

Puzzle Master

T.J. McKenna

Puzzle Master
Revised Edition

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Author's Note for the eBook Edition

I hope you won't prejudge the contents of this, or any eBook, by the price you pay for it. I've been given many books for free (including copies of the Bible) and I've found value in their pages regardless of whether money changed hands. I give you this eBook for free with my blessings, and here's why.

Every Easter, a house on the road between my house and my kids' school would do a beautiful, but simple statement of their faith. They'd erect a heavy wooden cross and drape it with a purple cloth in the days leading up to Easter. On Easter morning, the purple would be gone and the cross would be draped in white. I came to love seeing it there each spring. So much so, in fact, that over time, as I drove by, I'd find my eyes drifting to that spot year-round hoping to see it. I'd go so far as to say that, eventually, I could see the cross with my heart even when it wasn't there for my eyes.

Every now and then, I'd see the owners of the house in their yard and I'd consider stopping to introduce myself, and tell them how moving I found their cross to be. I never stopped. I was always too busy or felt like it just wasn't "the right time." Then, they suddenly moved away and I'd squandered my chance to meet them. They took the time to touch everyone who drove past, and I'd done nothing to touch their lives in return.

At about the time they moved away, my wife was unexpectedly diagnosed with cancer. Thoughts about opportunities to touch each other's lives again came to the forefront, as friends and neighbors sent flowers and food. The road won't be easy, but she's going to be fine. I'm sure of it. Imagining my neighbor's Easter cross, as I drive by each day, helps me to be sure of it.

If giving away this eBook is my best chance to plant a cross for someone to see with their heart as much as their eyes, then I don't want to squander it. I don't know that I'll ever have what it takes to be a "Best-Selling" author. Instead, I hope that people who read these words will help me to become a "Best-Giving" author by spreading the word.

You'll soon see that the main characters are just eighteen years old. I'd particularly like to see free copies of *Puzzle Master* in the hands of teens and young adults; so at the end, you'll find a second "Author's note," where I request you do something for me to spread the word among our youth and help me give away as many free eBooks as possible.

Finally, I recognize that not everyone is interested in eBooks. I, personally, still love the feel of a book in my hands and turning a page rather than tapping. Unfortunately, I can't give the paper version away for free, but I have made it available at Amazon for the lowest price possible.

Dedication

For Kristen on our Silver Anniversary.

You once asked the question: "What kind of man would you have our daughter marry?" I'd be lying if I said I want her to marry someone just like me, but there is one trait of mine I'd like him to have. I'd like her to marry the man who will wake up every morning honestly believing he married the most beautiful woman in the world.

Acknowledgements

For the revised edition, special thanks go to my very patient copy editor, Diane. If “comma deficiency” is a disease, then I have a prize-winning case of it. Diane was cure. In addition to commas, she found and fixed dozens of typographical and grammatical errors that occurred in the first edition and generally made this edition a more professional-looking product. I’d like to note that I had no prior connection to Diane, she simply read *Puzzle Master* and offered to revise it for free. Is that just happenstance? Or is it the hand of the Lord? I think you know what I believe.

I didn’t include acknowledgements in the first edition, so I’d like to thank my son, Cam. He was the first to read the first draft and is likely still my biggest fan. Sometimes we read a book and when we’ve finished it was “just a book.” Sometimes an author is lucky enough to feel that someone has really tried to “absorb” a book and uncover its nuances. If anyone has attempted that with *Puzzle Master*, it’s been Cam.

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Prologue

Sheridan, Illinois 2190 A.D.

God loves a good puzzle. He spent six days creating puzzles for mankind to solve and on the seventh day smiled, as we set to work on them. His grand design even included keeping some of His puzzles always just beyond our grasp, to insure we'd 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.

I love puzzles too. My parents say I solved my first puzzle before I could walk, and squealed and clapped with delight before smashing it, just so I could solve it again. From that day, puzzles became my joy and wonder. I don't even know how I do it. I just see things most people can't see and know how things will fit together. Just as God planned, He provided me with a supply of increasingly harder puzzles to solve so I'd never stop reaching. He had good reason. He wasn't training me to solve man's puzzles. He was training me to solve one of His own creation.

I was just six years old in 2190 A.D., but I remember the day when the first pieces of God's puzzle were fit together. Mom was in the kitchen, humming the same tune she hummed every morning, so I hummed it along with her. I'd learned the tune at school and both Mom and my teacher would smile when I hummed it, even if I couldn't carry a tune.

Dad came down the stairs with a small bag, indicating he was going to be away overnight. Whenever he was going to be away, he took an extra-long time saying goodbye; so on that morning, he sat and talked to me while I completed a difficult three-dimensional holographic jigsaw puzzle.

"Cephas, why do you like puzzles so much?" Dad asked, while I manipulated the hovering shapes of light with finger motions.

"Puzzles are like secrets only the puzzle maker knows," I answered without looking up. "It's fun to know secrets, especially when people don't know that you know their secrets."

It's good I didn't look up, or I may have picked up on my father's concern. James Paulson was a man keeping a secret from the world - and from me. Born to a powerful atheist family, he'd somehow fallen in love with both a Christian woman and her savior, Jesus Christ. As I was just six years old, my parents had decided it was too risky to teach me about Jesus until I learned how to hide my thoughts and opinions from prying eyes.

At six years old, all I knew about Christians was what I'd learned in school. They were people who believed in some force they called "God" and their ideas were banned by the government sometime after the Final Holy War in 2036. My teachers also told me there used to be many other religions, but they were all gone by about the year 2150.

Of course, there was also the playground education on the subject. At recess, we'd play "C&C" which was short for "Christians and Cult Hunters." One lucky kid, chosen at random, would be the government "cult hunter" and would hunt the rest who were the "Christians." When the cult hunter caught you, he could "re-educate" you and make you a fellow cult hunter, or he could just kill you outright and you'd sit out until the next game started. It usually depended on how good you were at begging for his "help."

To me, the game was a puzzle where my classmates represented predictable pieces that I could move around as I pleased, so I was usually the last one to get caught. I once tried to change the rules so that the last Christian caught would become the cult hunter in the next game, but my teacher overheard my proposal and wouldn't allow it. As part of her scolding, I was assured it was illogical that the Christian who was best at evading the cult hunters should ever be perceived as a "winner."

“If you know all the puzzle maker’s secrets, maybe you should be a puzzle maker when you grow up,” Dad said after a pause.

“But then somebody else would learn my puzzle secrets,” I replied, acting more like a six-year-old again. “Solving them is more fun anyway.”

“Is the last piece your favorite piece to put in?”

“I don’t know why everyone thinks that. The first piece is just as important to the solution as the last one. What difference does the order make?”

I stopped working and considered the last piece, which was hovering in front of me.

“Dad? Have you ever thought that maybe we’re all pieces in somebody else’s puzzle?”

The question set him back onto his heels, though I didn’t know why. Was this a dangerous theological thought I’d somehow picked up from my parents? Or, was it just another passing notion of a six-year-old - a notion soon to be forgotten?

“I don’t know Cephias. Why do you ask?”

I flicked my finger to slide the last piece into place.

“Because if we are, that’s a puzzle I want to solve.”

In the hills above Gore, Virginia

As Dad and I were having our conversation about puzzles; underneath a dilapidated old house over a thousand kilometers away, identical twin old men worked alongside much younger backs. They were burrowing out working and living spaces where the faithful could hide from prying government eyes. With the average life span nearing one hundred years, the twins refused to consider themselves “old,” but they both knew they’d be sore the next morning. Such was the life of a Christian: hiding in the shadows and being called “cultists” or “fish heads.” To them, this labor was considered worth the pain.

Any other excavation project in the world, big or small, would simply use digging robots. You’d program them to clear a certain space and they’d excavate it to the millimeter. The problem was, the drones would uplink to a global positioning system and the government would know instantly, and update its maps accordingly. For secrecy, manual labor was the only option available.

Three escape tunnels had been completed, but when the fourth was started it had run into a preexisting chamber which had been built by coal miners more than a century earlier. The coal itself had been much deeper, but the area was riddled with old air shafts that would mean death to anyone who fell into one. When the discovery was made, they’d explored just the first twenty or thirty meters, then erected a makeshift door and set up monitors for natural gas. Once the monitors confirmed the air was safe, the old twins took it upon themselves to keep everyone else out of harm’s way while they checked the area for danger.

“We good to go, Baby Brother?” Austin asked his brother Brill, who was about twenty minutes younger than himself.

“Sure thing, old man,” came Brill’s customary response.

Austin shined his light back and forth, paying special attention to the floor as he searched for danger. As his beam hit the far corner of the space, it swept across something shiny.

“Where’d that come from?”

“Looks like an old canary cage or something,” Brill replied. “I guess the old timers were worried about gas too.”

“I can see what it looks like. I’m saying it wasn’t there when we first broke through.”

“Your eyes are getting weak, old man. Look at the floor. Everywhere we’ve been, you can see our footprints in the dust. There isn’t a footprint anywhere near it.”

Austin carefully crossed the floor for a closer look.

“It’s not much of a canary cage. It has no bottom.”

He frowned as his light revealed a package, wrapped in brown paper and tied with a string, sitting under the cage. There was writing on it, which he could easily read because it wasn’t covered with the same layer of dust as everything else in the area.

“What is it?” Brill asked.

“Is the new guy, James, still planning on spending the night and helping with the power connection? The one with the government job and the little boy named Cephas?”

“James Paulson? Yeah - he got here an hour ago. I watched him sign the guest book and everything. Why?”

“I don’t know what it’s all about, but whoever snuck in here left a package with Paulson’s name on it.”

Chapter One

Colorado Springs, Colorado 2202 A.D.

Avoid eye contact. You know what'll happen if you look directly into those eyes.

It's an odd thing to think to yourself, while looking into a mirror.

Each day, it's my job to teach classes in religious history and convince young minds that any form of spiritualism is a delusional road to ruin, compared to the truth offered by science. So every day, before teaching class, I take the advice of my old friend and mentor, whose seat I now occupy at the University. He told me to look over the parts of my body and acknowledge I'm nothing more than a complex collection of biochemical reactions. He told me that embracing my nature as an evolved being would keep me grounded in reality and free of destructive spiritualism.

