosh,” James says. “I know my brother. If he survived at the vaccine facility, he’ll head straight to where the fighting is happening.”

Cindi, Martha and I set out towards the west. We all have hacked coms, but we decide to only use them when necessary - in case the government is catching on to the technology. Once we reach a larger city, we should be able to use the cargo tube system to get around quickly; but for now, we’re walking, and sometimes using local hover bus lines that are not yet equipped with the best tracking technology. Whenever we’re walking, Martha takes the lead and sets a hard pace, as if she needs to prove that pregnancy can’t slow her down.

Despite protests and pleading from first Martha, and then Cindi, I’m not wearing a disguise, other than sometimes a hat and sunglasses. I’m tired of running and hiding in shadows. I want to follow Michael’s lead and proudly proclaim my faith - even if it means that Henry finds me and I surrender myself to him.

On one old hover bus, deep in Appalachia, a man approaches me and says: “I thought you’d never come;” then takes a seat and doesn’t say another word. On a quiet road a woman sees us from her front porch and insists we eat with her. Then she fills an old horse trough and asked to be baptized quickly, before the water can run out a hole in side.

The farther we go, the more people seem to know that we’re coming. They take videos of baptisms, which sometimes end up broadcast to the world. We see drones in the sky; but they seem to pass over us, as we stand in a river or in crowded swimming pools, and move on without notice. It seems that the Lord has an appointed time for me to surrender myself and won’t be hurried by Corps agents, or their drones.

I’ve been amazed at the number of people who are yearning to have God in their lives, and I’m genuinely touched as they tell me how my testimony has inspired them. Sometimes it concerns me that they lack leadership and direction in their faith; but then I remember my own definition of religion is “institutions created by man to take power over other men,” and tell them to always beware the corrupting influence of men in their lives.

When we reach Parkersburg, West Virginia, we stop to baptize people in the Ohio River. There’s a large contingent - perhaps fifty in all - who want to accept Christ as their Savior. One of them is an old man who brought his granddaughter with him.

“I’ve lived a long time, Cephas,” the old man says, “and in that lifetime I’ve tried everything I could think of to make myself happy. I’ve been with many women; I’ve worked hard and made a lot of money; and when I still wasn’t happy, I spent that money on drugs so I could be numb to it all. I made three children who were born, and dozens more who were never born. This is the oldest of my grandchildren. Can you please tell her how to lead a happier life than the one I led?”

I judge the girl to be about eight-years-old, the age I was when my parents met their fate in a tube accident. She’s unnaturally pretty - a product of enhancements.

“Why do people get enhancements?” I ask the girl.

“To look pretty,” she says.

“But that sort of pretty is only on the outside,” I reply. “That sort of pretty is like having lots of sex or doing lots of drugs. It doesn’t make you happy on the inside, which is what your grandfather wants for you. When I was back in time on the Travelers Initiative, Jesus spoke to crowds every day in the temple. Back then, there were men who tried to teach what they thought was the word of God; but they had it all messed up, because they were doing things to try to look pretty on the outside instead of on the inside, where it really counts.”

“Jesus said to those men: ‘you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people’s bones and all uncleanness.’ Sometimes I think the enhancements that make you pretty on the outside also make you ugly on the inside. Jesus doesn’t care about how you look on the outside, and you’re best chance on finding happiness is if you do everything you can to enhance the beauty you have on the inside.”

“Can’t I do both?” the girl whines.

“Maybe you can. It’s not a sin to be beautiful; but if you allow your outward beauty to make you sinful, then you’ll end up ugly on the inside. People who are ugly on the inside are rarely happy.”

As I finish, Martha nods toward a bridge downstream of where we’re baptizing. A large bus is on the bridge, and heavily armed Federal agents are exiting it. One man scans our group with a pair of binoculars. They’re probably very powerful, and may even have face recognition software built in. I turn my face; but there’s no way he can miss me, or what we’re all doing in the river.

They got ahead of us.

He continues to scan the group; but then - inexplicably - the contingent hops back onto the bus and it glides out of sight. Cindi, Martha and I all exchange looks.

“Did we just get a little help from above?” Cindi asks.

After everyone is baptized, we share the water that I blessed in Bill and Wendy's barn. We are then invited for dinner at the house of a man named Hal and his wife, Chelsea. Hal walks us through town and we're joined by many well-wishers. I talk with them, telling them how much Jesus loves them, as we continue along. It's not until we stop at an old bakery, where Chelsea wants to buy bread for dinner, that I realize Martha is no longer at my side. As the group walked along, she stopped and is standing thirty meters away, staring at something set into the wall of a modern building. I excuse myself from the group and walk back to her. It's not until I reach her that I realize she's staring at a selective pregnancy kiosk.

Cindi sees it too, and encourages the crowd to keep walking without us.

"Martha? What are you doing?"

"I'm getting more tired and weak by the day, that's what I'm doing," she replies. "What horrible timing."

"I never question God's timing, but sometimes it does seem like He has a strange sense of humor," I say.

Martha turns toward me long enough to reveal tears on her cheeks; then turns her back on me and looks at the kiosk again.

"How am I supposed to protect you now?" she asks. "How fast do you think I'll be able to run in a few months? Or jump? Or kick? And even if I didn't need to protect you, how am I supposed to protect this baby? Henry's plague is coming, and here we are - walking from town to town - baptizing people when we should be creating our own vaccine, or destroying his toxin facility."

I walk around until I'm between Martha and the kiosk; but she turns her back on me again.

"You have every right to be scared," I say. "We're all scared--."

"Not everyone's scared, Cephas. *You're* not scared. Sometimes it's the only thing that keeps me going; sometimes it makes me even more scared; and sometimes it just makes me so mad that I want to hit something. What are you not telling me? What puzzle pieces have come together in that brain of yours that allow you to sleep at night?"

I hang my head. I want to tell her what I've done. I want her to know that she and Jocie are going to be okay. But right now, I can't even raise my head to look at her. It's as if Satan himself has me by the throat.

Could Satan be the one inducing me to keep secrets?

"Don't you get it?" Martha asks. "*We're* not having a baby, *I'm* having a baby - and *I'm* scared. What if I get the plague before she's born? What if I somehow survive the plague, and she doesn't? How can I bring a baby into the world, knowing she'll get the plague and die in my arms? Every time I look at one of these machines, I see all of the horrible possibilities and I wonder..."

Martha snuffles.

"... I wonder if maybe she's better off not being born."

Martha brushes past me, and walks to the kiosk. There's no risk of her identity being discovered. The government knows what most people ate for breakfast this morning; but abortion is an absolute right, where no names are taken and no questions are asked.

As the tears roll down her face, Martha exposes her belly to the machine. I walk to her and place my hands on her shoulders.

"I love her, Cephas. That's why I have to do this."

"No, you don't, Martha. I don't have all of the pieces yet; but I know enough about the future to know that this baby is in it, and that she'll be safe, happy, and loved."

The machine says: "You are seven weeks post-implantation. How would you like to proceed?"

“I know you can see connections and possibilities other people can’t see; but you don’t know the future Cephas. You can’t. But I can change my future, and the future of this baby. All I need to do is say one little word to this machine. I just don’t know if I can say it.”

“I agree. It’s clear what has to be done. There is one little word that needs to be said - and I’m going to say it for you.”

“Not a chance,” Martha replies. “I watched your face all those months ago when that girl was aborting her baby. Killing this baby would destroy you.”

“How would you like to proceed?” the machine prompts again.

“How would I like to proceed?” I say, and my voice cracks. “I’ll tell you how I’d like to proceed, you cursed machine. I’m going to proceed by saying the one little word that changes everything, forever. I’m going to say the one little word that you - and every murder box like you - must long to hear.”

I slide my hands down, so that they’re on Martha’s belly - and with tears rolling down my face - I say the word.

Chapter Ten

“Heartbeat,” I say.

The kiosk plays us the rapid swishing sound of Jocie’s heartbeat, and Martha gasps.

“Jocie!” Martha yells, and leaps away from the machine.

“I’m sorry! I’m so sorry!” she says.

I don’t know if she’s speaking to me or to Jocie.

“It’s okay,” I say. “She’s fine. Let’s hear it again.”

We stand for several minutes listening to the swishing sound, as I hold Martha from behind.

Martha starts to cry.

“It’s so unfair!” Martha says. “We can’t let her be born, just to die from the plague.”

She turns to face me.

For the first time I can remember, I’m the one who releases a stare by looking away. I can’t look her in the eyes. If I really can look into a person’s eyes and see a glimpse of their soul, then I’d have to watch this beautiful soul being tortured, and I can’t bear the thought of it.

And that’s why you have to do it. Look into her eyes, Cephas.

When I look up again, I see everything I’d feared and knew I couldn’t bear. I don’t know if it’s Satan, or the Lord, or my own human stupidity that has taught me to keep these secrets, but I can’t allow her to remain in anguish.

“I’ve done something,” I say. “Something that cost me dearly and I’m afraid there’s even more payment to come from it. The Corps didn’t find us the day Bethany House was destroyed. We stole the components of the time machine in Jerusalem and built a tiny version. The power went out because I sent the vaccine sample back in time twelve years. Four has been vaccinating members ever since. We’ve both been vaccinated, so Jocie has the gene too.”

“That’s amazing! We need to tell everyone.”

“No, we can’t. Nobody can know. If word gets out, then Henry will know that all the children born off grid are still alive. Besides, Austin and helpers like Bill and Wendy are still vaccinating people. We need to buy them time. We need to distract Henry so they can continue their work - unnoticed - for as long as possible. As long as I keep appearing in public, maybe Henry will focus on me.”

Her eyes tell me that she knows where this is leading.

“My dream - you DO plan to sacrifice yourself. That’s how you plan to distract Henry. No, Cephas. You can’t. He’ll kill you.”

All of the anguish returns to her face.

I’ve done everything you’ve asked of me, Lord, but I don’t want to do this. I’d sacrifice myself without hesitation; but why are You asking me to hurt Martha and our baby too? I’ve been making choices since this new life of walking with You began, Lord, and this time I’m going to choose disobedience. You cut David some slack when he disobeyed; so You can cut me some too. I’ll take the punishment, if it means sparing Martha this burden.

“But you’re right, Martha, that I even I don’t know the future. Maybe there’s another way,” I say, and bask in the relieved smile I receive.

We have dinner with Hal, Chelsea, and a few couples from their newly-formed prayer group. It turns out that Hal works at the local tube station in charge of cargo cars, and has been turning a blind eye for years as members of Four have used the cars to travel unseen. He offers to send us wherever we want to go.

“So where’re we going next, Cuz?” Cindi asks me, as we enjoy dessert - courtesy of Chelsea.

I want Martha and Cindi in Ogallala, Nebraska, where they grew up. Four has a safe house nearby, called Mount Carmel, which I find funny in such a flat state. They should be safe and comfortable in their parents' homes as Jocie grows larger and larger inside Martha's womb.

"I can get you anywhere in North or South America," Hal says.

"I want Martha and Cindi to go to Ogallala, Nebraska, but I --"

"We go where you go," Martha says.

Two months ago, she might have said: "I go where you go;" but now that she's definitely sporting a small bump on her belly, she sees the wisdom in having Cindi as her backup.

"There's no getting around it, Cuz," Cindi says. "We have you outnumbered."

Just then, the screen Chelsea was watching as she prepared dinner lights up with an old image of Michael baptizing in McIntosh Lake, and we stop the conversation to watch for what we know is coming. The reporter bemoans the fact that Federal officials can't deliver vaccine to plague victims in the "quarantined" town of McIntosh due to continued resistance from militant Christians.

We had already received an update from a local member of Four who received Zip's latest message and plea for help. When Henry found out that the residents were drinking the lake water, drones dropped several metric tons of powdered toxin into the lake. Since then, the residents have relied solely on rainwater and the Lord has not disappointed them. Not long after the drones appeared over the lake, the skies opened and it's been raining ever since.

Despite the rain, Zip reported water sources are slowly dwindling. The choice faced by residents is to maintain their Christian beliefs and slowly die of thirst, or take the vaccine and have their DNA rewritten to mark them and their children forever. So far, the vast majority have chosen to hold firm to their convictions.

What a hypocrite I am. I asked the staff of Bethany to answer God's call - no matter what is asked of them; but now I'm the one who's decided to choose a different path from the one God set before me.

"We're looking for a piece to a puzzle," I say to Hal. "Can you get us on a cargo tube to Colorado Springs?"

I hang my head over the decision to disobey God's plan.

Maybe something good can come from my disobedience. If I lead Henry on a chase, maybe it'll distract him from his plans to take the toxin airborne.

A tube car built for cargo isn't luxurious, and has much more vibration than a passenger car, but it travels just as quickly. There's one folding seat bolted to the wall that I assume is installed just in case there's cargo that needs to be handled by a courier. Cindi and I both insist that Martha take the seat, even though she's hardly showing that she's pregnant. She's already sick of us treating her like she's fragile, but takes the seat just the same, while Cindi and I sit on the floor.

"So, what's the new plan? Why are we heading for The Springs?" Martha asks.

"The last page of Dad's notebook is missing and the Corps wants it. Jennifer didn't give me those scans to protect the family legacy, she gave them to me so I'd solve the puzzle of the missing page for them - and lead them to it."

"What do you think was on the last page?" Cindi asks.

"I already know what's on the last page. It's critical information about Mom and Dad's work on the vaccine twelve years ago."

"So there's still a chance we can make the vaccine ourselves?"

I give her a knowing smile, and Martha has to look out the window to avoid giving away that she knows more than she's saying.

"And you think the page is in Colorado Springs?" Martha asks.

"No, but a clue to finding it might be. Aunt Jennifer threw away most of my parents' things when I was eight, but she never cleaned their attic. I moved an old trunk of theirs to Colorado

Springs. Actually, I rescued a whole pile of their things; and Jennifer doesn't know I have them, because I stored it all in the basement of Mrs. Pierce's house in Illinois. I suspect we'll be going there as well."

"So what's the plan?" Cindi asks.

"The only plan I have now is to break into my own house and get out as quickly as possible. Is there a Four safe house we can use while we're there?"

Cindi laughs.

"It's just two blocks from your house. It was very convenient for watching you."

"How long has it been a safe house?"

"Three years, give or take," Cindi replies.

"It was established about the time I moved to Colorado Springs. Is that a coincidence?"

This time it's Cindi and Martha who just smile.

The Colorado Springs safe house, which is named Mount Sinai House, is located next to the greenway along Monument Creek, which is where its two escape tunnels come out. There are just two full-time staff at Mount Sinai, one of which is my old student, Hope Dubois, who was chased by The Corps when she asked a question in class that was deemed to be "too Christian." She blushes when Martha tells her all about our wedding in Galilee, including our wedding night.

We decide to go on our raid just after dusk, rather than waiting until midnight. Hope tells us that the house was sealed by Federal agents not long after my testimony speech in Washington D.C. As far as she knows, nobody has entered since then.

When we arrive, I see that a new security system has been added. Even if my old system was in place, I no longer own a com keyed to my voice and access codes anyway; so we decide to go the "old-fashioned way" and kick in the backdoor. There are hedges which block the neighbor's view of the backyard; but I doubt they would do anything anyway if they heard the noise of us breaking in anyway. Although the house has modern locking systems, crime is unheard of; so I left the original wooden door and frame. One good kick and the ancient frame splinters around the modern locks.

No audible alarms go off, so we enter quickly, closing the door behind us as best we can. It's like I've just been away on a long vacation. The familiar smells hit me first, followed by seeing that everything is exactly where I left it. Since the last time I was in this house, I've traveled through time twice, gotten married, fathered a child, and become the worldwide leader of a spiritual revival. Still, it feels good to be home.

We leave Cindi hidden outside to watch for anyone approaching and to stay in contact with Hope, who is monitoring police channels. Martha and I quickly make our way through the house and up to the attic without turning on any lights.

"The trunk is in the far corner," I say, and make my way towards it. The top has a layer of dust, indicating that it hasn't been opened in years.

Good. If Henry searched the house, at least he didn't search this trunk.

The trunk is divided into two sections. One side contains objects that I would sneak into Mrs. Pierce's basement and look at when I was twelve. There are keepsakes that Mom and Dad brought back from their world travels before I was born; there are things that belonged to my grandparents; and there are even a few of my baby things. I would handle them all and imagine my parents holding them, or make up stories about where they were and what they were doing when they acquired them.

The other half of the trunk contains things I largely ignored. Most of it is clothing; but on the very bottom is a data storage device and a manila file folder. It never occurred to me when I was young that keeping paper records might mean that Mom and Dad were Christians, but as I look at the folder now, I see Dad wrote 3:16 on the cover. The folder has just a few papers in it, and I'm

excited to see they're torn from Dad's notebook; but my spirits fall when I see they have nothing to do with the vaccine project. The last page is blank; so I fold it and put it into my pocket.

We take the folder and I stuff the data device in my pocket as we retreat from the attic. As we hit the first floor landing, we're blinded by the lights coming on and the video screen springing to life.

Right on schedule.

"Hello, Cephas!" Aunt Jennifer says. "It's nice to see you. And is that the girl you're calling 'wife'? Martha is it? You may call me Aunt Jennifer, my dear."

"Hello, Jennifer," I say.

"What are you doing in my house in Colorado Springs?" she asks.

I assume I get a surprised look on my face, because she continues.

"The government made me the legal owner of your house - and everything in it - when you disappeared. So, please put my property down and I'll send someone along to collect it."

I hold up the folder.

"The page that you and I are both looking for isn't here. This is a Bible study. Since you can use it more than I, come along and collect it whenever you like."

I place the file folder onto a table.

Her eyes narrow.

"Sadly, I believe you're telling me the truth," she says. "If I'd thought that anything belonging to my fool of a brother was in your house, I'd have ransacked it ages ago. Henry thinks the missing page contains vaccine information; but if he's right, why would it matter so much to you? You're obviously out of time to create a vaccine. You've always been so good at puzzles, why don't you tell me what you're doing there and I'll try to persuade Henry not to go airborne with the toxin."

I start to laugh. It feels contrived to me, but it has the desired effect of unsettling Aunt Jennifer.

"The only puzzle piece I'll give you is this: You were worried about family legacy? That page *is* our family legacy. It will be remembered for a very long time."

"So where do you plan to look next?" Jennifer asks. "I've already searched the house in Illinois, and Henry had a large team investigate everywhere your parents traveled the hours before they died. That reminds me: maybe you should ask your friend Garai if he has the page. Apparently he was with your parents shortly before they died, but he opted to take a different tube that night."

How does she know about Garai?

Now it's my eyes that narrow.

"Sadly, I believe you're telling me the truth too, Jennifer."

I take the data device from my pocket.

"Maybe this will help me along the way?" I ask.

A signal in my com tells me we'll soon have company. Jennifer was stalling me as The Corps closed in.

"See you soon, Aunt Jennifer!" I say, as we run.

"Hope says there are drones in the air and kill teams on the way," Cindi says, as we join her.

"How did you escape the last time you ran from my house?" I ask Martha.

"I didn't. I knew I couldn't get outside the search perimeter; so I used the access you gave me to open the outside door, and then hid in your basement."

"Like the men who were robbing the Romans," I say.

"The drones have us on heat sensors," Cindi says.

"Head for campus. We need to get lost in a crowd," Martha replies.

Somehow we stay ahead of The Corps agents for the five blocks to the campus business district. There's normally a good crowd, but this one is bigger than usual.

“Hope hacked the ‘Get it on’ Club and announced a street party, with free drugs and robotic prostitutes,” Cindi says. “She even hacked the loudspeakers and is controlling the music.”

The young crowd is swaying and grinding to the music. Many of them are already removing their clothes.

“That should be enough heat to fool the sensors,” Martha says, as we wade into the crowd.

“Cephas!”

A student, who looks like he can barely stand, calls out my name.

“Hey everybody! Cephas is here.”

“Cephas! Cephas!” they begin to chant.

The crowd converges on us, making it difficult to stay together. I lock arms with Martha and she locks arms with Cindi. Some of the stoned students see what we’ve done and think it’s some sort of a new “Christian game.” The next thing we know, I’m leading a chain that’s twenty people long and there are other chains forming, making it that much tougher to move through the crowd. With both of her arms held, Cindi is groped and prodded by a number of young men. I see one of them heading for Martha and I ball my available fist to defend my wife.

“Let it go,” Martha yells at me. “We’ll blend better.”

“We’re not blending at all!” Cindi replies. “The drones still have us because we’re the only ones not wearing identifiable coms. We’re in a crowd, but electronically we’re sticking out like sore thumbs.”

“In that case...”

I turn and land a kick square to the gut of the guy who groped Martha.

“New game!”

I pluck out the coms of the two guys nearest to me. Martha and Cindi get where I’m going, break free, and start pulling the com out of every ear they can see. I even yank on the com of one girl - before I notice it’s attached to her ear by com locks. The new game catches hold quickly and soon coms are flying everywhere. We have to remove our own hacked coms before they get plucked out too, cutting off updates from Hope.

By the time we make it to the edge of the crowd, the game has been thrown into reverse as the students search the ground, looking for their lost coms. Most were practically born with a com in each ear and they don’t know how to live without them. When The Corps agents arrive, looking for us, the kids assume it’s to break up the party and scatter in all directions. We run along with the group that’s heading in the direction of the safe house.

“They’ve lost us,” Cindi announces when her com is back in.

“They’re looking for a group of three,” I say. “We need to break up.”

Cindi crosses the street and parallels our course about fifty meters back.

“Why did you show Jennifer that you had found an old storage device your Dad left in the trunk?” Martha asks. “Why let her and Henry know we may have more information?”

“To keep the chase going,” I reply. “The longer we can distract Henry, the longer we can delay an airborne release of the toxin.”

“This will only distract him so long,” Martha says.

“I know.”

The puzzle pieces indicated that God’s plan included a larger distraction for Henry. Much larger. I’m not sure which hurts me more, knowing that I’m not following God’s plan anymore - or knowing that I’ll eventually return to it.

Chapter Eleven

We reach Mount Sinai House and watch the stir we've caused on the news. Some of the college kids in the street claim I appeared and disappeared like a ghost. Others say I glowed with a heavenly light; while one even claims that I healed him of his thoughts of suicide and that he intends to dedicate his life to doing good works. I can't take credit for any healings, but I'm glad they happened just the same.

I pull the old data storage device from my pocket and Martha starts to work on it. The data standards have changed a little over the last decade; so while she works to retrofit the modern equipment, I look at the latest broadcasts from the Four network.

Once Zip's people slaughtered all of the cult hunters inside McIntosh, things calmed down and both sides settled into a standoff. The footage switches to Michael, who is still standing in McIntosh Lake. He baptizes an old man, then looks around to find there is nobody left standing in line.

"I guess I'm done here. Thank you, Lord," he says.

The member of Four who's holding the camera asks what's next.

"I've done more than I dreamed," Michael says, "but my time is almost passed.

It turns out the data on the old storage device is mostly mundane things, like copies of various bills and the like, except for one folder called "family." The family folder contains detailed information about my family going back nearly a dozen generations. For a moment, I hope I have even more cousins; but if I do, they must live off grid, because they're not listed.

A document called "Headstone" catches my eye. Headstones and graves are almost unheard of these days. Most people opt to have their loved ones cremated, once all the enhancements are removed for recycling, and the ashes are generally forgotten rather than buried in a memorial garden. By ancient standards, I'm sure the practice would seem cold; but in a world that witnessed over three billion dead in the Final Holy War, efficient disposal of the dead became the new tradition of death.

The document is an invoice for a headstone from a granite manufacturer in Barre, Vermont, which was then shipped to Knoxville, Tennessee to be engraved with my parent's names, and then shipped to a cemetery in Ogallala, Nebraska. The bill is quite large, due to the shipping cost, plus an extra charge for "specialty character" engraving. Interestingly, neither the name nor the address of the engraver are listed.

"Cindi? You grew up in Ogallala, right?"

She crosses the room to see what I'm reading.

"Martha and I both did. Why?"

"Did you know that my parents paid for a headstone in an old Ogallala cemetery?" I ask.

"Of course. I've been to it many times. When you live off grid, you don't get out in town much; so Mom would always take us when she tended the family graves."

Martha overhears the conversation and joins us.

"Sometimes they'd invite me along, and Cindi, Geoff, James and I would play among the graves," Martha adds.

"Don't forget about Cameron."

Cindi is clearly teasing, but earns such a warning look from Martha that I don't ask about it.

"Have you never been to their grave?" Martha asks.

"Until just now, I didn't know there was a headstone. If she knew about it, Aunt Jennifer never told me. All she ever said was there wasn't enough left of them to bury after the accident. This receipt is dated on my eighth birthday - just three days before they were killed."

“Like they knew it was coming,” Martha says. “There must have been some sort of threat or warning.”

We sit in silence for a moment.

“The receipt says there was an extra charge for special engraving. Do either of you remember what it says?”

They quietly rack their brains.

“I don’t think it said anything, other than their names and the usual dates,” Cindi says, “but it seems like it had some fancy squiggly lines across the top - like decorations.”

“I’ve been wanting to get you two home. I think it’s time for a visit to Ogallala.”

And to look for an unexpected piece of this new puzzle that my disobedience has opened...

It takes two days of waiting until we find a cargo car that will take us to Ogallala. It’s just as well, the police presence around the tube station increased substantially after the “party” near campus, so the extra days allow things to cool off a bit.

A tube ride from Colorado Springs to Ogallala takes less than an hour; so we soon find ourselves standing on the bank of the South Platte River. Martha and Cindi are giggly about being in their hometown again. They want to pay a surprise visit to their parents, but I convince them to go to the cemetery first; so we catch a bus on East A Street that will take us to the cemetery on Fifth Street.

I smile when I see that the place does, indeed, look restful. Its many acres of broad trees are just starting to turn colors, as the days are becoming both shorter and colder. The first bodies were interred here over three hundred years ago. The plots were all filled long ago, but my parents were able to put in a headstone because there were no remains to be buried, and because a long gone ancestor with foresight had bought a huge family plot.

Martha and Cindi lead the way, until we arrive at a headstone near a large maple tree. When I was eight, my parents were home one day and simply gone the next. Seeing their names engraved in stone is both comforting and disquieting. Obviously I came to grips with the finality of their deaths long ago, but right now, the term “written in stone” takes on more meaning for me than it ever has before.

My eyes are drawn from my parent’s names to the decorative “squiggles” adorning the top of the stone, and I gasp - the top line is my name, written in ancient Hebrew.

“What is it?” Martha asks.

“It’s okay. It’s just a little shocking to see your own name on a tombstone,” I reply.

“Your name?”

“It says, ‘Cephas, nothing is impossible’ in ancient Hebrew.”

“That’s a nice message,” Cindi says. “They were thinking about you.”

It’s not just a nice message. It’s a personal message.

“So what does the back say?” Martha asks.

Most people never look at the back of a flat headstone; so I walk around and see there’s more ancient Hebrew engraved there.

“The top says, ‘When given time to hatch’ and under that it says ‘J11:25.’”

John 11:25- The one who believes in me will live, even though they die.

“What does it mean?”

Cindi laughs and looks to me, but I’ve already hit my knees. My mouth is agape and I think I’m going to hyperventilate.

“Hatch, hatch, hatch,” I gasp over and over again, as Cindi and Martha drop to their knees to hold me.

If this puzzle piece means what I'm sure it must mean, what do I tell them?

"Cephas? What about 'hatch'? What does it mean?" Martha asks.

"I need a minute. Please - just give me a minute."

I stand and walk away from the stone. There's a small caretaker's shack about fifty meters away and I walk towards it. Cindi and Martha decide to give me some time alone. The shack isn't locked; so I go in and find it crammed with old tools like shovels, rakes, hedge trimmers, tree pruners and the like. I rummage through them until I find what I need.

When I get back to the gravestone, Martha and Cindi are whispering, undoubtedly about my sudden breakdown.

"Cephas? Are you okay now?" Martha asks.

"I'm okay; but there's something I must do that'll make me feel much better - and worse - at the same time."

I produce a large hammer from behind my back, and with an arching swing, bring it down, full force, on my parents' stone, cracking it in half.

The women jump back, as chips of granite go flying on my second and third swings. One chip slashes at my face, causing a trickle of blood.

"Cephas, what on earth are you doing?" Cindi shrieks at the desecration, but I keep swinging.

When I'm done, my parent's names are still legible on either side of the crack, but there isn't a single letter of ancient Hebrew remaining. I drop back to my knees, utterly exhausted. This time Martha and Cindi don't join me.

"Now you feel better?" Cindi asks. "What was that all about?"

"That was all about keeping family secrets. I've been lying to everyone this whole time. I thought the missing page was destroyed. I thought this was just a game to keep Henry busy and delay his plans, but I was wrong. The page still exists, and now I know where it is - and I know that it's more important than ever that we get to it first."

And I know an even bigger family secret than that, too. The words are similar, so I didn't think about it at first. The stone didn't say "hatch." It said "incubate."

"Now I really do need a moment alone."

I stay on my knees at the desecrated headstone, while Martha and Cindi return the hammer to the shed.

I begin to pray aloud.

"I'm the one who accused you of having a strange sense of humor, aren't I, Lord? I've been lying and disobeying you to avoid surrendering to Henry, and you even used my disobedience in your Plan. I'm not ready to surrender to Henry, or to sacrifice myself. Thank you for bringing me here and showing me this. Thank you for letting me continue to distract Henry - and giving me a little more time with Martha."

I walk to Martha and Cindi, who are still standing at the caretaker's shed. I thought that admitting my disobedience would be a sad occasion, but instead I feel as if a great weight has been lifted from me. Unfortunately, I still need to face up to my lies in the eyes of Martha and Cindi.

"Well?" Cindi says. "Which is it? Is there a magical piece of paper out there that will allow us to produce a vaccine? Or was that another lie?"

Cindi is furious, but it's the look on Martha's face that really frightens me. She looks like the very soul has been sucked out of her. She puts her hand on Cindi's shoulder.

"Cindi, I need some time alone with my husband."

Cindi turns, expecting to find the sympathetic eyes of an equally furious compatriot, and appears shocked to see the state Martha is in.

"Fine," is all Cindi can manage before walking away.

Martha sits on the soft grass and puts her face in her hands.

“You’ve told a lot of little lies, but you saved the biggest lie for me - to give me hope,” Martha says. “It was the one where you said you wouldn’t sacrifice yourself. You haven’t been doing all this to distract Henry. You’ve been distracting Cindi and me while you wait to surrender yourself to him. You plan to make some sort of deal with the devil that you think will save me and the baby - while you get cast into the lion’s den.”

“Yes, Martha, I lied to you; but the truth is, I don’t know how this is going to turn out. Even when I thought I had left God’s path through my disobedience, it turned out to be part of His plan. I destroyed the gravestone because the writing told me that the paper does still exist, and where it’s hidden. I need to retrieve it, and I need to keep following the path He’s set out, until I understand what else He needs me to do.”

“So where’s the paper? Where do we need to go?” Martha asks.

“Into the lion’s den.”

To cheer up Martha, I insist we sneak into town. I’ve been hoping to get Martha and Cindi here to visit their parents for some time, but I’m by far the most excited. I’ve been wanting to meet Aunt Kimberly and Uncle Trevor since I first learned they existed and, of course, meeting Martha’s parents has been on my mind as well. It’s a little late to ask for their blessing, but better late than never.

We catch a bus across town and are about to get off near my Aunt Kimberly’s house, when we see what can only be a large bus from The Corps is already on the street. We ride for another two blocks; then exit near a large tree, which we use for cover.

“Whatever’s going on, there’re no drones watching,” Martha says.

“I don’t think they’re here because of us,” I reply. “Think we should take a closer look?”

Cindi leads us through the neighborhood. We follow the invisible trails around fences and through hedges that only a kid who grew up playing hide-and-seek in the neighborhood would know. She leaves us under a tree in the backyard of a house that sits across the street and a few doors down from her parent’s place, and goes to the back door. The door is unlocked; so she opens it, while gently calling: “Miss Fox? Are you home?” She’s greeted instead by the throaty barks of an obviously large dog. We hear her say: “Quiet, fur ball,” and the barking ends instantly, followed by an exclamation of “Cindi!” Cindi’s face reappears in the door, and she motions us to enter. Martha goes first.

“Martha!” I hear a woman’s voice cry out with joy.

Standing in front of me is an older version of Cindi, right down to the sparkling eyes, which remind me of my mother. This can only be my cousin, Annie.

Annie goes silent with disbelief at the sight of me, and tears start to form in her eyes.

“It’s you. It’s really you,” she says.

I know what to do. I open my arms wide and say: “Annie.” She’s folded inside them in a heartbeat.

“Growing up, I used to tease Geoff, James, and Cindi that I always got to do everything first because I was the only one living on grid. I guess it’s their revenge that I’m the last to meet you.”

“You said I can’t tell Mom anything. Please let me tell Annie everything. She can keep a secret from Mom and Aunt Susan,” Cindi begs.

Martha looks at me and nods, and I nod back.

“Okay, but first tell us what’s happening at your Mom’s house,” Martha says to Annie.

“I wasn’t there when they arrived. I was here, watching the baby, while Miss Fox is out. Mom sent me a message to stay away. It looks like they’re searching for something. Anything they find that looks religious, they’re taking out front and destroying. The first thing they did was access all

information Mom and Dad have in public storage servers, and then they took any offline storage devices they could find in the house.”

Martha and I go to the front window to watch the action, while Cindi and Annie stay in back. We can hear words like “married” and “baby,” followed by squeals.

In front of Aunt Kimberly’s house, armed men are smashing things. It’s hard to say if everything they destroy has religious symbolism or if they’re just enjoying themselves too much to care. The backs are torn off of paintings, furniture is ripped, and even the appliances are inspected.

“They want that piece of paper. Anyone who knew Mom or Dad is going to be searched,” I say.

“We’ll know if they found Mom’s super hiding spot if they come out with her Bible,” Cindi says, as she and Annie re-enter the room. Annie gives first Martha, and then me, a huge hug.

Just then, a woman who can only be Aunt Kimberly, emerges from the house. She’s shorter than my mom was, but the facial features and coloring are strikingly similar to Mom’s. I’m not close enough to see, but I bet she has the same wonderful blue eyes that my cousins inherited.

Aunt Kimberly is yelling into her com loudly enough for the entire neighborhood to hear.

“Jennifer Paulson! You know darned well that James and Hannah weren’t even cold before you had their house and Cephas locked up tight. I don’t have any paper from them hidden in my house!” Aunt Kimberly yells.

It there’s ever a “battle of the aunts,” Jennifer will have her hands full.

“And why do you get to look through all of our information? Do you work for The Corps now? A special consultant? Considering who you sleep with, it’s not much of a title. What? Where’d you look that up? So what if I maintain a gravestone for James and Hannah? They died too young, and - unlike you - I want to remember them.”

She listens to what Aunt Jennifer is saying; then erupts again.

“I’m not drawing you a map. Go find it yourself!”

“They’re right behind us,” Martha says. “It’ll take a few days, but they’ll piece the headstone back together.”

“They’re going to have to do better than that,” I say. “Their only hope is to find the engraver in Tennessee who did the work.”

I take a pile of jagged granite chips, containing fragments of engraving, from my pocket, and drop them onto the kitchen table.

Chapter Twelve

As much as I want to meet Aunt Kimberly, Uncle Trevor, and Martha's parents, we decide Ogallala has too many Federal agents around for comfort. Mount Carmel House, the local Four safe house, is outside of town to the west, and the only hover line goes down 5th Street - right past the cemetery. As the bus passes, we can see a contingent of Federal agents scouring the ground in the area of my parents' headstone, picking up pieces of granite.

Have fun with that, boys, I took every piece with engraving on it that I could find.

We jump off the bus at the end of the line, where it turns around and automatically glides away, back towards town. The complete lack of trees to use as cover makes me uncomfortable. Martha catches me scanning the sky for drones and reads my thoughts.

"You get used to it," my native Nebraskan wife says.

There's a working farm to our west, growing wheat. We can see the automated tractors out spraying fertilizer, and the water rigs making sure that each plant gets exactly what it needs for maximum production; but there isn't a farmer anywhere in sight. The edge of the farmed land is defined by a deep, dry creek bed that finally gives me some comfort. If we stay in this bed, it'll be very difficult for a high-altitude drone to spot us.

We follow the bed for a few kilometers, when I spot what was once a small farm building sitting atop a low rise. It must have been some sort of a pump house, because it has an ancient windmill next to it that's still turning in the steady breeze. We leave the creek and travel uphill for only a few hundred meters, when Cindi leads us to a hidden tunnel entrance.

"The house is still a long way off. This tunnel must be almost a kilometer long," I say.

"It's amazing what you can accomplish - when you borrow farm equipment at night," Cindi replies.

The tunnel turns out to be just the beginning. The facility under the tiny farm building is huge - at least three times larger than Bethany House. For all its size, however, it's lightly staffed. There are just three members of Four doing the job of silently gathering information.

"Just three left?" asks Martha, when she sees an old friend that everyone calls Hank.

"What do you expect? First, you two run off to Colorado to kill Cephas; and then Geoff and James run off to follow Cephas to Africa; and the rest run off to join Zip in McIntosh..."

Hank's voice trails off, when he sees me.

"Hello," I say.

"Hi. Oh. Hey, what I just said about Martha and Cindi coming to kill you..."

"Don't worry about it. Many relationships get off to a rocky start, but we worked it out."

I laugh and Hank looks more at ease.

"Just you three? What about..." Now Martha trails off.

They all look as awkward as teenagers at their first dance.

"Cameron?" I finish the sentence.

Martha closes her eyes.

"I wish you wouldn't do that," she says.

"Zip said someone named Cameron was eager to move to Bethany House," I say. "Then Cindi mentioned his name as a childhood friend, and you got uncomfortable. It stood to reason when you looked uncomfortable again that he was the unspoken subject."

"He swore from the time he was ten that he and Martha would be a couple and have children someday," Cindi says.

"You're not helping," Martha replies.

“He was really broken up about you leaving for Colorado Springs,” Hank adds. “He took off right after you left. I think he ended up in Ohio or Illinois or something. Andrew went with him, I think just to keep an eye on him.”

“I’m sorry it worked out that way,” Martha replies. “I never meant to hurt him.”

“I’m glad you’re back,” Hank continues. “We’re one of the few houses that’s still operational, so we’ve been trying to coordinate information.”

“Sorry, Hank. We’re just here for a rest, and to see if we can uncover some information,” I say; “but since you mentioned it, how do you have full power?”

“That’s my family farm. Those machines use a lot of power; so it’s easy to disguise using a little extra when we need it. Plus, Martha upgraded the old windmill so it feeds power to us or back down to the farm to even things out. It sure has been a blessing. Having constant power means we’re the house Zip contacts first to relay her updates. She should be calling anytime now.”

“Really?” Cindi says. “I’d like to find out where Geoff is assigned and maybe send him a message.”

Hank’s eyes go wide and, from behind Cindi, Martha gesticulates wildly for Hank to keep his mouth shut on the subject of Geoff being missing.

“Sure. I’ll see what I can find out.”

Thankfully, Zip chooses this moment to call. Her face is tired; her hair matted. We can hear sporadic weapons fire somewhere outside her command post.

“Hank? There isn’t much time. There’s been a major buildup of their men on the west side of town, and I just got word that they’re coming through with armored drones. Any news I should know about?”

“Just that Cephas, Martha, and Cindi escaped their appearance in Colorado and are here with me,” Hank says.

I walk to where Zip can see me on the screen.

“How’s the water holding out, Zip?” I ask.

Her distaste for me is still apparent, but she answers the question.