He didn't mention that you'd develop an aversion to mirrors.

I watch my hands as they twist the silk of my tie into a knot.

"Hands are a useful adaptation our early ancestors acquired eons ago to give them a competitive advantage so they could pass on their genes. They're no different than a plant's leaves or a fish's fins," I say out loud.

It makes perfect scientific sense. Of course hands evolved. Where else could they come from?

I open my mouth, and look at my lips and tongue.

"Evolved to give my ancestors the advantage of communication."

I look over my ears, nose, and hair in turn, and assign them each a rational place in evolution, then let out a deep sigh when I give up pretending. I could work my way down to my toes - but my eyes will still be there in the mirror, waiting for their turn. Waiting to deny every scientific argument, with a simple twinkle.

My life makes no sense. It never has. It's like the twinkle is the only thing that's a true reflection of me and everything else in the mirror is a distortion.

Like every morning, the need to look into my eyes and ponder their secrets will soon overcome me; so I sigh, then close my eyes and lean in closer to the mirror. I tell myself again that eyes are just another set of complex cells that evolved to allow me to interact with my environment. I tell myself that the twinkle, the spark of life I'll see in there, is just light reflecting off the edge of the iris. I stand for a while with my eyes closed, hoping to believe it this time.

Opening my eyes is the same each morning. Try as I might, I can't see a mass of cells that collect light and transmit biochemical information to another blob of cells called the brain. I see beyond the cells staring back at me. I see a...

I stop short, before allowing myself to even think the word "soul".

Don't go there, Cephas. Your job is to deny the existence of such nonsense, not explore it.

I break off the staring contest with the mirror.

There's no place for this sort of thinking in your life. Even if you're retired, you're still a cult hunter. You're not just any cult hunter; you're THE Cult Hunter, so control your thoughts.

I drive the conflict from my mind and take another look at myself in the mirror, while avoiding my eyes. At eighteen-years-old, I'm younger than the students I teach, though it can be hard to tell anyone's age due to "enhancements." The human race long ago tired of seeing any sort of "imperfections" when they looked in the mirror. Virtually all children have enhancement surgeries of one sort or another, many while they're still babies and some before they're even born. The awkwardness of puberty typically brings more surgeries, followed by many more in later years in an attempt to deny the inevitable signs of aging.

Most people think of their enhancements as a step towards perfection, but I've never been able to view it that way. To me, enhancements make people look like a set of molded plastic dolls that all say the same words and think the same thoughts. It's always been a point of pride that I don't have any visible enhancements.

The only thing you like about looking in mirrors is the reminder that you're not perfect.

I look at the table that sits under the mirror and sigh again as I see the final step in my morning routine: my communications device or "com." When I place the tiny device into my ear, it'll automatically activate and the daily assault on the senses will begin. Coms don't understand the pleasure I take in being alone with my thoughts; so it'll batter me with personal messages, news, advertisements, music, and countless other types of noise. Once it's in my ear, the simple act of thinking will become like trying to sleep as a faucet drips nearby.

Maybe that's why people love their coms so much, so they can avoid thinking.

I wouldn't wear one at all, but as a professor I'm contractually obligated to wear my com for four hours per day, so I put it in solely to get the clock started. Anyone in the world who cares to look can now see my electronic footprint. My ear hasn't even warmed it before the first call comes.

"Incoming call, Cephas," the pleasant voice that's not quite male and not quite female says in my ear. At least it pronounces my name correctly: "See-fuss". The old voice never got it quite right.

"Really? Who's looking for me?"

"Riemann Jones from the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Cult Hunter Corps."

Not the Corps. Not again.

I rip it out of my ear and watch it deactivate. A call from my old friend Riemann can only mean one thing; The Corps has some sort of puzzle it can't solve on its own. With the Corps, the puzzle is always how to crack Christian communication codes that nobody else can crack and find Christian hiding places that nobody else can find.

And every time I solve a puzzle for the Corps, people end up dead.

As I step onto the front porch, a hover bus glides up the street towards my house. The hover line looks like a large metal plate embedded in the old pavement, but when a vehicle is detected, the plates will hum to life to provide both lift and propulsion. The contrast between a floating bus and my house is comical because my house has been preserved to look just like it did when it was built in 1967. That's why I chose to live here. I find a strange comfort in the old-fashioned.

I let the bus pass. As the public face of the Cult Hunter Corps, I avoid the bus system because many people on it will recognize me. A few will treat me with the adoration of a celebrity, but most will shrink from me in fear, as I force myself to make eye contact with each of them. Although I'm fascinated by looking into my own eyes each morning, I find looking directly into someone else's eyes disquieting. Unfortunately for me, being The Cult Hunter requires projecting dominance, so avoiding eye contact is not allowed. Luckily, walking for enjoyment is a lost art, so I can walk to the university and encounter far fewer people. Hopefully the solitude will put me in a better frame of mind to speak with Riemann after I'm done teaching.

Half a block from my house, I wonder if the world is conspiring to remind me that my old-fashioned world ends at my front door. A young couple is having sex against a tree just a meter from the sidewalk. Public sex is a protected form of expression under the First Amendment and since it's contrary to what we know about Christian doctrines, as The Cult Hunter, I'm expected to encourage it.

The young woman is facing me and our eyes meet. Thankfully, she can only meet my gaze for a moment, but it's long enough for me to see what I was expecting. She has what I call "doll eyes." There's light shining off the edge of her iris, just like everyone else, but even if I could stare into them all day, I know I'd never see a twinkle. Like a doll, there just isn't a spark of life to be found.

As I pass them, the closest I can manage to being encouraging is to nod approvingly at the young man. His doll eyes just stare vacantly at me.

At the next intersection, I approach some kids as they take advantage of the hover system with bikes and boards that hover. When activated by a board or bike, the system will only let them hover a few centimeters off the ground to ensure their safety. Despite the safeguards, kids have figured out that when they enter the wake of a passing hover bus, the extra lift will take them well off the ground where they can perform tricks. Some kids even carry a magnetic leash which they stick to the back or side of the hover bus and then “hover ski” along behind for kicks. Trust kids to always find a way to have fun in a system designed to prevent it.

The kids collect where multiple lines meet because there are more wakes to ride. As I reach a favorite spot, a “kid,” who’s older than I am, recognizes me and yells “The Cult Hunter!” while doing a hover board trick two meters off the ground. I don’t turn my head to acknowledge him.

“How many fish heads you take down today, Cult Hunter?” a boy who looks to be about twelve asks as he waits his turn to enter the next wake.

Why’d you have to ask a question, kid? Now I have to respond.

“It’s been a slow day so far,” I say in the usual monotone I reserve for the public; then stop and rotate my head like it’s on a swivel. I enter ‘cult hunter mode’ where even the smallest nuance of my appearance will be calculated and controlled.

“Christians often use such questions as a cover.”

Start off cold. Lower right eyebrow by two millimeters then tilt head down and to the right by one centimeter.

“Maybe you’re the first fish head of the day?”

Narrow eyes by one centimeter and stiffen lips. He already believes you know his every thought, so let him terrorize himself.

He goes motionless, like a scared rabbit. Some of the younger boys back away, but the older boy who first recognized me comes back and stands behind his terrified friend.

“Are you silently praying?”

Raise eyebrows and increase head tilt with slight rotation.

“What? No! I never.”

Slowly reverse head tilt.

“What are those words on the bottom of your board? Christian codes? Don’t deny it. You know I can crack any code.”

He finally lifts his head to meet my gaze.

Barely a decade old and already doll-eyed.

“I saw him, Cult Hunter,” the older boy says. “He was praying and making Christian signs with his hands before his last run.”

Freeze all facial movement. Remove all voice inflection. Stop all blinking.

“Good work, junior cult hunter. What should we do with this little fish?”

“I’ve seen this type before,” the older boy says. “He’s too far gone for re-education. There’s no hope really.”

“There’s hope,” the young boy squeaks.

“Are you saying you’ll take The Cult Hunter test to prove you’re clean of vile cultic thoughts?”

“Yes, sir. Anything!”

“Your test is to do a back flip off the next wake.”

He stares for a long time before I watch his face melt with relief when he realizes I’ve been putting him on the entire time.

“And do it without praying first.”

Curl up left side of lip to display cruel sense of humor.

As I resume my walk, I hear the older boy laughing about the look on his friend's face. He should know the look, I did the same thing to his doll eyes two years ago.

The farther I've gotten from that world, the harder it's been to maintain the persona. I wanted to smile. I wanted to put my hand on his shoulder and laugh with him, and look again for a spark of life in his eyes. I should get a private hover car instead of walking, just to avoid interacting with people.

I arrive at the University studio with plenty of time to spare and see there are already a dozen or so students in the lecture hall. Most lectures are done to an empty hall because so few professors keep a regular class schedule. There's no point. Most students would rather watch the replay of lectures at their convenience, or can't attend a live lecture simply because they live halfway around the world. My classes are unconventional in that I encourage a live audience to ask questions and therefore turn the teaching into a discussion instead of a lecture.

As always, I bound onto the stage rather than using the stairs and feel my face morph from that of The Cult Hunter to being just Cephas Paulson. I wish I could teach all day. When I'm on this stage, I feel like a human being again. I expect the lights and cameras to activate automatically when my presence is detected. When nothing happens, I realize I forgot to stick my com in my ear again. The instant it enters my ear, it registers an incoming call.

"Switch to teaching mode," I command the device.

Teaching mode is a privilege I've always enjoyed. As long as I'm standing on the stage, it blocks all incoming communication.

"Teaching mode has been temporarily disabled by order of the Cult Hunter Corps. The incoming call has been given top priority."

I close my eyes.

Even on my stage, I'm never outside their reach.

Riemann's image comes up on the screen that's embedded into the teaching podium.

"Hello, Riemann, what can I do for you?"

"Leaving your com in your ear would be a good start."

His eyes are slightly dilated and there's a slight shine from sweat on his upper lip. He's nervous to speak with me. Why?

"It's feeling kind of loose. I think it might fall out--"

"Don't you dare, Cephas."

"Two minutes. My class begins soon."

"I need your help chasing down some local fish heads. Can you come to D.C. tomorrow?"

He spontaneously picks a hair off his shirt.

Self grooming? He's lying about something.

"I'm retired."

I await the customary response.

"There's no such thing as a retired cult hunter. You should know. You coined the phrase."

His heart rate is increasing. I swear I can see the pressure increasing in the capillaries of his eyes.

"I've been out for three years. I'll stick to teaching my classes."

"I've been authorized to offer you four times your usual consulting fee and, for the record, you're still on the active reserve list."

And the only way off the list is to die.

"You do know I don't need the money, right?"

We both know the real purpose of the offer is to inflate my curiosity rather than my bank account.

In truth, money stopped meaning anything to most people two generations ago because the government provides all necessities for free. Food, medical care, transportation, public housing, and mindless video entertainment are all free. Throw in free, non-addictive government drugs to keep

you stoned, and there's no reason why anyone needs to leave their house. Money only means something if you want more out of your life than the basics. Money buys privilege.

"Six times your usual fee."

His entire forehead is shining now. He doesn't want to say whatever is coming next, but if I refuse one more time he'll have no choice.

"Still retired."

"The boss says you're not."

"The Boss" is Henry Portman, the director of the F.B.I. and therefore king of the Cult Hunter Corps. A century ago, the President of the United States was the most powerful man on earth, but in a world without armies, war or poverty, information is now the true currency of power and Henry holds more of it than anyone. He's the sort of man who has his fingers in everything, yet never leaves a fingerprint - unless it's from his hands closing around your throat. Invoking "The Boss" is as good as skipping to an outright death threat.

"What's really going on?" I ask.

"I wish I knew. I haven't been briefed."

No involuntary eye movements or facial changes. He's telling the truth.

"Then it's big enough to make it eight times the usual fee. I'll catch the first tube in the morning."

As if I have a choice.

"Thanks, Cephas. That makes my day easier. If you didn't agree when I reached ten, I was instructed to send a kill team to bring you in."

Chapter Two

When Riemann releases control, my com switches to teaching mode and the stage lights and cameras activate, while a congenial computer voice announces: “World Religion lecture number twelve, starring Dr. Cephas Paulson, will begin in one minute.” My podium screen switches to display relevant information for today’s class. There are hundreds watching worldwide, of which twenty-six are sitting before me in the studio audience. There are dozens of offers from both men and women to have sex with me, five of which come from women here in the studio.

Temptations. Never-ending temptations.

I hit the delete button on the sex offers and the message is automatically transmitted to all of the eight hundred or so students who are registered for the class. Tonight I’ll likely dwell on those offers. Will tomorrow be the day when I don’t hit the delete button?

Not likely.

The computer tells me that all twenty-six students seated in front of me are wearing coms to listen to me speak. All they need to do is look up and they can see and hear the real live me, but they still prefer to use their devices. I don’t blame them for having and using coms. Your com is your electronic link to the rest of the world. With simple voice commands, you can interface with virtually any computer, speak with anyone, display requested information on any nearby screen, or even do mundane tasks, like turning off a light that’s within your reach when you’re too lazy to do it yourself.

I wish they’d unplug once in a while and see me.

I look up to the live audience and find my silent wish has somehow come true. Seated front row and center is a young blonde woman I’ve never seen before. She’s wearing a com, but she’s also staring at me intently, so I nod to acknowledge her. When she doesn’t respond in kind, I look away and use the computer to find out who she is. Her name is Martha McLeod and she’s new to the class as of today. It’s a little unusual to gain new students after the term begins, but she and several others joined recently. In each case, the new students showed mastery of the material covered in earlier lectures, so the system let them join.

I pull up her records and see she has no high school transcript. Since high school isn’t mandatory, the lack of a transcript isn’t unusual, but it would be nice if she had one because it would help me guess at her age. With everyone trying to deny their age by getting enhancements, birthdays are strictly protected under privacy laws. Next, I look at her admission test scores and find she’s remarkably knowledgeable for someone with no formal education.

I look up again and find she’s still staring. I’d have to guess that she’s no older than me. Given the bright stage lighting, it’s hard to be sure, but I feel like she’s trying to bore a hole through me with her eyes.

I refocus my attention on the class. The truth is, the vast majority of students have no thirst for knowledge. They just enroll because they’re bored and are seeking some form of entertainment in addition to sex and drugs. I chance another glance and see that although Martha has a com in one ear, I’m clearly her sole focus.

I begin my lecture.

“Today we begin the section I like to call ‘the beginning of the end of religion.’ Who knows what event I’m talking about?”

My podium computer lights up to indicate there are people here in the studio and watching remotely who’d like to answer.

“Okay, Ms. Nikki in Toronto.”

A live picture of Ms. Nikki comes up on screens that flank the stage. She's a slender Asian woman viewing the lecture from her bedroom and barely wearing any clothes. There's a half-naked man visible in the bed behind her.

"The Final Holy War."

"Correct. For those of you who haven't read the text, the short story is that in the year 2036, a coalition of Middle Eastern nations dropped nuclear weapons on the major cities of Israel. Five years earlier, a single missile had been launched and was intercepted before it could do any damage. Somehow, just five years later, the attackers had acquired launch detection evasion technologies that should have been well beyond their technical capabilities, and the Israeli defense forces were taken completely by surprise. There were about fifteen million people living in Israel the day the bombs started falling. Just two weeks later, less than one million remained."

I pause to let the class mull over the information.

"Can anyone tell me what was unique about Jerusalem in the attack?"

I get no volunteers.

"Jerusalem was the only city that wasn't targeted. It was considered a Muslim holy site, so they chose not to bomb it."

I survey the live audience and am happy to see that a few heads have now raised to look at me. They've heard the generalities of the Final Holy War countless times since they were children, but they're here because they know I'll give them more than the usual government lecture on the evils of religion.

Deep down, maybe they want me to make them think.

"When it was clear that their homes and loved ones were gone, the Israeli commanders launched a counter-strike against the entire Islamic world. First they hit targets in Asia, as far away as Indonesia and The Philippines, with nuclear strikes. Then they hit Islamic population centers in both northern and sub-Saharan Africa. Lastly, they attacked the cities of the Middle East, but not with nuclear missiles. In the last attack, nearly two-hundred cities - including the capitals of eighteen Islamic nations - were targeted by the Israeli submarine fleet. But instead of nuclear horror, those bombs released little more than gigantic puffs of smoke and dust that seemed to do no damage at all."

The students know what happened next, but they want to hear it from me.

"The Islamic world danced and cheered and praised God for saving them, but just a few hours later the enormity of what had been done set in. The dust was a genetic toxin targeted specifically at people with certain genetic markers common to people of Middle Eastern descent. Within days, those who had been vaporized by a nuclear bomb were considered the lucky ones. The toxin wasn't designed to kill you quickly. It was designed to make you suffer. The Israelis had named the project "Moses' Staff" because it was like a plague of boils, skin lesions, unbearable pain, and finally death."

The screens show the image of a toxin victim, who I hope - for his sake - was nearing death when the picture was taken. Half of the live audience is now looking up, but there's little expression of empathy. Instead, their faces express a vague sense of superiority, as if to say nothing like that could ever happen to them in our modern world.

"Once all the bombs had fallen, a more powerful and destructive force that the Israelis hadn't anticipated took over. Who knows what force I'm talking about? Put your answers up onto the screen."

The large screens behind me light up with their guesses, which range from hydrogen bombs to flying monkeys. My computer indicates that Martha McLeod hasn't attempted an answer, so I look at her and see she's staring at me again.

She knows the answer, but she's refusing to participate.

“The massive force I’m talking about was nothing more than a gentle breeze. The wind blows wherever it pleases and soon an invisible cloud of toxin was circling the globe. It turned out that the genetic differences between the peoples of the region were very subtle, so about sixty percent of Jews worldwide were killed by the very toxins designed to kill their enemies. The toxin didn’t care about a person’s beliefs. No religion, no race, no country was spared.”

I look at the students in the studio.

They still don’t get it.

A few students show signs that they’ve come to class stoned, but even those who are sober know nothing about pain. Once free universal healthcare was declared a basic human right, it wasn’t long before freedom from all pain was also considered a right. In our world, pain is no longer something to be endured, it’s treated immediately, often to the point of feeling nothing at all.

“With few left in Israel to bomb, the remaining Muslim forces turned their anger to the only remaining Jewish population in the region, Jerusalem. Sick and dying from the genetic attack, they were still able to overrun Jerusalem’s defenses. It’s hard to imagine why, but they chose to use their final days to torture and butcher every Jewish man, woman, and child they could find. They even made a gruesome six-pointed star pyramid out of thousands of severed Jewish heads.”

A picture of the pyramid appears on the screens on cue.

Do you get it now?

“Once their black flag flew over the Temple Mount, an Israeli submarine commander made the decision to use his last nuclear missiles to bomb Jerusalem. The guidance system of the first missile failed and it hit several kilometers outside of the city. His second missile stayed on target and turned what used to be the Temple Mount into what we now call the Temple Crater. At his war crimes trial, he made a single statement: “If our temple is not to be ours, then no one shall have it.”

I pause again.

“Before the Final Holy War, the earth had a population of eight point seven billion people. Once it was over, there were less than six billion people standing on planet earth.”

I watch their faces. They barely stir. I know it was over one hundred and fifty years ago, but you’d think discussing the death of nearly three billion people would at least cause them to bat an eyelash.

“I see we have some questions,” I say, as I scan through them on my monitor.

“Mr. Schmidt in Buenos Aires, your question is just one word. All you asked is ‘why?’”

His face comes up on the screens.

“What I mean is; why’d they do it? I mean, nukes were really bad things, right? They destroyed entire cities and back then they didn’t have ways to clean up the radiation. If you nuked someone, you couldn’t even go and take their stuff because there was nothing left to take; so why do it?”

“I’ll get back to your question, Mr. Schmidt. Please excuse me for a moment.”

I step off the stage. I’ve set the lights and cameras to follow me.

If death doesn’t get their attention, I’ll hit closer to home.

“Mr. Taylor I can’t take any more. You have a com in each ear and I can hear your horrible music from the podium. Please come here.”