“It stopped raining before we could get effective water collection systems into place. We tried distilling contaminated water, but the toxin must have a very low boiling point. Just enough gets through that it affects some people, but not others. We’re also trying to dig up some of the ancient wells; but it looks like we’re going to die of thirst long before they shoot us. From what I’ve seen, it’s still better than dying from the plague.”

The sound of the weapons is suddenly very close to Zip’s location.

“This building is targeted! I’ve got to go.”

Before she can move, we see the building shake behind her and the picture goes sideways as her screen is knocked over. When the picture clears, we can see the front half of a massive, tank-like drone that has rammed through the wall of the building, but is no longer moving.

“Zip, get out of there! Those things carry a self-destruct,” Hank yells at the screen; but Zip is on the floor and moving slowly.

We watch as an armored panel slides to one side to reveal a screen that is projecting a familiar face. I cover the camera on Hank’s screen so we won’t be seen, but we can still see and record what’s happening.

“This is Henry Portman, Director of the F.B.I. I’m looking for the Four leader in McIntosh.”

Zip’s lower right leg is bleeding and she’s holding her ankle, but she manages to sit up.

“A white flag is traditional for negotiations,” Zip says.

She drags herself to the screen and rights it.

“Negotiate? Why would I want to negotiate, Zipporah?” Henry asks. “You’re surrounded, low on water, and I can drop my choice of weapons on you when it suits me.”

“Cut to the chase, Portman, I have more cult hunters to kill.”

“I see the reports of your natural charm were not exaggerated. As I was saying, your destruction is a simple matter; but you’ve intrigued me so much with your cunning and boldness, that I’m prepared to offer you a deal.”

“Let me guess, you want me to lead Cephas Paulson into a trap.”

“My sources say you’ve never liked him anyway. Something about killing your brother, I believe? I’m offering you a chance for both life and revenge, and to show you my sincerity I’ve sent you a gift.”

Another armored panel slides to one side to reveal a compartment containing a small white pill. Cindi squeezes my arm, as she sees an opportunity to get another dose of vaccine to work with.

“Here is a dose of my life-giving vaccine.”

It’s obvious that Zip’s in pain, as she slides forward and removes the pill from the compartment.

“This dose is marked for Garai,” Zip says.

“We didn’t make tablets for those living off the grid, Zipporah.”

“So not only would I receive the mark of the beast; but I’d also be responsible for killing Garai?”

“You could take over his organization. You’d lead thousands instead of hundreds. No one need know that you’ve taken it - or whose name was on it.”

She throws the tablet back into the compartment.

“I’d know the truth, and more importantly, the Lord would know.”

“I’m disappointed, but not surprised,” Henry says. “Luckily, you were just an insurance policy. I’ve already offered my deal to someone else.”

“If they take anything you offer, may they rot in hell alongside you, Portman.”

“I’ve changed my mind about your fate, Zipporah. Rather than bomb McIntosh, I’ll watch you suffer from thirst, and then - when it seems your pain can’t get any worse - I’ll watch you die from the plague. That, of course, assumes you survive the next thirty seconds.”

The screen on the drone goes dark, but the camera remains active. Henry intends to watch what happens next. A red light starts to flash on the front of the drone.

“Run, Zip,” Hank yells.

Zip tries to get to her feet, but falls from the pain; so she crawls towards the door instead.

“Faster, Zip,” Cindi whispers behind me.

Michael appears in the doorway and doesn’t hesitate. He picks Zip up and heads for the door.

We hear Henry say: “Two for one.”

Michael is just about to clear the doorway, when we see a flash and the connection is cut.

It’s over an hour before another call comes in from McIntosh. Although she was scorched when the drone exploded, we’re all relieved to see Zip’s face.

“Thank the Lord,” Hank says.

“Thank Michael,” Zip replies. “He shielded me from the worst of it. He wants to talk to Cephas.”

Zip lowers the screen to a nightstand next to the bed where Michael is lying. He’s badly burned and bloody. Although he’s on his side, we can see a large piece of metal lodged in his back.

“Hi, Cephas. I did it. I baptized everyone in McIntosh.”

“There are still plenty of towns out there that need you, Michael.”

“I don’t think so. It’s your turn now, Cephas. It’s okay. I trusted the Lord, just like we said we would. I’ve lived every part of my life for Him the last few months, and it was beautiful.”

“It’s not over, Michael...”

I stop, because his eyes shift to another part of the room, and he smiles.

“I know you,” he says.

In the background, we hear Zip ask: "Who's he talking to?"
"I saw you roll back the stone," Michael says.
He lets out a deep breath, and closes his eyes for the last time.
It takes a moment before Zip picks up the screen and leaves the room with it.
"Still think of him as nothing more than bait, Zip?" I ask.

I spend some time praying, then return to the command center, where Martha, Cindi, and Hank are talking.

"You said you're here to uncover some information. What're you trying to find?" Hank asks.

"What do we know about where Garai's headquarters might be?" I say.

"Less than nothing," Hank replies, while Martha and Cindi nod in agreement.

"Is that the lion's den?" Martha asks.

"Just the first of many. The night my parents died, their group met Garai and his uncle at a restaurant in Dayton, Ohio for dinner. They were all supposed to travel from there to Philadelphia, but at the last moment, Garai and his uncle chose not to go. I'm betting his headquarters is somewhere in Dayton."

"Why?" Martha asks. "If I had a secret organization, I'd hold high-level meetings as far from my headquarters as possible."

"In a public restaurant? With waiters and other guests able to overhear your conversation? Garai isn't that bold, and I'd guess that his uncle wasn't either. It was a restaurant where they felt comfortable and in control."

"You may be right, but it'll be difficult to prove," Cindi says. "Garai's people were driven out of electronic communications because of your work with The Corps. Until you came back from the Travelers Initiative, it was unheard of for Garai to use any electronic communications to contact anyone. Even now - as far as we can tell - he's the only one in his organization to do so, and it's only with you. There just aren't enough communications between us and them to find an electronic trace."

"Okay, so they still use mostly paper," Martha says. "Is there a way we can find Garai through that?"

"Maybe," Hank says. "We know they buy paper through antique dealers. What if we sift through antique purchases?"

"The Corps assigned a dozen people to that idea, and came up empty," I say. "Paper is considered a black-market item; so no records are kept. Besides, there isn't much antique paper left. It wouldn't be enough to supply the millions of followers Garai claims to have."

"Okay, then let's assume they're making paper," Cindi says. "What's their source of fiber?"

"Two dozen people tried to answer that question when I was at The Corps," I say. "They concluded Christians recycle used paper."

"That makes no sense," Cindi says. "Fiber can't be recycled indefinitely. After a few times of being processed, it breaks down too far to make good paper. Since the world stopped making and using paper a hundred years ago, they'd have run out of materials to recycle a long time ago. I'm sure they recycle; but there also needs to be a source of fresh fiber."

"Paper is made out of hemp fibers, which is why Cephias and I saw the government bringing in massive amounts of hemp for paper," Martha says. "Garai can't just import tons of hemp without any records."

"Before hemp, paper was made out of wood fiber; but that ended when tree cutting on public land was banned," I add. "There's also no way he can be cutting down large numbers of trees, without someone noticing."

“He doesn’t need to cut down whole trees,” Hanks says. “What if he’s just using pruned branches from trees, raked up leaves, or even grass clippings? Wouldn’t those things all contain fiber? Heck, the wheat chaff produced on this farm alone would be enough fiber to make tons of paper.”

“The Corps team looked into that too,” I say

Hank is taken aback by the idea that his family farm is being watched.

“Your harvesters weigh both the wheat kernels and the chaff being dumped onto the ground, and automatically upload the data to the Feds. Before and after the harvest, drones will take high-resolution pictures of the fields to determine how much chaff has stayed on the ground. They’d know if you were picking it up and making it into paper.”

“We’re pretty sure Garai’s family came from Egypt. Maybe he’s using papyrus,” Cindi jokes.

“That’s it,” I say.

“Papyrus?”

“Not papyrus, but something else the Egyptians have loved since the pyramids,” I say. “Did the Bethany back-ups come here before we self-destructed?”

“Sure,” Hank says.

“Display all known images of Garai and his uncle,” I order the computer.

Most of the images of Garai are from his contact with Bethany House, but there’s one old image that includes Garai and his uncle. I wince when I see the image was taken at a dinner that included my parents. It’s dated the night they died.

“Isn’t that your ...” Cindi says.

“Yes.”

“Computer, analyze the clothing worn by Garai and his uncle and display on each image the most likely material from which it’s made,” I say.

One by one, on each image, the word “linen” appears.

“Now display the location of the largest importers of linen fiber in this country.”

The computer displays a map of the United States, with dots on New York, Atlanta, New Orleans, Portland, Oregon and Dayton, Ohio. The company in Dayton is called “Antiquity Mills” and is known for producing high-quality linen and cotton fabrics.

“Display a map of Dayton, showing Antiquity Mills and the restaurant where the group image was taken,” I say.

They’re only two blocks apart. I look at Hank.

“Find a cargo car to Dayton.”

Chapter Thirteen

Antiquities Mills is located on the north side of the Miami River, with convenient access to the Danner Avenue hover line. The restaurant is the last vestige of a golf course that was converted to a public cemetery and park over one hundred years ago. I was very near to this spot once when I gave a guest lecture at the University of Dayton. I wonder if Garai sat in the audience.

Garai has created a perfect cover for his Christian organization. The production of linen naturally creates “waste” fiber that can’t be used for making cloth, but can be easily converted into paper. Unlike with farming, the machines don’t weigh the input and output of the factory; so as long as fabrics keep going out the front door, nobody is concerned with how little waste is going out the back.

Like a Four safe house, Garai has chosen a spot surrounded by trees; so Martha, Cindi, and I get comfortable among the branches and wait as dusk approaches. The plant is highly automated, so just a dozen or so employees are able to turn out tons of fabric. It could be done with even fewer; so my guess is that half or more of his employees are actually making paper as a labor of love.

“There he is,” Cindi says.

Garai has emerged from the building by himself, and is walking towards the hover bus stop.

“He’s shorter than you’d think from only seeing him on a screen,” Martha says.

We parallel his course, staying under the cover of the trees. Since we don’t know where he lives, our only option is to jump onto the bus with him at the last moment. If he has bodyguards, they’re hidden very well.

“What timing,” Cindi says from behind me.

I look through the trees and see that a bus is about to reach the stop. There’s no way we can close the distance before Garai boards the bus and it glides away. Garai has one foot raised to climb aboard, when he miraculously changes his mind and backs away.

He taps his com.

“I’m going to grab a bite to eat, and then go back to the office for a bit.”

Garai wears a com?

We stay in the trees and watch as the bus glides away. Garai crosses the hover line; then walks straight towards the restaurant where he met my parents for the last time.

“Hungry?” I ask Martha and Cindi. “Or do we meet him at the office later?”

“Definitely the restaurant. We don’t know what security he has in his building,” Cindi says.

We quickly catch Garai and walk just ten meters behind him. Remarkably, he doesn’t look back in the half a kilometer that we follow him. As he reaches the door, Cindi instinctively splits off and takes up a position where she can watch the building and warn of us trouble. The door slides to one side automatically; so Garai doesn’t even look back as he enters. When she sees him, the hostess smiles in a way that indicates he’s a regular fixture here.

“Get a private table and remove your com,” I say from behind.

His body stiffens, but he doesn’t turn as he removes his com.

“Of course, Cephias. I always love having guests at my table.”

He calmly makes the request of the hostess, then turns to face me.

“Ah. The lovely Martha is here as well. You’re even prettier in person than you are by video.”

When we’re seated and left alone, Garai begins.

“It is so good to know you are both alive,” he says. “When Bethany House was destroyed, everyone feared the worst. Did it take you this long to walk here from Virginia?”

“We took a couple of side trips before we got here. What do your sources say about the plague situation?”

“The toxin exposure on this continent is limited to the water in McIntosh for now; but there are air tankers full of the stuff, waiting for the command to go airborne. The vaccine is being distributed all over the hemisphere. It is still being tightly controlled. The government is hoping for complete vaccination of eligible citizens in about two weeks. I stand to lose forty to fifty percent of my members if we can’t find a way to get them vaccinated.”

Garai stops speaking as the waitress approaches. There are automated service systems that could do the work, but apparently Garai pays for V.I.P. treatment.

“Appetizer?” Garai asks us pleasantly.

“Just water for me. Eating in this restaurant has never agreed with my family,” I say.

Garai gets an angry look, and asks the waitress for more time.

“Why are you here?” he asks.

“Henry is desperately looking for a page that was ripped from my father’s notebook just before the tube accident.”

“And you think I have it because I saw your parents that night?” he asks.

“It’s not impossible,” I reply. “But mostly I want to know what was being discussed in that meeting.”

“Your parents’ group was volatile, and dangerous. They all wanted to develop the toxin, but there was great disagreement regarding what to do with it. The factions ranged from simply using it as a bargaining chip to negotiate for religious freedom, to destroying the world and starting over with a few million believers. Your parents were the key leaders, and yet they stayed strangely silent the entire night. I took it as a sign that their minds were already set on releasing the toxin.”

Or maybe they were figuring out where everyone stood.

“From here, the group was going to Philadelphia to meet with Aislin to seek her guidance and, more importantly, her financial support,” Garai continues. “It was clear to me that a civil war was erupting inside their group, and I wanted no part of it. On the other hand, both Aislin and I hoped to gain some important new members when the dust settled.”

“You both also stood to gain some powerful new rivals. So instead of the dust settling, they ended up splattered along a tube wall. That’s pretty convenient.”

“I have heard the rumors suggesting I caused the accident. My uncle and I did not jump off the tube car at the last moment, as the legend suggests. When your parents group left, we sat here long into the night discussing the dangers of repeating the mistakes of the Final Holy War. I was in favor of a selective release of the toxin in Washington, D.C. to kill the atheist leaders; but my uncle wanted nothing to do with your parents - or their toxin.”

“So, you just sat here, sipping red wine. That proves nothing. You could have easily ordered someone else to sabotage the tube car.”

“I’m sorry for your loss, Cephias, but we have all suffered losses. My uncle was among the first to disappear, due to your work on electronic surveillance at the F.B.I. Frankly, Cephias, your family’s contribution to religion seems to be to end it once and for all. The government is suppressing it on the news, but the survivors from Bethany are popping up everywhere and baptizing people. The government is calling it a massive suicide cult, since many are refusing vaccination, once they’ve been baptized. There are even rumors that there is water you blessed, which people believe will protect them, and that you told them to avoid the vaccine. So you can see - from my perspective - you are simply the second generation of your family to create a suicide cult.”

“I never forbade anyone to take the vaccine. Everyone must make their own choice on that,” I reply.

“It is insane. Four will be wiped out, along with millions of others. Is that what you want? A mass Christian suicide?”

His voice is becoming raised.

“Henry is now the one who looks sane,” Garai continues. “He’s even offering his vaccine to everyone in McIntosh, just end the violence.”

“It’s not my will to be done that I’m praying for, Garai. It’s that God’s will be done,” I reply.

“Then you are insane. When you came back from the Travelers Initiative, I thought you were sent by God to save us. I was ready to follow you into any battle you ordered; but now I see you are just like your parents. You would destroy us all instead. I thought you were a fresh start for Christianity where we could finally be free.”

I’m lost in thought and no longer listening to Garai, until he starts to yell.

“What are you going to do when the toxin is airborne? Is praying your only plan for when that happens? A lot of good that is going to do. I’ve been thinking about my own plan of action, and now I know exactly what I have to do to save my people.”

And I bet I know what your plan is. I’m not the only one wrestling with God. Garai’s disobedience seems to be part of His plan too.

I stand to leave, and Martha follows. I turn and stare him directly in the eyes.

“Whatever you’re going to do, Garai, do it quickly.”

We leave the restaurant and walk back to the bus stop in silence. I’m surprised to see a half-dozen people waiting at the stop, and even more aboard the bus; so we say nothing about our meeting with Garai. Two of the men who entered the bus with us seem to be casually watching us; so I motion to Martha and Cindi to exit at the next stop. One of the men follows us off, but the other stays on board.

Martha and Cindi sense my concern, and Cindi wordlessly splits from the group and takes up a position behind him.

“Hold on, there’s a rock in my shoe,” I say, and stop next to a large tree.

I bend down to remove my shoe, leaving the man no way to attack me without going through Martha, with Cindi just a few steps behind. He keeps on walking, but as he passes, a piece of folded paper drops from his hand, which I pick up.

Cindi continues to follow him for a block, then stops while we catch up.

“What was that all about?” Cindi asks, as I unfold the paper.

“It’s a handwritten note instructing us to get onto a private tube car at the local station, nothing else,” I say, as I read it.

“It sounds like a trap,” Cindi says.

“Maybe,” I reply. “It’s car 314X and the X is written in the style of the ancient Greek letter Chi. Whoever is inviting us is subtle, but knows how to make me curious. I doubt Henry could muster that much subtlety.”

When we reach the station, the man who followed us is standing at the car door with a welcoming smile on his face.

“Aislin said you would come,” he says, and ushers us inside.

The car is laid out similarly to Henry’s Bureau car, but is more tastefully decorated. Aislin is at a large table in the central dining area, and stands as we enter the room. She’s even more striking in person than she was over video, and yet there’s something different about her. Something has changed.

“I always knew you were clever, Dr. Paulson, but I had no idea just how clever,” she says. “It took me years to find Garai, and apparently you did it in a matter of hours.”

“Speaking of clever, you found us pretty easily.”

I take a seat at the table.

“It wasn’t clever at all. I keep Garai under surveillance and you walked right in front of my people; so I simply capitalized on an opportunity. What I would like to know is why you found Garai, and what you talked about.”

“Garai was one of the last people to see my parents alive. I needed to ask him about the meeting they all attended.”

“I don’t imagine he finally confessed to the murder.”

Aislin favors us with a coy smile - a look which she’s very good at giving.

I once again marvel at how striking Aislin is in appearance. On anyone else, the blue eyes combined with the otherwise dark features would make me think she’s enhanced, but she isn’t. When you combine those features with this smile I’m seeing for the first time...

Wait. The smile. Her teeth have somehow been enhanced. They virtually glow.

“Have you noticed that you and I share the peculiar habit of asking questions to which we already know the answers?” I ask.

I laugh and shake off the fact that Aislin has an enhancement.

“Let’s skip the rest of the gamesmanship, Aislin. Why’d you ask us here?”

Aislin looks up at her bodyguard and dismisses him with a nod of her head, then looks at Martha and Cindi to indicate they should leave as well.

“Whatever you tell me, I’ll just tell them later.”

“I know; but this may be the only time we ever meet in person. Please permit me this request.”

There’s something about the sudden gentleness in her voice that tells me to relent. I think perhaps I need to hear what she has to say, even more than she needs to say it.

I smile and nod to Martha, and she and Cindi depart.

Aislin stands and begins to pace.

“Don’t ask how, but I know about some of the conversation you had with Garai in the restaurant. He said one thing that expressed my feelings perfectly. When you returned from time travelling, we both thought you were sent to lead us. We thought you were the flashpoint for a public uprising that would result in heads literally on platters. When you made it clear that a Christian theocracy would be as bad as the current atheist theocracy, I was furious. I was ready to burn you - and all of Four - to the ground to prove my way was best.”

“Are you saying something has changed your mind?”

“I listened to you. I listened to every lecture and every chat group discussing your lectures. I read your books and even the classified reports about you that I could obtain. Then I read my Bible, and I prayed for wisdom. Through it all, there was one thing you said that I could never get out of my mind. You called our world a ‘man-made Garden of Eden’. The more I searched my soul, the more clearly I could see that Garai and I are just repeating the same mistakes. We wanted to appoint ourselves as God’s chosen leaders, but the truth is we’d just be creating another flawed garden made by man, and leading people away from the real one.”

“I’m glad,” I say.

“We still have to get back to real religious freedom, but it won’t be by me forcing it through an uprising and takeover of the government,” she says.

“It’ll be a pleasure to have you at our sides.”

I smile as I say it, but Aislin sighs.

“Why the sigh?”

Aislin closes her eyes.

“I don’t deserve your trust. Even after I knew the truth, I couldn’t find the faith necessary to refuse my dose of the vaccine. I’m marked.”

She sighs again, as tears roll down her face.

“It will be easy for God to separate me from the truly faithful. It’s written in my DNA.”

“If you pray for another chance, I’m sure you’ll find that He gives them - even when you don’t think you deserve one.”

“Thank you, Cephas, but not everyone gets a fresh start.”

A fresh start? How strange that both Garai and Aislin would use the same expression ... unless... That would certainly fit the puzzle. Why didn't I see it before?

“Where to now?” Martha asks, as we sneak into the cargo tube bay.

“I don’t know. Wherever looks good.”

I say absent-mindedly as I sort through details in my head. What I can only assume is God’s plan for me is coming together in my mind. I know what I need to do, even if I’m continuing to deny it.

“Cephas, I’ve seen that look in your eyes before. What’s going on?” Martha asks.

“It’s all starting to make sense.”

“Care to let us in on this piece of the puzzle?”

“Which one? There are puzzles within puzzles. Everyone assumes that my parents wanted to release the toxin; but now I’m sure they were out to destroy it - and everyone who knew about it. Unfortunately, their plan failed and it ended up in Henry’s hands instead. They knew the page was too dangerous to keep, but instead of destroying it, they chose to hide it away. At first it seemed like they did it so I’d one day find it and know they were innocent in attempting genocide. Now it seems more like God did it to provide me a way to distract Henry.”

Just then, the screen on the wall that had been running the cargo schedule lights up with an image of my Aunt Jennifer.

“They’re still running those stupid announcements from your Aunt Jennifer, telling everyone that time travel made you mentally ill,” Cindi says.

No. This one looks different.

The voice portion has not been changed. Most people will assume it’s the same announcement they’ve seen a hundred times and ignore it. In fact, it was designed to be ignored by everyone except its intended target: Me. The change is barely perceptible, but I notice the camera angle is different, and the shot is slightly wider.

“Whoever made it should know better than to shoot down like that. It makes it hard for the viewer to make proper eye contact with your aunt, and to personally connect with her and her message,” Cindi says.

The down angle allows me to see the top of the desk where Aunt Jennifer sat as the video was shot. I recognize it instantly as the ancient desk she loved so much when I was a child. I wasn’t allowed to touch that desk, or anything on it. When she reaches the final pitch of: “Wherever you are, please contact me so I can help you,” she leans backward slightly, and I see what I was meant to see.

“Find us a cargo tube to Chicago,” I say. “We’ve been invited to another family reunion.”

Chapter Fourteen

When we're safely in the cargo tube car, I review the video with Cindi and Martha to explain the personal message that was hidden there for me.

"Look on the desk, just behind her right hand, as she leans back."

I freeze the video in the right spot.

"What's that on the desk?" Martha asks. "A piece of paper? Why would an atheist have paper?"

"It's not just any piece of paper. It's a piece of slightly greenish, lined paper that's ten centimeters by fifteen centimeters. They want me to think it's the missing page from Dad's notebook. It's a fake, but it does tell us that they're sure we don't have it."

"It's another trap," Cindi says.

Yes. That was fast, I only provided the bait two hours ago...

"You're not going to just walk up to your aunt's house and ask for the paper are you?" Martha asks.

"Not a chance," I reply. "Kenilworth, Illinois is virtually an armed stronghold of the atheist elite. There are patrol drones, checkpoints, cameras, and identity scanners everywhere. We need to test her and see if she sticks to the story that she has the paper."

"How do we do that?" Cindi asks.

"We're going to raid another house she owns ... the house where I grew up in Sheridan, Illinois."

"Did you say Sheridan?" Cindi and Martha ask almost simultaneously.

"Yes, Sheridan. My hometown is the site of one of Four's original - and still largest - safe houses: Gethsemane House. It seems like more than a coincidence, don't you think?"

Are there really any coincidences in God's plan?

"Gethsemane House voted in Zip's camp from the beginning," I say; "but not that Zip's campaign in McIntosh falling apart, I hope they'll help us."

"Help us?" Cindi asks.

"Jennifer won't make the same mistake she made with my house in Colorado Springs," I say. "The house in Sheridan will have some sort of trap waiting for us. It would be nice to have more backup this time."

"You're assuming they're even still there," Cindi says. "For all we know, they all went to McIntosh to help Zip."

"Besides - getting them to help us is the easy part," Martha says. "First we have to find them. Until The Corps did it by tracing power usage, no Four house had ever been found. Even then, most of them went undetected - including Gethsemane."

"She's right," Cindi says. "Normally, arrangements are made in advance and you're escorted to a safe house the first time you visit ... sometimes blindfolded. It could be any building in town."

I cock my head to one side with a practiced look I used as The Cult Hunter; then smile.

"Are you ladies presenting me with a puzzle?"

"You never found a Four house when you worked for The Corps," Martha says.

Did she just bat her eyelashes at me?

"I never looked," I say.

How could I go so many years without learning to flirt? I love flirting with Martha.

We sneak out of the cargo area of the tube station and onto the streets of Sheridan.

"Okay, puzzle master. Find one of Four's best-hidden houses for us," Martha teases.

I turn a full circle, while scanning and thinking. Some parts of the town have grown in the seven years since I lived here, while others have been left to rot or have been knocked down entirely.

“Tell me anything you know about Gethsemane House,” I say to Martha and Cindi.

“All I know is that, unlike most Four houses, Gethsemane isn’t in the middle of nowhere. It’s in town - or at least on the edge of it,” Cindi says.

Gethsemane House is over ten years old; so I can eliminate all of the buildings built since then.

“We know they never shut down their power, and they claim to be the biggest house,” Martha says.

Drawing large amounts of power legitimately from the grid implies it’s hidden in, or under a business, rather than a house ... maybe even a warehouse. The only big warehouses are south of town, near the old prison.

As I think, I continue to study the buildings of Sheridan.

They’d need a way to come and go unseen to avoid attracting attention. Where would escape tunnels come up in the middle of a warehouse district? It needs to be somewhere near trees or other natural cover to hide the entries.

“Is that a stumped look on your face, Cuz?” Cindi joins Martha’s challenge.

The only heavily wooded areas are near the river on the west side of town. Everything to the east is either newer buildings or farmland.

“I think his brain is starting to overheat,” Martha says, and laughs.

Are there any large old, buildings near the edge of the woods?

A childhood memory flashes into my head.

When I was young, I got sick from a vaccine that was given to me in a creepy old warehouse. I don’t believe it! They must have given me the Four vaccine in Gethsemane House.

“I’m sorry to break Four’s perfect record, but I know where Gethsemane House is,” I say.

I enjoy watching their jaws drop.

“On the north side of the tube line, near the river, the government built a warehouse to store materials way back when the tube and hover lines were being constructed in this area. The tube line is built along an old railroad grade because it was easier to use an existing right-of-way than to knock down buildings. Those old railway grades were also the easiest place to run superconducting power lines, which would give Four an easy place to tap in.”

“What happened to the warehouse when the government was done with it?” Cindi asks.

“They sold it. I think it was used as a vehicle repair yard of some sort for a while, and it may have sat empty too; but at some point, a courier business moved in.”

Knowing that the building houses a courier business convinces them that I’m correct.

“What do you remember about the terrain?” Cindi asks.

“Nothing. I lived south of the tube line when I was a kid; so I never went up there.”

“You never explored in the woods when you were a kid?” Martha asks.

“Why would I? You could do it virtually, at home, with the right electronics, just like you can go to the Grand Canyon and the Eiffel Tower. Besides, just south of the tube line is the old sewage treatment plant. It was abandoned before I was born, but it still smelled.”

“How close is it to your parents’ house?” Cindi asks.

“Not far. Our house was on the north end of Hickory Street. When my parents died, my Aunt Jennifer moved in and we lived there until I turned ten and went off to college.”

“Your Aunt lived here when you were a kid?”

“Actually, Sheridan is her hometown too. My grandparents had a house on Park Street and Aunt Jennifer always said she hated everything about the town. Apparently from the time she was able to talk, she moaned that she would leave Sheridan and never come back. If this town is such a torture, I don’t know why she moved here rather than moving me somewhere else. According to public records, she still owns the house on Hickory Street.”

“Let’s go look at the old warehouse tonight,” Cindi says.

Sheridan only has two hotels, and both are near the tube station; so we check in and rest until the sun goes down. There's a hover line that runs down Johnson Avenue, but it's only a few kilometers; so we decide to walk to the warehouse. I take them down Church Street, which will dead-end into the woods along the river.

"They actually kept the name 'Church Street,'" Cindi says. "I thought names with any religious meaning had been purged a hundred years ago."

"Apparently they voted on it a dozen times over the years, and every time the people decided to leave the name as it was. Here's one of the reasons it was named Church Street in the first place."

I point out an old white building. It's barely bigger than the houses in the area, but is clearly an old church, including a steeple.

"Amazing. Most old churches had the steeples torn off, but this one survived," Cindi says.

"This church was built around 2030, during the Equalization. The town used it as a library for a while, after the congregation abandoned it; but by the time I was a kid, it was owned by an older lady named Mrs. Pierce, who was often my babysitter. She turned it into the Sheridan Museum and Historical Society, and absolutely refused to remove the steeple. After my parents died, I spent a lot of time in that old church, and Mrs. Pierce took it upon herself to become my surrogate grandmother. I didn't think about it at the time, but a lot of what Mrs. Pierce talked about contained biblical messages."

"What did your Aunt Jennifer think of that?" Martha asks.

"Aunt Jennifer and Mrs. Pierce hated each other, but Jennifer put up with her - if only because it meant less work for her to have me out of the house. I never mentioned to Jennifer what Mrs. Pierce and I talked about. I guess I just instinctively knew that Aunt Jennifer would have put an end to my visits."

We reach the end of the street and enter the woods, which are a mix of older stands that have not been touched by man for a century, and newer areas that were once cleared as farmland, but have been reclaimed by nature. We pass south of the abandoned sewage treatment plant, which doesn't smell nearly as bad as I remember, and walk towards the river. The safest route is to pass under the tube line where it's raised to cross the river, and then cut back to the old building.

There's a narrow walking path along the river. If you looked at it casually, you might think that it was made by animals as they pass under the tube line; but Martha has trained me too well to be fooled. It's purposefully wide in places, as the human makers tried to disperse their footfalls, and the side trails do not display the randomness you would expect in a path created by animals. Martha and Cindi see it too, but don't say anything.

We choose a side trail that'll take us towards the old warehouse. The south side of the building is only thirty meters north of the tube line; so we skirt around to the north side and find that the trees grow to within twenty meters of the building except in the vicinity of a loading dock area that has both a hover line and a tube line.

"This is the place," I say.

"What do you see now?" Cindi asks.

"Look at the old loading bays."

There are six old loading bays, each with a two meter tall number painted on it. The other five numbers are painted in white, but the number Four is painted in blue.

"Okay, so assuming they left some staff, how do we tell them we're here?" Cindi asks.

"They're in there, and they already know we're here. The question is how do we tell them who we are?" I reply.

"How could they possibly know we're here?" Cindi asks.

"One meter below the roofline, spaced twenty meters apart, there are cameras that ..."

“I don’t see them,” Cindi says.

“That’s because we’re not moving right now. If we move, the cameras will follow us and you’ll see a tiny red light flash every ten seconds as they do,” I finish.

Cindi gives Martha her best “Is he for real?” look.

“It can be annoying, but you get used to it,” Martha says in response. “You can even come to love it.”

“The cameras must be infrared to be able to see us. How about if we each hold up four fingers and approach?”

“How about if you all hold up both hands before you get shot?” says a man’s voice from only about five meters behind us.

These guys are good. I didn’t hear a sound as they approached.

“Let’s go with his plan,” I say.

Chapter Fifteen

I start to turn around with my hands in the air. I only make a quarter turn, when my left leg is kicked out from under me and I need to grab a tree to keep from falling.

“Nobody said to turn around,” the man corrects, then backs off a few steps.

Now I can hear three other people approaching through the trees at varying distances.

“The real Gethsemane is a much friendlier place, wouldn’t you agree Martha?” I say.

“Definitely,” she replies. “Try that with me, Cameron, and I’ll whip your butt like I always have ... only now I’ll do it Roman style.”

“Martha?” says the voice. “Cephas Paulson? We saw that the cult hunters took out Bethany House and thought you were dead.”

I turn around, and can see at least five dark figures among the trees.

“Thought we were dead? Everyone from Bethany House survived. You’ve had no contact with any of the others who were there? They should have contacted the other houses a long time ago,” I say.

“It’s not the other houses who’ve been cut off. It’s us. Come on. Let’s get underground where we can talk,” Cameron says.

It turns out that we were standing just twenty meters from a hidden entrance and the cameras had been watching us since we passed around the west side of the building. All they had to do was take up positions and wait for us.

When we get inside, I finally get a look at the team that captured us. Cameron is a muscular man, nearly two meters tall, with dirty blonde hair and intense blue eyes. There’s a scar on his right temple that could easily be removed; so I assume that he’s deliberately chosen not to do so. The rest of his team are equally fit. Apparently this house prides itself on physical training as much as Bethany used to pride itself on technical expertise.

The building has a massive basement that was not part of the original building. It’s been carved out by Four over the last decade, just as was done at Bethany. I see a large number of computers, a machine shop, and even a small chemistry area. Cindi sees it too, and I wonder if she’s wishing she still had the vaccine sample.

We climb up a ladder and pass into the warehouse itself through a hidden trapdoor. Coming from Bethany, we’re accustomed to leaving the surface building in a natural state; so it looks abandoned. It feels strange to be in such an open area, but since the building has few windows, the staff here no longer worries about prying eyes.

About a quarter of the warehouse is devoted to a real shipping business that specializes in providing couriers for fragile or extremely valuable goods. Cameron explains that the business allows members of Four to travel all over the world without raising suspicions. They even have a spur on the tube line and unrestricted access to cargo cars.

One corner of the building holds an indoor gym and training area, which explains why everyone here looks so fit. At the far end of the building I can see massive water storage tanks, but when I turn to ask Cameron about them, my thoughts are lost when I see that his only interest at the moment appears to be my wife. I want to get angry, but talk myself out of it. I imagine him as a ten-year-old boy, growing up off the grid. He probably only knew a few other kids and he chose Martha as the one he wanted to be with - regardless of her feelings on the subject. I bet things only got more uncomfortable when they became teenagers.

“How do you know Martha?” I ask.

“I was raised off grid outside of Ogallala, on Lake McConaughy. My parents would take me into town to play with other kids who were off grid,” he says. “How do you know Martha and Cindi?”

Here's another leader who asks questions, to which he already knows the answer.

"You already know that they were both on the team sent to kill me," I reply.

"Stop," Martha says, and playfully swats me on the arm.

Cameron's eyes widen slightly, and he looks angry. He knows Martha well enough to see the affection she put into the swat - like he's seen it before.

"But Martha decided to capture me instead."

She reaches down and takes my hand, ending the conversation and prompting me to go back to my previous train of thought.

"I can't help but assume that you got our last messages from Bethany. That's a lot of water you have stockpiled," I say.

"We're approaching one hundred thousand liters."

"What will you do with it if Sheridan ends up like McIntosh?"

"Hole up and make it last as long as possible."

"Will you share it with those who need it?" I ask.

"Anyone anticipating a need for clean water should be storing their own."

I drop the subject, as we enter a room with chairs and a large table where we can all sit.

I try to give Martha a look asking her to take the lead. I want to observe the people of Gethsemane House as they interact with us, particularly Cameron. I need to know if we can trust them. If she got my non-verbal message, she either ignored it or knows these folks well enough to have a better plan. The lull allows Cameron to be the first to launch into the questions on his mind.

Martha knew he'd show his cards. Very good.

"What happened at Bethany House?" he asks. "Judging by the crater, it looks like they hit the place with a missile."

"I ordered it blown up so it couldn't be captured."

My answer sets him back for a moment; so I start to ask the questions. If he wants to see me as a challenger for the role of alpha male, so be it.

"How many times has your perimeter been tested?" I ask.

His face goes wide first with surprise and then settles into a look of deep suspicion. He wears his emotion on his sleeve, so I'm determined not to do the same for him. Seated behind Cameron is a younger man, named Andrew, who is observing me carefully. It's apparent that they're brothers, even though Andrew has a lighter complexion and white-blond hair. Apparently we're also playing a game of 'good cop, bad cop.'

"How do you know about that?" Cameron asks.

"Until you confirmed it just now, I only suspected."

Andrew nods slightly and the corner of his mouth turns outward into a smile of respect.

"As to why I suspected: I saw the computer monitors when we walked through downstairs. Two of them were newer than the rest, which implies you've recently added more cameras. Before that, it was your willingness to kick me even after I suggested we approach with four fingers raised. That implies you don't know who to trust anymore."

Cameron may not be good at keeping his emotions in check, but he has the icy stare perfected.

I glance at Martha and her look implies pride in her husband - but also a warning to not push Cameron too far.

"The day after Bethany was destroyed, two men did exactly what you did," Cameron says. "They approached with four fingers up and we let them walk right in through the front door. They said Garai wanted to talk to us about working together, which is pretty strange, because Garai's never wanted anything to do with us. So we let one of them work in our system to call Garai, but he tripped some security protections. It turned out he was trying to get the locations of all the other

houses of Four - not knowing we don't write that stuff down. We kicked them out, but two times since then we've seen people lurking at the edge of our perimeter."

"How did Garai know the location of this house?" I ask. "We found it in part because I grew up here."

My statement causes Andrew's eyebrows to rise.

"I'm told that Garai visited here about ten years ago, when his uncle was running the show and he was second-in-command of his organization," Cameron replies.

Ten years ago. The year my parents were killed. How interesting.

"And that's about the time your communications were cut off?" I ask.

"Yes. The problem isn't in our systems; so we're thinking that it's some sort of external jammer."

Cindi and Martha nod agreement.

I remain quiet as I think, so Cameron continues.

"Nobody's heard from Austin for a month, and Zip's trapped at McIntosh. Since you're alive, I guess that makes you our leader now. So, what's your plan, leader?" he asks.

I stare at him for a while.

Cameron's a natural leader, but doesn't want the job. Why?

"You're the guy Zip planned to send to command Bethany House, aren't you?" I ask. "Why weren't you with her at McIntosh? For that matter, why aren't you there right now, leading an attack to break her out?"

My questions touch a nerve.

"I wasn't there because I was leading the other half of her brigade at Maggie Valley. The half that was blown to bits at Garai's deathtrap."

"Garai's?"

"Yeah. He's the one who provided the location of the vaccine facility. I guess his spies forgot to mention that the place was rigged with bombs, and that armed drones could be there in two minutes, if called. We never knew what hit us."

"How'd you escape?"

"We set up a command post on a high spot a couple of clicks away to direct the teams. I got to watch them all die. So, you'll excuse me if I don't feel like watching my friends at McIntosh die when the next wave of missiles is called down."

His eyes drop to the table, and don't come back up.

He's obviously torn up over what happened to his people at Maggie Valley, and there's nothing I can think of to say that will comfort him. Sometimes you just don't know if a guy needs a bear hug or a hard slap across the face to help him through his misery.

"Where's your backup location?" I ask, and realize that it makes me sound cold.

"It's a shack across the river," Andrew says. "I can take you there."

"Good. I need to make a few calls, but my plan - when I get back - includes a little diversionary operation in town that I think would be right up your alley."

Andrew leads Cindi, Martha, and me through a tunnel that takes us all the way to the river. Once we're in the woods, I let Cindi and Andrew move ahead of us so I can speak with Martha.

"So that's the guy who swore he'd someday father your children," I say. "He doesn't seem like your type."

"We grew up together. When you're off grid, you get close to the people who're also in your situation," she replies.

There's more on her mind that she isn't saying.

"He seems like a capable leader," I say.

“He’s prone to bold moves, and can be reckless.”

“He’s dedicated to his people.”

“He can be selfish and arrogant.”

“He loved you once, and still wants to.”