The bewildered student comes to the front. He’s very tall and lanky, with a long mop of dirty blonde hair on the top of his head and a scraggly beard on his face to match. I judge he’s in his late twenties, despite some low-grade facial enhancements designed to make him look younger. To me, his expressionless eyes make him look much older.

“Remove your com and turn off the racket.”

He takes the com out of his right ear and turns off the music, but the left com remains in his ear. His ear is pierced in three spots with screws that lock the com into his ear so it won’t fall out and deactivate when he’s asleep.

He could be sucked into a tornado and the com would stay in his ear.

“And the left one.”

Looks of horror, and then defiance, come over his face.

“No way man. It’s locked.”

“I have respect for your time by switching my com to teaching mode and giving this class my full attention. I expect the same from my students.”

He crosses his arms and stares at me.

He looks tough on the outside, but his eyes are darting and his feet are positioned to run rather than strike.

“Are you going to remove it or not?”

“No.”

“Get out.”

I point to the door.

“Make me. This is how I learn, man.”

I see some heads nod in agreement.

“My patience is ended, Mr. Taylor.”

I look away, but when I face him again, I’ve transformed my face into something my old colleagues in the Corps said would scare off a trained kill team. I feel like I’ve even willed the sparkle in my eye to go dark. I wonder how many times I can do this face before my eyes go dark for real.

I hear people in the audience inhale and hold their breath. Someone to my right whispers “it’s The Death Mask” and another responds, “I thought it was a myth.”

Poor Mr. Taylor is visibly rattled and his eyes move, checking his possible escape routes. I move a half step to the left. It doesn’t physically block him, but I’m still trapping him in a cage of his own fears.

“I... um...”

He reaches up and, with shaking hands, starts to unscrew the locks from his ear.

As I turn to the audience, I return my face to normal and the sudden switch sends a second shock wave through the class.

“This studio is now a com-free zone. I want the coms out of everyone’s ears - right now. Anyone who can’t live with the new rule can make their way to the door.”

Mr. Taylor is still fumbling with his ear and looks as if he’s about to cry. About half of the students in the live audience remove their coms, but many are wearing com locks like Mr. Taylor. Some begin to gather their things to leave. Out of the corner of my eye, I notice Martha McLeod smirk and nod, though she doesn’t remove her com.

She’s the only one who saw through me.

I start to laugh and the class looks at me like I’m insane, then start to smile when they realize they were taken in. Providing this kind of surprise and entertainment is the reason so many sign up for my classes.

Unlike the rest of the class, Martha is neither smiling nor laughing. With a little training, I bet she could do a great death mask herself.

“Have I answered your question, Mr. Schmidt?” I ask the screen.

“Put your lock back on and sit down, Mr. Taylor,” I add over my shoulder, as I return to the stage.

“It would seem that we can classify roughly half of the studio class as ‘com worshipers’ and the other half as not. I challenged Mr. Taylor with a belief system different from his own, and when I pushed him hard enough, I thought for a moment he might make the fatal mistake of attacking me. Now, does everyone see how a difference in belief systems can lead to conflict?”

Heads nod, but Martha's hand shoots up and I stare at it for a moment. I've never had a student raise their hand to ask a question before, they always use the electronics built into their desks.

"Ms. McLeod is it? Did you have a question?"

"I don't think you've explained anything at all."

Unlike Mr. Taylor's challenge, this is precisely the sort of challenge I've been seeking from my students.

I find I can't help myself, and I smile at her.

"Is that so? Go on."

"Choosing to wear a com isn't a belief system. It's a useful thing, a tool, something we can prove exists. Cultists have nothing but their faith."

"Believer's *had* nothing? Are you sure?"

Martha goes stoned-faced when I emphasize "had," like I've caught her in a lie. Ironically, cult hunters are trained to refer to religion in the past tense, so I imagine she's worried she just blew her chance of joining the Corps.

"The tablets that contained the Ten Commandments were physical objects," I continue. "The eyewitness reports of Christ's miracles and His resurrection were *something*."

"A tablet just proves someone chiseled words into stone - not that it was done by some supernatural being - and eyewitness accounts of miracles are just unverifiable stories. They're both far from scientific proof for the existence of God."

She's very difficult to read with these lights in my face. I'm getting no eye or facial movement.

"Let me ask you a question," I say. "If I told you a comet the size of Australia was on course to hit the earth in a year, would you be worried?"

"Of course not. We've changed the course of space objects in the past. A year would give us time to reach it and deal with it, despite that kind of size."

"So, even though it's much larger in size than anything man has done in the past, you believe mankind would use its technology to save itself - even if it meant creating new technologies? Technologies you can't see or touch today?"

"Yes, of course."

"So isn't it fair to say that you believe in something you don't know for certain exists or will exist a year from now? Wasn't that the essence of faith in gods?"

Martha takes a moment to think.

"It's not the same thing. A belief that man will come up with tangible solutions to a tangible problem can't be compared to believing that some all-powerful force is watching over us."

I reflect on her argument for a moment, then continue.

"Okay. For the sake of argument, let's say the solution to the comet problem is reached only because two scientists happen to run into each other on vacation and start talking. Let's even say that one of them was supposed to go on vacation a week earlier, but his plans were changed at the last minute because he got sick. If he hadn't been sick, the meeting would never have happened, the solution would never have been found, and - bam - the earth is a pile of space rubble."

I smack my fist into my palm.

"Was the fate of mankind just saved by a coincidence? Was it just a random occurrence, like the random mutations that allowed mankind to evolve in the first place? Or should we make just a tiny bit of room in our thoughts to consider that an external force could have been at work to make the meeting happen?"

The question is: can YOU, Cephas, make a tiny bit of room in YOUR thoughts?

Martha opens her mouth to speak, but I cut her off by raising my hand, and earn a sour look.

“There’s no need to answer the question, because this is a history class and not a philosophy class. The fact is that in 2036 Jews and Muslims *did* believe in God, and both *did* believe their belief system was *the* true belief and, therefore, they *did* drop bombs on each other and wipe out three billion people. So to get back to the question Mr. Schmidt asked of ‘why did they do it,’ the answer may very well be that they believed God had directed them to do it. Hence, we call it the Final Holy War.”

I pause for a moment, as I consider ways to challenge them further.

“However, for those who are interested in ancient philosophy, perhaps the more interesting question to ask is whether mankind has really grown beyond faith, or have we simply replaced those worship systems with a different kind of worship system. Could the argument be made that, instead of worshiping one or more Gods, man now worships himself and his technology? Are Ms. McLeod’s faith in man’s ingenuity and Mr. Taylor’s desire to wear a com at all times just forms of self-worship of mankind? Anyone who cares to turn in an essay on that question will receive extra credit.”

It’s an empty offer. Nobody’s ever done an extra credit assignment for me before. Nobody’s even cared about their grade before.

Chapter Three

I go to my office and try to read the news, but with a summons from the Corps hanging over my head, I can't focus. I give up and start walking home. The com is out of my ear again. Contractual obligations to wear it are not a consideration. I need to think.

Ahead of me, I see some female students walking to their classes. One of them drops a banana peel on the ground and a flying litter drone swoops in from nowhere to pick it up and carry it to a trash can. It's a warm day, so they all take off their shirts and continue walking, topless. Public nudity is also a protected form of self-expression. My thoughts drift to their half-naked bodies and what everyone on the planet would do with them. Everyone not saddled with maintaining the persona of The Cult Hunter, that is.

I look away.

Some male students approach the topless girls, which causes me to pay attention again. I've seen it so many times, it's obvious what'll happen next. The boys will invite the girls for sex and will most likely be successful, though hopefully not here on the sidewalk. Having sex with a stranger is supposed to be the simplest thing in the world. Legal adulthood is tied to reaching reproductive maturity, so most people have had multiple partners by their early teens, and dozens, if not hundreds, by the time they reach my age. But not me.

For many years I explained it away by concluding that entering college at ten-years-old caused me to miss the usual pre-teen education on the subject of girls. Later I convinced myself that being The Cult Hunter included seclusion, but I've come to realize there's more to it than that. I can't explain why, but every time I've been pursued by an attractive woman for sex, I've found myself backing away. No matter how much the world assures me that random sex with strangers is "right," something inside me assures me it isn't.

I observe every subtle facial motion, every voice inflection, and every bit of body language the boys use, and commit it to memory.

I can duplicate virtually any facial or body movement. Why does this stuff elude me?

I'm watching and listening so intently to the guys' pickup methods that as I pass the group, I don't look away when one of the girls smiles at me.

"You're Cephas Paulson, The Cult Hunter."

Focus. Use the moves you just learned from these guys. Maybe it's possible.

I turn to face her and try to find a balance between what I've just observed and what's expected of me when I interact with the public. She's topless, but when any other man would complement her by "enjoying the view," I instinctively look over her shoulder.

You're blowing it. The boys didn't look over her shoulder.

I can't overcome instinct, and continue to look at a tree behind her.

"That's right."

Inflection was all wrong to express interest in her.

"We're just going to my place. Would you like to join us?"

This isn't the first time I've been in this situation. As a local celebrity, it happens quite often. The boys don't look happy with the plan change.

Avoid eye contact. Maybe you can do this if you don't look at her eyes.

I can't help myself, I look her in the eyes. Part of me instantly wishes I hadn't while another part flushes with relief that I did. I tell myself that I can see a tiny sparkle in her eyes, but I don't really believe it. I imagine myself accepting her invitation and watching the final bit of light leaving her eyes in my bedroom, making her into another doll. I guess a look of sadness, or maybe revulsion, crosses my face at the thought of it, because she takes a half step backwards.

"I'm sorry," she says. "I guess that was presumptuous. I'm mean - you're The Cult Hunter and all."

Give up, Cephas. It's easier to just be alone.

I switch back to my usual public persona, but chance a look at her body and secretly wonder what might have been possible, if circumstances were different.

"Not at all. You're quite lovely, really. It's just that I have some urgent business that can't wait."

She backs farther away from me. The boys are pleased and promise to make it up to her. One of them even says he knows a cult hunter "game" they can play.

I'm left on the sidewalk, wondering why this happens every time. Everyone assumes I have countless conquests and more partners waiting in line. It's easier to just maintain the illusion than risk releasing the secret that The Cult Hunter is actually a virgin. That headline would hit millions of coms in just seconds. The Corps might or might not deny it, might or might not block further transmission of the information, and might or might not make people disappear over it.

I turn to resume my walk and find myself face-to-face with Martha McLeod.

"You enjoy that, don't you?" she asks.

Before I can think what to say, or what persona I should project, I flash her a smile, but quickly recover and feign indifference with my tone and body language.

"Enjoy what?"

"Having half-naked women throw themselves at you. I bet it's a real ego trip."

She's searching for ways to throw me off balance. I don't know if I'd call her demeanor towards me hostile, but she's definitely bent on challenging me at every turn.

Instead of responding right away, I allow my training to kick in and take my time looking over her features. I know most of my students faces only from a screen or in the studio with the lights in my face, so it's rare for me to meet one close up. Her face is quite striking, with delicate features, a light complexion, and long blonde hair pulled back into a bouncy ponytail. At first I'm not sure why I find her so striking, until I realize that, like me, she's not enhanced.

Here it comes - time to look at her eyes.

Years of cult hunter training keep me from betraying the surprise I feel when our eyes meet. Martha's blue eyes sparkle like nothing I've ever seen before. I just keep staring into them because... well, because I can.

"Well?" she asks without breaking the stare.

A slight dilation of her pupils. She's sincerely interested in my answer.

"Well what?"

"I asked you a question. Does the mighty Cult Hunter enjoy women throwing themselves at him like that?"

I regain my focus on the conversation without breaking eye contact.

"No. I don't."

One millimeter upward eyebrow twitch. She's surprised by the answer, but is trying not to show it.

"What would be the challenge in that?" I ask. "And speaking of challenges, thank you for challenging me in class today. It makes the class so much more interesting."

"I'm sure it's nothing compared to the challenges you faced when you were an active cult hunter," Martha replies. "That's really what I want to hear more about, but the University wouldn't let me into your advanced classes until I took this one."

What is it about those eyes?

"I take it you've read my books?" I ask, just to keep the conversation going so I can study her eyes.

"I've read a lot more than just your books. I've read everything ever written about you."

Yet there you stand, with crossed arms. You clearly don't like me.

“Books are often embellished for the audience, Ms. McLeod. The greatest contributions I made to the Corps were little more than using a combination of specialized knowledge and good powers of observation.”

“Modesty from *The Cult Hunter*? Now, that is a surprise. You cracked a code that everyone said was impossible to crack. You’ve personally captured more Christians than all other cult hunters combined.”

Maintaining eye contact has been easy and natural, but my eyes involuntarily flicker to the ground from a moment when she mentions what everyone considers to be the greatest achievement of my life. She cocks her head slightly.

She noticed that?

“Forget what you’ve read about me. I just solve puzzles, Ms. McLeod.”

Martha opens her mouth to reply, but thinks better of saying whatever was on her mind. I take the opportunity to change the subject.

“Was this a chance meeting, Ms. McLeod? Or was there something I can do for you?”

Her head moves back a centimeter, like I’ve caught her in some sort of act.

“I was just walking home, but when I saw you, I wanted to ask a question. In the comet problem, you asked if we should make just a tiny bit of room in our thoughts to consider that an external force could have been at work in saving the earth. I’m just wondering how you would answer the question. What sort of external force were you trying to suggest? It sounded like you were leaving the door open to the possibility that God exists.”

That’s the boldest statement ever made to me by a student. And on a public street, no less. Who is this woman?

“This is why I teach history instead of philosophy, Ms. McLeod. The danger of philosophy is that it often asks seemingly unanswerable questions. Unsolved puzzles, if you will. Mankind hates unsolved puzzles and too often creates illogical explanations for things current science can’t explain, but will explain in the future. That could be the origin of man believing in gods.”

A twitch of the corner of her mouth. My response made her happy, like I fulfilled a preconceived notion she was holding about me.

“I understand,” she replies. “You weren’t leaving the door open to God’s existence. You just didn’t complete your thoughts about scientific explanations.”

“Solving puzzles requires asking the right questions at the right time, Ms. McLeod. You just didn’t ask the right question.”

“Really? So what’s the right question?”

“The question you should ask me is what we would say if we could exhaust all reasonable scientific explanation and the puzzle remains unsolved.”

“You’re cracking open the door again?” she asks.

She narrowed her eyes. My answer conflicted with her preconceived notions.

“I’m an unsolved puzzle too, Ms. McLeod.”

As I continue walking home, I think about unsolved puzzles. From an early age, no puzzle has ever held me for long. By the time I was six-years-old I had moved to “real life” puzzles like mysteries and crime scene investigation. I even helped the local police solve a crime when I was seven. By the time I was eight...well, I guess my interests changed in a hurry when I was eight. That’s the year my parents were killed and my Aunt Jennifer moved into my life. That’s when my talent for solving puzzles put me on the path to being *The Cult Hunter*.

I look at the sidewalk in front of me and think about paths in life. Do I keep walking straight and take the shorter path home, or do I turn to the right and take the longer, but sunnier, path?

My father’s side of my family tree has long been known in atheist circles and once Jennifer became my guardian, my nasty old aunt wasted no time in making me part of the family legacy. She

saw the potential to develop my puzzle-solving skills into a weapon in the war to eradicate religion. She made me spend countless hours studying the works of prominent atheists until I knew their doctrines cold.

I smile inwardly at the thought of knowing the doctrines “cold.” There is no more apt word than that. I found no “life” in their message.

Next I studied the history of each of the “Abrahamic” religions of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. Of course, since I had no access to the ancient holy books, it wasn’t quite a “true” history. It was the history of religion as written by modern atheists. She even had me learn the ancient languages of Hebrew, Greek, Latin, and Aramaic. That seemed particularly pointless, considering the computer could translate those languages, but she was insistent. I was happy to do the work just to have an excuse to spend less time with her.

Jennifer even saw to it that I ended up in the Cult Hunter Corps. I was barely thirteen at the time and fresh out of college. I proposed taking some time to travel the world, but she made a few calls to the right people, and within days the Corps made me an offer I couldn’t refuse. Literally, a notice of mandatory public service showed up at my door in the hands of a large agent, who told me to pack a bag.

The first day on the job, I took a lot of teasing from the older guys for being the “boy genius,” but I must admit, I was in my element. The Corps had fascinating puzzles for me to solve - one with which they were getting nowhere. Within a week of my arrival, the teasing stopped as I started putting together the pieces in front of me.

I remember how hard I laughed when I first saw how the Christians were running circles around the Corps’ best agents. The old men were dependent on computer code-breaking algorithms and had no understanding that puzzles are a human art. As they watched their computers chugging through data, the nation’s best investigators couldn’t even see that the symbols <>< in a communication looked like a fish and signaled the beginning of an embedded message. That observation alone got me assigned to “Special Projects” and tasked with uncovering Christian communications. In two months, the old guys who teased me were all working under me.

I wish I could accuse the Corps of forcing me to work as a child laborer, but I can’t. I loved code breaking and would willingly spend countless hours poring over transcripts sent to, or from suspected Christians until I rooted out the puzzle pieces and fit them together. One of the old guys even scratched tally marks in the paint above my office door to represent the number of times they found me in the morning asleep at my desk.

As each new code was broken, the government set up computer systems that could monitor virtually all electronic communications worldwide and search them for the written or spoken word patterns that I uncovered. The kill teams took it from there.

After I found the modern code words and symbols Christians were using in their earlier communications, they switched to using ancient languages to communicate. I don’t know if my education by Aunt Jennifer was all part of her careful calculations, or if it was just a lucky guess, but she’d made me the only person in the world who reads and speaks ancient Hebrew, Latin, Greek, and Aramaic.

As I broke the codes based on ancient languages, I went from being the kid genius to Corps legend. When I’d walk the halls, people would stop to let me pass. Some would even bow their heads. For some people, becoming a legend provides them with everything they want, like fame, money, and sex. Maybe those people even find happiness. For me, it seemed like becoming a legend slowly transformed the joy of solving puzzles into isolation, loneliness, and pressure. Nobody else knew it, but I could see that each time I would crack a code, the Christians would develop a new system that was more intricate than the last. We were in a game of cat and mouse, where I was slowly creating a better mouse.

I look at the sidewalk again and snort a laugh when I notice that it's full of cracks. No matter which path you choose, there's no avoiding cracks in life.

Then, they finally did it. The Christians stumped me with what would later be known as "The Final Code." I could see that they were still communicating, but I couldn't decipher any of it. Never in my life had a puzzle held me for so long, and as the weeks turned to months, I became more distant and moody. By the time a year had passed, my days were spent sitting in my office staring at the data, refusing to speak with anyone.

Maybe it was desperation, or maybe sitting alone in the dark had driven me insane, but that's when I crossed a line that even a cult hunter isn't allowed to cross. Luckily, the gamble worked and soon the Christian codes began to unravel. The funny thing is, nobody even asked me to explain how I'd cracked the final code. Maybe it never occurred to them that I could have crossed some lines. Maybe they never cared where the lines were drawn in the first place. Either way, the secret of how the code was broken stayed with me.

I took my findings straight to the Director and even he couldn't believe what he was seeing. Christian communications were everywhere, once you knew how to look. That's when the saying: "There's no such thing as a retired Cult Hunter" was born. The Director reactivated everyone who'd ever served on a kill team and unleashed them all at once. And to say "unleashed" isn't an understatement. They were like packs of wild dogs. People were dragged from their homes in the middle of the night and shot in the street. That's what the classified reports said anyway. The news was never allowed to report any of it and the general public went back to their favorite shows and drugs.

The Christian code master, Zach, who'd stumped me for a year, was caught. I made sure of that. He was so confident his system couldn't be broken that he'd embedded his name and location into several communications. He'd even included a personal taunt he thought I'd never see. It said "Zach 1, Cephas 0."

The one thing the Corps didn't let me do was speak with anyone they arrested. I argued that just a few hours of simple conversation would help me to understand the Christian mind and lead to new breakthroughs. I practically begged the Director to let me meet Zach, but he wouldn't budge. He said I'd won the war, and he was right. With their codes broken, and Zach in custody, it wasn't long before all Christian communications disappeared worldwide. Unable to communicate on a large scale, the Corps assumed Christianity would soon fall apart from disorganization.