I say it as if it carries no more meaning to me than my other observations.

Martha stops in her tracks. Her head drops, and she sighs.

“Must you observe everything?”

“You never loved him back. That’s why he wasn’t significant enough for me to see in your memories when we time travelled; but you still feel guilty, probably because you hurt him.”

“Please stop.”

“I’m sorry, Martha. I need to know if I can trust him with our lives. Everyone in Four is well-trained in self-defense and stealth; but with him, it’s different. He’s sick of playing defense and wants to play on offense for a while. What happened at Maggie Valley has him on the ropes; but he’ll be back, and I have a feeling that the time is going to come when I’ll need him to play a very aggressive offense.”

“What you can’t observe is that Cameron is a man of great faith. Convince him that you’re on God’s path, and he’ll follow you to his dying breath,” Martha replies.

“What about Andrew?” I ask. “He isn’t the warrior that his brother is. He seems more like the people at Bethany, in that he looks for solutions other than combat.”

“Andrew is the tactician, Cameron is the battlefield commander,” Martha says. “You can trust them both.”

We’ve walked downriver to the point where the tube line crosses overhead. Andrew and Cindi are waiting for us, talking and catching up like old friends. We’re probably not supposed to overhear the end of their conversation, but I catch Andrew saying: “Married by Simon Peter himself?” and “There’s no way I’m going to tell him. Let Martha do it.”

They go silent when we approach.

“How do we cross the river?” Cindi asks.

Andrew points up to the bottom of the tube, which runs about twenty meters above the river. There’s a metal ladder, so we all start to climb. When we reach the top, I find that there’s a platform the three of them have squeezed onto, but there’s no room for me.

“These cables run all the way across. They were put here for maintenance drones to clip onto as they inspect the outside, but we use them as a zip line,” Andrew says.

“The lines have a low spot in the middle,” I say. “How do you propel yourself up the other side?”

“Grab the rungs.”

He points to the bottom of the tube. There are two sets of metal rungs that follow the cables like horizontal ladders.

“I only have three harnesses. I’ll trail a rope behind me so you can pull mine back when I’m over,” Andrew says.

The three of them set off, leaving me alone on the platform. Moments later, I hear someone ascending the ladder, and Cameron’s face pops into view. I make room for him on the platform.

“I’d hoped to find you here.”

“And I’d hoped to speak with you alone,” I reply.

“They’re only trailing one rope. Maybe instead of waiting here, we should cross the old-fashioned way.”

“I didn’t see a boat down there.”

I say it with a smile, which he doesn’t return.

“Hand-over-hand on the rungs,” he says.

“That seems a little reckless. A fall from this height - even into water - would likely kill you ... if not from the fall, then from drowning - with two broken legs.”

I try to stare into his eyes in the darkness.

“Reckless? Reckless is sending people into a building that’s been rigged to explode,” he replies.

Whatever is happening inside his head, he needs this.

“Oops,” I say innocently, and drop the trailing rope.

Cameron smiles, as I grab the first rung and start out across the darkness.

“We both wanted to talk. Do you mind if I go first?” I ask.

“Go ahead.”

He’s not straining at all at the effort, while I wonder if two hundred meters of monkey bars is more than I should have agreed to attempt.

“With the possible exception of Zip, you’re the most aggressive leader I’ve encountered in Four,” I say. “I think the fact we’re hanging here, risking our lives, is proof of that. We call this the True Holy War, and I think you’re looking for a leader who’ll take you into the sort of battle you want to fight. I think you want to go one-on-one. Good versus evil, to the death.”

“I don’t see a way around it,” he replies. “After what happened at Maggie Valley, I don’t see that I’ve got anything left to lose. The cult hunters are willing to slaughter people; so we should be willing to slaughter them. The toxin’s going to get us all anyway ... so why not go out fighting in the name of the Lord.”

“I’m not here to lead you into that battle,” I say.

“Then you’re not the leader I need.”

“If that were true, you’d be in McIntosh right now, instead of talking to me. I believe you’ve been called to do more than just slaughter people, Cameron.”

He says nothing, so I continue.

“I’m told you’re a man of great faith,” I continue.

“That’s right,” he replies. “More faith than you I think. I have faith that, with the Lord’s help, we can win the battle.”

“I assume you’ve read the Bible; so I’m sure you’ll understand what I mean when I say that things today aren’t so different from when Jesus walked among us,” I say. “Israel had Rome to contend with, and we have Henry and The Corps. Some people believe that Jesus got so many followers so quickly because they thought He was going to take up a sword and slaughter the Romans. Some also think that they turned on Him quickly, and crucified Him, because they were disappointed when they realized He wasn’t going to do that. Taking up the sword was their plan, not His.”

My arms and hands are killing me, and I’m audibly straining at each rung, even though we’re not yet in the middle.

“What happened at Maggie Valley was not part of His plan, and I don’t believe He can use you in His plan if you continue to follow that path,” I say. “I can show you a better path, if you’ll trust me.”

“Right now, I’m not seeing it, Cephas. All I’m seeing is another reckless leader like Zip - one who has a lot of faith, but no plan. You’re about ten rungs from falling into the river. Did you just set off into the dark with faith that God will give you the strength you need to make it across?”

“Actually, I’ve learned one must not test the Lord,” I reply. “I knew right away that I’d never make it, but I had faith that the Lord would give me a place to rest when I needed it.”

As I say it, I spy two small platforms on the central support pillars that stand in the center of the river.

Cameron laughs. We each take a platform, facing each other.

“You wanted to talk to me and we’re going to be here for quite a while, as I rest. What’s on your mind?” I ask.

He contemplates for a while, not knowing if he really wants to have the conversation or not.

“It’s about Martha. I noticed her flirt with you, and hold your hand. I’ve known her for a long time and I care about her a great deal. I need to know if you really care about her, or not. You’re kind of a worldwide star, and I’m wondering if she’s blinded by your fame. I just don’t want to see her get hurt, you know?”

“You want to know if I really love her, or if she’s just some current curiosity that I’ll get bored with and toss aside,” I say.

“Yes.”

“Have you ever been in love with someone?” I ask.

“Yes. But she didn’t feel the same way.”

“Did it hurt?” I ask.

“Like a knife wound. I thought I’d gotten past it, but it turns out I haven’t.”

“Does that knife wound make you wish you’ve never loved her? Do you wish you could go back and erase her from your memory?”

He contemplates my question, but doesn’t answer.

“Getting hurt is a risk we take every time we fall in love with another person,” I say. “Sometimes I wonder if that’s why this world seems to have so little love left. It was the one hurt we couldn’t numb with a pill. Somewhere along the line, we forgot that being in love is worth the risk.”

“Are you trying to tell me something?” Cameron asks. “Because it sounds an awful lot like you’re admitting that I’m right.”

“You are right. Loving me is going to hurt Martha someday. I know it, and I think she knows it; but the potential for pain doesn’t diminish the value of being in love. God wants us to have His love - and each other’s - despite being hurt sometimes.”

“If that’s true, then let her go, Cephas. Don’t put her through it. Think of her, instead of yourself?”

I think of nothing but her. I’ve even been willing to disobey God for her.

We stare at each other in the dark.

“You said that loving you is going to hurt her - but you never said how you feel about her,” Cameron says, after a minute.

How could words ever describe it?

“I’ll tell you, because I think you’ll understand,” I say. “I love Martha in the way that aches whenever we’re apart, and my heart skips a beat when I see her again. I love her so much that I sometimes question whether she could possibly love me back as much - not because I doubt that she loves me, but because it feels like nobody else on earth could possibly have the same capacity to feel as much as I do for her. I love her like the Lord put her on earth solely for the purpose of showing me how to fully love another person - if only to give me the smallest glimpse into the love He felt for us when He died for us on the cross.”

We sit in silence for a while longer.

“Keep resting,” he says. “I’d like to be alone for a minute, and I’d like to go talk to Martha - alone,” he says, then grabs a rung and starts swinging away.

“Cameron, stop. You need to come back.”

“No, thanks,” he says as he moves across two more bars.

“Martha and I were married by Simon Peter in the Sea of Galilee, and she’s carrying our baby,” I say rapidly.

Cameron loses one hand on the rung, but quickly regains it and swings back and sits on the platform opposite to me.

“You saw fit to mention that when I’m hanging twenty meters above a river?” he asks.

“I needed you back here as quickly as possible, and I was pretty sure that would get your attention.”

The words are barely out of my mouth, when Andrew and Cindi zip through at high speed, as they reach the low point in the cables. If Cameron had still been hanging on the rungs, Andrew would have collided with him and knocked him off. We hear both Andrew and Cindi say: “What the ...?” as they pass.

“You crush me, and save my life, inside of thirty seconds,” Cameron says. “Maybe you’re the kind of leader I’ve been seeking after all.”

Chapter Sixteen

When we all reach the far side, Martha is standing with her hands on her hips, ready to kill me and Cameron. Cindi looks relieved that I'm alright, but the scowl on her face makes me wonder if she's mad about something other than me risking my life.

Martha falls into my arms and holds me tightly, and then moves back and starts pounding softly on my chest.

"Don't you ever do anything like that again, you crazy, stupid ..."

That's as far as she gets, when Cameron clears his throat.

"This was your idea, Cameron," Martha says.

She heads for him, but I bear hug her from behind.

"Calm down," I say. "Cameron and I just needed time alone to discuss some things. Everything's fine."

She relaxes; so I loosen my grip.

"Okay. I'm okay now. You can let me go."

She's going to clock him. Should I stop her? Nah.

When she's free, she walks to him and rips a nice uppercut to his jaw, which he absorbs without betraying a hint of the pain it must have inflicted.

"I deserve that ... but you deserve this."

He reaches out and grabs her gently on both sides of her head.

"You're the luckiest woman in the world. Congratulations on your wedding, and the baby."

He kisses her on the forehead.

Martha's still angry, but she can hardly keep hitting people after getting kissed on the forehead.

Andrew wasn't kidding when he said their backup location is a shack; but in a way, it reminds me of Bethany House, since it sits on a little hill all by itself. It looks like it was abandoned a hundred years ago. We enter through a tunnel that's hidden between a large tree and a boulder and find that the space under the house isn't much bigger than the shack above. It does, however, have all we need in terms of equipment; so Martha and Cindi get to work.

"Gethsemane is definitely under a local jammer," Martha says. "Everything here is working fine."

"Can you figure out how Gethsemane is being jammed?" I ask.

"I'm already working on it," Cindi replies. "It looks like it's a series of simple frequency scramblers set up in the trees around Gethsemane."

She looks at Andrew.

"You guys couldn't figure that out?"

"We're a combat team; not technical," he replies.

"I guess that explains the people lurking around the perimeter," Cindi continues. "We'll need to physically remove them, but it shouldn't take more than an hour when we get back."

"Good, but when they're cleared, limit outgoing communications to just the Four network," I say. "Let whoever planted them think you're still jammed."

Andrew looks to Cameron, who nods his head in agreement.

Cindi and Martha take over on the equipment and patch together a call to Brill in Capon Springs.

"I need this call to be private," I say, when Brill's face comes up on the screen.

The looks on their faces at being asked to leave range from angry from Cameron to hurt from Martha and Cindi, but they all clear the room.

“Brill, I’ve pieced together some surprising information - some of which goes back about twelve years.”

“Yup. It all started about twelve years ago, and we both know how and why it started at Bethany House,” Brill says.

“What I did at Bethany House had ramifications; but now I suspect that one of the ramifications didn’t turn out the way I’ve always thought it did. You have some information that’s currently held by only you, Austin, and two other people - if you follow my meaning.”

Brill’s smile confirms my suspicions.

“Aren’t you the clever boy?” Brill says. “Austin and I swore an oath that we’d die before letting the secret slip; but in your case, I’ll make an exception.”

“Good. Then tell me exactly what happened the night my parents died, and when you’re done, you’re going to make another call.”

I’m happy to use the zip line method to return to Gethsemane, and equally happy to join the team climbing trees to locate and remove the jammers. There’s just something about climbing trees that makes you act like a kid again - even when it feels like the adult world is crashing down around you.

Cindi is laughing with Andrew about something, as they climb a tree together; but when I approach to find out what tree I’m in next, her expression goes cold.

When the jammers are cleared, Gethsemane’s screens all spring back to life and everyone sets to work collecting information.

The top news of the day - reported by the usual congenial anchor, with the usual empty smile - is not good.

“Government sources confirmed that all databases worldwide have been checked and rechecked. With the exception of the radicals in McIntosh, South Dakota, the vaccine will have been distributed to every known human being on the planet within the next two days.”

Two days? Garai said two weeks. Did he have bad information? Or was he lying?

“With everyone worldwide now accounted for, the government celebrated this historic medical achievement by burning excess supplies of the vaccine.”

We all watch the scene in silent horror. Medical professionals are seen shaking hands and slapping backs, as crate after crate of “excess” vaccine is tossed into incinerators. “Mark of the beast” or not, the doses of vaccine that could have saved millions of ‘off the grid’ Christians are going up in smoke. This isn’t just a case of government efficiency. This is Henry sending a message to all Christians that our time is running out.

“And it looks like the worldwide medical community acted just in the nick of time,” the announcer continues. “Medical officials have announced that an unvaccinated man in Vietnam is the first documented case of airborne transmission of the disease.”

Cameron says what everyone is thinking.

“Whatever information you plan to get from your aunt, you’d better get it soon.”

The raid on my childhood home on Hickory Street is planned for noon the next day. At first, Cameron thinks a daylight raid is too risky; but when his surveillance team tells him that the house is unoccupied and most of the neighbors are out during the day, he agrees. Together with Andrew, we come up with a plan that makes us all happy, and Andrew takes a team out the night before to make some final preparations.

When noon arrives, Martha, Cameron and I simply walk up to the backdoor and give it a good kick, just like we did to my door in Colorado Springs. The inside of the house makes my skin crawl. Everything that was here when I was a kid is still sitting exactly where I remember it. Jennifer took

nothing with her when she left, except the ancient wooden desk she loves so much. Worse, the smell of her perfume still permeates the house - like a dog that marked its territory with its scent.

We steal up the stairs to my childhood bedroom, which I'm thankful to see has also not been touched. When we enter, the projection system activates automatically, covering the walls with childhood artwork. Martha stares at the fractal drawings, as if she's trying to absorb my childhood in the few moments she has in the room. I head straight for the closet and reach up to a hook that I hid above the doorframe, and retrieve the framed picture of my parents. Although the rest of the house has been kept clean by robots, I can see from the dust that the picture hasn't been touched.

"Let's go," I say, and head for the door without looking back.

"Just a second," Martha replies.

Martha activates her com and tells it to download one of my fractal drawings.

Should be any moment now...

A large screen pops on.

"Hello, Aunt Jennifer," I say.

"So, you and the little wife are still stealing my property, I see. That house has been thoroughly searched three times. It doesn't contain what you're seeking."

"You're slipping, Jennifer. That sounded remarkably like an admission that you don't have the page either."

Aunt Jennifer simply grunts in response.

"Your searchers missed something," I announce, and hold up the picture.

Now Aunt Jennifer's eyebrows go up.

"I saved this picture of Mom and Dad from the dumpster the day you moved in, along with a box of neckties. Would you like to see what's hidden behind the picture?"

I open the back and remove the panel, but there's nothing there. I look up at the screen with a shocked look on my face. Aunt Jennifer looks surprised for a moment, but recovers quickly and gets a smug look on her face.

"I told you the house had been thoroughly searched. Can you see now that your situation is quite impossible? If you surrender now, I'm sure that Henry will be merciful."

Just a meter away, on matching tables, stand the two puzzles that fascinated Aunt Jennifer so much when I was eight-years-old. The one nearest to me is the spherical 'Impossible Puzzle,' which I pick up and rotate in my hands.

"You think our situation is impossible?" I ask. "They said this puzzle was impossible, yet here it is."

I remove a few key pieces, causing the nine thousand unique pieces to fall through my hands like water and crash to the floor.

"The Bible says that with God, nothing is impossible," I add. "However, since I'm just a man, I know to stick, instead, to the 'nearly impossible.'"

I pick up the 'Nearly Impossible' puzzle; then slip it into my backpack.

"You don't mind if I keep this one, do you, Jennifer? I'm sure it'll make a great conversation piece in my living room one day."

I nod to Martha and Cameron, and we head for the door.

"You should have quit, Cephas. You're too late," Aunt Jennifer calls to my back as we exit.

We hear the drones descending, even before Andrew announces over our coms that we have company. There are five in all, each one an advanced tracking drone that will follow us relentlessly until Federal agents can run us down. They descend to just twenty meters above us, and mirror our moves. Cameron shoots at one with a stunner, but it easily dodges the pulse. They must have target acquisition and face recognition software, because three of them seem to be keyed to me, while just one each are targeting Martha and Cameron.

“They’re all inside the perimeter,” Andrew calls into our ears.

“Take them down,” Cameron responds.

The words are barely out of his mouth, when the drones shut down and we have jump out of the way, as they fall to the earth. Cameron shoots each one, for good measure.

“If we ever find out who set up the jammers around Gethsemane, we should send them a ‘Thank You’ note,” I say, as we take off running.

When everyone has returned from the raid, I push two small beds together and rest.

“I guess that’s it,” Martha says. “Jennifer found the paper hidden in the picture frame. I guess you’ll walk up to the nearest cult hunter and surrender yourself now.”

I say nothing for a long time, because I don’t want to face Martha’s anger.

“Jocie would have been proud,” I eventually say.

“What does that mean?”

“Proud of my acting job.”

She contemplates what I’m saying.

“You knew all along that the paper wasn’t in the picture frame,” Martha says.

I nod.

“Then what was the point? Jennifer knows she doesn’t have it; so she’ll know you were just gaming her. Why take us into a trap, knowing all along that nothing would come of it?”

“Nothing would come of it? Martha, everything has come from it.”

“How can you say that? Have you looked at people’s faces since we got back? Cameron was standing right there when you opened the frame. By now he’s told everyone here, and soon all of Four will know ...”

She stops herself.

Here comes the anger.

“The purpose of the raid was to fool Cameron and his team? Why?” she asks.

“To solidify a secret,” I say.

“To perpetuate a lie is more like it. Has it occurred to you that Zip’s people are dying of dehydration in McIntosh because of your secrets? Are you willing to let them all die?”

“How many would die if Henry found out, and did an airborne release tomorrow?” I reply. “You saw the water in Brill’s bus, it’s tens of thousands of doses of vaccine. Would you have me sacrifice all the people off grid who could be vaccinated? When Zip refused the pill that Henry offered, I knew what she’d do if our roles were reversed. Even now, if we were to tell her about the water, she’d refuse to drink for the sake of protecting the secret and saving others.”

“So you spared her a difficult choice,” Martha says. “I suppose you think that makes you better than Henry.”

“What are you saying?” I ask.

“Following Christ is about making choices, Cephas. Do I choose to sin, or do I turn my back on sin? Do I repent, or do I continue to be disobedient? When you take away the choice, you rob people of the chance to make the right choice.”

For weeks when I’ve woken up first, I’ve had to untangle myself from Martha because she’s taken to sleeping on her side with her arm over me. Today I reach out and find that she’s slept so far away there’s a cold spot in the bed between us. She murmurs for a moment, as I slip out of bed; then rolls over and falls back to sleep while I get dressed. Luckily, the command center is the opposite direction from the escape tunnels; so I don’t need to walk past whoever is working the early morning shift. I choose the tunnel that will put me into the woods farthest from the building, and hope it’s far enough out that the infrared cameras won’t pick me up.

It's not my first time walking the deserted streets of Sheridan before dawn; nor is it my first time sneaking into the old church that houses the Sheridan Museum and Historical Society. Anyone else would have upgraded to an electronic lock coded to their com frequency, but I find the spare metal key hidden by Mrs. Pierce under a rock - exactly where it was when I was a boy.

The basement windows are covered, so I'm able to turn on the lights and get to work. Having once housed a library, the basement contains an old box of stubby green pencils, bits of scrap paper, and some tape. I write a message on a scrap, and then tape it onto the blank piece of greenish paper that was in the old trunk in Colorado Springs, which already contains a five-word message.

Last, I take the Bible I stole from this basement from my pack, and place the paper between the pages that tell the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman. I've carried this Bible everywhere for months and it's hard to leave it behind. The boxes containing things rescued from my parents' house are still where I left them; so I place the Bible inside.

I'll see you again, my old friend, I'm sure of it.

Martha is still asleep when I get back to Gethsemane House, but I find Cameron, Andrew, and Cindi in the command center. They're all lost in their own thoughts rather than talking. Once again, Cindi scowls at me.

"Gethsemane, and all of Sheridan, are in danger as long as I'm here," I say. "If I make a public appearance in another town, it should take the heat off you."

"What difference does it make now?" Cameron asks. "Without vaccine, there's nothing left to do except wait for the cult hunters to finish it."

I turn to Andrew.

"This house is compromised by Garai. You should start moving equipment and your water stash to a new location as soon as possible."

"We're not going anywhere," Cameron says. "This is our home and we'll defend it. You can stay or go."

I continue to look to Andrew, and get a nod. Water and equipment will start moving out of Gethsemane - whether Cameron knows it or not.

"We have a courier car in place. Where do you want to go?" Andrew asks.

"It so happens I got a message from Brill last night. I need to be in Dallas by tomorrow at dawn."

"A message from Brill?" Cindi asks. "What's this about?"

"Family secrets."

"I'm part of your family too, or have you forgotten again?" she asks.

"What do you mean?"

"You never told me that Geoff was on the list of those missing in Maggie Valley. Didn't you think I'd want to know? Didn't you think I could handle it?"

"I didn't have all of the information. If he's dead..."

"He's not dead. He was in the rear command post with Andrew and Cameron, and now he's gone off to fight in McIntosh. If you'd told me what was happening, maybe we could have intercepted him - but you never tell anyone anything, do you? You just love being the amazing Cephas Paulson, who can see everything, and solve everything, all by himself."

I turn to leave.

"Knowledge is dangerous," I say.

She grabs my shoulder and spins me to face her.

"So am I, Cousin."

Of that, I have no doubt.

I swear she's about to hit me, when Cameron speaks, with his head down on the table.

“Please leave my house, both of you. I’m done. I’m done watching friends die. I’m done waiting for the end. I’m done believing we can win.”

“Cameron!” I say his name like the Lord is commanding him through me, and wonder if He might be.

His head snaps up, and his eyes meet mine.

“You’re here with me as part of the Lord’s plan. Find your faith, and be ready for a mission when I get back.”

Those were exactly the right words to reach this man’s heart. Thank you, Lord, for giving them to me.

Chapter Seventeen

This cargo tube is no more comfortable than the others on which I've been; but the gentle vibration still lulls me to sleep on the hard floor, and I start to dream. In the dream, Martha and I are walking together on a white sand beach. We've run to a tropical island, leaving the world to fend for itself. What does it matter if Henry kills millions of Christians worldwide? We have each other.

"Want to go for a swim?" Martha asks.

"Sure," I reply, and peel my shirt off over my head. As I start to bring my arms back down, they freeze in place, straight out to my sides.

"Are you sure you're in the right place?" Martha asks.

I don't reply. I'm staring out at my frozen arms. My hands are balled into fists and are swollen to many times their usual size. When I look down at my feet, they are locked together and also starting to swell.

"You're in the wrong place, Cephas," Martha explains. "I thought you were good at puzzles. You know that there's only one place for each piece."

My hands and feet have swollen so much, they look like giant balls on the ends of my arms and legs. I'm shaped just like a piece of a jigsaw puzzle.

"Find your proper place, Cephas."

An unseen force lifts me up and moves me towards an empty space that I'm now shaped to fill.

I still have control of my puzzle piece head; so as I'm about to fall into place, I tilt my neck so that I no longer fit into place.

I don't want this spot in the puzzle. I never asked for this spot - and I'm not going in willingly.

"You'll find you're the perfect fit for this spot," the unseen voice of the puzzle maker says.

I keep my neck bent for a long time. I want to do things my way, rather than His.

"Please trust me, Cephas. I wouldn't have chosen this spot for you if I didn't know it was right."

I slowly straighten my neck and feel myself sliding into place. The puzzle maker is right: I am the perfect fit in His puzzle.

I awaken with a start, as the puzzle piece me is pushed into place.

Cindi is asleep on the other side of the car, but Martha is awake.

"Nightmare?" she asks. "I've been having some bad ones too."

"What are yours about?" I ask.

"I don't want to talk about it. What was your dream about?"

"Puzzles," I say. "I was a piece in somebody else's puzzle, and the only place I fit was in a spot where I didn't want to go."

"Puzzles within puzzles. Secrets within secrets. God gave you the ability to see things I'll never see, and to connect things in ways I'll never understand. Sometimes I wish you would tell me what you see ... and sometimes I'm afraid you will," Martha says, staring into space.

We sit in silence for a long time.

"I once read a sermon from the late 1990's," I say. "In it, the pastor described the three parts of a man's heart. The first part contains the things about himself that a man will tell a stranger he meets in the street. The second part contains the things that a man will share only with his family and his closest friends. The last part of his heart is full of the thoughts and emotions that a man won't share even with his wife. It doesn't matter if it's his fears, his desires, or his shame, because it's always something about himself that he doesn't want to face. So, rather than face it, he locks it away in his heart and tries to keep it secret even from God Himself. So, you're right Martha. I see how the pieces fit together. I just can't seem to face it."

My lovely bride looks at me, with tears welling up in her eyes. I take her hands in mine. She already knows; so I might as well face it and say it out loud.

“Martha, something’s coming. There are forces at work that I can’t control, and they’re pushing me to a place where I ...”

My voice trails off, and I look away.

“No matter what I do to escape it, I can only see one possible path that God has in mind for me ...”

Now my voice is beginning to quaver.

“And that path results in my...”

Death. Just say ‘death’ and get it over with. She already knows, and leaving it unsaid can’t protect her from it forever.

I take a deep breath and feel tears roll down my cheeks, as I squeeze my eyes shut.

“I think I’m going to ...”

I’m stopped abruptly, as she puts her index finger over my lips and makes a “Shhhhh” sound.

“I know,” she whispers. “But not today. Just tell me ‘not today,’ and we’ll live happy and free for today.”

“Not today,” I repeat back to her.

“Martha? If there’s ever a time when I can no longer say “Not today,” will you promise to do something for me? Will you turn your back on me and run?”

Part of me hopes to hear her say “Never,” but the closest she comes to speaking is the tears running down her cheeks.

How long has she known? For how long has she accepted it?

Like most cargo cars, ours arrives in the middle of the night when there are fewer people travelling; so we’re able to sneak through the darkened station and out onto the streets without seeing anyone. Dallas is one of many cities that suffered when the Sunspot reactors were brought online and the need for fossil fuels ended. The city went through decades of decline in both population and appearance; but eventually the old buildings were knocked down or restored, and families started to move in to enjoy the mild climate and the many beautiful parks created where the city center once stood.

We decide not to use the hover line and, instead, walk through the darkened city. On the edge of one park, Martha spots what must have once been a magnificent building that’s now marked for destruction. The various signs indicate that the building attempted - but failed - to hold a number of businesses over its lifetime.

“I bet it was pretty in its heyday,” Martha says. “It’s in a great location near the river. I wonder why businesses couldn’t make it there.”

“After the very first business failed, maybe the building was cursed,” I reply.

“What was the first business?” Cindi asks; so I stop.

“Look at the front of the building. The center is done in brick, but the wings are in some sort of stucco material. The brick part protrudes outward and has those massive lights focused on it. Why light up the plain bricks and not the rest of the building?”

“Because brick is prettier than stucco?” Cindi suggests.

“There was something on the bricks ... something to advertise the first business in the building,” I say. “I can’t see an outline in the glare of the flood lights, but maybe when the sun hits it just right, you can still see it.”

“A cross,” Martha says. “It was a church, and a giant cross hung on those bricks and was lit up at night.”

“That was a trick question. You said that it was a business,” Cindi replies.

“And I meant it. The building housed what people called a “mega church.” It probably did multiple services every Sunday, moving through tens of thousands of people and raking in millions of dollars per year. That sounds more like a business than worship, if you ask me.”

Next to the large building is a small and ancient stone structure. Although its steeple has been knocked off, it’s more obviously an old church than the “mega church,” whose shadow it sits within. The stone building houses a small law firm, and isn’t marked for destruction.

“The exalted mega church is soon to be humbled, and the humble stone church may someday be exalted. Choose your cornerstone well,” I say.

When we’re through downtown, we make straight for the Dallas River. Near the river is an abandoned shack, and under the shack is the local Four safe house, known as “Trinity House;” but we’re not going there yet.

We make our way through a greenbelt and down to the river where, we wait and watch. Just as the sun starts to lighten the sky in the east, we see two hooded figures emerge from the woods near the shack, and then wait near the river. From farther upstream, a group of a dozen or so people start to make their way down to meet the two people in hoods. When the groups meet, they head into the river for Baptism. I tap the shoulders of Cindi and Martha, and they follow me to the water’s edge.

When the group sees us, they become uneasy. Three unexpected figures on the riverbank is never a welcome surprise. Just standing in a river could be enough of a public expression of faith that, if we were Federal agents, we could arrest them or, at least, hold them for questioning.

“Can we help you?” asks the taller of the hooded figures, a man.

He’s nervous, but also confident. Judging by his voice, he’s about thirty years older than I am, which is exactly what I expected.

“We’ve already been baptized, but may we join you?” I ask.

The smaller of the hooded figures, which I presume is a woman, cocks her head to one side as I speak, and grabs the man’s hand.

“Where were you baptized?” she asks.

“In the Sea of Galilee, by Simon Peter.”

I hear my name being whispered among the brothers and sisters standing in the river. Several take out cameras and start to catch the moment on video.

“Then don’t just join the Baptism, Cephas Paulson. Please perform it,” the hooded man says.

I walk into the river, and one-by-one the faithful are baptized. I’ll never get tired of seeing the look of joy on a person’s face as they emerge from the water. I send them, one-by-one, to the shore, where Martha and Cindi are giving them each a drink of the water I blessed, until just the hooded man and woman remain in the river with me. The woman has spent the entire time looking down, hiding her face from me. I speak softly, so only they will hear me.

“You were going to baptize these brothers and sisters, but have you been baptized by immersion yourselves? Or is the only baptism you’ve had the baptism by fire ten years ago, the night my parents died?”

“How’d you find us?” the man asks.

“Like all good puzzles, the pieces came together; but that’s not important right now. What’s important is that - outside of Martha and my cousins - you’re the only two people I can trust. You’re never in one place for very long, and you’re obviously good at disappearing and keeping secrets; so I want you to hold onto something for me - something that others are seeking. It’s in the black pack on the shore. Take it when Cindi and Martha aren’t looking.”

“How will we know what it is?” the man asks.

“Trust me. You’ll know.”

“I have a favor to ask of you, too,” the woman replies.

“Forgiveness?”

“Actually, I was wondering if you’d still be willing to baptize us.”

“Of course,” I reply.

“We call this the Dallas River now, but do you know its name before it was changed during Equalization? It was called the Trinity River, which is how Trinity House was named. Great place for a baptism, don’t you think?” the man asks.

As they emerge from the water, I catch just a glimpse of the woman’s face before she’s hidden again by her hood. She reminds me of the lepers I saw in ancient Israel, never allowing anyone to see their faces. The man makes his way to the shore and I see him deftly remove something from my pack, as Martha and Cindi continue to greet the newly baptized. The woman has remained by my side.

“Cephas. About the night when your parents died, and the decisions that were made...”

“If it helps, the only person I’m mad at regarding that night is myself,” I say. “I hadn’t seen enough pieces of the puzzle to figure out what Mom and Dad were really doing. I’m just glad you did. Besides, if you think about it, aren’t I the one who needs to ask you for your forgiveness?”

The hooded man and woman disappear like ghosts, while I’m talking with the newly baptized on the bank of the river. These folks aren’t trained members of Four. They’re just souls who’ve felt lost, and have now found a path home. None of them are accustomed to constantly looking over the shoulders; so they don’t hear the footsteps descending on us through the woods. Martha hears it first and gives me a sign. Cindi’s in a conversation, but still picks it up. The footsteps are not moving like those of Federal agents. There’s no sign of stealth or covering moves of any kind; just walking feet.

Then I hear the greatest sound in the universe: The sound of children laughing. Martha and Cindi visibly relax as people start to filter through the trees towards us. A little girl squeals my name and runs to me, and I instinctively catch her with open arms.

“Well, hello!” I say and smile. “What’s your name?”

“Donna.”

She smiles back at me.

“How’d you know to find me here today, Donna?” I ask.

“Mommy and Daddy saw you on the news. They want you to baptize us, and then they’re going to ask you to marry them! You’ll marry them, won’t you, Cephas?”

“If you promise me that they really love each other and are getting married to follow God’s Word, then I’ll marry them.

“Yeah!”

Donna squeals and hugs me tightly around the neck.

“I knew you’d do it! I just knew it.”

Dozens and dozens keep coming through the trees.

“I’m glad you’re getting used to receiving little girl hugs,” Martha says. “But if our location is out there on video, don’t you think we should get moving?”

Martha’s eyes twitch to something over my shoulder without her head moving to betray that she’s seen something.

“Martha?” I ask without turning.

“On the other side of the river ... I think a small surveillance drone just landed. If it is, it’s one of the ultra-small ones that flies like a hummingbird.”

“Why don’t you and Cindi take a little walk? Laugh and talk like you’re part of the crowd, and see if there are agents in area.”

“What are you going to do?” she asks.

“I’m going to baptize, of course.”

I lead a group into the river, as Martha and Cindi begin their reconnaissance. When I reach the center of the river, I look up towards the heavens, as if for inspiration, and there can be no doubt: There are at least four high-level drones hovering over our location. Even the ones flying three thousand meters above me have cameras that can easily zoom in on my face, and the lower-level drones hiding among the tall buildings near the river can probably do a retinal scan on me. I want to laugh at the irony, when I see one drone perched on the old mega church like a vulture.

You wanted Henry to know you’d left Sheridan. There’s no doubt now.

Those wanting to be baptized keep coming, and keep taking videos. The cameras are linked to coms, which are automatically uploaded to the public information net. They’re password protected for privacy; but the right of privacy does not apply to the government, which owns the massive computers that store everything. A world that thrives on public sex in the name of “expression” isn’t exactly one that cares about its privacy.

As more videos are picked up by the media, more people come to be baptized. There’s no way to tell if someone is truly faithful, or if this is just another “new game” - like linking arms or plucking out coms in a crowd. As I look at the throngs of people, I can’t help but think of the many parables Jesus told. Who here is wheat, and who here is chaff that will be blown away as soon as the wind changes?

Martha wades into the river and whispers into my ear.

“Agents have set up a perimeter on both sides of the river, but are just holding position and letting people come and go. There are probably some inside the crowd, too. If one of them comes out to be baptized, they could easily shoot you.”

“Any suggestions?”

“Fighting our way out isn’t an option. There are too many of them. Our best bet is to sneak out with the crowd. Keep baptizing, for now. I’ll watch the line for weapons.”

After an hour, the number wanting baptism slows. The kill teams are still holding a perimeter, but doing nothing, as people come and go. As far as we can tell, they aren’t even trying to record who’s been here.

Something has changed. Henry’s holding his troops back for a reason ... but, why?

Just then, a man on the riverbank, who may be one of Henry’s agents, yells: “Cephas! What about the plague? What are you going to do about that?”

So that’s it. Henry can’t destroy Jesus; so he wants to raise me up as an effigy, then destroy me in Jesus’ place.

“Save us, Cephas!” yells a man from the other side of the crowd.

“Overthrow the government!” yells a third.

The priming is enough to set off loud discussions inside the crowd. There’s arguing and shoving, as everyone tries to get their opinion out. This is going to be a great set of clips for Henry to exploit.

I turn my back to the crowd, and walk further into the river.

They’re just like the people of ancient Israel, and Henry might as well be the Emperor of Rome. They want a savior to give them their material needs here on earth, when they should be worried about what will become of their souls. Jesus never promised His followers a comfortable life, and neither can I.

Lord? Was anyone saved here today? Did I reach even a single heart?

As if in answer, I feel a small, warm hand gently take mine. I look down to see Donna smiling up at me, and I can’t help but smile back at her. The crowd goes quiet at the sight of us.

“Don’t worry, Cephas. I don’t mind if you can’t stop the plague. I’ll be with Jesus in heaven. Thank you for marrying Mommy and Daddy today. Now we can all be in heaven together, and that’s what Jesus really wants.”

“Do you know what would make me feel a lot better?” I ask.

Donna shakes her head.

“Another hug.”

I bend down so she can grab me around the neck. I pick her up and start walking towards the shore.

“I’m thirsty,” I add. “I have some special water that came all the way from West Virginia. Let’s find your parents and go have a drink.”

Thank you, Lord.

Chapter Eighteen

When I left the river and went into the woods, the stream of new videos stopped, and eventually the crowd dispersed. To avoid exposing Trinity House, we decide to sleep in the woods, and I fall so deeply into sleep that I don't wake up until Cindi touches my shoulder, just after dawn.

"I just patrolled to the edge of the woods to our south, and there's no sign of any cult hunters. Martha is doing the same to the north."

"Martha's alone?"

"She made a staff for herself, and still has a chip on her shoulder about pregnancy not slowing her down. Feel sorry for the cult hunters."

I smile, because I know Cindi is right.

"Cephas, before she comes back, I want to say I'm sorry for how I acted back at Gethsemane. Maybe you were right not to tell me that Geoff was missing."

"What I said about knowledge being dangerous is true; but that's not why I kept it to myself. For years, I acted as if I had no emotions ... but the truth is that I feel things very deeply and the memory of those emotions sticks with me. I just didn't want to add the memory of your face when I told you the news to all the other sad memories I carry. I was being selfish."

"I understand."

"Cindi? There's something else. Before we all went our separate ways the day of the wedding, James told me he was going to McIntosh to find Geoff."

She inhales audibly.

"At least they'll be together," she says.

We both hear Martha approaching.

"They've all pulled back, but who knows how far," Martha says. "We'd never see high-level drones in this light. They're probably watching us on thermal cameras right now, to see what we do next, and will surround us once we're in the open."

"Not today," I say, and smile. "They could have nabbed us at any time. Henry saw the sound bites he was getting in the river yesterday and called off his dogs. He must want more."

"So you think he's going to just let you just walk out of here?" Martha asks.

"It won't be the first time. Didn't going unnoticed by the troops on the bridge in Ohio and escaping tracking drones in Colorado Springs seem a little too easy?" I ask.

"What about Ogallala?" Cindi asks.

"I think we were ahead of them that time, and again in Sheridan."

I shake my head and start to chuckle.

"What's so funny?" Martha asks.

"I'm looking at puzzles within puzzles, and pretending I can solve them; but I'm not the master of any of them anymore. The search for the notebook page has been a distraction, but not in the way I thought. At first I was distracting and lying to you two. Then I thought we really were distracting Henry from an airborne release of the toxin. The truth is, all along I've just been lying to - and distracting - myself to delay giving Henry what he really wants."

Martha looks away; but Cindi stares at me as I stare into space, until she can't take it anymore.

"Well? If not the notebook page, what does Henry want?"

"At first, he would've been happy to just get his hands on me ... but we've driven him past that point. Henry's an atheist; but like many atheists, he knows the Bible. Look at what he did yesterday with the men in the crowd. He got everyone calling to me for salvation from the plague. He wants me to preach and baptize openly, and draw out crowds of followers - just like Jesus did. He wants to

build up their hope in *me*, rather than in Jesus. Then he'll unleash the plague and watch everyone turn on me - just like the crowds turned on Jesus."

"So what should we do?" Martha asks.

"I have to stop playing Henry's game. I'm not Jesus, and I'm not turning over the tables of the money changers, or preaching in the Temple."