I open the front door and enter my house. Sitting on a small table inside the door is a favorite three-dimensional puzzle from when I was kid, which I pick up and roll around on my fingers. Most people never solve it, but I first did it when I was four. It was my most prized possession and I carried it around like other kids might carry a teddy bear.

After the dust settled from me breaking the final code, the Corps held a ceremony in my honor. My Aunt Jennifer dug the puzzle - which I now hold in my hand - out of my old room and presented it to me as a gift. "You are the Puzzle Master. This puzzle represents your triumph," she said, and the entire Corps clapped.

"No, Aunt Jennifer. This puzzle represents joy," I say to my empty house and hold the puzzle up in the sunlight. "Or at least it used to."

I set the puzzle back on the table and wonder where those childhood emotions went. How did the sense of joy and wonder that puzzles used to bring me disappear from my heart? How is it that in breaking the Christians, I somehow broke myself?

At just fifteen-years-old I announced my retirement. Or so I thought. From the Corps' perspective, I'd saved the world from another holy war, and they wanted credit. More than that, they wanted a war hero and I was it; so together we created "The Cult Hunter." A picture of me sitting in a dark room, breaking codes, wasn't the image they wanted as their new face for the Cult Hunter

Corps. According to the official press releases, I was the prototype for the next generation of cult hunters. They told the world I'd kicked in doors, jumped out of planes without a parachute, and engaged in hand-to-hand combat with crazed Christians bent on destroying the world. They even released a couple of movies.

My role in breaking codes was almost an afterthought in the propaganda, which suited me.

You loved the deal they offered. You loved the idea of living behind a mask, where you could hide your true role in all that death.

Once the initial public relations campaign was over, the Corps allowed me to finish a Ph.D. in history and announced my "retirement" to teaching, where I would create future cult hunters for them.

Chapter Four

The morning tube to D.C. is right on schedule. The tube system is a remarkable invention, sort of like the centuries-old mail tubes that were once used to move papers around buildings. Unlike the bumpy ride given to papers though, tube cars move at over one thousand kilometers per hour, using magnetic lifts and propulsion, and have such good stabilizers you feel like you're standing still.

I take a seat, close my eyes, and wait. The only clue that we're accelerating is the low-pitched whistle of air, followed by a slight pop as we enter the main tube and achieve full speed. I continue to sit with my eyes closed as others in the car carry on conversations. Now that the car is moving at the same speed as the air around us, all there is to hear is a slight monotone hum. Our society prizes being monotone; so I wait to hear what nobody else seems to hear. To increase efficiency, cars will pull in close to each other and ride each other's slip stream. There's always a momentary pitch change when cars get close enough to break through the minor turbulence.

Good powers of observation sometimes create brain clutter too.

I caught a direct tube, so the trip from Colorado to D.C. will take under two hours. As always, I brought along a small computer and plan to work on the final edits of a new book. My time at the Corps still haunts me, but at least it gave me material to turn into four best-selling books. I wrote the books to feature a nerdy puzzle master who puts together the pieces of Christian codes but a book where the primary action occurs in a dark room in the basement didn't fit with the Corps' plan. By the time they were done "editing," the books featured a field agent who blows things up and sleeps with every beautiful woman in sight.

The few code-breaking scenes that they allowed to slip through are closer to the truth than anyone would believe. I think part of me had that hoped writing the books would purge me of the memories - like putting the words down in type would erase them from my mind. It didn't work.

Riemann meets me at the tube station.

"Hey, Cephas, thanks for coming," he says.

"My pleasure, Bear."

I gave Riemann the nickname "Bear" when we worked together and, as always, his dark hand envelopes mine as we greet each other. Luckily, he also has a gentle demeanor and a light-up-the-room smile, so he comes off as charming rather than intimidating. Even so, I never told him his nickname is short for "Teddy bear."

"Now I know something big is going down. You've never met me at the station before," I reply.

Tilt head two degrees and release pressure on handshake prematurely.

"The boss wanted you to have a private hover car. He thought it would be a nice 'welcome home' gesture," Riemann says.

Bear is a trained cult hunter, but controlling inflections is not one of his strengths, so his voice betrays him. This is something big.

Be nice. Don't hit him yet.

I scan the station without even twitching my neck. To me, the agents hiding in the station look like pieces that have been jammed into the wrong spot in a puzzle. The man on the balcony above us is given away when light glints off his earring, which is a purple stone given to those who complete ten years in the Cult Hunter Corps. There's a slight bulge of a weapon under the jacket of a woman pretending to watch a video screen ten meters to my right. A couple to my left, who are pretending to kiss, is really glancing at me, and a young man directly ahead is simply staring straight at me.

Not yet.

As Riemann and I walk, I see two more agents

They sent a full kill team to watch over me?

At least the puzzle of identifying them all keeps me entertained as we walk through the station.

“Is all this muscle here just for me?”

“Muscle? What do you mean?”

Now is good.

“I’ve found seven agents in the station so far. Tell me what’s happening or I’ll find a way to embarrass them.”

“Fine. We have a few people around. Can you just pretend this is a normal meeting between old friends and ignore the security? It’ll make more sense, once you’re briefed.”

Cracked like an egg.

“It’s your show. Lead the way.”

As we reach the exit, I pick out three more people who are watching us leave but don’t have the right demeanor to be from the Corps. I say nothing to Riemann.

Are they security? Or are they the reason for the security?

We reach Bureau headquarters without any problems, and although Riemann heads straight for the elevators, I choose to linger in the foyer for a moment. The foyer has massive windows and skylights that light up two brass emblems that are inlaid in the floor. The first emblem is the one the F.B.I. has used for over two hundred years. The second is the emblem of the Cult Hunter Corps. This is the only place where the sun touches the Corps, the rest is hidden deep in the basement, like a crazy old uncle. You never see him, but you’re never allowed to forget that he’s down there.

We take the elevator all the way to the bottom floor and I’m not surprised to find the place hasn’t changed a bit since I left. The hallways are cold and lifeless, despite the dozens of people who scurry about with their heads down. One exception is a young agent who recognizes me and watches, with his mouth open, as we approach. I stop next to him and slowly turn my head to look at him.

“I was not here today. You did not see me. Is that clear?”

“Yes, sir!”

They want persona? I’ll give them persona.

“Good thinking. I’ll make it a general order,” Riemann says, as he walks me to the office of the director and turns to leave.

“Aren’t you coming?”

“I wasn’t invited,” he says. “It’s above my pay grade.”

Seconds later, the conference room door opens by itself. I’m expecting the usual affair with two dozen people seated around the massive table, so I’m surprised to see just three. At the head of the table is the director, Henry Portman, a burly man with white skin but dark features, and a face that’s been enhanced so many times there’s no telling how old he is or what he may have originally looked like. Henry’s eyes are harder to explain than most. If I describe my own eyes as having a twinkle of light, then Henry’s could only be described as having a twinkle of darkness.

The man to Henry’s left is my old supervisor, Ray Lewis. Ray’s the deputy director for Cultic Affairs, which was Henry’s job before he became the director. Ray likes me because I based a character in my second book on him. He denies the book played any role in making him something of a rock star within the Corps, but his office door has a small nameplate under the official one that bears the name of the book character. He now even changes his hair style daily, just like the alter ego I created for him.

I don't know the man to Henry's right. He's an Asian man, who has just a few wisps of his natural dark hair on the sides of his head, but has chosen blonde hair implants that sit on the top like a bird's nest. He also has facial enhancements to remove wrinkles, as well as a pronounced chin implant on a face that wasn't originally designed to have much of a chin. The combined effect makes him look like he was drawn by a cartoonist.

They all stand as I approach.

Don't say it. Please don't say it.

"Welcome home, Cephas."

Henry extends his hand.

"It's good to see you, Henry. Hi, Ray. How've you been?"

"Very good, Cephas," Ray responds with a broad smile that almost says: "Thanks to you."

"Cephas, I'd like you to meet Toshi Tanaka," Henry says. "Toshi's the deputy director for Advanced Technology."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Toshi. Advanced Technology? Does this mean I'm here to help with a new gizmo for tracking Christians?"

No facial expression. No interest in their new project. Give them nothing.

"Not exactly - but I dare say what we have here will be the topic of your next book."

I bet he's hoping to be in that book.

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves," Henry says, and gestures for everyone to sit.

"Cephas, before we start on Toshi's briefing, I should get you caught up on recent events," Henry says. "No individual has done more for the world in the area of identifying cultists than you have. Three years ago, I thought your efforts had won the war for us, but now it seems that you only found the tip of the iceberg. Tell me, Cephas, how many fish heads do you think there are in North America?"

I think about it for a moment.

"I'd guess somewhere between one hundred and two hundred thousand at any one time. Kids probably jump in and out of small groups for kicks or to shock their parents. People on the fringes probably do the same."

"What would you say if I told you the Corps estimates there are now over five million fish heads in the United States alone, and the number is growing each year?"

Okay, that's worth raising my eyebrows by two millimeters.

"I'd ask two questions. The first question is: 'Where are they all?' since I don't see any evidence the number is that big; and the second is: 'If they're practicing their faith so quietly they're invisible to me, what's happened to make you believe they're dangerous? Why call me in?'"

"I'll answer both of your questions. They've invaded every facet of our society. They're everywhere, living among us. As to the fact that they practice their so-called faith and stay invisible - that's exactly what makes them so dangerous - but why am I telling you? You know more about religious history than anyone. You know ideological differences lead to holy wars. After two millennia of wars, we have peace because of the world unity we've built in the absence of religion."

"Are you saying the Christians have become violent?" I ask, and look from Henry to Ray. "I monitor all public news references to Christians, so you've kept it quiet if they have."

"Not yet," Ray says. "but you can see how such a growing and organized force must be contained now, before it can become violent."

"Okay, I get it. What do you need from me?"

"We need a spokesman," Henry says.

"A spokesman? I'm an analyst. Find an out-of-work news anchor."

"Just hear us out."

Ray commands his com to display something on a screen embedded in the table in front of me.

“Here are some papers we recovered when we raided a cultist meeting place. As you can see, they’re written in Latin and are dated to a year ago. We believe this is a letter from a leading Christian to his followers. It’s signed with the letter ‘A’.”