"Haven't you already?" Cindi asks.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you didn't literally turn over any tables here in 2202; but you kind of did the equivalent when you gave your speech in D.C. Then you started hacking broadcasts, and tens of thousands flocked to you - welcoming you into their homes and listening to you spread the good news."

I close my eyes.

"Maybe you'll find a way to reach even more people," Cindi continues. "Maybe you'll have a modern Triumphal Entry, on a worldwide scale."

She's right. You know she's right - but you're not accepting it. You're still not trusting His plan.

"So what comes after that? My crucifixion?" I ask as I open my eyes.

Cindi looks frightened by the suggestion.

"We're skipping that part," Martha says.

How I wish that were true, Martha. How I wish that were true.

We walk out of the woods and into downtown Dallas, without seeing a drone in the sky or anyone I can positively identify as a Federal agent. That doesn't mean we go unrecognized. People quietly walk up to me in the street and shake my hand and ask for blessings. They tell me they have faith that I can stop the plague, and that soon everyone who wants it will have religious freedom. Others recognize me and cross the street to get out of my path, making it clear to anyone watching that they don't want to be associated with me.

We see many cameras as we walk towards the tube station, but don't try to conceal our faces. When we reach the station, we finally see two Corps guys dressed in black combat gear. They acknowledge our presence, but make no effort to stop us; so, instead of sneaking into the cargo tube area, we go to the area where public transport tubes load and board a car going to Memphis.

When the car detects the discrepancy between the number of passengers it can see via electronic signature and the number it sees on its infrared camera, it refuses to move, and asks all passengers to put in their coms for an important announcement. Not wanting to give away any information about our hacked coms, we refuse, and the message repeats three times before the lockout is mysteriously overridden and we're speeding towards Memphis.

The Memphis tube station is near the river; so we walk towards the Mississippi, until we find a sidewalk café offering authentic barbeque. With all of the dietary supplements that people take, and enhancements that regulate metabolism, many people have moved away from eating meat - but not the people of Memphis. We gorge ourselves on the finest chicken and ribs I've ever tasted, and then proceed towards the river.

While we were eating, many people stopped and looked at us. Most made calls on their coms; so by the time we reach a footbridge to Muddy Island River Park, there are fifty people walking with us, and many more joining all the time.

I find a shallow spot, and dip my feet into the river. The water is warmer than I expected it to be, so I close my eyes and wiggle my toes in the mud. The people who've gathered respectfully give me this moment of simple joy. When I turn, I ask the question that doesn't need to be asked: "Who would like to be baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit?"

As the people line up, we again watch as tiny government surveillance drones quietly find hiding spots among the trees and rocks. I baptize for hours, waiting to see how Henry intends to

manipulate the crowd this time. Once again, it starts with a man on the shore, in dry clothing, calling out to me - while those around him are wet from baptism.

“Cephas, can you save people from the plague?”

Henry wants me to be viewed as a savior...

“Why are you so concerned? You’ve already been vaccinated.”

He doesn’t deny it; but it’s not the kind of answer he was expecting, and he doesn’t know how to respond. A quick-thinking colleague on the other side of the crowd covers for him.

“Is it true you’re telling Christians not to get the vaccine because you think it’s the biblical mark of the beast?”

Henry wants Christians viewed as a suicide cult...

“I’ve never told Christians to get vaccinated or not to get vaccinated. I’ve told everyone that I twice saw Christ crucified and risen, and that we should place our trust in Him.”

“Should we rise up against the government?” the first man asks.

Henry wants Christians to be viewed as dangerous...

“Christ taught that we should submit to the government in matters where the government has been given sovereignty, and submit to God in matters where God alone is sovereign.”

“The world is living in peace. Why are you bringing a new Holy War?” the first man yells.

“Jesus said in Matthew, chapter ten: ‘Don’t imagine that I came to bring peace to the earth! No, I came to bring a sword.’ The world is no more at peace now than it was when Christ walked on the earth. Only Christ can bring true peace to the world.”

The crowd finally catches on that these men were sent by Henry to ask such questions, and grab hold of them.

“Stop,” I say. “All of their questions can be easily answered by the truth found in the word of God. They came in peace, so let them go in peace.”

The two men sulkily disappear through the crowd.

I’m look directly into the camera of a mini drone.

“Send tougher questions next time, Henry.”

Muddy Island River Park contains a large dock where tour boats stop, as they make their way up and down the Mississippi. Most of them are sex and gambling cruises; but we find one that’s simply a scenic river cruise that’ll take us up the river to St. Louis, stopping at many smaller cities and towns along the way. At each stop, we get off the boat to baptize, always under the watchful eye of drones; but no more planted questions come my way. If Cindi’s right - that I unknowingly did an electronic “table turning,” - then I suppose this trip to Dallas then up the Mississippi must be my version of teaching in the temple.

But it’s not quite time to pray at Gethsemane.

Both the boat dock and the tube station are housed in a single large terminal in St. Louis, so as I remain on the deck of the ship - under the watchful eyes of the drones - Martha appeals to three of the recently-baptized faithful for their help. When I enter the terminal building, the drones can no longer keep a visual eye on me, but they will continue to track my movements with infrared scanners, used in conjunction with the many security cameras inside the building.

Martha has found a spot in the tube station where there’s just one camera. It’s only about three meters up; so I give Martha a quick boost and she simply unplugs it. I have to laugh at the absurdity. The camera is linked into a central computer, which allows it to automatically scan millions of facial features, identifying anyone who walks in and out of its view. It has lip reading software so it can “hear” what people are saying, and can detect the frequencies given off by the enhancements that are implanted in people’s bodies. Yet, in spite of all of its sophistication, disabling it is still as simple as pulling a plug.

When the camera is off, we simply start to hug the dozen or so new friends in the group. The hacked coms in our ears automatically download identity information from the three who agreed to help, and shut down their coms. Electronically we've switched places. The hope is that there's enough hugging that the infrared scanners will be momentarily confused.

We all head for tubes. The people we switched places with are travelling west, to Kansas City, while we're continuing north. We can see the departure board from our car. The Kansas City car has been delayed - presumably because there are three people aboard who are leaving no electronic signature. After a minute, the override is activated and their car leaves, indicating that the Corps has taken the bait.

"Where to now?" Martha asks.

I look at Cindi, whose eyes are pleading with me; then back to Martha.

"McIntosh."

McIntosh, South Dakota is one of those places that could have disappeared when life became automated. Before the Final Holy War, it had a population of only two hundred and thirty. When the war reduced the world's population by three billion people, most farming communities shrank, and McIntosh was no exception. At one point in its history, it had only twelve year-round residents.

When the Sunspot One reactor brought unlimited electricity and complete automation to farming, McIntosh was reborn when it was chosen to receive a station on the tube system for loading grains. At two hundred permanent residents, it would be overly generous to say that the town became a metropolis; but it is one of many beloved farming crossroads that dot the Great Plains.

Unfortunately for us, the tube line that saved the town is now the only public transportation still servicing it, and the station was closed when Zip attacked. The next nearest tube station is forty-five kilometers away, in McLaughlin, and is crawling with Corps agents, as they're shuttled to and from McIntosh on military transports. Our only choice is to climb inside a dusty, automated grain truck that travels overland to a farm five kilometers south of town.

Cindi has maps that Zip sent to Hank when she was hoping for outside help. We're trying to make a plan as we walk.

"It was easy for The Corps to hem Zip in," Cindi says. "The south side of town is basically walled off by the tube line, and the east side is the lake. There are three places where grain trucks pass under the tube line and a causeway that splits the lake; but they're all heavily guarded."

"What about the north and west sides?" Martha asks.

"Henry set a perimeter along two old roads. There are no trees, deep ravines, or cover of any kind. There's just open ground where anyone could see you from kilometers away."

"Let's assume that by the time Geoff arrived, the perimeter was too tight to pass through. What would he do?" I ask.

"Hit and run attacks," Martha replies, and Cindi nods.

"What about James?" I ask.

"Gather intelligence. James would look for weak spots, and then try to get the information to Zip to make a coordinated attack from two sides."

We stop when we see the tube line in the distance. It does indeed look like a massive wall. Cindi takes binoculars out of her pack.

"It's a normal tube line. There's no way to climb over. It looks like they've built some watch towers on top, but they must lift the Corps guys up there with drones."

When we're a kilometer from the tube, we come to an old irrigation ditch. It's wide, with a sandy bottom and definite signs of recent foot traffic.

"They're near," I say.

“A patrol?”

“No, Geoff and James. That’s the same boot tread James was wearing when he left Bethany, and the steps toe out like I remember. I don’t see a definite print for Geoff; but based on these prints, six or seven people are out here - led by James.”

“Those prints could be days old,” Cindi says.

“They’re less than an hour,” I say. “They were made sometime after that late afternoon rain that drenched us, rolled through.”

We follow the prints.

“Crouch,” I say.

“Why?” Cindi asks.

“Because they did.”

The side of the ditch is low at this spot, and is lined up with one of the Corp’s watch towers. Our heads would be visible over the edge of the ditch if we hadn’t gotten low.

The tracks continue onward until they leave the ditch, heading south. I borrow Cindi’s binoculars and scan, as the sun sets.

“There they are, I say.”

We can see two people are at the base of some kind of agricultural equipment, while four others have formed a perimeter.

“That’s a monitoring station to tell the automated rigs exactly where to put water and fertilizer,” Cindi says. “I’ll bet they’re trying to use it for communications.”

“How do we get their attention - without getting shot?” Martha asks.

“It’ll be dark by the time they get back here. I’d hate to spook them if they’re well-armed,” Cindi replies.

I hand the binoculars back to Cindi.

“Watch the nearest tower for a reaction,” I say. “If they spot me, we’re all in trouble.”

I climb out of the ditch and put my arms out into a cross. Counting off ten seconds seems agonizingly long before I scramble back into the ditch.

“The guys in the nearest tower are focused inward, on McIntosh,” Cindi reports. “Did James spot you?”

“I have no idea. We’ll find out, if we get shot.”

We wait in the ditch until three dark figures slip over the embankment, with raised weapons. They’re all capable of moving silently, but are making noise to cover the movements of the three others, who are sneaking up behind us. If I turn, I’ll likely be shot.

“Put your hands up,” James says from behind.

“Only to hug you, Cousin,” I say. “Is that any way to greet family?”

“Cephas?” asks a voice in front of us.

“Geoff!” Cindi cries, and runs to her brother.

The group includes Blake, Stephen, Misty, and Sarah from Bethany House. They were all assigned to the rear command post in the Maggie Valley raid, and came here together. When Cindi releases him, James walks to me.

“I was praying you’d come to McIntosh, Cephas. We could use a puzzle solver right about now.”

Chapter Nineteen

We continue walking in the ditch, heading east, towards an old barn the group is using.

"I've made a map of their defenses, they've turned McIntosh into a prison," James says.

"There's a network of motion and heat sensors along the north and west perimeter that wouldn't let a rabbit slip through."

I have to alter my course slightly to avoid a circle of large stones that's been placed in the middle of the ditch. The stones are scorched black, but there are no ashes in the bottom to indicate a recent fire.

"We've been trying to reach Hank over the Four network; but we don't have the right parts or equipment to tap into the old fiber-optic lines," Misty says.

The end of the ditch is marked by ancient concrete and rusty metal. When we climb the embankment, I see that the metal is a gate that's holding back water from a marshy area on the other side. The marsh acts as a central hub for many old gates and ditches. Above the marsh is an even larger gate that's holding back a pond. A spillway is allowing a small stream of water to continue feeding the marsh.

"So now we're trying to use the local agricultural monitors to get a message to Zip, but they're not designed to carry a voice signal," James adds.

The barn has a warm light shining out of the cracks and knotholes in the old wood. The group has partially cleaned the inside; but one corner is still heaped with old blankets, pillows, and various containers that once held pleasure drugs. There's also a sizeable store of stolen food and water, all of which is marked with the cult hunter Corps emblem.

After we eat, the talk turns to a technical discussion of how to defeat the sensor network. As always, the team ignores me as they begin to speak at both a higher technical level and volume. I walk around the barn, and find myself in the corner heaped with trash. On top is a shirt that says: "McIntosh Tigers."

Kids.

I poke through the pile with my toe.

These containers all held pleasure drugs approved for kids.

I look back at the group and find that Martha is staring at me. She holds up her hand and the group stops talking.

"Cephas, what are you thinking?"

"Why doesn't the sensor net cover the south side of town?" I ask.

"Because the tube line acts as a wall," James replies.

"Where's the first place kids go to have fun?" I ask.

There are blank stares for a moment, before Cindi says: "Wherever you tell them they can't go."

I point to the pile of trash.

"How do kids cross the tube line?" I ask.

"There are three tunnels under the tube line for the grain trucks," Cindi says. "Maybe they sneak through between trucks."

"That would be dangerous," James says. "Grain trucks aren't predictable like a hover bus, and they don't have all the safety sensors to stop them if someone is in the way."

The group descends into a discussion of how kids could hack the system to stop the trucks while they walk through the tunnels. I look back at the pile of garbage.

This stuff is all old. They had most of the summer to hang out here, before Michael arrived and the town got locked down. Why didn't they hang out in the barn this year?

The patter of rain begins on the old roof.

“More rain for McIntosh,” Blake says.

“Babylon!” I say.

My conclusion results in bewildered looks.

“Babylon was protected by a giant wall, but the Euphrates River flowed through the city. The river was too deep for an army to cross; so Cyrus diverted the river. Once it was shallow enough, he marched his army into the city.”

The bewildered looks continue.

“Cindi, project the map of McIntosh onto the wall. Look, the tube line defines the south side of the lake, but the outflow passes under the tube line and into the marsh. Normally, the lake level drops in the summer, as the water is used for agriculture, and the kids can walk under the line in the channel. This year has been rainy; so there’s too much water for the kids to use that route.”

“That’s great, Cephias, but the lake is still full,” James says. “We’d need to hack every irrigation controller for a hundred square kilometers to use enough water to lower the lake. The system would detect it.”

“The automated irrigation systems are all tied to a central pipe that was drilled up into the bottom of the lake,” I say. “Before the system was built, the farmers would open those metal doors and flood the ditches, like the one we walked in to get here. All we need to do is open the gates.”

Cindi is doing a rough calculation in her head.

“Based on the surface area of the lake, we’d need to drain thirty to forty million liters to drop the level a half a meter. It would be deep, but we could make it.”

“Then we’d better get started.”

The old metal gates protest, but eventually relent. We limit the flow so the water is moving quickly, but doesn’t sound like a waterfall to the men in the watchtowers. We watch them all night and the next day, and they pay the water no heed. By noon, we can see the opening of the outflow channel. By dusk, we can wade through.

“Is it smart for you to walk into a prison run by The Corps?” Martha whispers to me, as I wade into the water.

“Martha? Not today,” I whisper back.

We emerge cold and muddy inside McIntosh; then walk along the tube line until we find a place where there are enough trees to provide cover. The houses are close enough to the tube line that we can reach them without being seen from the watchtowers, but the town is completely dark, and we don’t know where to go.

“The power is still on,” Geoff says. “Zip must have ordered the lights out.”

“Any idea where Zip would be?” Martha asks.

“The newest part of town,” I say.

“What makes you think that?”

“She was in an old brick building when an armored drone smashed right through the wall. She won’t make the same mistake again. Besides, if Zip was going to attempt a breakout, it would be to the north, and that’s where the newer houses are.”

We move from house to house towards the north. There’s a lot of stumbling because it’s so dark. We’ve reached the corner of Third Street and Third Avenue, when a sliver of moon peeks above the horizon, providing us with some light. I see something move in front of us.

“James? Does a heavy combat team from Four carry night-vision equipment?”

I speak in a normal voice rather than a whisper, and practically hear our group cringe at the broken silence.

“Usually.”

“Then we’re surrounded.”

I put my hands up. Men and women in black start creeping out of the shadows, with guns drawn.

“We’re Four. We’re from Bethany House,” Geoff says.

“The cowards,” a voice says from the dark.

“Or traitors,” another says.

“I’m Cephas Paulson. I need to speak with Zip.”

We surrender our weapons, and are led further north and east, into a house in a new neighborhood where armored drones can’t ram through the walls.

“You love being right,” Martha says.

While the rest of the team is left in a room on the first floor, Martha and I are taken into the basement. Zip is looking at a map of the Corps defenses that is being projected onto the wall.

“James has a more detailed version of that map, if you’d like it,” I say, as we enter.

Zip spins at the sound of my voice.

“I’m not taking prisoners,” she says.

“I’m sorry to say it, but - yes you are,” I reply. “You’re taking yourself prisoner - a prisoner for our Lord.”

I look at the guards who brought us in.

“Zip is under the Lord’s protection now. You can leave.”

They don’t even look to Zip for approval before going, causing Zip and Martha’s jaws to drop.

“The fact that we’re here is proof there’s a way in and out,” I say. “You can filter a few dozen people out of town each night and leave Henry with any empty trap. The catch is that you’ll need to stay here until the end and keep broadcasting, so he doesn’t catch on. I’ll keep him focused on me from the outside.”

“How will you do that?” she asks.

“You’ll know it when you see it.”

She thinks about it for a moment; then shakes her head.

“We’ll run out of water long before we get everyone out. I’d rather die fighting. Besides, what’s in this for me?”

“There’s nothing in it for you, Zip. I’m asking you to do it for the memory of your brother, Zach. When he was captured, they let him record a final message to you. There was no way to send it to you; so it was placed in a file and forgotten. Here it is.”

I reach into my pack and take out a small storage chip.

“We’ll let you watch it in private,” I say, and we leave the room.

When she opens the door five minutes later, she makes no secret of the fact that she’s been crying.

“He told me to take care of our people,” Zip says. “So I’ll do it for Zach - but not the way you want. We’ll sneak out half and use them to attack the Corps line from the rear in a breakout.”

“Even if you break the line, you won’t make it a kilometer. They’ll rain missiles down on you from drones,” Martha says.

“I can’t do it his way!”

Zip points at me.

“It would feel too much like...”

She sighs.

“... too much like forgiving him. I swore I’d never do that.”

“Finding forgiveness is up to you; but you do need to trust Cephas, and do this his way,” Martha says.

“There’s nothing you can say that’ll change my mind.”

“I know, Zip; but there is something I can show you,” Martha says.

Martha digs through her pack and brings out her com; then puts it into her ear and interfaces with Zip's projector.

"Display image 'Cephas one.'"

"That's the fractal you downloaded from my room," I say. "I called it 'Cloud.'"

"That's because you drew it sideways," Martha replies. "Computer, display an image of Zip's back."

I feel like I should look away, and I definitely don't want to ask why there's an image of Zip's naked back in the system; so I focus on the fractal pattern that Zach drew. It starts at her neck, covers her left shoulder, and trails down her back.

"Now rotate image 'Cephas One' by ninety degrees clockwise and superimpose on the image of Zip, on her right shoulder," Martha says.

The result makes both Zip and me gasp in surprise.

"Angel wings," I whisper.

Chapter Twenty

“We’ll get as many people out of town as we can,” Zip says, as we walk back to the lake. “There aren’t many children, but they’ll go first. We’ll probe along the northern perimeter every time a group leaves, as an added distraction.”

“The group from Bethany House will stay in the barn and escort them all away. James is looking into repairing an old grain truck to shuttle them to another town,” Martha says.

Zip looks at me.

“Here’s an intercepted message that Hank thought you should see. I hope you know what it means.”

She holds up a small screen that is showing what looks like an intercept of a government communication. It says: ‘Target 314X termination authorized,’ followed by an address in Philadelphia.

“You know what it means, don’t you?” Zip asks.

“Aislin lives in Philadelphia, and 314X was the number on the private tube car where we met with her,” I reply. “Henry found Aislin, and has ordered her execution.”

I turn to Martha and Cindi.

“How quickly can we get there?”

The address provided by Zip is for a luxury apartment in a building overlooking the Delaware River. Aislin lives in one of the four massive apartments that share the top floor. We arrive in the early evening and manage to get lost in the dinner crowd that’s walking around the nearby shopping district, as we try to come up with a plan. Eventually we sit on a bench overlooking the river.

“Her building has tight security,” Cindi says. “Hacked coms might get us through the front door, but there are face scanners in every hallway and elevator. With the right gear, I could hack the system; but with just a com and a computer pad, it can’t be done. I can’t even see a way into the underground maintenance areas.”

“Any luck contacting her?” I ask Martha.

“Sorry. She uses some sort of drop-box system that’s not linked to her com. It would sometimes take days to get a response.”

“Can we find her tube car?”

“I already thought of that. It’s listed as ‘taken out of service, location unknown,’” Martha says.

“Does she have a private hover car?”

“I already thought of that too. It’s parked in the basement of her building right now.”

Martha smiles. She likes that she’s already a step ahead of me.

We sit in silence, each trying to figure out a way to find a woman who’s very good at hiding. As Martha and Cindi start discussing ways to overcome the various security devices, I remember something Martha once said: ‘Not all technical problems have a technical solution.’ I allow my mind to wander and just watch the river. A large yacht has passed the area three times, and now drops anchor in the middle of the river. With the sun starting to set, I keep seeing something shiny reflecting from the top bridge.

“How did Aislin find us when we were hunting for Garai?” I ask, interrupting their technical discourse.

“She was watching Garai too, and we just happened to get in the way,” Cindi replies.

“That’s right. She was watching the watchers. If we can’t find Aislin, maybe we can find whoever is watching her, and they’ll lead us to her. If I’m not mistaken, the yacht that just anchored has a telescope trained on Aislin’s apartment.”

I excuse myself from the bench and walk towards Aislin's building. Not far from the entrance to the underground garage, I see a man sitting in a private car. He reminds me of the Corps guys who would sit in front of my house, waiting for me to come out.

I put my com in my ear and call Cindi.

"Hey, Cuz. You said the security is tight inside the building and you can't hack it with a com; but would it be possible to hack something that has low security? Could you turn on a light in Aislin's apartment?" I ask.

"Probably. Why?"

"I think I found a watcher. Let's see what he does when the light goes on."

"Give me ten minutes," she answers, and hangs up.

I pace for what seems much longer than ten minutes before my com finally rings in my ear.

"Ready?" she asks, when I take the call.

"Go ahead," I reply.

She turns on the light, which is visible from both the yacht and the hover car. A few moments later, I see the man in the car sit up straighter and stare at the entrance to the private garage.

"I found a watcher," I say.

"Cephas!" Cindi says. "The light went back out. It was done manually by someone inside the apartment."

"I figured she'd already left. She must be hiding up there, and now we've revealed her."

"Her private car just activated. She's going to run," I hear Martha say in the background.

"Meet me at the hover line entrance," I say.

I hear Martha and Cindi running up behind me, just as the large door begins to open. Martha has always been the fastest runner in Bethany House, but today - she's lagging behind Cindi - the effects of pregnancy.

As the private car glides past, we can only see a dark figure inside. I wave, but get no response.

Normally, the system controls the maximum speed of even a private car in order to maintain the flow of traffic; but if you have enough money and influence, such inconveniences can be overridden. I see the car jump to an abnormal speed.

"What now? We'll never keep up," Cindi says.

"Let's jump the guy who was watching," I reply.

I begin to run to where he's parked; then stop short.

"What is it?" Martha asks.

"If you knew your assassination had been ordered, would you leave by the front door - in a car with your name on it?"

I see a small boat approaching the riverbank behind the building. The engines on the yacht roar back to life, and the anchor rises out of the water.

"There she is," Martha says.

Aislin is running for the small boat.

"They'll never get away," I say. "The yacht is too close."

Five men climb onto the top bridge of the yacht, carrying kinds of weapons that I've never seen before.

"Cover fire," Martha says.

We draw stun guns and take cover behind the bench; but it's too late. Aislin is about to step onto the small boat, when we hear a small pop sound, followed by a 'whoosh' and see a smoke trail heading towards the shore. It's almost pretty - until it hits Aislin's boat and explodes in a fireball. Aislin is thrown backwards by the force and rolls on the ground. She tries to get up once, but then puts her head down and doesn't move.

As the yacht moves closer, the men on the bridge begin to fire stun rifles at her.

“Now,” I say.

I take two men off the top bridge, and Martha takes one. The other two return fire; then take cover. One leaves his arm exposed, which I hit before he crawls out of sight. The driver guns the engine and we fire as they retreat.

I look to my left and see that Cindi has been hit and is on the ground, with Martha looking over her.

“I can’t move my left side,” Cindi says.

I get my arm around her and lift her to her feet.

“Can you get her to cover, while I get Aislin?” I ask Martha.

We switch places and I watch them hobble away. Downriver, I see the yacht turning back towards us.

I expect to find that Aislin is just stunned; but it’s much worse. There are pieces of jagged metal sticking out of her leg, abdomen, and chest and there is a lot of blood on the ground.

“Cephas?”

“Hi, Aislin. We need to get you out of here.”

I start to lift her, and she moans loudly in pain. I withdraw my hands and find that they’re covered with blood.

“I’ve never been hit with a stunner before, you’d think it would stop the pain,” she says. “I wonder if they planned it that way - just to be cruel.”

She coughs.

“I’m going to try to pick you up again and get you to a doctor.”

“It’s too late for that,” she replies. “Cephas? Do you think the mark in my DNA will keep me out of Heaven?”

“Did you ever visit Brill at Capon Springs?” I ask. “Or did Austin ever bring you some water from there?”

“I met with Austin many times. He always had water with him, and I drank it on many occasions. Why is that important now?”

“It’s important because it means you’re not marked, Aislin. Four put vaccine in the water that kept your DNA free of the mark of the beast. You’re free.”

A look of peace comes across her face and stays there until it’s clear that she’s gone.

As the yacht approaches, I feel an electric charge, as it passes my shoulder and hits the dirt bank. I don’t want to leave Aislin here; but I have no choice but to run.

I find Martha and Cindi a block away, in an alleyway that’s partially hidden by a tree. When they see the blood, they don’t ask where Aislin is.

“As soon as Cindi can walk, we’re finding the next cargo car to Chicago,” I say.

“I take it we’re going back to Sheridan?” Cindi asks. “Why?”

“It’s time to finish the puzzle before anyone else dies.”

“You’re back,” Cameron says, as he meets us at the entrance to a Gethsemane House escape tunnel. “I thought you were gone for good.”

No you didn’t. You’ve been praying for us to return.

“But you’re glad we’re not,” I say. “Did you maintain silence, as I asked?”

“Yes. Our only communication has been with Hank.”

Cameron speaks to me as if he’s reporting to a commanding officer.

“Was there any unusual Federal activity here in Sheridan after it was clear that we had left?” I ask.

“As a matter of fact, there was. A team of cult hunters searched...”

“... the Sheridan Museum and Historical Society,” I complete his sentence.

“It was never reported anywhere. How’d you know?” Cameron asks.

“I stored a lot of my parents’ things there when I was twelve. It was only a matter of time before Aunt Jennifer figured it out,” I say. “She should be feeling very confident about now.”

“You think she found the notebook page?” Cameron asks.

“Yes.”

“So what’s next?” Martha asks.

“Another family reunion. If I contact her, she’ll come to Sheridan - if only to gloat,” I say. “So, who’s ready to go on offense for a change?”

Everyone smiles.

We travel to the shack that acts as the backup to Gethsemane, and I’m glad to see that Andrew has moved excess equipment and a sizeable amount of water there. Martha sets up the hacked com to call Aunt Jennifer, again making it appear to be Henry again. She bets that the signal will be recognized as fake, and rejected; but the call goes through easily.

“Cephas. How good of you to call your old aunt again.”

The way she smiles, it’s clear she knew it was not Henry calling this time.

“Aunt Jennifer. How nice of you to wear more clothing this time.”

“I’m thinking you want a certain piece of paper that has recently come into my possession,” she says. “It was so nice of your old babysitter to keep it safe at the Historical Society. I’d love to show you my new home. Why don’t you stop by?”

“I’d prefer a more nostalgic meeting place,” I reply. “The only place I’ll meet with you is in my Father’s house in Sheridan.”

“You’re making me come to Sheridan as a punishment, I assume,” she says. “Did you know that the name ‘Sheridan’ means ‘wild’ or ‘untamed’? What a fitting name.”

“Then I’ll see you tomorrow at noon in Sheridan, at my Father’s house; and if a single boot from The Corps walks on Hickory Street, the whole thing is off. Do we have an agreement?” I ask.

Aunt Jennifer gets a self-satisfied smirk on her face.

“I hear you, Cephas. Noon - in your Father’s house.”

My parents’ old house on Hickory Street is again put under surveillance to see what sorts of traps are being set up. Andrew keeps me busy watching surveillance footage on the assumption that I’m best able to spot disguised cult hunters; but there’s no visible Corps activity anywhere in Sheridan.

“Do you have a final plan?” I ask, as I enter the command center.

“They’re all bad,” Cameron replies. “The escape routes and cover are both limited, and they control the hover lines, the tube lines, and the airspace.”

“Then how about if I just walk into the house and sit at the table?” I ask. “I know my aunt. She has the paper, and she’ll bring it with her.”

“It’s not your aunt I’m worried about.”

“She’s the only one I’m worried about,” I say. “I won’t be captured by Henry’s men tomorrow. That much I know.”

As the evening wears on, the activity inside Gethsemane doesn’t slow down. Everyone - except for Martha - seems to have too much nervous energy to sleep; so they check, and recheck, the plan and their gear. An offensive operation seems to be what the men and women of Gethsemane House have been waiting for; but now that the opportunity has arrived, they’re unsure of themselves.

I know how they feel. The last time I saw Michael, we promised each other that we would place our trust in the Lord. Everything I’ve seen, every piece of the puzzle, seems to be leading me

towards the plans I've set in motion. I want to believe that I've ended my disobedience, and that I'm now following the Lord's will; but I keep asking myself if it's possible that I'm just another Pharisee.

Is it possible that this is just another plan, conceived by a foolish man that will again miss the mark of what God designed?

Martha was tired out from our travels and is asleep; so while everyone else bustles about, the only thing I can think of to do is pray. I close the door to our room, and watch Martha sleep for a while; then get onto my knees, with my head resting against the bed.

Father? I'm scared. You made me a master of human puzzles; but Your puzzles are beyond my understanding. They're just a jumble of pieces to me. It makes no sense to me that this is the solution You want me to find. Twice, You sent me on a path through time to see Your only Son crucified and risen, and when I returned, I shared the good news. Was that not enough to ask of me?

I pause for a moment, because I'm shaking from the effort of this prayer. I can no longer stay on my knees, and I fall flat onto the floor.

I led the people back to the Bible, and yet it seems that You want me to follow even more closely in the path of Jesus. Your message reached the hearts of Michael and Aislin, and now they're dead. I prayed at Bethany House; but the only way I could see to heal the sick led to its destruction. Now I'm praying in Gethsemane, and I know it'll be destroyed next.

If this is really what You want me to do, then I'll gladly do Your will without hesitation. Please tell me that I'm doing the right thing.

As I've been praying, I've been bending my neck to one side without realizing it; but now my neck is stiff. I suddenly remember the dream I had on the way to Dallas, where I was a puzzle piece refusing to go into place by bending my neck. As I straighten my neck, it pops and I feel complete relief of the pain. I let out a gasp, as the meaning becomes clear.

Thy will be done. I'll trust the Lord, and take my place in His puzzle.

Chapter Twenty-One

I crawl into bed beside Martha. I was praying aloud, so I'm surprised she didn't wake up. I somehow manage to drift off for a while; but I wake up as I feel Martha first jolted out of her sleep, and then slip slowly out of bed. We have the only room in the basement of Gethsemane House with a private bathroom; but she walks past it and leaves, closing the door quietly behind herself.

I wait five minutes, and when she doesn't return, I slip out after her - wondering if she needs comforting. I see the door to Cameron's room is slightly ajar, so I walk to it and listen; then ease my head inside and find that his room is empty. I glide down the hallway until I hear Martha's voice in the conference room. She and Cameron are talking privately.

"I'm just saying that the whole mission is a little strange. There's something Cephias isn't telling anyone ... not even you," Cameron says.

"I know," Martha replies, "but he sees things that we don't see. There's some puzzle coming together in his head, and we can't even see the pieces - much less the picture that needs to be formed."

"Why doesn't he tell you? You're his wife."

Cameron chokes a little on the last part.

"If there's anything I learned from time travel, it's that there's a price to be paid for knowing what's going to happen, before it happens," Martha replies. "As the puzzle comes together in his head, he's paying a steeper and steeper price for the knowledge he carries. I can see it on his face. I know he'd like to tell me ... but he won't let me pay the price along with him."

They stand in silence for a minute.

"Cephias knows that he can't protect you. When we were under the tube, he told me that loving him is going to get you hurt someday," Cameron says.

"What else did he say?" Martha asks.

"He told me how much he loves you, and I have to admit I've never seen love like that in any man's eyes before. Cephias loves you, down to the very core of his being. Like Christ commanded us, he loves you more than he loves himself. On the other hand, he'll do anything to protect you, and - frankly - that makes him dangerous on this mission."

I hear Martha sit down and start to sob.

"Please don't cry, Martha. We're taking the entire combat team. He's going to be fine."

"That's why I came to you," Martha says. "I had this dream where Cephias was captured and tortured, and everything they did to him, I felt along with him. I'm telling you it's real. I may not feel it on my body; but if he's captured, every strike of the lash they give to him I'll feel the pain in my soul. Whatever's coming, I can't let him go through it alone. Cephias said that he won't get captured tomorrow ... but I know that's what's going to happen. Please don't let him walk into that house."

"Okay. We'll change the plan, and you'll stick on him to make sure he stays away; but if things somehow go bad, are you absolutely sure Cephias doesn't know what you told me earlier?" Cameron asks.

"I'm pretty sure. I was very careful," Martha replies.

"Does Cindi know?" Cameron asks.

"Of course. So does Blake from Bethany - but only because I needed his help with the metalwork," Martha says.

And now I know, too. My sweet, sweet Martha. God has always had a special place for you in this puzzle, too.

"So you'll be with me, if the time comes?" Martha asks.

"You know I can't say no to you, Martha."

"I know. That's why I asked you," Martha replies.

“One more thing,” Cameron says. “Since we’re taking almost everyone we have tomorrow, Gethsemane House isn’t going to be defensible. Given the way the perimeter has been tested, if Cephas is off the raid, I think you two should clear out of here when everything is going down on Hickory Street.”

Thank you, Cameron. That’s perfect.

“Okay. We’ll do that,” Martha replies. “I need to get back. I need to be with him tonight.”

I hear them start to move; so I quickly retreat through the halls to our room. I make it into bed a minute before Martha returns, and realize that I’ll need to keep my feet away from her or she’ll feel that they’re cold.

As she slips into bed, I pretend to sleepily roll over and put my arm around her. She lets out a sigh and cuddles into me. A few minutes later, I feel the first telltale spasm that lets me know she wants to cry, but is holding it back. When I pull her tighter to me, and she begins to sob.

“It’s going to be okay,” I say.

“Earlier tonight, I had another dream where you’re tortured.”

She had the dream while I was praying?

“I was back at Golgotha, watching the crucifixion, but I couldn’t see because a Roman soldier was in the way. So I moved forward, and when the soldier moved out of the way, I could see that it was you on the ground, being nailed to the cross by Henry. I could hear laughter, and at first I thought it was Henry doing the laughing ... but then I realized it was you - laughing at him. And the harder he pounded the nail, the louder you laughed at him, and then...”

She begins to sob again, so I let her cry for a while.

“What happened next?” I ask.

“They raised you up first; but when they raised up the thieves on either side of you, it wasn’t the thieves on those crosses. It was Aislin and Garai.”

This time she cries for a long while; so I hold her and stroke her hair. As she starts to cry herself out, I speak again.

“Martha. Who was on my left?”

“What? Why does it matter?”

“It matters to me. Who was on my left?”

She calms down, and focuses on the memory.

“Garai was on your left and Aislin was on your right, and they were both already dead. Garai had even started to rot - like he had been dead for a while.”

He’s been rotting on the inside since he decided to join Henry...

“In your dream, did I die too?” I ask.

“No. You were still alive and laughing at Henry when I woke up.”

We lie in silence again.

“Cephas. I know there’s something you’re not telling me. The puzzle is coming together, and you know what it means - and you don’t want to tell me. You think you can protect people by not telling them things; but you can’t. Even Christ warned His Apostles of what was coming.”

“You already know the answer, Martha. We ran here and there around the country, leading Henry on a chase; but you know I wasn’t running from Henry. I was running away from something I’ve been called upon to do. A cup has been set before me, and I have no choice but to drink from it,” I reply.

“Then save some for me, and we’ll go through it together,” she says.

“Whatever’s coming, watching it happen to you would be a greater torture than enduring it alone. You have a different place in His plan, Martha. Do you remember when you were kidnapped, how I said I wouldn’t stop looking for you; and when I prayed, clouds covered the moon so I could see the light in the house where you were being held?” I ask.

“Of course.”

“Someday it will be your turn, Martha, and one of the things that helps me to face it is knowing that you won’t stop looking for me, and that you’ll continue to pray until the Lord shows you the light where I can be found,” I say.

“You said the one thing you know for sure is that you won’t be captured tomorrow. Does that mean you already know what’s going to happen?”

“All I know is that I won’t be captured,” I say.

“Then promise me you won’t go anywhere near Hickory Street.”

“I promise,” I say.

My fate doesn’t lie on Hickory Street...

The next morning I slip out of bed, without waking Martha, and grab the backpack that contains all of my current possessions. This pack rode on my back from Egypt to Galilee, but it’s time for it to give up the last of its contents.

Cameron’s door is open and he’s on the floor doing push-ups, which I have no doubt is part of a longtime morning routine.

“Good morning. Where’s Martha?” he asks.

“Still asleep. Can we speak privately for a minute?”

“Sure, I wanted to talk to you anyway,” he says. “Martha requested - and I agreed - that you’re off the mission. The plan’s simpler now. We’re not even going to let your aunt enter the house. We’ll take the paper, if she has it ... or her, if she doesn’t. Your wife will kill me where I stand, if I let you into that house.”

“Give Martha’s imagination some credit. She’d think of something worse than death,” I reply. “Don’t worry. I’ve already heard about the plan change and I know better than to ask. I’m here to give you something for safekeeping.”

I reach into my pack and bring out two leather bundles and set them on his desk; then unwrap them, revealing the two handguns we took from Francis and Michael in Galilee.

“Cool - but I’m not an antiques dealer,” he says. “Stunners will work just fine for today’s raid.”

“These aren’t for today ... but they could come in handy in the future,” I say. “These are so old that they’re literally just hunks of metal. They don’t have a single chip in them.”

“So?” he asks.

“When these were built, the standard for finding a hidden weapon was a device called a metal detector. When things like target acquisition software and trigger fingerprint safeties were invented, chips were integrated into both the weapon and accessories, such as helmets and visors. Guns like this were all melted down over a hundred years ago, and the few that were kept by collectors had the firing pins removed under Federal law.”

“Keep talking,” he says.

“When that happened, the standard for weapon detection became detection of the chips, rather than the metal, because those sensors tell you exactly what sort of weapon it is, and the name of the person carrying it. Metal detectors became obsolete and were thrown away.”

“You’re saying these are operational guns which can’t be detected?” he asks.

“I’m saying you could take these into F.B.I. Headquarters, and they’d never know.”

I fix my eyes on his, as he contemplates the significance.

“Do I have a reason to go into F.B.I. Headquarters?” he asks.

“Maybe not today - but you never know.”

My next stop is Cindi’s room. At Bethany House, I noticed that she likes to work late and sleep late, but today she’s up early.

“Ready for the big mission?” I ask.

“I’m the backup lookout six blocks away from the action,” she says. “It isn’t exactly a high-pressure position.”

“Would you do me a favor?” I ask. “I have something that I’d like you to hang onto for me.”

“Sure - but why? Martha goes where you go and I go where Martha goes; so what difference does it make?”

“In a way, it’s a family keepsake and I don’t want to risk losing it.”

I take a small leather pouch out of my pocket. I dump the contents into my hand to reveal the various gems we pried out of Jocie’s cross before we traded the gold for coins.

“Are those man-made or natural?” she asks.

She takes a large red stone out of my hand.

“I have no clue. I figure I’ll give them to our Jocie, when she’s old enough to understand the story of how she was named and who she was named after.”

“What are these smoky-colored ones?” she asks.

“Those were a gift from Albert. They have an interesting story too.”

I pour everything back into the pouch and hand it to her.

“I was thinking that the next time we’re near Ogallala, you could give them to your mother for safekeeping. All she has to remind herself of me is an empty plate on holidays; so I thought she might like to have them for a while.”

“Mom would love that.”

Cindi packs the gems away; then heads out to join the team.

My pack is empty except for a few ancient gold coins that are worthless in this time and my Roman toga and tunic. Martha will want to have those. I wish I had my travelling staff, but it’s still sitting in a corner in Capon Springs. A traveler should always have a staff, though I suppose it isn’t going to do me any good on the journey still left in front of me.

I’ve given everything away. I’m ready for whatever today is going to bring.

The team starts to move out in small groups to take up positions around the house where I grew up. Hickory Street is a quiet little lane in a small town, so I wonder where any of them can hide without being conspicuous ... but I have confidence that they’ll pull it off.

As the last of the Gethsemane staff leaves, Martha and I prepare to make our way out an escape tunnel and down to the river. Martha turns back, as we pass our room.

“I should take a com - just in case,” she says.

“They can handle this without you,” I reply. “Besides, we may be safer if we don’t carry anything traceable.”

She mulls it over for a moment.

“You may be right,” she says, and we continue on our way.

It’s a beautiful late summer day; so we watch the river roll by for a while. The bugs are having their last hurrah before the cold of fall and winter drive them into hiding, and the fish in the river are enjoying the buffet, as they try to stock up for the cold months ahead.

“It’s only eleven o’clock. What shall we do for the next hour or so?” Martha asks.

“How close am I allowed to go to Hickory Street?” I ask.

“Not very.”

“Can we visit the Sheridan Museum and Historical Society? That’s seven or eight blocks away from my parents’ house on Hickory Street. Since my parents’ things were still in the basement when the Feds raided it, Mrs. Pierce must still be alive and running it. I’m sure she’d love a surprise visit, and I’d love to see her.”

“Okay, but let’s go right now. I want you completely off the street at noon,” Martha says.

Me too...

Martha takes no chances. She insists that we walk well south of town along the river, and then move east through the newer section of town, rather than walking straight down Church Street itself, which would take us within a few blocks of the raid. When we've cut back to the north, we find Old Robinson Street, which will take us to within a block of the museum.

It comes into sight at ten minutes before noon. I stop Martha under some tall trees that provide deep shade.

"Do you mind if I go in alone? If Mrs. Pierce is still running the place, I'm sure it will be a huge surprise for her."

Martha frowns disapprovingly at the idea of me going anywhere alone; then begins to stare over my shoulder at the little white building with the steeple. Her mouth opens slightly and she starts shaking her head.

She got it.

"My Father's House," she whispers, and starts to pull me away.

I grab her by the shoulders.

"Martha, it's going to be okay."

She shakes off my hands.

"You told your aunt to meet you *at your Father's house*. You didn't mean your parents' house. You meant the old church."

She reaches up to her ear where her com would be, if I hadn't convinced her to leave it behind.

"It was the only way I could keep the Gethsemane people safe," I say. "She'll keep her word. Nobody will touch them on Hickory Street."

"No."

Her voice is a whisper and her bottom lip begins to quiver, followed by tears running down her cheeks.

"Please, Cephas. You can't."

"It's the cup that's always been set before me. It's time for me to drink from it."

"No. We can still run. We'll get the team over here. We'll get the paper from your Aunt. We'll keep the chase going. You don't have to walk into this trap."

"I'm not going in for the notebook paper, Martha. Jennifer never had the paper. All she has is a fake that I left for her."

"Then why? Why are you sacrificing yourself? You said you wouldn't be captured today."

"And I meant it. I'm not going to be captured. You were there with Jesus at Gethsemane. He wasn't captured. He gave Himself over willingly, and that's what I have to do, too. It's the only way left to distract Henry and keep him from releasing the toxin. Every day that I can delay him is a chance to save more souls."

"There's more to it," she says. "There are ways to distract Henry without handing yourself over to him. Explain it to me."

"It's the moment of darkness," I reply. "I've been running from it, denying it, trying to find my own solution to the puzzle that doesn't include it; and that solution doesn't exist. Do you remember how I asked you how I'm supposed to be the rock in a world where hearts are closed off? I don't know why, but somehow the moment of darkness that's coming is the only way to open hearts up again. Somehow -when things look darkest - Jesus will shine through me."

"You can't ask me to do this, Cephas. I'm not strong enough to go through it again - especially not by myself. I stood by and did nothing while Jesus was tortured, and I can't watch you being tortured the same way."

I lift her chin, forcing her to look at me.

“I’m not Jesus. I’m not taking the punishment for the sins of the world, and - unlike Jesus - I’m not going to be separated from God. He’ll be with me the whole time.”

“Cephas, tell me ‘not today’ like you did in Dallas,” Martha says.

I stand silently, tears rolling down my cheeks.

“Say it! Say ‘not today’,” she begs, softly pounding my chest. “Say it!”

“I’m sorry, Martha. Only He knows the day.”

Martha sees my lips are now quivering too, and loses what little control she had left.

“Please God! Make him say ‘not today’ for me.”

She sinks to her knees.

“Martha, listen to me. You’re a piece in His puzzle too, and He has a plan for you ... and maybe in His plan you don’t have to stand by and do nothing, like we did at Golgotha. Remember your promise. Keep looking for me - no matter what. Jesus will help you. He’ll help you find me.”

She stops sobbing and stands. I can see the new strength and resolve surging through her, as she accepts what I’m about to do, and embraces that it’s now her turn to save me.

“That’s the fire in your eyes I wanted to see, my bride,” I say, though my lip is still quivering.

“Get used to seeing this fire. You’re going to see it again. Remember your promise too: Nobody takes your ring off your finger except for me.”

“Nobody,” I say.

I can hear drones high overhead, starting to descend.

“It’s time for you to keep your promise, Martha. It’s time to turn your back on me and run. You have to get the Gethsemane teams to safety and abandon Gethsemane House. It isn’t safe there anymore.”

She doesn’t move.

“You can do this, Martha. You have three things that will get you through: faith, hope, and love.”

“But the greatest of these is love,” she whispers into my ear, then sprints away.

Chapter Twenty-Two

I turn towards the steeple and take a deep breath. Even though it's noon, the steeple casts a short shadow on the lawn in front of the building, and I gasp when I look down at it. There's a bush growing against the building that's just tall enough to catch a few of the sun's rays. The top of the bush has lost its leaves, and at this very moment the sun is aligned so that the leafless sticks cast a shadow in the shape of cross at the top of the shadow of the steeple. The cross that once sat atop the steeple was removed decades ago; but for now, it's as if it's still standing proudly in the light.

The drones descend to just one hundred meters. I count four of them - all trained on me. I smile, knowing that Martha isn't being pursued. The old church has heavy, double wooden doors. I open the one on the right and it creaks exactly like it used to when I was a boy. As I close it behind me, a large Corps bus glides to a stop, and dozens of heavily-armed agents burst out. In a minute or two, the building will be an armed camp that the Four teams couldn't possibly break through.

Then the old familiar smell of the building hits me. It's slightly musty, with a hint of pine from the air freshener that Mrs. Pierce likes. The large, open sanctuary was maintained as a reading area down the center, with display cases along the walls. I see the large stuffed fish that some guy named Si caught in the Fox River and donated to the Historical Society. Mrs. Pierce hated that ugly old fish, but tolerated it as a means to start conversations and assess who might be a Christian.

As I walk down the rows of reading tables, I catch an invading whiff of my Aunt Jennifer's perfume. It hangs in the air, like death. I walk into the library to the left, and find Aunt Jennifer casually reading the copy of the Bible that I first stole from - and then returned - to this church.

"Updated International Version from 2029," I say. "It isn't exactly the original Greek, but it's still a nice choice for beginners."

She smiles pleasantly, and rises.

"I've never seen what all the fuss is about," she says, as she approaches. "They have a book on witchcraft too, and I don't see much difference."

When she has crossed the room, she comes up close and gives me a tentative kiss on the cheek.

"Aunt Jennifer. From the time I was eight-years-old - even when I was lost and lonely after mom and dad were killed - that has got to be the first time you've ever kissed me."

"How could I possibly resist the opportunity? I thought you, of all people, would enjoy the irony of being betrayed with a kiss," she says.

"I'm sorry, Jennifer, but the role of Judas is already taken. Where is Garai, anyway? He usually pops up on a screen at times like these."

She suddenly looks flustered.

"You're still good at these little games, aren't you, Cephas?"

She composes herself, but is starting to look frightened.

"But you seem to have lost your boyhood curiosity. Don't you want to get a look at what you came for? I have your father's notebook page right here."

She holds up the piece of paper.

"You're going to be disappointed," she says. "There's no technical information about how to make a vaccine."

"I know."

When Aunt Jennifer is feeling nervous, she has a slight twitch in the corner of her mouth. Today it's working overtime.

"You're not here to find some last minute miracle for the plague?" she asks. "You don't think the last page describes how to make the vaccine? Then why have you come?"

“The page is just a piece in His wonderful puzzle - as are you and I; but you’re right. I do love puzzles. If you’d remembered that and searched the paper, you’d already know that God has you right where you’re meant to be today.”

I place a com in my ear.

“Computer, display the page in Jennifer Paulson’s hand on the nearest screen, and highlight the first and last letter that appear on the first ten lines.”

The highlighted letters appear on the screen.

“Now pull them out and line them up in order.”

The letters spell out: “You forgot about the trapdoor.”

I cross the two meters separating us. She looks scared that I’m going to hit her, but I bend slightly and kiss her on the cheek.

If it’s possible to make a person become completely unhinged from a kiss on the cheek, then I’ve accomplished it.

“I’ve been advocating behaving more like Christ,” I say. “Even though it was well within His power to escape crucifixion, He surrendered peacefully. So, here I am.”

I open my arms wide.

Aunt Jennifer takes a com from her pocket and, with a shaking hand, places it into her ear. It’s been set to make an automatic call on activation.

“Henry, call it off. Get everyone out. He knows everything before I say it. I don’t know how, but we’re not in control here.”

She’s shrieking into the device.

“Of course you’re not in control here,” I say. “God is. Can’t you feel His presence all around us?”

Jennifer backs out of the room, obviously terrified.

I hear doors opening and men crashing through the building. When they enter the library where I’m standing, they’re all carrying stun rifles and comically pointing them in every which direction, as they look for hidden threats.

“It’s okay,” I say.

I open my arms wide again to show that I’m not a threat.

“I’m the only one here.”

An older man, who appears to be in charge, rushes towards me. I can see that he’s going to do a leg sweep and knock me down. I could easily avoid the blow, and probably disable him and take his rifle, but I stand passively and let him knock me down. I get onto my hands and knees.

“Don’t worry. No harm will come to any of you,” I say.

“I can’t promise the same, fish head.”

He brings the butt of his rifle down on the back of my head, turning the world black.

I wake up - or at least I think I’m awake. The pounding pain in the back of my head tells me at a minimum that I must not be dead. I start taking a mental stock. I appear to be sprawled out on a hard, cold surface, which means I’m not tied up. The surface seems to have a slight vibration to it; so I’m probably in a tube car.

I open my eyes and instantly regret it. The light is dim, but still sends a shockwave of pain through my head. Everything was blurry or covered with stars anyway, which probably means I have a concussion. My left hand is killing me. Did I fight someone? Fighting certainly wasn’t part of my plan.

A new series of vibrations hit me - it’s from footsteps heading my way.

“Why can’t those fools follow instructions?” a man’s voice asks.

That voice seems sort of familiar.

“I told them not to hurt him, unless absolutely necessary and instead, they knock an unarmed man unconscious with a rifle butt? Idiots! Getting him healthy could delay things by days.”

Delay? Delay is good. I'm supposed to be delaying somebody.

“Shall I find out who did it and bring them to you?” a woman’s voice asks.

That voice sounds familiar too. I wish I could think just a little more clearly. I'm sure I could figure out who it is, if my head would just stop throbbing.

“Yes. Get a report, and get his head on a stick,” the man replies. “And get a doctor on board. I want Paulson up and talking as soon as possible.”

I drift back out of consciousness, with my head ringing. Is my head ringing from the concussion? Or is it something else? It sounds more like a hammer hitting metal than a constant ringing in my ear. Slowly I come to realize that I’m having the blacksmith shop vision again; so I embrace it. This time I’m going to hit the nail so hard that it breaks. I do not want to be the one who forges the nails that crucify Christ. I hit it again and again and can’t even bend it. This time when I pull the nail from the water, the “C” and “H” have been joined further down the nail by an “S.”

I wake up with a start, but keep my eyes closed. I thought the dream would be more pleasant than reality - but I was wrong. Instead, the addition of another letter in Christ’s name leaves me feeling depressed, like I’m waiting for an inevitable outcome that I can’t affect.

I have no concept of how much time has passed, though I do know I must have been in a very deep sleep, because I’ve been moved. I’m now on my back on a soft surface - most likely a bed. There’s now a bandage on the back of my head and the pain is tolerable, though my left hand still aches. On the bright side, enough of the fogginess has lifted from my brain that this time I’m sure I’m awake.

Based on the vibrations, I seem to still be on board a tube car. There’s someone in the room with me, as I can hear soft breathing and the occasional shifting of weight, like they’re sitting and reading. I open my eyes just a slit and see Janet, my old “press secretary,” seated across the room reading something on a computer pad. Hers was the female voice I heard earlier, and the man was Henry. I notice that my clothes were changed at some point while I was asleep, I’m now wearing just a simple brown robe, similar to the ones I saw in ancient Jerusalem.

Henry wants you to look like Jesus.

I can think of no good reason to speak with Janet; so I remain still, hoping to gather more information. I don’t have to wait long, because moments later Henry, and a man I presume is my doctor, enter the room.

“Good. He looks perfect,” Henry says. “When do you expect he’ll wake up?”

“It was a serious concussion, but the swelling is stabilized,” the doctor reports. “It can be hard to predict when he’ll regain consciousness. It could be an hour, or it could be a day. Just don’t expect him to think clearly for a day or two.”

“He’s still wearing the ring on his left hand. I thought I was clear that everything that was his needs to go,” Henry says.

“I know what you said but ...,” Janet replies.

“I’ve never seen anything like it,” the doctor interrupts. “Normally, when someone is unconscious, all of their skeletal muscles relax; but his left hand goes into some sort of involuntary spasm every time we try to remove the ring. I had two strong men try to pry his fingers open, and they couldn’t do it. It was like trying to straighten out curled up pieces of iron.”

“He looks relaxed now. Get it off,” Henry says.

Janet snorts.

When the doctor touches my hand, my fingers instantly curl into a fist. While the rest of me feels horrible, my left fist feels like a source of raw power. I know there's no way anyone can open my hand, if I choose to keep it closed.

God put the rings on our fingers. Nobody removes it, except Martha.

"See what I mean?" the doctor says. "I've never seen anything like it. All I can figure is that it's some abnormal side effect of the concussion."

"Fine. Leave the ring for now. I'll think of some way to use it," Henry says. "Janet, we'll be there soon. I don't need to tell you that you need to move fast. We're doing this with minimum security so nobody suspects who our guest is. Once he's inside, we're relying on secrecy rather than firepower."

That's good to know.

The bed I've been lying on turns out to be some sort of rolling medical gurney. Why would they choose an old one with wheels, when hospitals are fully equipped with modern ones that hover? I must be going somewhere old, where the floors don't have hover pads installed.

When we pull into the tube station, my wrists and ankles are secured to the gurney. It's okay, I wasn't feeling up to a run anyway.

I start risking cracking an eye open to search for clues as to where I am. When we reach the elevator that'll take us up to a private hover bus entrance, I can see the board listing the occupants. Janet is listed, as are three men whose names are unfamiliar; but my name isn't on the list. When Martha was captured, they put a chip into her; but they haven't done so with me. They must be afraid that Four can hack tracking chips and see where I am. It also allows them to make me disappear without a trace, once they've killed me.

It's good information, but it tells you nothing about where you are. It looks the same as any elevator in any tube station.

We go up three floors then enter an area reserved for private bus loading - which looks the same as any. There's bright sunshine coming in through the windows. That doesn't mean anything. It's cold. Now, that could be something. I'm probably still in North America ... perhaps in one of the northern states.

They load me into a large, private bus with all the windows darkened; so I leave my eyes closed and begin to count. Maybe I can estimate the distance we travel. As I count, I realize that we're traveling uphill. A hover bus can only climb about a two to three percent grade, but the difference is noticeable. When we stop, I estimate that we've travelled somewhere between forty and forty-five kilometers.

They take me out of the bus and into bright sunlight; but it's still cold. I smell something familiar on the wind. It's something vaguely sweet - like butterscotch, or maybe vanilla. I crack my eyes and see evergreen trees. I'm smelling ponderosa pine trees, which means I'm somewhere in the western United States or Canada. That would be consistent with the fact that I can see a lot of sky.

The sun is blotted out, as we enter a large shadow, so I risk cracking my eyes open again. I catch a glimpse of what looks like the Great Plains stretching out in front of me, with a small city nestled against the large hill we climbed up to get here. I'm not sure that's helpful.

The shadow deepens, but slowly I become aware of dim lights high above me. I've been taken inside a building. It must be very large - like an airplane hangar - because we're not turning any corners. No - it's not wide like a hangar. I can hear the echoes of the footsteps as I'm wheeled along, so it sounds more like I'm moving through a large tunnel than a hangar.

"Doctor," Janet says, with some concern in her voice. "I've been watching the numbers on the monitor. Have you noticed that his pulse rate is swinging up and down? I also noticed his oxygen has been dropping. It was ninety-nine percent, and now it's ninety-seven."

The doctor comes along-side the gurney and looks at the monitor.

“The oxygen perfusion is no big deal. We’re over two thousand kilometers above sea level and it’s normal for it to drop a little as you go up in altitude. The pulse rate is more of a concern. Getting hit at the base of the skull can mess up a number of autonomic functions like heart rate and breathing; but it might also mean that he’s regaining consciousness and is scared or confused.”

We’re at two thousand kilometer; it’s cold; I smell ponderosa pines; and I could see out over a large plain. Wait. Not all of the evergreens were green. Some were blue spruce, and I could hear the rattle of quaking aspen. I think I’m in Colorado.

“See? His pulse is spiking up again,” Janet relays to the doctor; but he doesn’t respond.

Oh, no. My pulse is spiking as I piece together where I am. I need to stay calm. I need them to think I’m still completely out of it.

“Even with a concussion, this one is very smart,” Janet says. “I wonder…”

You’re smart too, Janet - no matter how dumb you sometimes try to act.

“Doctor. Is there any way to tell if someone is awake or asleep?” Janet asks.

“Sure, but I don’t have that kind of monitoring equipment here.”

“Are there any old-fashioned ways?”

“One traditional way to revive someone who fainted was to use very strong smells. Doctors used to carry a tablet called a smelling salt that they’d activate and hold under the patient’s nose. It smelled so bad that it would often bring people out of the faint. If you held it under the nose of a conscious person, there’s no way they’d be able to resist acting reflexively. Of course, doctors haven’t carried such primitive things for decades now.”

“It sounds like the idea was to make the person uncomfortable. I’ve always been pretty good at making this particular patient uncomfortable,” Janet says.

I’m sure she has a devious smile as she says it.

She slides her hand up my robe, squeezing and tickling first my lower leg and then my thigh, as she goes.

Think fast.

“Martha,” I moan.

“I promise I’m much better than Martha McLeod,” Janet says.

“That was great, Martha. Don’t stop now.”

“All you’ve proven so far is that you can make his heart rate spike again,” the doctor says.

“He’s fighting for consciousness, but he isn’t there yet,” Janet says, and withdraws her hand. “If he knew whose hand was really up his robe, he wouldn’t be so enthusiastic about it.”

What did you once say, Janet? I’m under deep cover?

I wake to the sound of the door being unlocked and two people entering the room; but I decide to continue the possum act, if I can. My head still hurts where the rifle butt hit me, but my mind is surprisingly clear.

“Wake him,” Henry says.

I know from his tone that his patience has worn thin.

The doctor must have found a store of ancient medicines, because I hear a slight popping sound - followed by the worst smell I’ve ever encountered assaulting my nose. The doctor is right, I begin to cough reflexively - and the possum act is over. I try to raise my hands to keep my head from shaking painfully as I cough, but find I’m still strapped down.

“Rise and shine,” Henry says.

“Henry?” I ask.

It’s not hard to act disoriented.

“I have the mother of all headaches,” I say.

“I’m sorry about that. My agents can get a bit over zealous at times. Giving you a concussion has thrown me at least two days off schedule - maybe more, depending on you.”

“How thoughtful of you to wait for me.”

I settle back, with my eyes almost closed.

“Of course I would wait for the star of the show,” Henry says.

“Are you sure want me as the star of this show? The last time you made me the star, the show didn’t turn out the way you wanted.”

I intentionally wince, as if I’m in agony, but Henry doesn’t betray the slightest hint of sympathy for my pain.

“Of course you’re the star, Cephas. Look! You’re already in wardrobe and everything.”

Henry gestures to indicate the “Jesus robe” that they dressed me up in when I was unconscious.

“You told your dear Aunt Jennifer that you’re trying to be more like Christ; so I thought I’d treat you to the entire experience. Of course, I can’t go so far as to make you a martyr. Some fish heads are going to survive, and I wouldn’t want to provide them with a rallying point. It would be much better to break you. I want every fish head that remains to hear you deny Christ.”

“It’s not going to happen, Henry. I was there twice. I saw the angel who rolled back the stone from the tomb - and I saw Christ walk out. You’ll kill me before you hear those words cross my lips.”

“You say that today ... but a week from now you may not be so confident.”

If I can buy the world a week, it’ll be worth it.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Henry doesn't waste any time in getting the torture underway, though stage one isn't what I expect. A large screen is brought into the room, with the volume turned up to maximum.

First up is coverage of the siege in McIntosh, South Dakota. Drone footage shows lines of people at water stations, where members of Four are doling out rations of what little safe water remains. Henry has *generously* offered safe passage to registered citizens - as long as they take their assigned dose of his vaccine. None have accepted the offer.

At first, I'm surprised that Henry is allowing footage of defiant Christians to be broadcast to the world; but the scripted commentary of the announcers tells me his aim is to paint everyone in McIntosh as suicidal nuts. For decades, his strategy has been to get everyone to forget about religion through the use of sex and drugs. Now he seems intent on awakening them again, so long as he's in complete control of the narrative.

Next is footage of Zip, in an intercepted conversation she had with Hank. Her lips look dry and she appears to be very tired.

"Hey, Hank, if you can get a message to Cephas, tell him that - at the current rate of depletion - we have just fifteen days of water remaining."

"I have some bad news, Zip. Cameron reported that Cephas has been captured by The Corps."

"Then get a message to Martha. Tell her I'm sorry."

Zip's as clever as her brother. She allowed the message to be intercepted. There's no way they have that much water; so she was letting me know that she needs fifteen days to get everyone out of McIntosh.

As a torture, the footage of McIntosh is supposed to wear me down with feelings of responsibility and guilt; but, instead, I find myself feeling uplifted. The remaining saints that packed the town to be baptized by Michael appear to be real believers rather than the pretenders Henry expected them to be. I know there are cameras watching for my reactions; so I try to give them nothing.

It seems my lack of reaction works, because the feed switches to footage of my arrest in Sheridan. They switched my clothes to this robe before I even left the building, making it appear to the world that this robe has become my everyday attire. There are close-ups of my face, showing my head rolling to one side and blood dripping from my nose, as I'm carried to the large Corps hover bus. The Bible that belonged to Mrs. Pierce is held up as some sort of war trophy, "proof" that I was in the building teaching the Word. The commentators say that I was heavily armed and subdued after resisting arrest.

As the bus pulls away with me inside, the footage switches to an aerial shot from a news drone. As the commentators prattle on in the background about cult activities, the drone follows the bus west on Church Street. When it reaches Barr Street, I see Martha standing on the corner. My cousin Cindi has her arms around Martha's shoulders, as they watch the bus pass. Ten meters away, I can see Cameron and his brother, Andrew. Other figures scattered about are likely the rest of the Four team.

Martha is safe.

I feel uplifted again, so the screen is turned off and Janet enters the room.

"Please don't speak in the squeaky voice you used when you were my press secretary," I say. "I still have a headache."

"Not to worry," she replies. "What I have here will give you headache enough; but first, I'm wondering about the ring that won't come off your finger. Where'd you get it?"

"I bought it during my second go at time travel. It's my wedding ring."

I smile; then pretend to wince at the effort.

“I presume you’re claiming to be married to Martha McLeod? How did you manage a Christian wedding, with no priests around to do the job?”

They don’t know that Martha time traveled with me. If I answer truthfully, they’ll be gaining information to somehow twist against me. If I lie and say we were married in our own time, they’ll call the marriage a cultist sham because the government wasn’t involved.

Rather than answering, I just smile.

“No matter,” she replies. “Whatever she was to you, your beloved Martha McLeod is now dead.”

I continue the silence.

“Don’t believe me? Here’s the high-level drone footage from just before you walked into the old church,” Janet says.

The image is from about one thousand meters above street level. I watch the footage of me holding Martha by the arms. I can hear her voice again in my mind, begging me not to willingly walk into the obvious trap. I see myself turn towards the church, and Martha running in and out of the shadows of the huge old trees that line Church Street.

“You’ll love this part.”

Janet switches to her annoying, squeaky voice, and watches my reaction.

“Your Martha was good at evading drones; so here’s the shot from a drone that was farther south.”

The camera angles switch, showing Martha is still running west, now about four blocks away from where we parted. She disappears under a dense tree for a moment, and when she emerges, she’s tripped by a man who appears from around the corner of a house. He draws a stunner and fires on her at point-blank range. When she’s completely incapacitated, he puts the pistol directly against her temple and fires, causing her body to jerk. Even on a low setting, a stunner against the temple is usually lethal. He backs up and shoots her a couple more times for good measure; then walks away, his long shadow trailing behind him.

Long shadow? When I went into the church, it was noon. Even the tall steeple was casting a short shadow. Besides, the other footage showed Martha on the street corner when the bus pulled away with me inside. Are they really this incompetent? Or is there a reason for showing me things that I’ll easily see through?

I keep a steely-eyed stare on the screen, and let out a deep sigh.

“You should be happy, Cephas. It was a much better way to go than by the toxin.”

Wow. It looks like they really are that incompetent.

When Janet leaves, the screen returns to loud news coverage of anything they can think of to depress me. There are reports from McIntosh; there are reports of continued airborne spread of the plague; and lots of footage of “Christian” corpses in Southeast Asia. Somehow I manage to sleep through much of it.

When the screen clicks off, I’m not surprised to see Henry enter my room - followed by two large security men.

“Cephas, you look depressed. How about if we get you onto your feet for a while?” he asks.

“Before you pound a nail through them? Sure, why not?”

I intentionally give a half-hearted smile.

Let him think his psychological assault is working.

“Where are we going?” I ask.

“The star of the show needs to see his stage, don’t you think?” Henry replies.

Henry moves to undo the restraints.

“I do hope you’re not thinking of escape or a rescue. We learned a lot from the last time you were rescued. Five different tube cars buzzed around the country, following patterns consistent with

transporting a prisoner of your importance. Even then, we're quite sure that members of Four watched us move decoys into the NASA base in Michigan and into Corps headquarters in D.C. Nobody seemed to be watching when we got here though. Sorry."

As I get off the bed, I purposefully lose my balance, and have to catch myself. The security men lunge forward, probably thinking I was about to attack Henry. One even kicks my leg; but I manage to stay on my feet, with the help of the bed.

You're stronger than you thought you'd be - but not strong enough to take these two.

"Wheelchair?" asks Henry.

"No thanks. I need to build up my strength, so I'll be ready to carry a cross."

As we walk through the halls and up an elevator, I scan and analyze everything I can see. From the look of this facility, I would swear that I'm inside an old aircraft carrier rather than a mountain. Wherever it is, it's very old and has been largely unused for a long time. The wires and lights hanging on the walls appear to be at least one hundred years old, and have a thick layer of dust to prove it. The air circulation system in this area may have been only recently restarted, because the air smells moldy.

"We have only the finest arrangements for you," Henry says. "You're in an underground bunker that was created prior to the Final Holy War to house nobody less than the President of the United States, and protect him from enemy missiles. Of course, that was when the president was worth saving. These days, we'd just let him fry and prop the next loser in line up in the chair. It's an ideal location because it has all the video equipment we'll need for your show."

A Presidential bunker? We're inside Cheyenne Mountain - just outside of Colorado Springs. The bunker was built above a military facility that was part of NORAD. I read about it years ago when I was first studying the Final Holy War. Henry must have loved the irony of bringing me "home" for his big finale.

Henry leads me through the halls, until we reach what appears to be an old television studio. It's constructed like a theater, with seating for a few hundred and a stage where the President would speak to the nation in an emergency. In the center of the stage, two wooden posts have been bolted to the floor, each with a wrist cuff attached to it. I presume I'll be chained to those posts as part of the show.

I walk to the posts and feel the rough wood. I stand between them and find they're perfectly spaced so my arms will be fully extended when I'm chained.

"You won't hang me on a cross, so you'll chain me here, and make me look like a human cross instead?" I ask.

"I wanted to hang you on a real cross - but we outlawed all religious symbols decades ago," Henry says, and laughs. "Still, I'm sure the symbolism will get through."

I'm counting on it.

"So, what over-enhanced movie star did you hire as the host of the show?" I ask. "It can't be Brock, I'd never get enough screen time."

"I'm glad you asked, Cephas. I've been meaning to thank you for inspiring me to take the role myself. My family has been working in the shadows towards this day for generations, and you made me realize that it's finally time for me to step into the limelight. My star will be born, as yours is finally snuffed out, and mankind can finally get on with living up to our true potential."

When the tour is over, I expect to be returned to the room with the bed; but instead I'm locked into a cold room that's empty - except for the large screen on the wall, and a bucket in the corner. The screen isn't carrying a live feed, but is set in a continuous loop of a woman pleading: "Help us, Cephas." They play it for three hours straight. I can't imagine how I manage it, but just as I drift off into sleep, the video stops and the door opens. After three hours, the sudden silence is almost as intrusive as the lady pleading for my help.

Garai steps into the room, flanked by two security men.

“Cephas, you look awful,” Garai says.

“You look worse - if you consider the tattered appearance of your soul,” I reply.

Garai just smiles.

“So what did he pay you, Garai? Thirty pieces of silver?”

“He paid me in a commodity of which you are short, I’m getting enough vaccine to save everyone in my organization who is off grid. We will become fully registered members of society. Unlike you, and the members of Four, we will live on.”

“If you gave Henry your membership list, you’re a bigger fool than I thought,” I say. “You should find out if it’s too late to get the silver, maybe it’ll be enough to buy a plot to bury you.”

“You have him all wrong, Cephas. Henry knows he can never kill all Christians, so he wants to find a way to integrate us. He’s the one who’s helped more moderate groups - such as mine - survive, while more radical groups - like Four - need to be controlled before they can damage society as a whole.”

“Society as a whole is already so damaged that God is now the only hope of repair,” I reply.

“And that is where my group will be successful - where yours has failed. Henry has agreed to let us teach - within certain boundaries. We’re to be called ‘The New Christians.’”

Garai sounds like a giddy child.

“Was the name ‘The Marked Christians’ already taken?” I ask. “And what exactly are ‘certain boundaries?’ You can’t teach only the parts of the Bible that are convenient for you.”

“We’ll work out those details later.”

He pulls a computer pad out of his pocket.

“Here. Look at the magnificent New Christian Cathedral I’ve designed.”

The video shows a gigantic glass and steel building with a towering steeple.

“Build whatever you want, Garai. You can’t make it a house of God. All you have there is a soulless building with a cross on top of it. It’s too bad Henry killed Aislin. She could have helped with the finances.”

“Do you really think the fools who work for Henry could accomplish killing Aislin by themselves? I had to lead them straight to her; but even I couldn’t have done it without your help. Turning on the light in her apartment to flush her out was pure genius.”

I try to never think of a person’s smile as good or evil, but Garai now gives me a reason.

“Even then, Henry still couldn’t get his part right and plant your DNA to make it look like you killed her,” Garai says.

“Why? Why did you kill her?”

“Aislin was much too dangerous to be left running around inside the government - especially after she told me she was going to ally herself with you. You’re right that she could have helped with finances though. I thought the hundred million or so I control was pretty good; but the money that woman controlled was well into the billions. It’s such a shame that you forced me to work with Henry, the three of us could have made an incredible team.”

“Why are you really here, Garai?” I ask. “I’m sure you didn’t stop by simply to gloat.”

“I’m here to help you save the members of Four, of course. Your membership is small - I’d guess just a few thousand at most. Henry has offered to let them live under my protection as ‘New Christians’ - if you can provide me with a members list.”

“I don’t speak for Four. Ask Austin.”

“Nobody has seen Austin for some time now,” Garai says. “I do hope nothing has happened to him.”

Garai smiles again and I see something that shocks me much more than his words. In the corners of his eyes - where there used to be subtle crow's feet - the skin is now smooth. He's had small enhancements placed there.

"Can you get Henry that information? It may save your life," Garai says.

"He who loves his life will lose it," I reply.

Garai's face flushes red with anger. He turns on his heel to leave; but then stops, and looks at me over his shoulder.

"It's such a shame about what happened at Gethsemane House in Sheridan. I'm sure you heard by now that the whole thing exploded in a ball of flame. If only their equipment hadn't been jammed, they might have seen the missile coming and gotten out. I do hope your lovely wife wasn't inside when it happened."

He doesn't know that we found his jammers. Gethsemane House did see it coming - and they got out. I can just feel it.

Chapter Twenty-Four

This otherwise empty cell still has its original clock on the wall. Most people have never seen a clock with hands, but I rather like them. The second hand on this one makes an audible click as it moves, which I think is intended to be part of the psychological torture. When you have no way to see the passage of time, it may pass slowly or quickly, depending on your perception. When you have nothing but a clock and your thoughts, you realize just how much time you really have in a day, a year, a life.

Luckily, the experience of time travel - that unending blackness where you are stuck for a lifetime between two ticks of a clock - has conditioned me to the point where watching seconds pass in a cell is not only tolerable, but possibly enjoyable. I smile when I think it was all part of God's plan for me. God prepared me to be here, and I'm exactly where God wants me to be - like a piece in a puzzle.

My sleep is broken by the video of the woman pleading: "Help us, Cephas" and bright lights coming on every hour. I think they're timed to invade my dreams. With my head wound feeling much better, I'm also ravenously hungry and thirsty; but all I've been given is about a liter of water. I know sleep deprivation, starvation, and dehydration should be having a cumulative effect on my ability to think clearly; but as far as I can tell, my mind has remained sharp. On the other hand, maybe my thinking has become too fuzzy to even recognize it's getting fuzzy.

At precisely nine AM, the screen comes on for the morning news, and the guard delivers my food - along with a gruff warning to be ready when he comes back.

"Be ready? It's not like I'm taking a shower and putting on a suit in here," I reply, but get only the clunking of the door and the locks being activated as a response.

My breakfast is a slice of coarse bread, two sticks of dried meat, dried apricots, and a small glass of water. I pick every crumb from the plate.

The morning news moves to a live feed that must have been specially ordered by Henry. It's an aerial shot of the smoldering remains of Gethsemane House. The government claims the cause of the explosion is unknown; but the view from above shows two entry points - like the fangs of a viper - where missiles penetrated the roof. Henry wants to send a clear message.

I start to have some doubts about whether the Four staff survived the attack, when I notice something flashing every few seconds in the lower left corner of the screen. Someone is hacking the live feed. It's very small and subtle; so I walk closer to the screen and focus on it. It says, $\mu\mu\pi\chi\rho\delta$. Only Martha knew what I carved into the wall of the tomb in Giza. This is from her, telling me she's okay. I touch where the symbols appear on the screen, trying to connect with her. Although I feel a newfound strength in knowing she's alive and reaching out, I rest my head against the screen in the agony of missing her. I hope Henry interprets it as me starting to break.

At exactly ten minutes before ten o'clock, the door opens and the guards command me to follow. We arrive in the Presidential studio, and I'm chained between the two posts. The distance between them keeps my arms outstretched to the point where I'll find little rest while I'm here. If I lose my footing and fall, my own weight pulling down could dislocate my shoulders. Even breathing will become difficult eventually if I fall - much like hanging on a cross.

At exactly ten o'clock, the lights in my area of the stage go dark, while the stage lights to my left brighten - revealing Henry. He's wearing full stage make-up and is dressed in the latest fashion, like a game show host. Janet must be in charge of his wardrobe.

"Welcome, world!"

Henry is practically screaming in his excitement.

“I know we’re breaking in on some of your favorite shows worldwide right now; but I think everyone will find what we intend to present so interesting and entertaining that you won’t mind a bit. I’m your host, Henry Portman. Most of you came to know me, not as the Director of the F.B.I., but as the heir to my family legacy as leaders of the worldwide atheism movement. No family has done more than mine to clear the world’s collective mind of theology and focus it upon human potential.”

“I believe so devoutly in human potential that I’m taking a week off from my duties at the Bureau to put my beliefs on the line, and stand toe to toe with a man who has recently dedicated his life to confusing you. You know him as the man who went back in time, and now claims to have witnessed the resurrection of Christ - not once, but twice. You also know him as the man who loves being on camera so much that he’ll hack into his old lectures; so we’ve decided to save him the trouble and just give him his own show. Ladies and gentlemen, I present to you, Dr. Cephas Paulson.”

The lights come up on me. There’s a large monitor in front of me so I can see what the world is seeing. There I am, with matted hair, standing chained in my brown “Jesus” robe. Henry crosses the stage and enters the shot to provide a remarkable contrast. Here he stands in his fashion statement - representing a clean, shining future - while I’m portrayed as a disheveled figure of the past - one that’s better off forgotten.

The monitor also has a viewer counter. It’s registering over one hundred million, and growing rapidly. That’s many times the audience that I ever reached, and many times the number of known or suspected Christians in the world. Are people watching because this is on in place of their favorite videos? Or are they really interested?

Cindi was right. I didn’t arrive on a colt, but Henry arranged for me to have a modern version of Christ’s Triumphal Entry.

“Let’s tell everyone the rules of our show,” Henry says. “Everyone who has followed Cephas since he returned from the Travelers Initiative knows he’s an advocate for being more like Christ. For that reason, he’s dressed in his “Jesus Robe.” Every day at this time, Cephas is going to be given the opportunity to tell you how you too can be more like Christ, while I argue against him. At the end of the week, we’ll have a final debate. That all sounds fair, doesn’t it? So, without further ado, it’s time for Cephas to make an opening statement.”

I say nothing. Henry is puzzled at first, but his expression quickly shifts to anger.

“Come now, Cephas. You have the floor. You must have something to say.”

“Book of Matthew, Chapter 27: When accused by the leading priests, Jesus remained silent,” I reply.

Even under the heavy makeup, I see his ears turning red with rage. He wants a point for point debate, but I’m not going to give it to him.