Interesting. Much of the New Testament of the Christian Bible is composed of letters written by a man named Paul in exactly the same way.

The letter starts with encouragement to the brothers and sisters, then goes to explaining certain passages of the New Testament. The last paragraph switches to more practical matters, including watching a person referred to only as “DRCP.”

“Now read this one,” Ray says.

It’s the same format as before, but this time encourages the readers to examine the writings of “DRCP.”

“And this one.”

I skip straight to the last paragraph, where it suggests it would “send a powerful message, if DRCP were to die.”

“We put a team on it three months ago and they recently answered the question of who the target is,” Ray says.

It took three months? The bar must have lowered again after I left.

“Then you should have called me in sooner. ‘DRCP’ stands for ‘Dr. Cephas Paulson,’ and apparently they’re not part of The Cult Hunter fan club.”

Ray winces.

“You have no idea how big a bet I just lost with Riemann over whether you’d figure it out before I could tell you,” he says.

“It’s so nice to know that protecting me is your primary concern.”

“Our people have been protecting you around the clock for two weeks now,” Henry says. “You’re in no danger. We’re not going to let anything happen to our greatest asset.”

I turn to Toshi.

“Why do I have the feeling this is the part where you start talking, and that I’m some sort of live bait for your new high tech gizmo?”

“I thought you’d never ask,” Toshi says. “Do you remember about twenty years ago, there was a big stir in the news about a scientist in Utah who claimed he’d unlocked the secrets of time travel?”

“Considering it happened before I was born, no, but I’ve read about it. Didn’t he retract the whole thing and leave science in disgrace?”

“The truth is that he left academic science to work for us. It took twenty years, but we now have a working device.”

Toshi flashes me a proud smile. I wish he wouldn’t smile. When he smiles, his chin implant gets in the way of the normal movement of his cheek muscles and makes him look a little crazy.

“Great. Send me to the future so I can see if they killed me or not.”

“Actually, we can’t send people to the future. We can, however, send them to the past and then pull them forward again to the present.”

“Seriously? You’ve been sending people back and forth through time?”

“Not yet. The power requirements are enormous and increase exponentially, according to the mass of the object sent and the distance through time being traveled. We’ve sent some small objects back and pulled them forward again, and recently sent two mice back.”

Toshi again smiles proudly, and again gives me the creeps.

“I take it the mice lived. Otherwise finding volunteers isn’t going to be easy.”

“We pulled one mouse forward and there were no side effects from transport whatsoever. The other one we left inside a cage two years back in time to prove it had time traveled. According to a necropsy, it lived a normal life and died of old age.”

“So now you’re working up from mice to lab rats, and you want me to be the first rat into the cage?”

“We’re proposing three people go back in time,” Henry says. “Are you familiar with the work of Dr. Thomas?”

“Of course,” I reply.

Dr. Thomas, as he’s now called, was born Ivan Frank. He became the world’s leading religious abolitionist through a combination of extensive writings and firebrand oratory skills espousing the evils and dangers of religion. Ironically, he changed to the Biblical name “Thomas” as a publicity stunt to make the statement that he’ll believe nothing religious until he sees it with his own eyes. When I broke the last Christian code, he started to fall out of the limelight. I guess I put him out of a job.

“So, who’s the third rat in the cage?”

“Why, a fish head, of course,” Henry says. “I’m sure you see the combination is necessary. We’ll send a devout believer, a devout skeptic, and someone whose word is above reproach with skeptics and believers alike.”

“I’m above reproach with Christians? I’m The Cult Hunter.”

“You need to read the rest of these letters,” Ray answers. “Despite your work with us, they seem to believe you’re as open-minded and thoughtful as a person can be. I’ll send them to you.”

“The fact that you read and speak four ancient languages make you the only choice,” Henry says.

“You need someone who can speak ancient languages? Where do you plan to send me?”

“Not where, Dr. Paulson. When.” Toshi says.

I sit there, looking back and forth at the three of them.

“You’re going to the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. You’re going to end religion once and for all by proving Jesus Christ was a fraud.”

Chapter Five

Riemann catches me in the hallway when Henry's briefing is done.

"You mind taking a look at something for me? I wasn't kidding that there are some local fish heads we're interested in."

He doesn't know the real reason I'm here, or he'd give me a chance to catch my breath and let the enormity of the plan sink in.

I look at the time. There are two direct tubes back, either one of which will get me back on time to teach my afternoon class. Unlike the world religion class I taught yesterday, today's class is for advanced students and is where I teach about the modern cultic Christians and the methods used by the Corps to find them. The government sponsors the class in an effort to create a new generation of cult hunters, but so far they've gotten little return.

"Sure, Bear. Why not?"

When we reach his office, Riemann instructs the computer to project a file showing surveillance footage of a street, with a dozen or so people walking in each direction.

"Another section picked up a guy who was selling stolen antiques, and in his collection were several boxes of blank paper - thousands of sheets of the stuff. Before he got busted, he was contacted with an offer to buy his whole stash. He knew only fish heads would be looking to get their hands on that much paper, so he used what he knew in exchange for leniency. The dealer was told to sit on a specific bench at precisely noon and someone would make contact. This is a video of everyone who came through from 11:50 to 12:10," Riemann says.

"Why didn't you just trace the com that called the dealer?"

"That's the thing, the com that called him couldn't be traced."

"Could it be one of your own people?" I ask. "I've heard rumors that field agents sometimes use untraceable coms."

"Just watch the video."

I take in hundreds of small details as I watch the first fifteen minutes, but they don't come together to form a puzzle. When something of interest does happen, I'm disappointed at how simple it is. At 12:05 a man walks onto the screen from right to left.

"Him."

I point at the screen.

"He walked in the other direction at exactly noon."

"Very good," Riemann says. "Now check this out. Computer, add identity codes to the footage."

Everyone passing back and forth through the camera's view has a name and a number superimposed above them. The names and numbers are in different colors. Most are in red and a few are in blue, but the colors don't seem to correlate to anything. The lone exception is the man I noticed. Above him, it says "Unknown."

The man walks to a woman who's been sitting on the bench the entire time, watching something on a small tablet device. His back is to the closest camera and the longer shot is too far away for the lip reading software to determine what he said. We presume he asks her for the time, because she takes her com out of her pocket and puts it into her ear. As it enters her ear, her name and number flip from blue to red and the lip reading software determines that she asks her com for the current time. She responds to the man by saying: "Its 12:04 - I mean 12:05," to the man. The man then gets onto a passing hover bus and leaves. Once the man has left, instead of returning to her tablet, the woman shifts herself to the front of the bench and starts drumming the four fingers of her right hand.

She's not drumming casually. Her finger speed is too fast.

"So you have no clue who the guy was?" I ask.

The drumming fingers continue at their steady pace, so I switch to her eyes.

"He was wearing a hat and sunglasses. We have a dozen possible matches from the greater D.C. area, based on the partial facial features the computer could see - none of which match anyone in the database of suspected fish heads."

Her eyes are fixed across the street. The drumming is a signal and she's watching for a response to be sure it's received.

"Who's the woman on the bench?"

"She's already been cleared. She works in the Department of Energy and that location is consistent with her lunch routine. About sixty other people passed through the camera during that time. None of them are on any suspect lists."

"Other than the fact that you can't determine who he is, did you notice anything else strange about him?" I ask.

Riemann smiles.

"Your class on observing small details is still standard training. You can see there's a com in his ear, but either we can't track it or it didn't activate when he put it in. If it's broken, then why leave it in? If it's untraceable, why did he ask her for the time rather than just asking his own com? Did I miss anything?"

"It's a little odd that the woman got the time wrong and then corrected herself, when her com had just said the time into her ear. According to the time index, it was already 12:05 when she spoke to her com. Her com was active and connected to the system at the time. There's no way it said '12:04' into her ear when she asked it."

Riemann pauses to think about what I've said.

"Anything else?" he asks.

As he asks, the woman on the bench raises her eyebrows and abruptly stops drumming her fingers.

Her signal was received.

A moment later she stands and gets onto a hover bus.

Keep it to yourself.

"Send me a copy and I'll go through it a couple more times," I say.

"Sure. It's not classified or anything, and it's probably nothing anyway. Most likely the fish heads were watching from a distance, and when the dealer didn't show, they took off," he replies.

Riemann and the security detail escort me all the way back to the tube station and watch me until my car pulls away.

"Thanks for looking over the video. After the last one that pulled you here for a visit, I thought you might refuse today," Riemann says as the doors close.

I almost did.

My last visit was a year after my "retirement." I'd done such a good job crushing the Christians that the Corps had reassigned half of the agents, due to lack of work. It stayed that way for just a year, which is when Riemann asked me to look over a video of a man on his watch list. The man had died when a multi-ton hover bus malfunctioned, jumped its line, and crushed him. That might have been the end of the file, except that the local police reported him as rhythmically babbling the same words over and over, and after he died, they found a single piece of paper clutched so tightly in his hand his fingernails had cut deeply into his palms. The use of paper had been abandoned for nearly a century, so, naturally, an investigation was opened.

By law, all police officers wear helmet or shoulder cameras when on duty, so both the paper and a video of the man's last words ended up on Riemann's desk. I burst out laughing when

Riemann handed me the paper. It contained Psalm 73, written in Latin. My work breaking their codes hadn't eliminated the Christians, I'd simply forced them out of the modern electronic world and back to writing on paper.

When I watched the tape of the man's final words, my laughter stopped. It was horrific. He was a tall, dark-skinned man with short, dark hair tinged with gray at the temples. His eyes were - thankfully - closed, but his lips were moving in rhythm, so I focused on them to avoid looking at the rest of the scene. Only half of him was visible, because his entire lower body and his left arm were pinned under the hover bus, to the point of being nearly flattened. I later heard the only reason he wasn't killed instantly was because the enormous weight had crushed him to the point that he couldn't even bleed out quickly through his lower body.

Even so, it was clear he couldn't survive long and the officer asked him typical questions, such as his name and address, but he continued repeating his rhythmic chant. What everyone else mistook as babbling was "The Lord is my Shepherd," in French.