Make him lose his cool.

“I had thought you might not want to debate and, given the weakness of your position, I can hardly blame you,” he says.

Henry is playing to the camera instead of me.

“So why don’t I start? I think you can still be coaxed into responding.”

I give him a penetrating stare, but smile pleasantly.

“Societies are made of rules,” Henry says. “Without them, we would wander. That’s why, one hundred and fifty years ago, the United States amended its Constitution for the thirty-fifth time, to give everyone the basic right to be free from seeing or hearing unwanted religious expression. The world was such a mess, back then. There were too many voices expressing too many belief systems; so many, in fact, that a nuclear and biological holy war erupted, killing one-third of the earth’s

population. Three point four billion people died - because of religion. It seems clear to me that God's rules killed those people, not the sensible rules we've passed to govern ourselves."

He stares at me, and I stare back. He can't believe that I won't respond to correct all the inaccuracies and outright lies he just spewed.

"Our rules are so much simpler," he says.

Henry gets up into my face.

"We've built a society where we take care of everyone. We're free to pursue whatever pleasures we choose, and I - for one - like to choose among many pleasures. Just ask your Aunt Jennifer."

Why is he so desperate to bait me?

I want to respond, but instead, I think about The Travelers Initiative and the time I spent muted by the injury to my neck. At the time, I thought I was muted so I could finally learn to listen. Maybe the time was also meant to teach me how to stay silent.

"You still have nothing to say?" Henry asks. "Then I guess I'll need to handle both sides of the debate. I guess I'll have to figure out for myself what being more like Christ is all about."

It's working. I'm not following his script, and he's definitely losing his cool.

The camera moves to a wide angle so Henry and I both stay in the shot, while he crosses the stage and picks something up.

"Lucky for me, Cephas has kindly provided me with a manual so we can all see what it's like to follow Christ."

He holds up the Bible that belonged to Mrs. Pierce.

"This should be very enlightening. What did you quote earlier, Cephas? The twenty-seventh chapter of Matthew?"

He turned right to it. He knows how the Bible is arranged.

"I'll get to twenty-seven later. Twenty-six looks like a better place to start today. According to this, part of being a Christian includes having people spit in your face," he says, as he reads how Jesus was treated by the Jewish leaders after his arrest.

He walks up to me and spits in my face, hitting me on the forehead. I shake my head and most of it flies off. I catch a glimpse of the viewer counter, which is shooting up. Henry follows my gaze. He sees it too, and smiles as he makes the connection.

"It also says right here, that you should be slapped."

The sting of the slap, and the loud crack, are shocking. It was so hard that Henry has to shake his hand from the pain he inflicted upon himself. A few moments later, the counter soars and Henry smiles again.

"I have some assistants here who also want to explore Christianity."

Henry gestures to the big security guys to come onto the stage. He holds the Bible in front of himself and pretends to read.

"According to the Bible, a good Christian should expect to be hit with fists, too."

He motions to the two agents to start beating me.

I know the first blow came to my face and started my nose bleeding, and the second was delivered to my stomach and knocked the wind out of me; but after that, I lose track. Outstretched as I am, I fight to stay on my feet by tightening the muscles in my arms and chest. My attackers realize what I'm doing and sweep my feet out from under me. I go down with a jerk, hanging from my wrists. The cuffs cause deep cuts in each wrist, but luckily neither of my shoulders dislocate.

"These are two zealous new Christians, aren't they folks?" Henry says to the cameras.

"I didn't read anything in the Bible about using a knee to the chest, but apparently my associates here have created a new Christian doctrine."

The blows are countless, and hanging by my wrists, I'm defenseless. When I can open my eyes, I see my blood dripping onto the floor. I manage to look up for a moment and see that the viewer count is over three hundred million worldwide.

Eventually, new blows don't add any new pain, and my mind calms down for a moment. I remember the conversation I overheard between Martha and Cameron. Martha said: "I had a dream where Cephas was captured and tortured, and everything they did to him I felt and I'm telling you it's real. I may not feel it on my body, but every strike of the lash they give to him, I'll feel the pain in my soul."

"Martha!"

When I yell, Henry raises his hand for the beating to stop.

"So you can still speak?"

Henry's gloating over the small victory.

"Shouldn't you cry out to God instead of your beloved Martha? Maybe there's some Humanist in you after all."

"Martha. Close your eyes."

"That's it? No Bible lesson?" Henry asks.

"All the answers you need are found in the Bible."

I see blood spray from my lips as I speak.

"Go on. Please enlighten us," Henry says.

"We all walk different paths on our way to Jesus."

I'm starting to feel lightheaded, and my vision is blurred.

"To follow my path, look to Noah, Obadiah, Ruth, Abraham, and Daniel."

I hear Henry paging through the Bible as I watch my blood continue to drip onto the floor.

"The rest look boring, but Noah and Daniel look like good suggestions. We can probably put you through some sort of flood, and a lion's den sounds like great viewing."

I try to focus on Henry, but my head is wobbling too much. I try to smile at the camera, but I think my face is already too swollen for my satisfaction to come through.

You missed it, Henry.

I'm dumped into my cell and promptly pass out, despite the video blaring the latest anti-Christian news. In the middle of the afternoon, I'm awakened by the doctor, as he cauterizes, and then bandages the cuts in my wrists.

"If those had been deeper, you might have bled to death," he says.

He hands me a large bottle of water, which I gulp down.

"If you're cooperative, you'll get more water and some bread.

"That's Henry, always the humanitarian," I reply.

"Henry ordered me to reduce the swelling in your face. He's afraid that if you look too bad, you could inspire sympathy."

"Do I have a choice?" I ask. "I could use a little sympathy."

"If you fight me, the guards will hold you down while I treat you. So, no; you don't have a choice."

He applies cool-feeling bandages to my face, and the skin instantly feels better. When he's done, there are only holes for my eyes, nose, and mouth. It must have been quite the beating.

"It's not so bad, you know," I say.

"This treatment should feel pretty good," he replies.

"I don't mean the bandages. I mean the beating isn't so bad - when you think about it from my perspective."

"How so?" he asks.

“Although he’s trying to replicate the torture given to Christ at the crucifixion, all Henry can do to me is the beating one man can give to another man,” I say. “Christ endured much more than I ever will. God gave Christ the punishment that all of mankind deserved, so we wouldn’t have to be punished. Worse than that, for the first time in his life, Christ felt what it’s like to be separated from God. Henry can’t separate me from God more than I already am; so anything he does to me is pretty weak in comparison.”

The doctor stares at me.

“I’m not a trained psychologist, but Henry has asked me give him regular psych evaluations.”

“Tell him what I just said, and let him draw his own conclusions.”

“Thank you for cooperating, Cephas. I’ll get you that food and water now. You’ll look better by morning, but I’m going to include some pain killers and some drugs that’ll help you heal faster,” he says.

“Keep the painkillers, doctor. I won’t take them.”

“Why?”

The very idea is foreign to him. Nobody in this culture ever refuses painkillers.

“Because they’ll numb everything - including my mind - and I don’t want that. Jesus suffered an excruciatingly painful death as a representation of what sin does in our lives, it causes us pain and separation from God. I want everyone watching to see the pain that sin causes the way I saw it when I was back in time: Up close and personal.”

Besides, when you’re drugged to the point of feeling nothing, you also miss out on feeling love.

Chapter Twenty-Five

I'm asleep again that evening, when Janet comes in to see me, with more water. I fell asleep sitting up in the corner because my ribs hurt too much to lie on my back.

"You can have this water, if you answer my questions," she says.

"Just don't ask me to move."

"You called out to Martha McLeod during the show today. What makes you think she's still alive? According to our informant ..."

"You mean Garai?" I ask.

"Yes, Garai. According to Garai, Miss McLeod..."

Janet places emphasis on "Miss," so I interrupt her again.

"It just kills you that Martha and I are married, doesn't it, Janet? We're married and in love and right with God. I have to ask myself: Why does an atheist like you care?"

I watch her face carefully, and see that Janet cares a lot. I've rattled her, but not because she wants me; she wants love. Janet continues.

"According to Garai, *your wife* was in the place you called Gethsemane House, and it was surrounded by jamming devices. They had no way of sending or receiving communications, or detecting any incoming threat. They should've been taken by complete surprise, and yet you seem quite sure that she's still alive. Why?"

"Gethsemane House? You told me Martha died on the street in Sheridan from a stunner to the head. I've always known she's a remarkable woman, but my wife is quite extraordinary to have survived that, isn't she?"

"I told them you'd see right through that lousy video."

Janet shakes her head.

"Again, Garai guaranteed us that everyone at Gethsemane would be taken by surprise," Janet says. "What makes you so sure she's alive?"

"There are two reasons. I'll give you the first one for half of the water in advance."

I try to smile through the heavy bandages, but Janet gives no indication she's seen the effort. She hands me the water. I'm not feeling thirsty, but I gulp it down just the same. She stops me when I'm about half done.

"The first reason is that men who are in love know these things about their wives. It's a special thing, being in love. Don't you think so, Janet? Tell me: what's his name?"

"Who's name?"

"The guy you love - the one you hope someday will love you enough to marry you?"

I see Janet shudder, and it isn't because the room is cold.

That got to her...

"Give me a better answer than that, Cephas, or I'll pour the second half of the water over your head."

"The other reason is that we removed all the jammers. I ordered the facility to stay silent and act like it was still jammed, and Garai fell for it. Before I walked into the old church, I ordered Gethsemane abandoned. You bombed an empty warehouse. Didn't anyone notice how we used Garai's jammers to take down the drones at my parents' old house? You guys are pretty slow sometimes."

I neglect to mention the symbols that Martha hacked onto the broadcast for me to see. Janet hands me the water, and I finish it before she can change her mind.

"It sounds like you have jammers in your life too, Janet."

I know I'm pushing a line, but it could be very useful to touch Janet's heart.

“All the enhancements, all the casual sex ... they jam your ability to send and receive love, don't they?”

She turns her face away and her hand goes up, presumably to wipe a tear.

Who's in whose head now, Janet?

“Thanks for the water, Janet. If you're interested in drinking from the well where you'll never thirst again, I'm easy to find.”

The door opens abruptly and the guard pokes his head in.

“Henry wants you out of there - *now!*”

I bet he does.

I look directly into one of the cameras that watch me around the clock.

“You should have listened to Aunt Jennifer, Henry. You're not in control here.”

I spend the night wondering if I should've taken the painkillers. I probably have at least one cracked rib, and my abdominal muscles are bruised beyond belief. Breathing is painful; but I take comfort in the fact that I'm not coughing up blood.

At exactly nine o'clock, the screen comes on and some bread, fruit, and water arrive. For today's lead news story, Henry has selected short clips about the ratings my beating got, and how today is expected to have even more viewers. There are no “man on the street” interviews to tell me if the world simply enjoys watching torture, or if they're watching in order to pray for me.

The next story is about the status in McIntosh, South Dakota. There is no rain in the forecast; but the faithful are holding firm. Unfortunately, they're also getting bold. Last night a group of armed Christians attempted to steal a Federal water truck and take it into McIntosh, and wounded three Corps kill team members in the process. They didn't get the water, but they did play right into Henry's hand. Sooner or later, he'll use such violence as an excuse to attack the town and kill everyone in it.

The last story is designed to show me just how little time I have left. Airborne spread of the plague is continuing, and many newborn babies have died. The synthetic virus does not cross the placenta; so babies in the womb do not receive the gene therapy. Tissues taken from aborted pregnancies show that mothers who are vaccinated before getting pregnant pass the protection to their children.

My Jocie is safe.

The government announces that they're sending people to every remote corner of the globe, and have vaccinated all babies in utero. If the story is true, Henry can release his airborne toxin anytime he wants. As far as I know, there's only one thing delaying his final assault: me. He still wants every Christian in the world to hear me deny Christ before he wipes out all who have not been vaccinated.

Again, at precisely nine-fifty, the door opens and the guards tell me it's time for the show. One of them is the guy who first hit me yesterday. I look down at his hands and see his knuckles have fresh scars. He hit me so many times that his hands started to bleed.

“I wish I could heal those for you,” I say.

His gaze snaps around to meet mine.

“What?”

He clearly isn't accustomed to hearing prisoners speak.

“Your hands. They got nicked and bloody from beating me. If I had the power, I would heal them for you. I've already forgiven you.”

“No talking,” he grunts.

“Perhaps your hands aren't the highest priority. I'll pray for the healing of your soul,” I say.

He shoots me an angry look, telling me I had better shut up.

When we enter the studio, Henry takes one look at me and starts yelling at everyone around him.

“Why is he still wearing bandages on his face? I told you to have them off by show time.”

His tantrum reminds me of a child.

“The doc didn’t show up in time,” the guard protests.

“You don’t need a doctor to rip off some bandages. You take them off. We go live in five minutes.”

The guards chain me, and proceed to rip the bandages from my face. It feels like the bandages did reduce the swelling; but there were cuts on my face that were starting to heal - which have been ripped open again by the rough treatment. I feel a trickle of blood, or puss, run down my cheek, and I smile. The doctor would have undoubtedly taken more care.

When the lights come up on Henry, I see there are over seven hundred million people watching before the show even begins. That’s nearly a quarter of the world’s population of three billion or so. It’s far fewer than the number who watched the Travelers Initiative, but it’s still a staggering number.

Henry opens the show with a recap of yesterday; then crosses the stage to where I’m chained to the posts.

“Shall we debate today? Or would you like to spend more time having the “Christian Experience,” like yesterday?” he asks.

“I have nothing to say to you, Henry. To the audience, I’ll say simply: ‘pray for me.’”

I stare straight ahead.

Henry predictably flashes to anger, but calms himself quickly.

“I thought as much.”

Henry smiles to the camera.

“But I know a topic where Cephias is the expert. Since he brought up the subject of his beloved Martha yesterday, let’s talk about her.”

He looks at me to assess my response, but I stare ahead blankly.

“For those who don’t know, Martha McLeod is an operative in the group known as Four. She was sent to kill our dear Cephias, but ended up falling in love with him and recruiting him into the group instead. Now they claim to be married. Can you imagine - in this day and age - anyone wanting to be married? He even wears a gold wedding band on his finger.”

The camera zooms in on my left hand.

“What a lovely ring,” Henry says.

He turns to his two security men.

“Remove it,” he orders.

I’m chained around the wrist; so I can still make a fist. The bigger guy, with the torn up knuckles, comes over and laughs. He thinks it will be simple. He grabs my fist and tries to straighten my fingers, but cannot.

“I’ll break them if I have to,” he warns, but I don’t respond.

“Not today,” I say directly into the camera.

I look at him. He’s so intent on removing my ring that he’s completely exposed himself. My feet are not chained; so I could easily kick him in the groin and end this, but I don’t need to do that. My hand feels like a solid rock and he feels like a fly trying to move it. It’s as if the strength of God is surging into my clenched fist.

The other security guard joins him; but even together, they cannot make headway. They finally give up.

“We could cut his finger off,” one of the guards says.

“Beat him until he lets it go,” Henry replies.

Fresh from the frustration and embarrassment of being unable to open my hand, the guards go into a frenzy, when given the order. They must have been told to lay off my face, because today they

take turns punching and kicking my ribs and abdomen, until I'm hanging by my wrists again. The cuffs tear open the cuts in the same spots as yesterday. This time I know I felt one of my ribs crack.

"Get the ring," Henry says.

The guards try again, but again my fist is like a solid rock, and they fail in frustration. For just a moment, I see that Henry is amazed and confused, but he regains his composure.

"I knew he would never give it up," Henry says, in order to declare some sort of victory. "His ring is a symbol of being bound like a slave. Slavery is one of the most repugnant chapters in human history, and something in which I want no part."

I manage to raise my head, and see the viewer counter is approaching one billion people actively watching.

Henry retrieves the copy of the Bible.

"Didn't I promise Cephias that we'd return to Matthew, Chapter 27?" he asks the camera. "Ah, yes, here it is. Apparently the full 'Christian experience' includes being scourged. I like the sound of that."

When Jesus was scourged, He was on His hands and knees, with His hands tied to a post above His head; but Henry leaves me standing, with my arms outstretched. I want to laugh when the guard comes out with a Roman-style flagellum made of seven long straps of leather. Henry is reading a Bible printed in 2029 that simply says Jesus was scourged. If he was reading a King James Version, he would know that Jesus was whipped using a lead-tipped flagellum, and that scourging alone took Him to the edge of death.

This whip is going to hurt. It will even cut through my skin so I'll bleed; but it's a child's toy, compared to what the Roman's used on Jesus.

I won't be the first to follow Christ's path; but like so many before me, I will bleed for what I believe.

When Jesus was scourged, the thongs at first cut only through the skin and produced an oozing of blood and plasma from the capillaries of the skin. However, as those initial blows fell, the balls of lead struck with such force that they produced large, deep bruises in the deeper layers of skin and muscle. As the leather thongs cut deeper and deeper towards the subcutaneous tissues, those bruises eventually broken open - until Jesus was spurting blood from the veins and arteries of the underlying muscles. By the time the soldier was done, His back was an unrecognizable mass of torn and bleeding tissue, some of it falling away from His body in long ribbons.

Henry's men unchain me long enough to strip me to the waist; then return me to the posts. The smaller guard takes the first turn.

The whip cracks, and pain sears across my back on the first strike.

One down. Only God knows how many to go...

Crack! Two down.

This guy might have made a good Roman soldier.

Crack! Three down.

Jesus didn't cry out, even when they drove the first nail through His wrist. I want to deny them the satisfaction of hearing me scream.

"Stop," Henry says.

His smile after the third strike falls tells me it's not an act of mercy.

"Cephias isn't in proper wardrobe," Henry says.

He jumps up and places a wig of long brown hair on my head and a short, brown beard on my chin. I try to shake them off, but they're stuck on using some sort of strong adhesive.

"If you want to play the part, you must look the part."

Henry signals for the scourging to continue.

There goes the first trickle of my blood down the small of my back.

Unlike the punching, where I quickly lost count of where and how many blows were landing on me, I'm agonizingly aware of exactly how many times the whip falls across my back.

Seven. Eight. Nine. Ten.

"Aaahhh!"

The sound leaves my mouth involuntarily.

I wanted to have the strength of will to bear it in silence ... but I'm just not strong enough.

When the lash lands the eleventh time, I hold back the cry - but I don't think I can hold it back again.

Crack! Twelve. "Aaahh!"

This time the cry is much longer and soulful.

They can get sounds out of me, but they will not make me sound like an animal. I will show them that I have a soul.

As number thirteen, I call out: "Faaather!"

As I call out to God, my knees give way so I'm hanging by my wrists again. The guard waits a moment for me to stand, but when I can't regain my footing, Henry waves for him to keep whipping. He hands the whip to the larger guard for him to take a turn.

At number fourteen, I yell: "Martha, close your eyes."

At number sixteen, I say: "Mercyyyyyy."

Henry leaps to his feet, with his hand raised to stop the scourging.

"Are you ready to talk?" he asks.

There's glee in his eyes at my suffering.

"I wasn't talking to you, Henry. I told you that God is in control here. I was asking Him for His mercy."

Henry's face flushes red and he barks at the guard to continue the scourging.

Seventeen.

Stand for me, Cephas.

Eighteen.

"Wait!" I cry out.

The guard stops the whip.

"Unless you're ready to say something that interests me, the scourging will continue," Henry says.

He waves his hand to the guard, but I'm looking over my shoulder at him and have the man transfixed with my eyes. He makes no move to continue.

"I'll stand now. I cannot stand in the place of my Savior -but I'll stand in his name," I say.

I struggle to my feet, with many groans and cries. I nod to the guard to continue, and hear the whip as it slashes through the air.

"Nineteen," I announce through gritted teeth, a split second before it lands.

"Twenty," I announce the count again, directly into the camera.

Henry looks furious.

"Twenty-One."

I look over my shoulder again.

"I personally forgive you; but only God can forgive your sins," I say to the guard.

Number twenty-two lands much lighter than the others, and I smile. Henry orders the guards to switch again.

Twenty-three also lands lighter than this man is capable of whipping.

"Harder!" Henry screams.

"Twenty-four," I call to the camera, before the blow lands heavily and I again lose my footing from the pain.

I'd like to say I'm bearing the pain well; but the truth is the pain is so great that, for now, the additional lashes don't add much to the agony. Even so, I know my body can't take much more, and I'm going to pass out soon.

Twenty-five.

I'm hanging limply, and my head is rolling around involuntarily.

"Is there anything you want to say?" Henry asks.

"Not today."

Twenty-six.

As the blow falls across my back, I feel myself passing out. If a real Roman soldier had been holding the whip, I bet I would have passed out after the seventh stroke.

Forgive me Father. I'm just a man.

Chapter Twenty-Six

I wake up back in my room; but this time I'm lying face down on a gurney instead of the floor. My left fist is clenched into a ball; so I loosen it enough to feel with my thumb and confirm that my wedding ring is still there.

"It's still on your finger," the doctor's voice says. "I've never seen anything quite like it. I swear all I have to do is look at your hand when you're unconscious, and you'll make a fist."

"What are you doing?" I ask. "I can barely feel any pain. I told you I don't want painkillers."

"The bandages themselves have a mild topical anesthetic in them; but don't worry. You'll feel plenty of pain," he replies. "It's the middle of the night, you've been out cold for about twelve hours. Right now, I'm changing the dressings on your back. I covered you with artificial skin and pumped fluids into you. You were pretty ripped up, but the wounds were fairly superficial - considering what they did to you. Only a few cuts penetrated all the way through the dermis to the subcutaneous. I got the deepest ones with a laser cauterizer, and patched up your wrists again."

"When will I feel pain?" I ask.

"Every time you move for the next month."

I try to lift my head, and find out that the doctor is correct.

"I've been given very specific instructions," the doctor continues. "Your wounds need to be closed; but Henry wants every mark to remain visible - preferably bright red, because it shows up well on camera. I'm afraid it's going to leave some nasty scars."

"Jesus kept the scars," I say.

The door clangs open, and a guard enters.

"Henry says time is up, doc. Remove the I.V., and he gets no more food or water until further notice."

The doctor removes the I.V.; then leaves the room.

"... and no more comfy bed," the guard says. "Get up!"

"I don't think I can, without passing out," I say.

He walks over and claps his hand down hard on my back. The explosion of pain makes me wish I'd moved a little faster. I manage to sit up, but I feel my head start to wobble with dizziness. I instinctively start to lie back down, but the guard hits me so hard on the back that I fall off the gurney. Thankfully, I land face first in a heap rather than on my back.

My robe is on the floor beside me; so I endure the pain of pulling it over myself as a blanket, and curl up on my side, in a fetal position. Something feels wrong with my face. I reach up and touch my chin and realize that Henry's "Jesus beard" is still stuck to me. It's a strong adhesive, but I tug until I remove it - causing a great deal of pain from the movement and the loss of some skin on my face. I count removing it as victory, before I pass out again.

Sometime later in the night, I open my eyes at the sound of the door opening. I'm having a hard time lifting my head; so my view is limited to a pair of very high heels - filled with very shapely feet and ankles - walking towards me.

"Professor, you don't look so good," a familiar voice says.

"Jocie?" I say. "Jocie, if you're here, does that mean I'm ..."

"Dead?" she completes my thought. "Not yet, Cephas - although I can see how you would make that mistake. After all, can it really be called heaven, if I'm not in it?"

"If I'm not dead, then how are you here?"

“How should I know? You’re the professor, and I’m just a movie star. All I know is that I’m here to tell you to hang on. You’re winning, Cephas! Every minute that passes is a small victory. You just need to hang on for a little while longer.”

“I don’t feel like I’m winning. It hurts, Jocie. It hurts so much. Sometimes the pain helps me understand Him better; but sometimes it makes me ask: ‘Why did He do it? Why did He hang on a cross and take our sins upon Himself?’ We didn’t deserve His sacrifice.”

“Of course we didn’t deserve His sacrifice. Isn’t that the point? He died a horrible, painful death to illustrate that sin cause’s pain and death.”

“I don’t know how much longer I can go on Jocie.”

I feel like I’m going to drift off again.

“I never got to kiss you the way I should have, Cephas,” Jocie says. “I wanted to kiss you in all the wrong ways - and for all the wrong reasons. Now I’m finally going to kiss you.”

I feel a warm, gentle kiss on my forehead. The warmth seems to spread all over my face; then down my neck; and eventually throughout my entire body.

“That should help you hold on for a while.”

Despite the pain, I turn my body so I can see Jocie’s face. Her enhancements are all gone. She has the natural proportions she was born with, and even her hair color is different. By some measures, she looks quite plain.

“Jocie. You look so beautiful. It’s the most beautiful I’ve ever seen you.”

My eyes start to tear up.

“Don’t you cry!” she says, even as a tear runs down her face. “You can’t afford to lose a drop of water. You’re the only one who ever looked beneath all of the plastic, and still saw me as beautiful.”

“I’m not the only one. Christ always saw you that way.”

“How I love you, Cephas Paulson, and - oh, how I envy Martha,” she says.

“I love you too, Jocie. Thanks for stopping by. I feel much better now.”

“Any time, Professor,” she winks an eye, as she says it.

She begins to fade out of my vision, but I continue to stare until she is gone. My eyes are wide open; so I’m pretty sure I was not asleep. Have the pain and dehydration caused me to hallucinate? Or was she really here?

I don’t bother to look at the clock when the screen starts blaring. It’s precisely nine o’clock. In one hour, I’ll be chained to the posts again, waiting for whatever torture Henry has in store for me today.

The news from McIntosh isn’t good. During the night, a large group of people who had been baptized by Michael marched to the perimeter and surrendered. None of them look like they’re from Four. The footage shows them lined up and receiving a dose of Henry’s vaccine, as the price they must pay to leave town and get safe water to drink. The screen then cuts to a shot that I’m sure was not seen by the public. As the last of the group receives vaccine, it begins to rain. It comes slowly at first, but quickly turns into a downpour. Many of the “newly marked” can be seen on their knees in the mud, crying. Souls lost.

There’s another intercepted message from Zip. Through dry and cracked lips she reports to Hank that - despite the number of people who left, and the rain they’ve collected - they’re now down to just five days of drinking water.

Zip has somehow accelerated the pace of sneaking people out of McIntosh. Even so, I don’t know if I can last five days for her, Lord.

The next video is a surprise. Garai is on a morning show that I recognize as coming out of Denver. The man who has hidden himself - and Christianity - in the shadows, is sitting in a studio giving an interview.

The hostess of the show is a highly-enhanced woman named Kelli whose age I could only guess. She explains to the audience that Garai speaks for several million “hidden Christians” who are seeking resolution. She then gives Garai an open microphone.

“The first thing I want to say, Kelli, is that, as the leader of the New Christians, we do not condone the actions of radical elements, such as Cephas Paulson, the man named Michael, or the organization Four. The New Christians are your friends and neighbors. We do the same things you do, and like the same things you like, and are not a danger to anyone. We’ve moved on from many old-fashioned notions, such as absolute purity and chastity, because we’ve seen that such ideas make Christians seem judgmental and preachy to outsiders. I, for one, visited a nice sex club here in Denver last night, and had a wonderful time.”

“So you would support the people who left McIntosh, South Dakota last night?” Kelli prompts on cue.

“Absolutely, Kelli. The New Christians would, of course, open our arms to all the brave people who finally saw the radicals for what they are, and turned their backs on them. In fact, I would like to personally offer everyone who leaves McIntosh a copy of the ‘New Christian Faith Guide.’”

Garai smiles and the screen switches to picture of the new guide. At the bottom, it says it will only be offered electronically - no paper copies allowed. It does not say “Holy Bible” on the cover.

“That’s a bold move, Garai, as is just being here,” Kelli replies. “Not long ago, the government labelled anyone holding Christian beliefs as a “cultist.” What’s changed?”

“I have met many times with Henry Portman, and I want to tell my followers - and all Christians - that the government is as eager as we are to find an end to conflict. As New Christians, we will need to temper ourselves to comply with the First Amendment limitations on expression of faith, but we’ll do so with government advice and oversight. As a matter of fact, Henry has even offered government support in editing and publishing our new Faith Guide.”

I bet he has...

At exactly nine-fifty, the door opens. It’s time for more torture.

“On your feet,” the guard barks.

It’s the guy whose knuckles are cut up from beating me. He must have the day shift.

I manage a low crouch, like a walking fetal position. While I was sleeping, the bandages dried out and stuck to the wounds; so straightening causes them to pull at the cuts, causing unbearable pain. We begin the journey back to the chamber, but the pace is much slower than usual, as I’m forced to walk hunched over.

“What’s your name?” I ask the guard with cut knuckles.

“What do you care?”

“I’ve been praying for you. It makes a better prayer, if I know your name.”

“Danny.”

I start to laugh.

“Quit laughing. What’s so funny about my name?”

“Your name is Daniel. It’s a Christian name that means ‘God is my judgment,’” I reply. “When you were whipping me, at times it felt like God’s judgment.”

“You must have had a few choice words for God,” Danny says.

“Of course I did - but not the choice words you may think. I thanked him for every lash. Paul felt it was an honor to be deemed worthy of being tortured in Jesus’ name; so I took it as an honor. I also spent some time praying for you.”

“Praying for me? Really? What did God say when you were praying for me?”

“He told me that no matter how much I wanted to, I wasn’t allowed to kick you in the groin all those times you left yourself wide open for it. He said that your children will make better choices than you; so I’m not allowed to hurt them before they’re born.”

I laugh.

“Check the videos, Daniel. There were many times that I could have ended your ability to father children.”

After that, we walk slowly, in silence. They don’t prod me along like they have in the past; so we’re late arriving in the studio. Henry is already on air, stalling for time.

“Where have you been?” Janet snaps.

“Look at him,” Daniel says. “His knuckles are dragging on the floor like an ape. He couldn’t stand up, so it was as fast as he could go.”

“Get him out there,” Janet says. “There are one point three billion viewers who are looking for the star of the show.”

As we cross the stage, the picture switches to me.

“Cephas, it’s good to see you; but I’m very disappointed that you made the audience wait.”

Henry says and claps his hand down on my back. I try to suppress it, but I let out a loud whimper.

“The bandages all dried in his cuts. I think he’ll pass out if he tries to stand up,” Daniel says to Henry.

Henry shoots Daniel a look that makes it clear his job does not include speaking, and motions the guards to take me to the posts. When we get there, they each take an arm to stretch me out and force me to stand. Their touches are almost gentle, and they each take a deep breath, as I feel their muscles tighten to begin pulling my arms outward. They know the agony it’s going to cause me, so they’re hesitating.

“No, Daniel. I can feel that you don’t want to do it. I won’t make you do it to me.”

I say it loud enough for the cameras to pick up, with tears in my eyes for my torturers.

“I won’t inflict that pain upon your hearts,” I say.

Daniel and the other guard release my arms.

“This...”

I grunt as I begin to straighten myself, my body shaking at the effort.

“Is mine...”

I grimace, and growl loudly as I continue to move inch by agonizing inch, while the bandages pull and rip at my wounds.

“... to bear.”

I look at the screen and see the camera has a close-up of my face. Anyone with a heart should see the fire in my eyes.

The guards watch in fascination, because I’m trembling in pain - but refusing to stop. I swear Daniel looks as if he’s about to cry, while I raise my arms in front of me, like I’m offering hugs. I then slowly stretch them out to my sides, until my wrists are in place at the posts. I nod to my guards, as if giving them permission to chain me in place. While they’re putting on the shackles, Daniel’s eyes meet mine and I nod down to his feet, which are again spread apart wide enough that he’s open to attack.

“Close your feet - but leave your mind open, Daniel.”

I whisper the words to just him. He closes his feet, but I’ll have to pray that he takes the latter advice as well.

“I don’t see what all the fuss is about,” Henry says. “Take the bandage off.”

The guards look at one another and then at me. I nod, and they take positions behind me.

“The faster the better,” I say, and clench my teeth.

The interlocking rolls of artificial skin have essentially formed into a single large bandage covering my entire back. They each find a corner near my shoulders, where they can peel it up gently and get a good handhold.

“On three,” Daniel whispers. “One-two-three...”

They pull mercifully quickly; but even so, I let out a shriek, and the pain drives me to my knees. Much the same thing was done to Jesus. When the Romans dressed Him in a purple robe and mocked Him as the King of the Jews, the blood from His scourging would have soaked and dried into the robe. When they were done, they ripped it off His back - tearing open His wounds and causing a new round of excruciating pain.

“It doesn’t look so bad to me,” Henry says.

The live shot on the screen is of my back, which is crossed with ugly red welts and cuts. The deeper ones have been reopened on the surface and are bleeding or oozing; but the doctor is correct, in that it looks much worse than it is. Having my back in the open air again is actually something of a relief.

“I’ve heard the fish heads are calling my life-saving vaccine the ‘Mark of the Beast,’” Henry says. “From where I’m standing, it looks like it’s Christianity that marks you for life.”

Henry smirks.

“And unlike my life-giving vaccine, it looks like the marking Cephaz chose to receive has missed some spots. Why don’t we take care of that right now?”

Henry nods to Daniel, who hands the whip to the other guard. He takes it uncomfortably and walks behind me.

I stand tall, with my eyes straight ahead. The first blow lands high on my shoulders, which was indeed a spot that didn’t hurt - until now.

“Speaking of the vaccine, today we’re having a lesson in the history of the Paulson family,” Henry begins. “Cephaz won’t talk about Christianity, but perhaps he’ll talk about his father - the known conspirator to mass murder.”

I can’t keep my eyes forward after such an accusation, I have to turn and look at Henry with disbelief.

“James Paulson was a longtime government employee, as well as a secret fish head cultist and conspirator. I have here his secret manifesto, which he hid by placing it on paper.”

Henry produces my father’s notebook.

“It’s all in here - mixed with fish head ranting and gibberish. It was James Paulson who ordered the re-creation of the genetic toxin used in the Final Holy War, and then altered it. He plotted to vaccinate Christians and kill anyone who wouldn’t convert, by releasing the toxin.”

As he speaks, select parts of the notebook are flashing by on the screen, with incriminating parts highlighted and exonerating parts obscured. Henry motions to the guard, and I’m whipped on cue. Although it seems to be a lighter blow than it could have been, landing a whip on a fresh wound quickly brings me back to the pain point where we left off yesterday.

“They tried to keep it a secret, but it was even a Paulson family idea to poison the world through its water supplies.”

Henry nods and I’m whipped again. Although it’s another light hit, this one falls on the deepest of the old wounds, making me cry out.

The screen demonstrates that Henry also found the words “distribute it through the water” pressed into the blank page.

The audience counter continues to soar, with each strike of the lash.

“Harder than that!” Henry yells. “Whip him like his family history deserves.”

The next lash lands with a crack, and a groan from me, as I lose my footing. I try to stand back up, but I can’t find the strength.

“Do you admit that you’re from a family of mass murderers?” Henry asks.

“It’s true that it was my father’s hand that wrote ‘distribute it through the water.’”

I sound delirious even to myself.

“That sounds like a confession to me, folks,” Henry concludes.

“O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, thank you for hiding the truth from those who think themselves so wise and clever, and for revealing it to the childlike,” I say.

I smile, as I quote from Matthew, with my head now wobbling.

“What does that mean?” Henry asks.

“In the water, in the water, in the water,” I babble the words from the edge of consciousness.

“You’ve still missed some spots,” Henry says to the guard holding the whip.

The whipping starts again. Even the act of crying out takes more effort than I can manage.

“Care to also confess that Jesus was a fraud?” Henry asks.

With a slight smile, I croak the words directly into the camera, as the second day of scourging continues.

“Not today,” I say.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Waking up on the hard floor of my cell is getting old, even for someone with experience sleeping on the ground while back in time and training with Four. The doctor has not bandaged my back again, but I think I may be better off for it. I open my eyes, and stare straight ahead and am surprised to see a pair of man's legs, wearing very expensive, and stylish shoes. At least they would be stylish - if they didn't have blood on them.

"Is that my blood? I'm sorry if it is," I say.

I cough, and notice my lips are dry and cracked. The lack of water is taking its toll.

"I wish. It's my blood," the man replies.

"Thomas? Why are you here this time? I like Jocie better."

"Beats me. It's your vision."

He laughs.

"C'mon, Cephas, that was funny. You know: a guy with no heart saying 'beats me.'"

I look up to find Thomas looks the same as when I last saw him in the arena. There's a gaping hole in his chest where his enhanced heart blew up during transport through time.

"I didn't think it was possible for anyone to look worse than me, but I'd say you've managed it," I say.

"You haven't looked in a mirror lately," he replies. "Since I'm here, can I ask you a question?"

"Sure. I don't have any appointments until ten o'clock."

I try to laugh, but end up coughing instead.

"I'm just wondering: If you're the one leading the life of a believer, and everyone else is checking off deadly sins on a daily basis, why are you the one on the floor dying?"

"Good question. Christ never promised believers would live a life of riches or even a life free of pain. In fact, He said the world would hate us and that many would suffer greatly in His name," I explain.

"You have to admit, Cephas. That's not much of a sales pitch."

"I'm not done. One reason people hated Christ then - and hate Christians today - is because He set standards by which we try to live. We try to avoid sin, and when we fail, we repent and try harder to not sin in the future. Sinners hate standards that can be broken. It's much easier to have no standards. That way there's nothing to break. Our reward for believing in Christ and repentance is entry into the Kingdom of Heaven."

"Yeah, yeah. You get the wings and harp and all that; but what if you're wrong? What if you die, and there's nothing else? What if you wasted your time when you could have been having sex with Jocie?" Thomas asks. "Which - for the record - I did, and you didn't."

"I admit, I will miss making love with Martha," I say.

"Really? Cephas Paulson is going to miss life's carnal pleasures?" Thomas asks.

"I don't know anything about carnal pleasures. I'm talking about making love with my wife. Tell me, Thomas, when you were with Jocie, did you gently stroke her hair or her face? Did you hold her hands, and stare into her eyes, and find yourself awestruck, not by the physical act, but by how the mutual decision to share yourselves and love each other in that way is part of God's plan for us? Did you find that you wanted to give yourself over to her so fully that your own pleasure was no longer a consideration?"

Thomas' expression is all the answer I need.

"I had conversations with Jocie, and connected with her as a person," I say. "I loved her. All you did was have sex ... which is pretty pathetic, in comparison."

Thank you, Thomas, you're giving me strength to face the day.

My vision blurs, and Thomas fades from view - but is replaced by two other pairs of men's shoes.

"This is the second time he's had hallucinations like this," the doctor's voice says. "He seems totally unaware of our presence. I've consulted with a psychologist friend, and she agrees that he's physically and mentally broken."

You forgot the most important one, Doc. I'm not spiritually broken.

I continue a glassy-eyed stare and keep my lips moving, while I listen.

"Good," replies Henry. "I should have started releasing toxin into the air days ago, but I've been waiting for him to break. Tomorrow is the day. Either he denies Christ, or he dies looking like a nut case. The unvaccinated nut cases will be dead inside a week, and the rest will easily fall into line as hypocrites."

They leave, and five minutes later the screen springs to life; so I pretend to awaken from a dream.

Again, the news from McIntosh isn't good. Despite the rain, many more left.

Or is that just what the world is supposed to believe?

The footage shows the ground is dry to point of cracking; but I know it poured rain after the first group abandoned the town. It should still be muddy, or - at a minimum - there should be mud on their clothing. I watch the scene intently, until I find what I'm seeking.

I point to the screen and look at the nearest camera.

"There's a young woman at the front of the line who I recognize as being in the background yesterday," I say. "It's all another lie. Nobody abandoned McIntosh last night, and I won't abandon them today!"

The screen abruptly changes to another intercepted conversation between Zip and Hank.

They sound depressed, which I know is designed to rub off on me. As much as Henry would love to show the public that Christians are losing hope, I'm sure I'm the only one seeing this.

"Have you been watching the show with Cephass?" Hank asks.

"Of course."

"How much more do you think he can take?"

"Outwardly, he's almost broken," Zip says.

"I could say the same for you," Hank replies. "How much water is left?"

"The last of it will be gone by morning."

She did it. She got them out.

"How's Martha doing?" Zip asks.

"She only stayed here long enough to get a few hours of sleep; then took off south," Hank says. "She's a mess - but you know what she's like when she's a mess. If she came up against a hundred armed cult hunters, I'd feel sorry for them."

"I'm sorry she's gone. I wanted to talk to her and tell her I'm sorry. I was wrong about Cephass. I wish I'd had the chance to tell them both that..."

A tear runs down her face.

"... that I understand why things happened the way they did with Zach, and that I forgive him."

This, too, is giving me strength to face another day.

Instead of Daniel, today two fresh and angry-faced guards show up at nine forty-five to ensure that I get to the set on time.

"Where's Daniel?" I ask one of them.

"Reassigned. Keep moving."

He prods me in the small of my back, where the welts are the worst.

I imagine Daniel has been reassigned for "going soft."

Without the hardened bandages hunching me over, I'm able to walk upright; so we make it to the set, with time to spare. When we reach the posts, I again hold my own arms up and nod permission to my guards to shackle me in place. I'm doing my best to appear strong. I want to inspire the faithful, and fill them with hope for both my future and their own. In truth, I know a strong breeze could knock me over.

The only thing holding me up now is your love, Lord.

The viewer count says the audience is nearly two billion. Am I just an unwilling participant in a modern-day Roman coliseum where, Christians are tortured for sport? Or am I reaching people's souls? As if to answer my thoughts, Henry begins to speak.

"This is the largest worldwide audience since the departure of the Travelers. It seems everyone wants to see what it's like to lead the life of a Christian; so today we have some special treats for you."

"The first item is a shocking bit of news concerning the hypocrisy, and sinful behavior, of our star, Cephass Paulson. I have some footage showing Cephass having sex with the young woman he now calls his wife *before* they were married."

Henry raises his hand in front of his mouth in a mock gesture of shock.

"Oh, Cephass, how could you? How could you do such a thing to such an innocent Christian girl?"

Henry signals someone in the control booth and the screen switches over; but instead of showing the expected footage of myself and Martha under a blanket while I removed a tracking chip from her back, the image is of my half-dressed Aunt Jennifer announcing: "Henry, I was just thinking about you."

The feed quickly switches back to the live shot of Henry, whose face flushes red with anger.

I can't help it, I start to laugh at how Martha hacked the broadcast. The guards are barely suppressing a giggle as well.

"Henry," I say through dry lips. "I thought the idea was to torture me - not the audience. Maybe you should stick with whippings."

If Four can hack this broadcast, does that mean they know my location? Did they figure out that the clue of Noah, Obadiab, Ruth, Abraham and Daniel stands for NORAD? Is that why Martha was heading south from Nebraska?

"Don't tempt me, Cephass; not on a day as special as this one. I did some research back through various calendars, and I discovered that today is Maundy Thursday - the day of the Last Supper," Henry says.

Not a chance. It's the wrong time of the year; but few will know that he's lying.

"To celebrate, we're going to have a little feast."

Henry motions, and someone brings a small table and a large comfortable chair. I'm left chained and standing.

Henry makes himself comfortable in the chair, while the stagehand brings a silver plate of large, juicy blackberries. If he gives me one, I'll pop it with my tongue and let every droplet of juice dribble down my parched throat.

"It looks like Cephass is ready for our feast," Henry says to the camera. "He looks like a hungry dog. But of course, it isn't that easy. You can have every berry on the plate - in exchange for recanting everything you said when you returned from the Traveler's Initiative. Just tell us that Christ didn't rise, and this is all over."

I stand in silence.

"Before you say 'no' Cephass, let me try the berries, and tell you about the experience."

Henry reaches towards the berries, but stops himself.

"Oh, wait. I should wash my hands first. There is a plague out there, you know."

The guard brings Henry a bowl full of water. He dips his hands in to the wrist; then rubs at them.

Where have I seen that motion? Oh, right. Pontius Pilate washed his hands in just the same way.

He grabs a handful of berries and, with great show, drops them - one by one - into his mouth. Each berry is accompanied by over-the-top “oohs” and “aahs.”

“Those are incredible. I don’t think I’ve ever had such plump, sweet berries. Are you sure you won’t try one, Cephas?”

Henry picks up the next handful, and drops them into his mouth all at once, with great lip-smacking. He purposefully lets some of the purple juice escape the corner of his mouth and run to his chin, before dabbing it with a white cloth napkin. He continues to enjoy them, until there’s only one berry on the plate.

“Last berry, Cephas,” he says, as he picks it up. “And now it’s an empty plate.”

I think about the empty plate that sits each year at Christmas and Easter on my Aunt Kimberly’s table. Even an empty plate can have inspirational meaning, if you keep your mind focused on God.

He tosses the berry to the floor, and steps on it.

“I’ll never understand the mind of a fish head,” Henry says. “You label the best things in life as ‘sin,’ and then call it ‘righteousness’ when you deny them to yourself. Take those blackberries as an example. You know you’re severely dehydrated. Watching their juice dribbling down my chin must have been downright painful for you; yet you still deny them to yourself.”

Henry crosses the stage to retrieve the Bible and provide a dramatic pause.

“Luckily, I’ve been reading ahead. It seems that all this righteousness must lead to a superiority complex. I knew you wouldn’t try the berries themselves; so instead I saved the part of the plant I knew you’d like the most.”

He produces a thick “crown” made of twisted blackberry vines. The thorns are long, slightly curved, and very sharp. I remember the day when I ran from Bethany House and plunged headlong through a blackberry thicket. As the thorns clawed at me, I wondered if someday blackberry would serve as my crown of thorns.

Henry dons a pair of thick leather gloves, and approaches me.

“Here is your crown, oh king.”

He drives the crown violently into my scalp. The blood flow is immediate - and dramatic.

What was it I said to Martha, that day in the woods?

“I once met a Man who was cut by thorns on His forehead. It wasn’t important to Him, and it isn’t to me,” I say to the camera.

“We forgot your purple robe and your scepter,” Henry says.

Henry motions, and the guards drape something purple over my shoulders and place a stick in my right hand.

“Get a close shot. Let the fish heads behold their king.”

This is why Henry wanted my face healed quickly after the first beating. This is the shot he wanted all along: A shot of me wearing the crown, with blood dripping down my face. The fool thinks he can raise me up in effigy, then destroy me to dispirit believers. It will more likely inspire them.

I become aware of the stick that the guard placed in my right hand. I tilt my head to the right, and use the stick to flip the crown off my head and onto the floor.

“Abdicating the thrown, Cephas?”

“There’s only one king: The King of Kings. He died for our sins, and on the third day, he rose again. I saw it twice,” I say.

“You are definitely all in for the Christian experience,” Henry replies.

He picks up the Bible and pretends to study it.

“Ah, yes. Here it is. According to our guide, the proper thing for this situation is to use the scepter to ensure the crown stays in place.”

The guards jam the crown back onto my head with a twisting motion, ensuring that every possible thorn is set into my skin. With the scepter, they take turns hitting the crown, driving the thorns deeper and providing a continuous flow of blood from my scalp. After a while, they aren't even trying to “secure the crown.” They're just beating my head and shoulders with the stick for fun. The blood flowing from my scalp into my left eye is enough to blind me on that side; but my right eye is the one that concerns me. The world keeps fading to gray, and then coming back to crystal clarity.

I shake my head violently to try to remove the crown again; but it won't budge. The effort only adds to my dizziness and disorientation. To stop me from shaking, the guards kick my feet out from under me so I'm hanging by my wrists.

The world does one last cycle from crystal clear to gray, and then to black. The last thing I remember is looking at the screen. The viewer count stands at two point three billion.

I wake up, as I'm dumped onto the cold floor of my cell once again. With what little energy I have, I sit up and back myself into the corner so I can reach up and remove the crown of blackberry vines. I hope to do it slowly, with minimal pain and bleeding; but that proves impossible. I start to rip it from my head - along with skin and hair- only to find that I don't have the strength to remove it.

I begin to sob.

“I'm sorry, Lord,” I cry. “I can't give you another day. I tried, and I just can't. I've given you everything. I'm empty.”

“Nobody who is as filled with the Holy Spirit as you are can ever truly be empty, Cephas.”

“Michael?”

I look up to find him standing in front of me.

“I can't do it, Michael.”

“Are you saying that what's been set out before you is impossible?” Michael asks. “How about surviving being thrown into a furnace, or a lion's den? Walking on water? How about dying, and rising again, three days later? Are those impossible, too?”

“Okay, maybe tomorrow is only ‘nearly impossible’,” I say.

“If you were alone, I'd agree with you - but you're not alone, Cephas. He will be there - inside you - every step of the way.”

I find the energy to reach up, and remove the crown.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

As the vision of Michael fades, I look up and realize that the guards haven't even bothered to close the door. I can see the elbow of one of the guards, but even if he wasn't there, they know I'm not a flight risk. Besides, it appears the door is open because I'm about to have visitors.

The doctor enters first, followed by Garai and Henry. The doctor's face shows his concern, as he does all of the ancient doctor things like shining a light in my eyes and feeling my pulse.

"Will he live long enough to star in tomorrow's finale?" Henry asks.

"He definitely has a concussion; but the cuts and bruising on his face are largely superficial. His biggest problem is the lack of food and water, but that won't kill him in the next twenty-four hours. If you want him to be awake tomorrow, I would suggest you give him a liter or more of water - just to be on the safe side," the doctor replies.

"Thank you, doctor. You may leave."

"Your turn, Garai," Henry says. "Be quick."

Garai gets down low, where he can look into my eyes. I notice he's dressed in a much finer suit than I've ever seen him wear before, and that it's made of synthetic materials, rather than linen.

"Cephas? Can you hear me?" Garai asks.

"Hello, Judas," I reply hoarsely.

At first, he appears to be assessing if I'm hallucinating; but when Henry laughs, Garai figures out that I'm insulting him.

"You should have a little more respect for the man who accomplished everything you should have aspired to do," Garai says. "When your show ends, tomorrow, mine will begin. The New Christians will be following me into a new era."

"New Christians? Tell me, Garai: what do you and your new Christians believe? More accurately, what has Henry told you that you're allowed to believe? Do you believe Christ was the Son of God and that He died for our sins and rose from the dead? Or has Christ been watered down to being just a really nice guy in a white suit?"

The look on his face tells me the answer. Whatever the new "Faith guide" teaches, it's not belief in Christ. It's most likely some sort of twisting of Christ's message in order to reach the conclusion man is supreme.

"What we believe is that we will be alive - and you will be dead," he says, "- or at least most of us. Thanks to you, I'm losing ten percent of my membership because they refuse to take the vaccine. Their deaths are on your head."

"Then you believed in preaching for the sake of preaching itself, and not in the message being delivered," I say.

Garai begins to respond, but Henry cuts him off.

"Your big moment is tomorrow, Garai," Henry says. "Leave us, and close the door behind you."

Once Garai is gone, Henry starts laughing.

"Even beaten to the edge of your life, your mind is still sharper than Garai's. How I wish you could have been broken; but your eyes tell me that it isn't going to happen."

"So now what? Kill me on a live broadcast?" I ask.

"You'll find out tomorrow," Henry says. "But I would like to say that I never wanted to martyr you. I always hoped to break you, and make you a leading atheist."

"I was a leading atheist: The Cult Hunter. Remember?"

"It's too late to dream about the good old days, Cephas."

Henry laughs again.

“One problem with atheism is that it takes too much work,” I say. “When you look at a beautiful sunset, you have to waste your time justifying weather patterns, sun angles, and the particulates in the air, when you could be simply enjoying the hand of God, and smiling up at Him - thanking Him - for putting on a good show. Butterflies; drops of dew sparkling in the sun; unexpectedly hearing from an old friend; you atheists make them all into such a chore for yourself.”

“So, it’s just like your old mentor, Dr. Holt said: religion is a sign of laziness?” Henry asks.

“Saying faith is akin to laziness is like saying the pursuit of science is akin to cowardice,” I reply. “Maybe you spend all that time measuring the angles of a sunset, or the air displaced when a butterfly flaps its wings, so you can avoid asking yourself the really tough questions. Faith is about searching, and solving puzzles, without being afraid of the answer you’ll find. You fear the true answer, Henry. You’re afraid that you’re not the one in control. Some would say admitting to the authority of God is a coward’s way to view life; but I’d say it takes more courage.”

From inside his jacket pocket, Henry produces a container with a dozen blackberries in it, and tosses it to me. Eyeing him warily, I open it and put the first berry on my tongue; then crush it against the roof of my mouth. I close my eyes and sigh, as the little packets burst in my mouth and the juice trickles into my throat.

“Does it really matter so much, Henry?” I ask. “Are these berries a product of evolution? Are they adapted to be sweet to tempt birds and rodents, ensuring the survival of their genes when their seeds are disbursed here and there? Or were they simply put here by God for all of us to enjoy? Right now, they taste like a gift from heaven.”

Henry and I lock eyes for a long while - until he breaks the stare, shakes his head, and turns to leave.

“It’s all true, Henry. Jesus is the Son of God.”

I say it to his back, and Henry stops.

“I know. I just don’t care,” he replies, without turning around.

“One liter of water,” he barks at the guard, and disappears.

I drink the liter slowly, making sure not a single drop is spilled. I could portion it out over my remaining hours; but my body needs every drop now, so I drink it all. Perhaps by some mercy, I’ll get another liter later.

The screen is turned back on, and I can see that tomorrow is being advertised worldwide as the final “debate” between myself and Henry. The entire world is expected to watch to see my fate - just as they did with the Travelers Initiative.

Given that I have a concussion, I should try to stay awake, but my eye lids are just too heavy to fight sleep. Besides, I know my body has the best chance to heal when it’s sleeping. Unfortunately, turning off my brain is nearly impossible; so for the next twelve hours, I slip in and out of consciousness that’s filled with dreams of more torture.

Somehow I’m not surprised when my eyes open to yet another vision. Like before, I’m still in my cell. I’m lying on my back, with my shoulders on a rough wooden cross that’s digging into the welts that cover my back. My arms are outstretched, waiting to be nailed into place, but nobody is holding them down.

My head rolls to my shoulder and I look out across the room. Next to me, on His own wooden beam, is Christ, who is staring into my eyes and smiling. A single Roman soldier is kneeling with his back to me, preparing the first spike and his hammer.

“Have I failed you, Lord?” I ask Jesus. “Am I the sinner to be nailed to the cross beside you?”

“No, Cephas. You haven’t failed me. I’m so very proud of you. But you must make the choice you’ve been putting off for all this time. This man has only three nails. He can only nail one of us to

a cross, and you need to choose which of us it will be,” Jesus says. “You can lie there and let yourself be nailed . . . or you can stand up.”

The Roman turns and I finally see his face. It’s me. I’m both here on the cross and the Roman soldier at the same time. The “soldier-me” smiles wickedly and stands between us, holding the nails from my blacksmith dream, waiting for me to make my choice.

“You forge strong nails,” the soldier-me says. “But then, who doesn’t these days?”

“Stand up, Cephas,” Jesus says again. “Choose freedom from sin.”

When I stand, the soldier-me smiles, and holds out the hammer and nails for me to take; then disappears.

I’m alone with Christ, with the hammer and nails in my hands. I look down at the nail which has the glowing “C,” “H” and “S” from my blacksmith dream. As I stare at the nail, the letters space themselves differently and the rest of the letters fill in to spell “CEPHAS” - rather than “CHRIST” - as I had expected them to. I let out a shriek.

“Whose name were you expecting on the nails, Cephas?”

Jesus laughs.

“It’s your sins that nail me to the cross, after all.”

“I can’t,” I say.

“Do you remember what you thought when you realized you could look me in the eyes, as I hung on the cross? You thought that maybe my death was supposed to be up close and personal. What could possibly be more personal than using a nail with your name written on it? Those nails are your sins, Cephas; and now is when you’re finally going to turn them over to me.”

I look again at the nail in my hand. He’s correct, of course. I’ve never fully handed my sins over to Him. I look at the scars on my own wrists.

“I don’t take your scars any more lightly than I do my own, Cephas.”

Jesus smiles.

“Just below the wrist,” He says. “You’ve seen it twice; so you know the spot.”

“I don’t want to do it,” I say.

“I hope you haven’t forgotten that nobody takes a hit for others better than I do. It’ll be okay, Cephas. Trust me. Whatever it is that pains you, nail it to the cross. All the best sins are hammered here: greed, envy, pride, hatred. . .”

I look Him in the eyes, and He continues the list just for me.

“... murder, lust.”

He’s speaking directly to my memories - and my soul.

“I don’t want to do it,” I repeat.

“You have to, Cephas. It’s the only way you can free yourself of it,” Jesus replies. “Now nail your sins to the cross.”

I bring the hammer down ever so lightly, it makes barely a sound on the top of the nail.

“That’s no way to attach sin to the cross, Cephas. You must hammer it like you love me.”

I take a deep breath, focusing my eyes on the head of the nail, and swing the hammer with all the love I feel for Him. It rings hard and true, and drives through Jesus and into the wood.

“Yes!” Jesus says. “That’s how you hammer sin. Hammer it with love. Now, the other arm.”

I take the second nail with my name on it, and I hammer it home with love. I’m crying with pain, love, and freedom - all at the same time.

“Good. Now stand for me, Cephas. Stand up in the light.”

I awaken with a jolt. I’m standing inside my cell, looking down at an empty floor. I fall to my knees and weep. I want to vomit all the precious water in my stomach, but manage to hold onto it. My sins nailed Christ to the cross, as much as anyone’s, and I hate the thought of it. We all hate to

be reminded of this simple fact, which is why our world chooses to bury itself in sex and drugs. It's easier than facing the truth of the choices we make.

I remember Christ telling me to stand; so I rise back to my feet. I'm dizzy and have a splitting headache - presumably from the concussion - but I'm standing.

The screen springs to life. It's nine o'clock. The screen contains a message from Garai to his "New Christian" followers that there will be a live special presentation just prior to the "final debate" between Henry and myself.

The guard brings me two salted crackers, a small glass of water, and an apple, which I'm sure Henry regards as a wonderful joke. I don't know why I'm being shown this sudden kindness, but I'm more than ready to thank God for it, and accept the gifts. I scrape the salt off the crackers to avoid further feelings of dehydration, and eat them. Then I eat every bit of the apple, including the seeds. If it still had a stem and leaf attached, I'd eat those too.

The door opens at precisely nine-fifty and the guards command me to follow them. I'm walking better now, so we again reach the stage with time to spare. As usual, I hold my arms up to be shackled; but today the guards tell me to just stand still between the posts.

Garai is already on the set, sitting in one of two comfortable chairs. He's wearing even more expensive clothing than yesterday, as well as a gold necklace and gold rings. My jaw drops when he removes the jacket and a stagehand brings him a long, white linen robe. I've seen pictures of similar robes. They were last worn by men called bishops.

"How dare you?" I ask.

"We've each gotten no less than we deserve, Cephas. You must see that," he replies.

Before I can answer, Henry rushes onto the set.

"Perfect, Garai. Just perfect." Henry says. "This is going to be great."

"Cephas? If you promise to behave yourself, you don't have to be chained today," Henry says to me.

He doesn't want you to behave yourself. He wants you to attack Garai and demonstrate to the world how religions hate. He gave you food and water to strengthen you for that purpose. Let God use that strength for His purpose instead.

The cameras and lights come to life. The viewer count is at two point seven billion people. Effectively, the entire world is watching.

"Hello, everyone!"

Henry is virtually singing.

"And I do mean everyone. This is the second largest video audience in history - second only to the departure of the Travelers. Today we have here in the studio Garai, the leader of the New Christian movement, and - of course - Cephas. You two are old friends, aren't you, Garai?"

"I'm not sure 'friends' is the right word, but yes," Garai says. "Cephas and I worked together. He as a part of the organization 'Four,' and me as the head of my organization. Although we didn't get along, I must thank Cephas for teaching me about the mistakes religion has made over many centuries, including through his own example. My organization hopes to correct all of those mistakes and move forward into a new era of faith that will be embraced by all mankind. We can't afford any more failures like those we've seen from Cephas."

"Wow. That's a bold vision, Garai," Henry says. "Cephas? Anything to say in response?"

The guards visibly back off. They're intentionally giving me an opening to strike Garai.

When I bow my head in prayer, Henry misinterprets the move as me attempting to control my anger.

"Garai, would you do us the favor of chaining Cephas today?" Henry asks. "I think it would be symbolic of your victory -, and Cephas' failure."

More provoking? Henry really wants me to strike Garai. I mustn't follow Henry's script.

Garai approaches and the guards take another step back. Henry has a blood lust in his eyes as he watches the scene unfold. I outstretch my arms forward. My fingertips are only centimeters from Garai's neck. With one easy lunge, and I could choke him, though as weak as I am, I doubt I could kill him before the guards would stop me - assuming they've even been instructed to stop me. Instead, I set my hands lightly on his shoulders.

"Bless you, Garai. You are indeed playing a role in God's plan for a fresh start."

Your fate is already sealed, Garai - but it won't be by my hands.

Even without bandages dried into the cuts, opening my arms wide is painful, but I again bear the painful motion until my wrists are against the posts - then nod my permission to be shackled.

Henry is angry beyond words at the development.

The cuff on my left wrist appears to be broken, it won't fasten as tightly as it should. I could easily slip my wrist out of it. I notice the guard on that side is watching me as I look at the cuff. Letting me slip free at the right moment must be Henry's backup plan.

"As everyone can see, Cephas didn't like the crown we gave him. But we still have his scepter and - of course - the flail. Garai, would you once again do the honors?" Henry asks.

The heavy stick that served as my 'scepter' is placed where I can easily reach it if I were to free my left wrist.

The robe is stripped from my back, and I can see on the screen that the wounds are still red and raw. Garai is handed the flail. He begins to take off the white robe; but Henry waves that he must keep it on. Henry has the shot set up exactly how he wants it. From his perspective, this is one religious nut whipping another.

The first strike lands weakly, but still hurts on my damaged skin.

"Harder!" Henry says. "Whip him like a New Christian."

The second strike is much harder and connects where the earlier damage was deepest. The pain, combined with the concussion, makes my knees start to buckle; but I manage to stand through the third, fourth, and fifth strikes before I fall. I'm falling as Garai tries to land the sixth lash, so the leather thongs hit my neck and wrap around the side of my head and face, reopening the wounds from my 'crown.' The force of the fall causes my left wrist to slip free of the cuff and - as luck would have it - my hand lands squarely on the scepter stick. My fingers instinctively curl around it.

Choose your next action wisely, Cephas.

"Again! Hit him while he's on the floor."

Henry is trying to egg him on, though he doesn't need to do so. Garai is in full frenzy all by himself.

"For decades, I built my organization in the shadows, and my family worked for decades before I was even born," Garai says. "Then you came along ... and in days they were all ready to leave and follow you. After everything I did for them..."

Garai is screaming at my back, as he lands another blow.

I look up at Garai. The flail is raised above his head, and he too has eyes filled with a lust for violence. The whipping has opened the old wounds on my back. They must be bleeding, because his perfectly white robe is now spattered with my blood. Henry has a look of pure joy at the way the scene has played out.

My hand is on the stick. I could sweep Garai's feet out from under him and, once he's down, use the stick to crush his neck. I'm sure the guards will just watch.

I uncurl my fingers from the stick; then slowly stand and raise my left hand to the post so it can be shackled again. The guards don't bother, so I hold the cuff with my fingers, to willingly shackle myself.

I am a prisoner for Christ.

I'd hoped this act would take the wind out of Garai's sails; but he whips me - again and again - until my knees buckle from the pain.

"I am done casting my pearls before swine!" Garai says.

"How lucky," I reply, as I raise myself back to my knees.

"Lucky?"

"Without pearls to cast, your hand will be free to work that log out of your eye."

He crosses in front of me, and gets into my face.

"Enough of the whip. I'm going to do something that will torture you even more," Garai says.

He reaches into his pocket and brings out a small tablet.

"This tablet contains the vaccine you need if you want to survive the plague," Garai says. "I have one and you don't. You don't have one; the members of Four don't have one; and most importantly, your precious Martha doesn't have one. She is going to die, Cephas, and it isn't going to be an easy death. She is going to suffer. She is going to writhe in pain for days, until she is begging for death to take her. And if I can get a video of it, I'm going to play it over and over, and make you watch it - until you beg to join her."

"If you think your salvation can be found in that pill, then take it," I say.

His eyes go wide with anger, and he places the tablet under his tongue, where it will quickly dissolve.

"Does it taste like apple?" I ask.

I struggle back to my feet, and again grab the broken cuff.

"It tastes like new life."

He smirks as he says it, but his eyes say otherwise. He lets out a groan and grabs at his stomach. There's a slight foam at the corners of his mouth, and his eyes are wide with pain. He tries to speak, but can't get anything to come out. He drops to his knees, but stays there for only a moment before he hits the floor, where he rolls onto his back and begins to shake. With the cameras documenting the scene for the entire world to see, he coughs up some foamy saliva - and dies at my feet. All the while, I leave my left hand up at the post - unshackled.

"There's no better way to kill a snake than to cut off its head," Henry says.

He turns to me.

"Is that in the Bible?"

I simply shake my head 'no.'

"It probably should be," Henry says. "It's good practical human advice after all. I'll make sure it gets into the New Christian Faith guide."

Henry turns to the camera.

"Well, I for one think Garai did an excellent job of demonstrating how religion brings anger and hatred into our world; but, of course, he isn't the star of the show. Our star is Cephas."

The camera goes to a tight shot on me, while the guards drag Garai's body offstage and fasten my left arm securely to the post - all unseen by the audience. My hair is caked with blood and sweat. There's still blood trickling down my face from where Garai missed with the whip and tore open the facial wounds from the yesterday's crown and scepter treatment. Despite receiving some water last night and today, my lips are still dry, cracked and bleeding from dehydration. All in all, I judge myself to appear on the edge of insanity - except for my eyes. Didn't Jocie once tell me that I need to stare into my own eyes, and assess my own soul, once in a while? I stare into my own eyes via the camera. My sins have been nailed to the cross, I'm ready to do whatever is asked of me.

Everything I am is yours, Lord. I'm ready to finish this.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

“I promised the world a final debate between myself and Cephas, and I do not intend to disappoint,” Henry says. “As everyone knows, Cephas is a teacher of religious history; so to be fair, my argument will be grounded in history. That way, all can see my arguments are factual. With an audience of this size we can’t take questions, but we have arranged for anyone who wants to vote on the outcome to do so over their com. If you agree, a light indicating your position will light up on our giant map of the globe. Go ahead and give it a try.”

A massive world map is projected behind me, which I can see on the monitor in front of me. Lights start to twinkle on and off in every corner of the world. Even Antarctica has a few lights come on and go off. The map goes dark and the screen returns to a shot of Henry.

“Where do I even begin in a debate about religion?” Henry asks. “Religion has been around since before recorded history. Even when our ancestors were living in caves and painting figures on the walls, they were starting to create religious doctrines.”

The screen switches to a depiction of two cavemen grunting at each other about something painted on the wall. One takes out a club and smashes in the skull of the other.

“Even the beginnings of religion were not a pretty sight,” Henry says. “And it only got worse from there.”

He switches to a movie that’s so old it’s in black and white. It’s a depiction of the crusades and the fight to recapture Jerusalem - complete with men in chainmail adorned with white crosses, who are butchering anyone who stands in their way. The movies they made in those days weren’t graphic; but you certainly got the idea that Christians brought mayhem and slaughter to the Holy Land - in the name of Christ.

The next video depicts the Spanish Inquisition. Many people, particularly Jews and Muslims, were tortured - some of them to death. Others were thrown from their homes, and told to either convert to Christianity or leave. Again, mayhem and death ... conducted in the name of Christ.

“Of course, the ugliness and violence that follows religion isn’t limited to ancient history,” Henry continues. “Modern man is just as guilty as our so-called ‘primitive’ ancestors.”

The screen switches to a black and white scene of Nazi Germany. The bones of dead Jews are being stacked in immense piles by Jewish laborers - most of whom are barely more than bones themselves. In the background, a makeshift German chapel - with a wooden cross atop it - can be seen, appearing as if it’s overseeing all of the horrors that happened there. Across the screen, flash the words: “Six million Jews killed in the name of Christ.”

I’d like to add that at least that many Jews died at the hands of the atheistic Russians under Stalin; but what would that prove? I’ve always maintained that atheism is just another religion, whose leaders are fallen, imperfect men who are bound to be tempted by sin, just like anyone else.

“You’d think the horror of the holocaust would have been enough to shock the world into doing something about religious fanaticism; but it wasn’t,” Henry says, and sighs.

“In the decades that followed, things got worse and worse. Religion was used to justify racial bigotry.”

The screen flips to images of crosses being burned by white-hooded figures known as “The Clan,” followed by images of churches with black congregations going up in flames.

“At the same time, religious hatred that had been smoldering for thousands of years continued to flare up,” Henry adds.

The screen shows rapid-fire images of tanks with the Star of David painted on the side, interspersed with scenes of massacred women and children. There are also images of hooded Islamic terrorists, interspersed with images of beheadings, and entire cities on fire. The screen switches to a

plane colliding with an ancient skyscraper, while the tower next to it burns from being hit by an earlier plane.

“Planes made into flying bombs; beheadings; dead women and children - all courtesy of religion,” Henry concludes. “And that was just the warm-up act, before the true horror was unleashed.”

The screen jumps to scenes from the Final Holy War. It starts with nuclear bombs exploding and images of children burned to a crisp. The first bombs of that war fell onto Israel, but there’s no telling if these children were Jews or Muslims. The bomb that melts your skin off doesn’t care about your religion. The imagery switches to bombs that explode in a cloud of dust - the original genetic toxin - followed by pictures of the new horror that came with the dust. There’s a picture of bodies stacked two stories high, waiting to be burned. The faces you can see are covered with open sores, and they bear expressions of the agony that gripped them until they died.

The last image was taken as I stood in the Mississippi River. It’s of me quoting Jesus in Matthew, chapter ten, saying: ‘Don’t imagine that I came to bring peace to the earth! No, I came to bring a sword.’ Taken out of its Biblical context, the words seem to reinforce Henry’s argument that God - rather than man - is the source of death and destruction.

Henry runs the entire presentation again, starting with the cavemen; but this time at a speed that blurs the carnage into just a few moments of horror. He freezes the final image of me on the screen, letting the words ‘bring a sword’ echo over and over.

I don’t know how I can possibly respond to Henry’s point. Men have done great evil upon men in the name of religion; but in the end, it’s still the sinful actions of men - not of God. How can I convince a worldwide audience that God loves them, in the face of those images?

“I don’t need to debate any further,” Henry says. “History speaks for itself - starting with the cavemen and ending with the promise of Cephas Paulson to swing a sword in the name of Christ and bring us back to the brink of war. So I ask the world a simple question that you can all answer on our map of the earth: Who wants religion back in our world?”

The world screen itself is behind me, but the monitor on which I can view it stands in front of me. There are nearly three billion people watching and there’s not a light to be seen on the map. It’s pitch black.

‘But this is your moment; the time when the power of darkness reigns.’

Those were Christ’s words to me in Gethsemane.

“Good choice,” I say unexpectedly, in a loud, clear voice, ending my silence.

Henry’s head and the camera both snap to me.

“Did you just say rejecting religion is a good choice?” Henry asks.

Henry looks so happy that he could dance a jig right there on the stage. I don’t think I’ve ever seen such glee on a person’s face before.

“There you have it folks!” Henry says. “I did what Jocie couldn’t do through temptation. I did what torture couldn’t accomplish through physical pain. I, Henry Portman, have finally broken the unbreakable spirit of Cephas Paulson! I declare myself to be his god.”

Henry points to the darkened map behind me.

“The world has made its choice, and now it’s time for you, Cephas, to make yours.”

Henry taps his com and says “ShowTime,” then nods his head and the guards bring in two small tables, each containing several liters of water and a small tablet on a metal plate.

“Unlike Garai, you actually have a choice. On your left, is a vaccine tablet. Take it, and join my family. On your right, is a tablet containing the plague. It contains many times the dosage you’d get from the air or water. Even someone who’s been vaccinated would be dead in about five minutes. I should also mention that it will be a very painful five minutes.”

Henry smiles.

The screen starts to go fuzzy. At first I wonder if it's my vision failing, but then I realize Four is hacking the broadcast. It may even be Martha, trying to influence my choice.

"Martha, stop!" I command the screen. "This is truly my darkest moment. The dark clouds have gathered, and it's time to find the light He is shining for you."

The hack stops and the screen clears.

Jesus could have chosen to end His own torture at any time, it was within His power. Instead, He chose to allow the torture to continue in order fulfill his role. I have no such power. I have to hand my life over to God, and trust in His plan.

"It's an easy choice," I say as a tear rolls down my cheek.

"It is an easy choice, isn't it?" Henry says. "Go ahead. Lead the way for your followers."

The guard loosens one chain, so I can hold the water and tablet.

"If you had refused to choose, then as your god, I would have chosen for you," Henry says. "A few minutes ago, I don't know which would have been the greater torture for you: dying or being marked. Now that you've acknowledged the world made a good choice in refusing religion, you are ready to take your place among *my* chosen people."

I let his words hang in a dramatic silence before I respond.

"In the words of the Apostle Paul: 'for me to live is Christ and to die is gain.' That's why I'm choosing life..."

Henry gets a beaming smile on his face. The thought of me marked in my very DNA is pleasing to him.

"... eternal life," I add.

I smile, pick up the toxin, and swallow it.

Henry gasps - stunned that I've chosen the toxin and Christ over what he thinks is the perfect world of man.

The guard tightens the chain again, stretching my arms out wide, knowing that I'm going to be in for a rough ride. The pain in my stomach knocks me off my feet, so I'm hanging again by my wrists - writhing back and forth. I desperately want to vomit the poison out of myself, but I can't. Even if I could, I think I'd try not to. Christ chose to endure the pain for me, and I want to do no less for Him ... right up to the end. The pain soon radiates outward, until it stretches from my toes to my fingertips. Only my head feels fine. In fact, it feels as clear as I can remember in days.

"I did not see that coming, folks," Henry says.

The camera should switch back to him; but instead, I can watch myself, as I thrash in pain.

"This is a sad commentary on how the religious mind works," Henry continues. "They prefer an early death over a long life of enjoying the pleasures of this world."

The convulsing stops, and I hang limply from my wrists. The internal pain has ended, but I feel burning hot, as the toxin continues to work its way through every system in my body.

"Debate," I say.

My voice sounds more like a croak.

"What?" Henry asks. "You can still speak?"

"We didn't finish the debate."

I practically yell, as I grimace through the pain.

"You said I have five minutes of life left. I get to speak - and you and the world are going to listen to me ... and to the Word of God."

"By all means, Cephas. Let's hear your dying words, while we wait to see if your God will save you."

"You asked the world the wrong question, Henry. You asked the people of the world if they want religion, and I'm inclined to agree with their response. You showed us centuries of evil acts done by men in the name of God; but every last one was done by the hand of man. He made it so

simple for us in the Old Testament, and still we messed it all up. We made up rules, and called them doctrines and religious laws. Some men declared themselves to be 'holy,' and used the position not to demonstrate the power of God, but their own power over other men."

"So God tried to make it even simpler for us. He sent Jesus - Who gave us just two simple rules: To love Him, and to love each other ... and then we messed that up. Two simple rules - and we still couldn't get it right. We tried to stuff God into boxes with steeples and crosses on top, and got mad when we found He is too big to fit. We made the same mistakes as the Pharisees, and made up our own rules to define Jesus and His love for us. We used our foolish rules to slaughter each other, and had the audacity to declare ourselves - and our rules - as righteous. I'm here to tell you that twice I saw Him die and walk from His tomb. He is too big to be bound by our rules."

I still can't stand; but the burning from the toxin has stopped. Trust God to again have a perfect plan to respond to a moment of darkness.

"We're lost," I continue. "Humanity has gone nowhere in two generations. I won't suggest for a moment that reviving religions is how we must get back on the right path. In fact, I think quite the opposite is true. I think we've messed up the message of His word so badly, that God decided to clean the slate and start over again. The only way He could get us to *believe* again was to wipe out religion and start over - and he sent you to do it, Henry."

"He sent me?"

Henry laughs.

"You must have the wrong guy," he says.

"I have the right guy. You, and generations of your family, were all sent as part of His purpose. You perverted His Bible by constantly changing it to suit your needs. You pushed the Equalization, and led the fight to ratify the Thirty-Fifth Amendment. You provided the bombs to start the Final Holy War, and declared a man-made utopia with the Sunspot Initiative. Then, when even your idea of a perfect world couldn't destroy the last of the faithful, you sent me back in time to land the final blow. All along, you and your family were the perfect instruments to carry out His plan."

I try to laugh, but it turns into a cough.

"I ask the people of the world...can't you feel that something is wrong? That something is missing from our world? The vaccine may change your DNA; but can't you feel something much older that's been coded into you? Can't you feel the longing in your heart to know and love God? When you do drugs, and then have sex with a stranger - do you feel an empty space inside yourself? Is it possible that space feels empty because it needs to be filled with God's love? When you spend an entire day without lifting a finger, because your material needs are met by machines, don't you feel a desire to get up and do something more with your life? Could it be that our very genes are coded by God to drive us forward to do great things in His name?"

"So now I ask the world the question that should have been asked in the first place. Forget about religion. Look deep into that empty place in your heart, and ask yourself: DO YOU WANT GOD IN YOUR LIFE?"

I slump down onto my chains again - utterly exhausted. I hang there, with my eyes closed, breathing heavily ... yet gaining strength. As the moments pass, I become vaguely aware of someone shining a light into my eyes. I open them to see that the shot is centered on me, with the world map still up and running behind me - but it's no longer dark. Pinpricks of light are erupting all over the world. There's a glowing spot that represents Sheridan, Illinois; Colorado Springs is ablaze; Cairo, Egypt is lit. All over the world, the lights are coming on in answer to my question.

Stand up, Cephas. Stand for Me one more time.

I struggle to regain my feet. The light from the map is blinding behind me, while in front of me I can see the screen, and my own silhouetted figure struggling to stand.

For a moment - just one brilliant moment - I was allowed to be His light in the darkness. Now the fire is lit, and He is again the light of the world ... and I'm the dark silhouette. Even if it's for the last time, I MUST stand.

With an effort, I right myself. I stand up tall and straight, and hold my arms out to my sides, as immovable as wooden beams. With the light blazing behind me, my silhouette now forms a perfect cross over His glowing world.

“Christ came as a light to shine in this dark world, so that all who put their trust in Him will no longer remain in the darkness,” I say to the world.

Chapter Thirty

The light from the map continues to glow behind me.

"I believe it's now been about six minutes, Henry, and I feel fine. Are you ready to believe in miracles now?" I ask.

"How is it possible?" he asks. "You should be dead."

"My father never conspired to commit mass murder. When he wrote 'distribute it through the water' in his notebook, he was referring to the vaccine - not the toxin. Four hid the vaccine in spring water and has had over a decade to take it all over the world, and give it to the faithful."

"But the toxin dose I gave to you was five times what we've been giving through the air or water. I was enough to kill even someone who's vaccinated. We tested it."

"That's true for someone who took your 'Mark of the Beast' vaccine; but the extra bit of DNA you put in there as a family legacy makes the vaccine less efficient. Go ahead and release your toxin if you like. It's nothing more than dust."

For a moment, Henry is stunned beyond speech, but regains his composure.

"Perhaps martyrdom will become you after all," he says.

He nods to the guards.

"You two. Nothing fancy is necessary. Just shoot him in the head."

I remain standing as solid as a cross. The guards don't draw their guns. They don't even move.

Please, Lord. Let their empty hearts be filled with Your love.

"What are you waiting for?" Henry asks.

They still don't move. It's as if they can't see or hear us.

Henry approaches the nearest guard and draws the stunner from the man's belt himself. Even on its lowest setting, a point-blank shot to the head will generally kill. In my weakened state, there's no doubt about the outcome. He raises the gun, but his hand is shaking.

"You've killed millions; but this is the first time it's actually your finger pulling the trigger, isn't it Henry? Christ taught me that death is supposed to be personal, and I suspect right now, you're feeling just how right He is."

His shaking intensifies.

"May I have a moment to pray for your soul, Henry? Jesus commanded us to love one another. He even loved the men who nailed Him to a cross. So before you do this, I need to tell you that Jesus loves you Henry - and so do I."

He can no longer aim the gun, and lowers it to his knees.

"If God's purpose for me and my family was to destroy religion, then what was your purpose?" Henry asks.

I was sent to open hearts and stir souls, which is all it takes to destroy *your* religion, Henry."

I instantly regret my words and my tone, as I see Henry's heart harden.

"You're wrong, Cephas. There's no going back," Henry says. "People won't live without enhancements. They want sex and drugs, and to be told by the government who they are and what to do with their lives. They love all the things you call sin, and don't want to stop doing them."

"That's been true since before God walked among us," I reply. "He gave us free will, and allows us to choose our own paths. But now that the world's eyes have been reopened to their choices and His love, I think you'll be surprised by how many will choose to live His way."

His hand has steadied somewhat, and he raises the gun again.

"Without you, they'll be back to their videos tomorrow," Henry says.

A loud shot rings out from across the room. Henry's right wrist explodes with blood and the stunner flies from his hand. For a moment, he stares at his bloody wrist. I don't think he's ever seen his own blood, or felt intense pain, before now.

Across the room is my beautiful Martha, holding the ancient pistol Henry sent back in time to kill me. I guess I was right that it could be taken into secure Federal facilities undetected.

Behind her are Cameron, Cindi and a large team from Four. They secure the room without any more shots being fired, but I can see Cameron, Andrew and my cousins Geoff and James have each taken multiple stunner hits in order to get here. If I know the hearts of these men, they used themselves as shields to protect Martha and Cindi.

Dozens of people begin streaming into the room. I see many of my old students; I see mothers and their children; and I see grandmothers who remember the things their grandmothers told them about the Lord. I see people who've been sitting in a fog in front of their screens for decades, whose hearts are now ready to do more with their lives.

They're not here seeking me though, they're all here to seek the Lord.

The cameras are still on, capturing everything for the world to see.

Henry drops to his knees, holding his wrist.

"It went right between your radius and the ulna, Henry. Not a bone was broken. Sometimes the messages are subtle ... but not this one."

Federal officials from the Secret Service are the next to arrive, but other than taking Henry and his people into custody, they do little to interfere with the scene.

Martha runs to my side and unchains me. I hold up my left hand and show her my wedding band.

"Nobody takes it off but you."

As I say it, I feel consciousness starting to slip away from me, as if I was being held up by something outside myself that's done its job and is now needed somewhere else.

The last thing I hear is Martha yell "Cephas!" before I hit the floor.

I wake up to a small light flashing in my eyes. I'm on a medical gurney that's moving quickly down a well-lit hallway. My head is secured on either side so it won't roll around, and a doctor is flashing a light in my eyes.

"Pupils are non-reactive," the doctor says. "Keep pumping fluids into him. His internal organs are shutting down."

I try to speak, but the only thing that seems to be working properly is my brain. I can't even move my eyes; I can only stare blankly up at the ceiling. Someone has pumped me full of pain killers that have a paralytic effect.

Someone is holding my left hand, and out of my peripheral vision, I keep catching glimpses of blonde hair. Martha is running alongside the gurney. She has a com in her ear and is calling out instructions.

"Cameron, we're on the sixth floor. Put someone on each stairwell and elevator."

She listens to the response.

"I don't care what the Secret Service says. If the President himself shows up on the sixth floor, I'll stun him personally!"

She listens again.

"Okay, you're right. You take over command ... and Cameron? Thanks."

I feel someone gently take my right hand, and Jocie's face comes into view.

"I'll say it again: Oh, how I envy Martha McLeod! You need to stand up to this like you stood up to me. Fight, Professor! Your body is shot; so you fight with that blazing fire of a soul and don't you dare let her down."

Jocie fades away, and I feel a tear run down my cheek.

I was wrong about one thing: Even full of painkillers, you can still feel love.

"His heart is in V-fib. We're losing him," the doctor calls.

Thomas comes into my view.

"If I could give you my old, enhanced heart, I would," he says. "You've given me so much more ..."

He also fades from view and I feel another tear. I love him too, for the role he played.

"Blood pressure is dropping," a nurse calls out

Jesus comes into my view.

"Life in this world is an amazing series of choices, don't you think, Cephas? You can choose a vaccine that will mark your DNA, or you can choose a deadly toxin - and have faith that God's plan will save you from it. Why don't you choose to stay in this world a little longer? Time means nothing to me; so I'm in no hurry to see you in person."

Jesus gazes at me with those deep brown eyes; then smiles.

"Besides, I'm always with you."

Many more tears roll down my cheeks as Jesus reaches down and puts his hand onto my chest.

"His heart is stabilizing," the doctor says.

It would be so much easier to just let go.

"Who promised that life would be easy?" Jesus asks.

"Doctor, look at his brain activity," the nurse says. "It's through the roof."

"He's conscious," Martha says. "Look at the tears."

"It's probably just an autonomic response," the doctor says, as he again gets in my face with his little light.

Martha pushes him out of the way.

"You may not be able to say it to me, but I know you can think it, Cephas Paulson! Think 'Not Today!'" Martha orders. "Do you hear me? NOT TODAY!"

"There's no guarantee he can hear you, or understand you," the doctor says.

"I know you hear me. Not today," Martha repeats softly.

What was it that Martha said about me in class all those months ago? It seems like forever. She said that when I have something to say, nobody can shut me up.

My mouth still won't work; so I focus on my left hand, which Martha is still holding. I feel her jump a little, when I manage to move my thumb.

"He moved his thumb!"

The doctor mutters something about nerve damage.

I stay focused on my thumb and continue to painstakingly move it, until it touches my wedding ring.

"That's right," Martha says, with tears rolling down her cheeks. "Nobody removes that ring but me."

Not today, Martha. Definitely not today.

I wake up, but leave my eyes closed. I'm in a soft bed, rather than the cold floor of a cell, and there's a warm sunbeam on me. It seems like a good start. I can feel an I.V. running to my left arm, presumably pumping fluids and nutrients into me. I hear the turning of the page of a paper book, and soft breathing beside me. I wiggle the fingers of my left hand, my wedding band is still there.

I crack open my eyes and am surprised to see that I'm in my own bed, in my own house in Colorado Springs. I thought for sure that I'd be in some sort of Federal facility, or - at best - that Four had smuggled me out of government control and I was in one of their safe houses.

Martha is sitting beside me in the sunbeam, reading the 2029 Bible that belonged to Mrs. Pierce. Her hair looks like living gold in the sunlight and I can see sparkles dancing in her eyes as they move back and forth across the page. I'd be content to just lie here and watch her all day.

"I must be dead - I'm seeing angels," I say.

My whisper startles Martha enough that she jumps a little.

"Cephas Paulson dead? Not today."

Tears begin to roll down her cheeks.

"Don't worry, I'm fine."

"Fine? You think you're fine? You've been unconscious for over a week. When we got you to a hospital, you were on the edge of death. Even when you touched your thumb to your ring, they said there was nothing they could do ... and to bring you home and make you comfortable. The entire world has been on deathwatch, waiting for what they think is inevitable. Doctors have spent days on the news talking about the extent of your injuries and your chances of surviving."

"How are we here in my ... I mean *our* house?" I ask. "We're not safe here."

I struggle to sit up, but Martha easily holds me down with just a light pressure on my chest.

"You're under Federal protection, ordered by the President. All Christians are under Federal protection. Outside our front door, there's an outer ring of Federal agents who won't let anyone through, and an inner ring of protection from Four that won't even allow the Feds through. Cameron took your request to play offense to heart. He even shot down a news drone that hovered too close to the house yesterday."

My cousin Cindi walks through the door without knocking, holding a tray with a sandwich and a drink.

"Martha, it's been days since you slept or ate anything..."

Her jaw freezes open when she sees that I'm awake.

"Hey, Cuz. I see you're still protecting my protector, like I asked."

I smile and think to reach out and place my hand on Martha's stomach, even though the movement is painful. There's a noticeable baby bump now.

"Geoff! James!"

I hear the sound of feet running up the stairs in response to Cindi's yell.

"Oh, God, no. Please, no!" I hear Geoff say, just before he and James appear in the doorway next to Cindi.

"No, Geoff. I'm not dead yet."

I answer his fears and watch his eyes go wide.

"I don't believe it," Geoff says.

"There's no way I could have been on the edge of death," I say. "I remember how strong I felt - standing straight and tall in the shape of a cross, with the light behind me."

Like an immovable puzzle piece...

"The doctors have wondered about that too. They can't explain it," Martha replies. "They say you were a dead man standing."

"I can explain it. Does anybody feel like doing a little hacking?" I ask.

"Hacking? We don't need to hack," James says. "The deal for you to come home to die was that the Feds put a camera on you around the clock so the world can see you're safe from Henry, and people like him."

He points to a camera on the wall.

"You're being watched right now, Cephas. Say something to the world."

"For anyone who wonders how a man who was nearly dead stood up and formed the sign of the cross, open your Bibles to Second Timothy, Chapter 4, verse seventeen:

But the Lord stood by me and strengthened me, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all might hear it. So I was rescued from the lion's mouth.

“Thank you for your prayers; but now I need to go back to sleep. Please don't worry about me. My personal angels are watching over me.”

I smile, and indeed fall back into a deep, restful sleep.

Chapter Thirty-One

As the days and weeks pass, I speak daily from my bed. At first, Martha only allows one hour per day of speaking, so I can continue to rest, but as I gain strength, she slowly loosens the restrictions, until I'm speaking and answering questions from around the world. People are truly hungry to hear and understand more of the word of God.

There are some questions about the torture I endured, but I tell the world that I'm not ready to talk about it yet. Instead, I limit the discussions to the Bible, and to what I saw and thought when I was back in time - particularly my interactions with Jesus. The one question I can't seem to answer about time travel is about how Jocie died. Every time I try, I'm just too overwhelmed to continue.

One trauma counselor tries to get me to speak off camera about my thoughts and feelings, but I just can't do it. I'm not even ready to relive it privately with Martha. Every time I even think about the brutal beatings, I get short of breath and the images flash into my mind. Sometimes I even start shaking. One counselor suggests I try a new enhancement that's shown promise in blocking unwanted memories - and is politely shown the door.

Time will help this wound to fade; but the memories and emotions are going to be with me for rest of my life. I'm not sure I'd want to erase them, even if I could. Like both love and sin, the memories are a part of me now. So although the images cause me pain, in an odd way I cherish them as a reminder that - through it all - God was with me.

"I need to get out of this room, and out of this house," I say to Martha one morning, when the camera in my room is turned off.

"I've been thinking the same thing," she says. "Why don't we go up into the mountains to a hot spring..."

"Actually, I have a place a little homier in mind. We're going to Ogallala. There are a couple of things I need to do."

"It's a little late to ask my father for my hand in marriage."

She rubs her stomach, which is now much more than just a little baby bump.

"Perhaps ... but that's not what I need to do. There are several pieces of this puzzle that still need to be put into place."

Martha sighs, and closes her eyes.

"Can't we put it behind us? You can fool everyone else - but you can't fool me. I see the faraway look in your eye, and know what you're remembering. I feel you shaking and sweating in the night, and I curl around you and hold you until you relax. I want it to be over, Cephas. I want to be done with the secrets, and the hiding in the shadows. I want us to be free."

"Me too. That's why we need to go to Ogallala. This will be good for me. I promise."

I smile, and kiss her on the head.

"What does a wife need to do to get all of your secrets out of you? Travel through time again?"

It takes some time - and a lot of convincing - to allow me to travel anywhere without Secret Service protection; but, in the end, they're persuaded by the fact that I'll be taking a team from Four along with me. In truth, the only members of Four who know what's happening is the only security team I've ever needed: Martha and Cindi.

The tube ride from Colorado Springs to Ogallala, Nebraska is quick, and I'm soon enjoying a walk in the sun with Martha and Cindi along the South Platte River. It's a warm day for April and we walk slowly because Martha is due to give birth anytime now, and because months of lying in bed have left me weak and stiff.

"Nervous?" Martha asks.

“No, but only because they don’t know I’m coming,” I reply.

“Your first Easter dinner with Aunt Kimberly. She’ll be so happy to finally wash that empty plate...”

“... and with your parents. I warned you months ago that if I didn’t meet them by video, Jocie would be born before I met them. We’re just barely making it in time. Speaking of time, you and I still need to make a stop before I make my surprise Easter appearance.”

“Are you sure you don’t want me to come with you?” Cindi asks. “I mostly just get in mom’s way in the kitchen.”

“I’m sure. This is a special visit for me, and I want to take some time at their headstone. Besides, you can always go to a computer and track where I am, if you want to.”

I laugh, and hold up my wedding band.

Martha and Cindi stop dead in their tracks, and look at each other first, and then at me.

“Who told you?” Martha asks.

“Who told me you put a tracking device in my ring, way back at Bethany House? Nobody told me. The pieces of the puzzle just came together when we were in Sheridan.”

“I’m never planning a surprise party for you,” Martha says.

We reach a hover station on East A Street, and after hugs with Cindi, we head in opposite directions. I smile, when I see the ancient cemetery again. Its many acres of broad trees are just starting to bud in response to the warm spring sunshine, and I can’t think of a place that looks more restful.

Unfortunately, the dead are going to get no rest here today.

“I’m glad you asked me to come along,” Martha says. “I thought you might want to see their headstone alone this time - considering what you did to it the last time we were here. Have you thought about replacing it?” Martha asks.

“We’re not here to mourn. We’re here so you can learn one of Four’s best kept secrets,” I reply.

“The engravings on the headstone?” she asks, and I simply nod.

There’s an older couple strolling randomly through the graveyard, this Easter Sunday. The woman is wearing a very old-fashioned hat with a black veil, and the man is sporting a hat and sunglasses. I last saw them after I baptized them in the Trinity River in Dallas. At my request, Brill sent them a message, asking them to meet me here today.

Martha and I reach the headstone, and lean against an ancient maple tree to give Martha a rest. We say nothing, but we can both hear the couple approaching from behind us. Martha squeezes my hand, not knowing if she should be ready for danger or not.

“Planning a combat roll with that beach ball in your belly?” I ask.

“You’re nervous. I can feel it through your hand,” she replies.

“Secrets inside secrets; puzzles inside puzzles,” I say. “This part of the puzzle is about to have its last piece pushed into place.”

The woman looks eager to speak, but the man walks up beside me and reads the headstone.

“James and Hannah Paulson. Those are some names I haven’t heard in a while. They died in that horrible tube wreck all those years ago, didn’t they?” he asks.

“So they say,” I reply.

“The headstone looks like it went through the wreck with them,” he adds.

“The four of us have a lot in common with that stone,” I reply. “We all served a purpose and those purposes all included suffering some pain.”

I look at the woman, as she pulls back her veil. She looks agitated to the point of exploding.

“You’ve always had the most beautiful eyes,” I say.

She can’t take it any longer, and leaps at me - holding me in ten years’ worth of maternal embrace.

“Take it easy, Mom. There are spots on my back that still hurt, and probably always will.”

“I take it the engraving did its job? I knew someday you’d see it and figure it all out,” dad says, as he joins the hug.

“Puzzle pieces only fit together one way,” I say. “I just had to go looking for the two pieces I thought had been thrown away when I created my own solution. The file Aunt Jennifer showed me - as well as the classified report from the F.B.I. - never made sense. The Corps concluded that mom’s homemade incubator was used to experiment with the toxin and the vaccine. When I realized the headstone said: “When given time to incubate,” I knew mom had used it to incubate tissue samples containing your DNA to leave in the tube car. It fit perfectly with the F.B.I. finding that the DNA had some ‘aberrations.’ They wrote the aberrations off as contamination, but the real reason is because you grew them in a petri dish. You both got haircuts just before the accident so you could leave hair samples, too. It all just fit. I got Brill to admit that you’d been taking Capon Springs water - laced with vaccine - around the world for the last ten years.”

“I loved and hated every minute of our role in God’s plan,” Mom says. “We lost ten years of watching you grow up.”

“I know. Growing up without you wasn’t easy, but it was always part of the plan. Besides, we’re together now.”

Martha clears her throat.

“Can I join this hug?” she asks.

“Of course, dear,” mom says. “This hug is for family.”

We talk for a long time. Martha and I tell them about time travel and meeting Christ and the Apostles, and they tell us about travelling the world to vaccinate believers. Dad finally cuts it off.

“It’s getting late. Right now, let’s focus on what you’re suggesting we do today. Are you sure this is a good idea? They think we’ve been dead and gone for ten years. How can we just show up for Easter dinner? Maybe some things are better left in the past,” Dad says.

“Have you never read the story of the prodigal son? They’ll be shocked, but you’ll be welcome,” I reply. “We’ll do it in stages. They don’t even know that I’m coming; so I’ll show up first, and then I’ll signal you on a com so you can arrive just in time for pie.”

They look at each other, trying to decide.

“It’s the only way you’ll get to meet your granddaughter,” I say.

“Kimberly has always made a pretty good pie,” Mom says, and smiles.

Martha and I go back to the tube station and I wait out of sight, while her parents pick her up from the car they think she just arrived in. I hang around in the station for a while, and then catch a bus to the other side of town.

Martha signals me through my com, and I arrive at Aunt Kimberly’s house at just the right moment. I let myself in through the back door and silently walk to the dining room where I find everyone around the table with their eyes closed and heads bowed in prayer.

There’s a hearth on the wall opposite me. Above the hearth is a picture of an old man with just a crust of bread on his plate with his head also bowed in thanks for what little he has. It’s all such a beautiful sight that I want to weep.

Aunt Kimberly is seated at the head of the table at one end, and Uncle Trevor is at the other. All of my cousins are here, as are Martha’s parents, and her brother Eddie and his family. At my request, even Albert is here. I’ve never met some of them, and yet I feel like I’ve been sitting at this table my entire life. My heart positively melts when I see the empty seat that’s been reserved for me all of these years, and tears start to roll down my cheeks.

“I can’t help but notice that you have an extra seat,” I say.

There are a few surprised gasps, as eyes open.

“Aunt Kimberly, do you mind having another plate to wash?”

At first, all eyes focus on me; but my gaze is locked squarely on Aunt Kimberly. I see heads turn to watch her face. She stares at me, as if she’s seeing me in a dream and is afraid that if she blinks, I’ll disappear again. Eventually, her eyes soften a little and begin to water, while her lower lip begins to quiver.

“How I’ve dreamed and prayed that someday you’d walk through my door and dirty that plate,” she whispers.

“I know. Thank you for never giving up on me,” I whisper back.

When the plates are all washed and dried, Aunt Kimberly brings out three pies. I offer to get the dessert plates, and take a moment to send a message via my com.

“Cephas, you brought two extra dessert plates,” she remarks, when everyone has been served. “I could start setting one out for Jocie, but who is the other one for?”

“Aunt Kimberly. Do you believe that Easter is a day for new beginnings?” I ask, as mom and dad ring the doorbell.

Hours later, when the crying and pandemonium have died down, I find myself sitting quietly in the corner of Aunt Kimberly’s living room, simply observing my new family. Mom and Aunt Kimberly are remembering their childhood, as they try to reconnect after ten years. Martha is telling her parents and brother about her time travel adventure, and persuading everyone to get married.

Seeing me sitting by myself, Cindi crosses the room.

“Figuring out a new puzzle, Cuz?” she asks.

“This one is out of my league,” I say with a laugh.

“I have something for you,” she says.

She hands me the pouch filled with gems that I plan to give to Jocie someday.

“I don’t think you need me to watch after this - or Martha - anymore.”

Dad comes over, and Cindi turns to him.

“There’s something I’ve wanted to know, but I never thought I’d get the opportunity to find the answer,” she says to my dad.

The room quiets, and heads turn to hear what she’d like to ask the uncle the world thought was dead.

“Technology was pretty good ten years ago, but I looked at the vaccine sample we had before it was lost at Bethany House. It was a very complex artificial virus. How in the world were you able to create it, and what made you think to distribute it in spring water?” Cindi asks.

Dad looks at me, and I look first at Albert, then James.

“You didn’t tell them?” dad asks me, and I shake my head.

“I didn’t create the vaccine, or think to distribute it through water. Cephas did,” dad replies to Cindi and the room.

“How could he? He was only eight-years-old?”

I dump the contents of the gem bag into my hand and hold up one of the smoky green crystals.

“Before we blew up the smaller time machine in Israel, Albert and I stole the key components,” James says, and Geoff’s jaw drops. I don’t think either twin had kept a secret from the other - before now.

“You used the device the day we lost Bethany House,” Geoff says. “I saw the data download from when you used the panic button. I knew there was something strange about the way the power went out, and how it took the Feds an hour to get there. It’s because the Feds didn’t cut the power. The blackout was from the time machine drawing power to send the vaccine sample back in time. Then you blew up Bethany House to hide the evidence.”

“You did it, Cindi,” I say. “You and Amelia made the vaccine that saved us all. You just needed more time.”

“That reminds me: I believe this belongs to you, my dear,” Mom says to Martha, as she removes the ancient gold locket from around her neck.

“You used it to send a chip with the information,” Martha says.

“Okay. So you sent the vaccine sample and instructions back in time, and those instructions were added to the last page of the notebook to prove that Uncle James and Aunt Hannah weren’t conspiring to commit genocide. So, where did Uncle James hide the notebook page that we looked for all over the country, but never found?” Cindi asks.

Dad retrieves a pack he has been carrying since Dallas and pulls out a dodecahedron shaped puzzle about the size of a beach ball.

“No way,” Martha says. “It sat in your Aunt Jennifer’s house for the last ten years?”

I pull a few key pieces and the orb disintegrates into thousands of unique pieces that clatter to the floor, leaving an ancient sheet of greenish lined paper in my hand. Although I wrote the letter just a few months ago, it’s faded and worn where it was folded and unfolded many times. I open it and begin to read. As I do so, Dad begins to recite it from memory:

Dear Mom and Dad,

This is from your son, Cephias, writing to you from the year 2202. The metal cage in the abandoned tunnel in Bethany House is part of a time travel device which I’ve used to transport this package to you. In your timeframe, I’m just six-years-old; so there isn’t much I can offer as proof that this is really me - other than this.

Dad? Do you remember asking me: “Cephias, why do you like puzzles so much?”

My answer was: “Puzzles are like secrets that only the puzzle maker knows. It’s fun to know secrets, especially when people don’t know that you know their secrets.”

I know your secrets. I know you’re Christians and that you founded a new Christian group known as Four. My journey to get here was long and difficult; but now I’m also a member of Four - and Four needs your help.

Your prayer group includes people who are experimenting with the toxin that was used in the Final Holy War. Their plan is to vaccinate Christians and then release the toxin to kill all non-Christians. Their unspeakably evil plan is going to fail and their research will end up in the hands of the government. In my time, the government has vaccinated all non-Christians and is about to release the toxin to wipe out all believers. We don’t have time to produce our own vaccine, but God has revealed enough pieces of this puzzle to prove to me that the only way to save us is by sending the vaccine sample found in this package back in time. All the information we have about the vaccine is contained in the data chip hidden in the locket.

Playing with timelines is a tricky thing, but I can give you one hint: Brill and Austin know about the vaccine, and how it’s

distributed around the world. This is Four's greatest secret and must be kept a secret, no matter the cost.

Dad? Do you remember the question I asked you that day? "Have you ever thought that maybe we're all pieces in somebody else's puzzle?"

I know the answer now. We're all pieces in His wondrous puzzle.

Love, Cephas

"Puzzle solved?" I ask.

Chapter Thirty-Two

I'm given a few days to secretly rest with my family in Ogallala. Martha lets me stroll through the cemetery and along the river under the watchful eyes of Cindi and Albert. Dad comes along to "work off the pie" he ate at Easter, but mostly I think he wants to be around me and family after so many years spent secretly traveling the world. He's even talking about finding a house in Colorado Springs to be close when the baby is born.

The day after Easter, Cameron joins my "security detail." This is his hometown too; but I don't think he's really here to watch over me. He and Cindi have been spending a lot of time together and today, when they ran ahead to "scan the perimeter" I saw Cindi grab Cameron's hand just as they turned a corner in the trail. Last month, I started a lecture series on Christian dating. I hope they were watching.

As we exit the tube station in Colorado Springs, I look up at Cheyenne Mountain and can't help but shudder. In the dark heart of that mountain, I was tortured nearly to death. My time in Ogallala was refreshing, but I can't expect it to chase away all the demons. I wonder to myself if I'll someday be able to visit that place - and my knees feel weak at the thought of it.

Martha sees where I'm looking. She takes my hand and wisely turns me away from the view. "Not today," is all she says.

The President has been pushing for me to do an official public interview, and I've finally been given clearance by both the doctors and Martha. It seems anticlimactic, considering the number of lectures I've given from bed; but I'm happy to have another excuse to get out of the house. I wanted to at least travel to Denver, but instead Martha insisted that the interview be held in the familiar surroundings of my old teaching studio at the college.

"Will you wear the red tie?" Martha asks, as I get dressed. "I always loved it when you wore the red tie to teach. It seemed like it gave you an extra spark."

"Then the red tie it is."

I take it off the rack and tie it.

"How do I look?"

"Considering you almost died a few months ago, you look great."

I swear Martha's over-protective mothering instinct is already in full gear, and I'm bearing the brunt of it.

"I need to work out," I say. "How about a light jog?"

"I don't think so."

"But I'm getting fat."

I rub my belly.

"Oh, please!"

She rubs her gigantic abdomen, and we both laugh.

"Then I have the perfect plan. Let's go," I say and head for the back door.

"Where are you going? The car isn't even here yet," she calls after me, but I'm already out the door.

"I'm going for a walk through the park."

I keep going, as I hear Martha announce over her com that I've altered the security plan. I watch as my cousins and other members of Four scramble, followed by members of the Secret Service. I may not get in a light jog, but they all do.

Martha comes up behind me, and I offer her my arm, which she takes - as if she needs to hold me up. There's a light snow on the ground from a late spring storm; but the sweeper bots automatically cleared the walkways and park benches. I walk directly to the rosebush where I picked the first rose that I used to send a secret message to Martha. The leaves have all fallen from the bush, but there are still a couple of brown and dried-out flowers that are managing to cling to their petals.

I gently pick one and offer it to Martha.

"Does it have a secret message?" she asks.

"That's is the message. It means I have no more secrets."

When we reach my old classroom, the studio is full. Martha hand-picked the audience, so it includes many members of Four and some of my old students; but I also see the Vice President of the United States, plus Brill and Austin, who traveled from Capon Springs to see me.

I freeze when I see Zip sitting behind the Vice President. She never made it out of McIntosh. She vowed to evacuate every last Christian and, in the end, was so weak from dehydration that a Four team had to sneak back into town with I.V. fluids. I want to tell her I'm sorry for letting her suffer when I could have revealed the water was safe for her to drink.

She must see it on my face, because she lowers her shirt from her neck and right shoulder, revealing a tattoo of the fractal pattern I drew years ago. She has truly forgiven me.

The next surprise is the woman who's waiting to conduct the interview. I thought it would be some leading national news figure; but Martha has chosen a woman named Lauren who works as a news anchor right here in Colorado Springs. There are two things that are particularly remarkable about Lauren. The first is that, unlike other news people, she has no apparent enhancements. The second is that two years ago she was a student of mine in this very classroom.

"Lauren. It's nice to have you back in my classroom," I say, before the cameras come on.

"You remember me?"

"Of course I remember you," I say. "You had a reporter's instinct to uncover the truth back then too. I take it you found the Truth?"

She doesn't get a chance to reply before the stage manager calls us to places, but her smile tells me all I need to know.

The interview begins with the Vice President joining us to announce that - when I'm ready - I've been nominated to chair a Presidential commission for religious privacy and freedom. The agreement was that the Vice President wasn't going to take questions, but new puzzles are forming in my head, so when I ask to speak, it's plain he has no choice but to make an exception for me.

"Mr. Vice President. I'm honored to accept the chairmanship of the new commission; but the first step can be done without me. Article Five of the United States Constitution contains a mechanism by which the people can quickly make change happen. If enough people call for an immediate Constitutional Convention through their state legislatures, we could have the Thirty-Fifth Amendment repealed and the original First Amendment restored before a Presidential Commission is even done discussing the seating arrangement at the table."

The Vice President stammers some unintelligible politician's response, and makes a hasty retreat to his seat. It doesn't matter. Article Five will be the hottest topic on the net within minutes.

The interview moves to all of the expected exchanges, with Lauren asks about my health and about the baby. I tell the story about how the baby named herself 'Jocie,' as we traveled through time. The audience coos ... but I've opened the door to discussing the original Jocie.

"Cephas, enhancement removal is the hottest trend in medicine right now, and all the major movie studios are seeking the natural look. It's no secret that you're not a fan of enhancements.

What do you think Jocie would say, if she were here right now? Would she argue with you over the subject?" Lauren asks.

I sit there, frozen by my thoughts and memories. Martha gets a concerned look on her face, and I feel a tear roll down my cheek. Martha stands.

"Cephas? I'm sorry if Jocie is still too painful a subject for you. Let's move on," Lauren says.

I raise my hand to stop her.

"The old Jocie - the Jocie that the world knew - would have argued, and quite possibly have slapped me across the face again."

The audience remains silent, as my tears continue to fall.

"The Jocie that only I knew - the Jocie who loved Christ - that Jocie understood how she had allowed the beauty she'd obtained on the outside to make her ugly on the inside."

Lauren doesn't know what to say or do next. Her training as a reporter is telling her one thing, but there's something on her heart that she'd rather ask.

"Cephas, even if you haven't, everyone else in the world has seen the videos. We saw the whippings and the beatings. We saw your blood, and even your very life, draining out of you before our eyes. But all that time, you knew that Four had been quietly vaccinating people for over ten years. So I have ask: Why did you do it? Why did you stand there and willingly accept a beating that was so unnecessary?"

"I was never there to save people from the toxin. I was there to wake them up by giving them just a small glimpse of what He did for us on the cross. What I did was minor. I simply absorbed the wrath of one man. Christ absorbed the wrath of God that was meant for all mankind. But even being tortured and nailed to a cross was nothing compared to the pain I saw Him feeling in His soul. He hung on a cross just a foot off the ground, and I was able to look Him in the eyes while He felt - for the first time - the pain of being separated from God. That's what sin does to us: it separates us from God and causes us pain in our souls. Even if we don't understand why, we feel that pain every day of our lives. It was simply my job to remind everyone of the cause of our pain."

"So you watched Him pour out His blood and pour out His love for us, at the same time?"

Lauren observes.

"That's an excellent way to wrap it up," I say. "My part in His great puzzle has ended."

"Wrap it up? How can that wrap it up, when there's so much left to do? The world is seeking God again. How will people learn what they need to know?" Lauren asks.

I laugh.

"Jesus told us everything we need to know. Love the Lord with all your heart, and love your neighbor as yourself," I reply.

"But how will we be organized?"

"When two or more gather in His name, He will be with them."

"But if not you, who's going to be in charge?"

"Isn't it obvious? The one in charge is the One who's always been in charge of this entire puzzle we call life on earth."

"HE IS."

HE IS

We may forget it, from time to time; but He never has.
Did you ever really doubt it?

Epilogue

Colorado Springs, 2208 A.D.

“Why can’t I just let the day pass quietly again, like last year?” I ask Martha.

I’m sitting in a comfortable chair, enjoying a sunbeam and watching Jocie put together a three-dimensional puzzle on the floor. She’s watching me - while pretending she’s not - so I keep getting flashes of the wonderful blue eyes shared by all the women in my family. Her brother, Austin, is toddling around the room

“It’s a national holiday, and it’s the five-year anniversary. It’s important to help people remember,” Martha says.

I remember daily - whether I want to or not.

“They’re hoping you’ll say an opening prayer this year.”

“It would be a lot of walking, and we’ll be carrying Austin. What if he gets tired and cranky?” I ask.

“I’m sure either my mom or yours would be happy to help out. Cameron and Cindi are coming with a two-year-old and she’s seven months pregnant; but I don’t hear her complaining.”

“They won’t ask me to stand between the posts and re-enact it, will they?”

“I’m sure you can set the agenda. You can say the prayer outside if you don’t want to go inside.”

“Look, Daddy! I solved the puzzle,” Jocie says. “The puzzle was you.”

It’s a puzzle of me chained between two posts, with a lit up map of the world behind me.

“I was only one piece, sweetie.”

I look up to Martha.

“If I’m doing this, I’m calling the shots.”

When Martha, Jocie and I arrive in a private car, I see that hand-picked friends and family are standing in lines on either side of the giant tunnel entrance. It’s a warm day for this time of year and the women are mostly wearing sun dresses and the men short-sleeves.

The press is stopped at the lower gate, except for one official camera crew. I wanted to have just family attend my first trip back to the mountain, but one crew broadcasting live was the compromise we settled on. Despite the heat, one of the camera men is wearing a long-sleeved shirt and a hat that is pulled down to cover his entire forehead. Martha has learned to follow my gaze when something strikes me as out of place.

“The crew was background checked and searched for weapons,” she says. “You’re safe.”

Jocie yells “Aunt Cindi” and runs for my cousin; but I remain where I am, looking at everyone who has assembled here to support me today. For ten years, I didn’t think I had a family. Now I’m so overwhelmed by how deeply I love them all that tears begin to run down my face.

Just keep telling yourself that you’re walking towards them - not towards the entrance to that place.

Martha takes my hand, encouraging me to keep walking.

“I don’t envy you your memory today,” she says.

I look down at my wrists. The scars from where the cuffs cut into me are visible.

“Why are we doing this?” I ask.

“Because you still haven’t put it behind you,” Martha says. “Let me tell you what I remember about that day. We had tracked you to Colorado Springs, using the transmitter in your ring; but we lost the signal before we knew exactly where they’d taken you. I was in Nebraska when you gave the hint about your location using the books of the Bible. Unfortunately, nobody knew what the initials ‘NORAD’ stood for, and it took us a day to find the historical reference.”

A small gust of wind halts my progress, and my heart starts to pound.

“What is it?” Martha asks.

“Do you smell ponderosa pines on the breeze?” I ask. “Do you hear the rattling of the aspen leaves? That’s how I knew I was back in Colorado. God sent something as simple as a gentle breeze. I thought it would be the last time I’d ever smell or hear the wind.”

My loved ones start to look concerned.

“Keep talking, Martha. Tell me what else you remember,” I say.

Maybe hearing her memories can keep mine at bay for a few more minutes.

“We set up a camp in an abandoned house down the road. We figured that the old blast doors into N.O.R.A.D. were closed and didn’t know how to get through them. So, like the rest of the world, we watched you being tortured, and waited for some kind of sign. When not a single light was lit on the world map behind you, it felt like the darkest moment of my life; so I ordered an assault.”

“There were five guards at the entrance when we came for you,” Martha says. “We didn’t know if firing our stunners would be detected inside and were afraid that if we tipped Henry off, he’d shoot you. So we just rushed straight into their fire and took them down, hand-to-hand. Geoff took a hit to his right arm and James took one to his left. They linked their stunned arms together and fought side-by-side, just like they always said they would.”

As we pass through the lines, I look at Geoff and James. They’ve linked arms standing in line.

“Cindi had to roll to avoid a shot, and when she came up, the last guard had her dead to rights,” Martha continues. “It was one of those heavy stun cannons. It probably would have killed her at that range; but before he could fire, he was stunned from behind by a guard who hadn’t fired a shot at us.”

“Daniel,” I say. “He writes to me from prison, where he leads a big prayer group. He’s getting out soon and says he’s looking forward to having children.”

“He opened the blast doors and showed us the fastest way to you. The rest you know.”

My knees go wobbly, as I pass the threshold and smell the musty air. Martha holds my hand tighter.

We walk to the room where I was held. The screen and clock are still on the wall. I watch and listen as the second hand ticks its way around the face. As luck would have it, the time on the clock is approaching nine AM, so I almost expect the screen to come on, showing a scene designed to torture me.

Only Martha and the camera crew have come into the room with me, but Geoff is standing in the doorway.

“Henry taped you around the clock,” Geoff says. “Did you know you talked in your sleep? You even stood up once; then knelt down and acted like you were hitting something with a hammer. Do you know who you were talking to?”

“Old friends, mostly,” I say.

And One who’ll never leave my side because of how I knelt down with a hammer that day.

We begin my daily route from my room to the studio. Part of me wishes there was a guard to prod me along, rather than having to do it of my own accord. Everyone is heading for the main entrance; but I stop when we reach the backstage door they used for me each day. My hand is shaking as I reach for the knob.

“I think we’d better go the other way,” Martha says.

The camera crew is capturing every moment, and sending it to the world.

“No, I can do this, but I’d like to do it alone,” I say.

When I reach the stage, a spotlight is lighting the two posts, which still have their chains and cuffs. There are dark blood stains on the floor. I run my hand along the rough wood, and feel twinges of pain in the skin of my back where the whip cut the deepest.

Everyone else has filtered in through the main entrance and are watching me in silence.

“What are you remembering, Cephas?” Martha asks. “Pain? Fear?”

“Yes; but they’re not the strongest memories. The strongest memory is still love. Jesus did what He did out of His endless love. He loaned some to me, to help me through.”

Jocie runs to the front of the stage.

“Daddy? Is this where you solved the big puzzle?”

I look at her for a long time and marvel at the wonder I see in her eyes. For a moment, I feel the childlike wonder of solving a puzzle along with her.

“I didn’t solve the puzzle, sweetheart. It’s a secret only the puzzle maker knows.”

God loves a good puzzle. He spent six days creating puzzles for mankind to solve, and on the seventh day He smiled, as we set to work on them. His grand design even includes keeping some of His puzzles always just beyond our grasp, to ensure we'll never stop reaching higher. I've never thought of His unsolvable puzzles as a means to frustrate humanity. I'd rather believe that, as long as we keep searching for the solutions to His puzzles, we'll also be searching to know Him.

Connect with the Author

So that's it, the trilogy is complete. Thanks for taking the journey along with Cephas, Martha and everyone else. It's been a journey for me, too, and I hope that your journey has been as personal as mine has been. Part of the fun of writing is letting little pieces of yourself slip through into the characters and the background. If you want to know me, look for song titles and lyrics and movie references that I've hidden here and there along the way. More importantly, look for all of the Bible references, there are a lot more hidden in there than you see at first glance!

People often think that an author must naturally identify most closely with the main character, particularly when a book is written in the first person. There are a few experiences from my own life that made it into his life, but I don't want to say that I identify most closely with Cephas, except in one key regard ... as good as Cephas is at puzzles, it's the ones that he messes up that make him the most human.

There's a little Cephas in all of us.

One last thing ... it's been suggested that since I've gone to all the work of creating this world, that I should keep writing in it. I think I can do it ... but I'll need some encouragement! If you think I should add to the story, send me an email (puzzlemasterbook@gmail.com).