The officer happened to look up at one point, and his camera showed the hover bus was still full of passengers. They were all standing around watching video pads and talking on their coms, as if nothing out of the ordinary was happening. I don't know if having them exit the hover bus would have done anything to relieve the great weight from the man, but none of them seemed to notice - or care - that a man was dying, literally under their feet. When the officer panned back, the man opened his eyes, looked up at the sky, smiled, and was gone.

The look of peace on his face will stay with me for the rest of my life. I most certainly have more knowledge of religion than that man did, but it's clear to me that he had an understanding of faith I've never been able to achieve. I still have a copy of the video showing the man's last moments. When I watch it, my only thought is that I need to find out for myself what he knew.

That piece of paper and video brought the Corps back into the search for Christian cultists, but with the Christians no longer communicating through electronics, the Corps has been chasing its tail, trying to find them again.

With no systematic communications to search and no codes to break, my services have been limited to consulting rather than re-immersion into that world.

Until now.

As I take the tube ride home, I don't know what to think about first. Do I think about the fact that I'm under twenty-four hour surveillance by both Corps kill teams and by Christians who would prefer me dead? Or do I think about the prospect of being hurtled twenty-two hundred years into the past?

The details were pretty vague. They need six months to pull everything together. The announcement of the plan to the public will come next month, but they won't announce who's been chosen to go until a month before it happens. Waiting to reveal the identities of the time travelers is partially for security, and partially because they intend to launch a public relations campaign to boost my celebrity. They want me to be the household standard of credibility and trustworthiness when the time comes.

Despite all the variables, how could I say no? I've spent my entire adult life studying ancient religion, and now I have the chance to observe the birth of Christianity. Whether the Bible is accurate or not, this is the adventure of a lifetime. More importantly, - maybe this is my opportunity to understand faith, rather than just read about it.

As I exit the tube car, two men from the Corps who are protecting me are easy to pick out in the crowd. I consider giving them the slip for fun - until I notice a woman who might also be watching me. She's walking a parallel course while talking on her com, but the conversation doesn't

sound natural, and she keeps glancing at me. If she's another Corps agent, it'll be fun to watch her reaction by doing something unexpected.

I make an erratic turn straight towards her and close the distance. She looks straight at me with a surprised expression, and just as we're about to collide, I slow my pace, pass just centimeters behind her, and walk to a food stand. When she's another fifteen steps away, she looks over her shoulder at me, then stops at a map of the tube station. I buy some candy and join her at the map.

"Do you need directions?" I ask.

She's most likely a few years older than me, but I can't see any enhancements. I really do prefer people who choose to look natural. She's also wearing clothing that's either very old or would be considered very plain by today's standards. They almost look like they were sewn by hand.

"Four?" she asks.

"Four what?"

"Sorry. Where do I find the bay for hover bus number four?"

"All bus stops are up two floors from here. I think number four is on the right."

"Thank you."

She gives me a pleasant smile and is on her way, but not before looking back at me twice.

She's not from the Corps. Could she be a Christian?

There are now three Corps guys in sight. I scan their faces and see that none of them noticed anything unusual about the woman, and I'm certainly not going to raise an alarm. She may be just a visitor from out-of-town and there's no telling what the Corps might do to her. If anyone else were to point a finger at her, she'd just end up on a watch list. Suspicion raised personally by The Cult Hunter could get her killed, and I don't want that on my hands.

Chapter Six

I'd prefer to cancel my advanced class and continue sorting through my thoughts, but since I'd just have to reschedule, I decide to get it over with. I step up onto the podium with the usual fanfare of lights and cameras. My screen indicates there are only a dozen in the live audience today, but there are still six offers for sex, which I delete. Another hundred or so are watching remotely.

"Let's start with a little review. Last time, I told you that following the Final Holy War, there was a fifty-year period in which Christianity surged in the Middle East, as the few remaining Jews and Muslims distanced themselves from the horror of nuclear devastation and a biological attack that went global. Who can describe what was happening outside of the Middle East - particularly in the large cities of Europe and North America?"

I call on Ms. Mikami in Japan.

"The Holy War continued in the form of terrorism and violence."

"Very good," I say. "Churches, mosques, and synagogues were burned to the ground as each group joined in continuous retaliation against the other. The death toll from beheadings performed by the remaining Islamic extremists alone numbered in the tens of thousands. What else was happening during that time?"

As I call on a young man in the live audience named Ali, I realize Martha McLeod is sitting in the back row. She's not registered in this class.

"World food and water supplies were decreasing," Ali says.

"And why were food and water supplies decreasing?"

"The main reason was pollution," he replies. "There was a combination of the nuclear fallout and industrial waste, the latter coming mostly from the toxic waste in the southern hemisphere created by mining the materials being consumed in the northern hemisphere."

"The north was polluting the south? Please explain."

"Part of the problem was the toxic materials used in making solar panels and wind turbines after all carbon fuels were banned; but the bigger problem was Christian excesses. They had holidays where they'd give gifts of all sorts of useless junk that they'd usually just throw away. Pollution alone was reason enough to ban all religions."

"It's nice to see everyone was paying attention. So the world was on a course of extraordinary violence and religious extremism, coupled with slow starvation due to pollution. How did we manage to pull ourselves out of it?"

I call on Ms. Jones in New York.

"The Sunspot Initiative," she says.

"Exactly. In 2098, Sunspot One, the world's first hot fusion reactor, came on line in Lake Superior in Michigan. It was the first man-made object to be visible from space since the completion of the Great Wall of China many centuries earlier. As it does today, Sunspot One provided free power to all of North and South America. And what was the result of that happy, triumphant occasion?"

"The world came close to a full-out nuclear war," Ms. Jones replies.

"Yes. For a ten-year period, the American continents had unlimited electricity. They were able to automate everything and could manufacture anything cheaper, and therefore enjoyed crushing every economy in the world under their boots. With that much power, they also invented new ways to do everything cleanly and even cleaned up every sort of old toxic dump you can imagine. In just a decade, the Americas became a paradise where there was no pollution and everyone's needs were fulfilled. With unlimited electricity, we built the tube system. We could make tons of steel hover in

the air, and so the hover bus came into being, and on and on. So how did that push us towards war?”

This time I call on Mr. Travis in Montreal.

“The rest of the world wanted what the Americas had.”

“Who wouldn’t?” I ask. “It was paradise. As a matter of fact, why don’t we go so far as to call it ‘Man’s Garden of Eden’? This period is referred to as ‘The Great Christian Revival’ in Europe, Africa, and Asia. Islam and Judaism were waning after the war, Christianity was growing, and everyone was bonded by their common hatred of the Americas’ prosperity. If the Americas were Eden, then the rest of the world was ready to start a holy crusade to capture it. Now, who can tell me what was happening to religion in the Americas as the rest of the world was having a Christian revival?”

No volunteers light up my screen, but I see Martha raise her hand. Although she’s wearing a com, she’s not registered for the class, so the desk didn’t activate when she sat down. I smile and tell the computer to activate her desk. Her picture comes onto the screens.

“Christianity and all other religions in the Americas were falling apart during that time period,” she says.

“Yes - which brings us to the big question of the day and one of the central themes of this entire class: Why did religion fall apart in America during that time?”

“You said it yourself,” Martha replies, without being called upon. “Man made his own Eden, so he decided he no longer needed to dream of God’s Eden.”

“And how did the world avoid a full-scale nuclear war?”

“The Americas chose to export their Eden rather than fight. They helped the world build Sunspot Two in Lake Baikal in Siberia, and Sunspot Three in Lake Victoria in Africa. Together, the three reactors reach over ninety-nine percent of the world.”

“And within another two decades, the world was at peace,” I add for effect. “So I’ll leave you all with this question: If the entire world is now ‘Man’s Eden,’ why is Christianity still around at all?”

As soon as the cameras deactivate, my com buzzes and tells me Henry Portman wants to speak with me.

“That lecture was brilliant, Cephas! Just brilliant!”

Luckily, my com automatically adjusts the sound or he’d hurt my ears with his excitement.

“You tapped in on my lecture?”

“Of course - and as soon as we make the announcement of the project, I’m going to put the squeeze on your University to make all of your lectures available to the public. The Bureau will make up any loss in tuition, of course. Send me your plans for the next lecture and maybe we can tweak them a little. We should start introducing more and more doubt about the origins of Christian cults over the next few months.”

Henry’s tone tells me this is more than a friendly suggestion.

Push back.

“Let’s walk carefully when it comes to my lectures, Henry. If I start to sound scripted, it might be bad for credibility.”

“With your lecturing talent? Not a chance. I knew you’d be the perfect spokesman to sell this project to the public. I’ll send you some ideas for your next lecture.”

He hangs up before I can respond. I can now add the Corps censoring my lectures to the many things weighing on my mind.

I look up to see Martha is still sitting in the studio and realize she heard my half of the conversation. She walks towards me and climbs onto the stage.

Nobody’s ever climbed onto my stage before.

I look pointedly at her feet, then look up, to find her smirking.

“Hello, Ms. McLeod. You’re not supposed to attend a class for which you’re not registered, but I’m still glad you came.”

She looks directly into my eyes.

Breathe, Cephas.

“Will the world-renowned Cult Hunter get into trouble for activating my seat?”

I can’t tell. Was that challenging? Or flirting?

“I doubt it, but I’m sure it’s already been noted on both of our records.”

She smiles at my reply. It’s the first time I’ve seen her smile and it makes me feel lit up.

I guess she was flirting. Did I just flirt back?

“You’re eligible to register for this class when I teach it again next semester. I’ll just say you showed up a little early. Is there anything else I can do for you, Ms. McLeod?”

“What’s the story with calling everyone ‘Ms.’ and ‘Mr.’ and insisting we call you ‘Professor’? You’re my age - eighteen years old - but you try to act like you’re much older.”

My age is considered dassified. It’s never been written in any book.

“Is that just another part of The Cult Hunter ego trip? Why can’t you just call me ‘Martha?’”

Although it’s out of character, I sigh audibly. Yesterday my life was simple, but this morning I found out that I’ve been marked for death; that I’m going to be sent back in time; and worst of all, that I’m an active cult hunter again. My mind feels like an egg that’s been scrambled, and I’m not in the mood to be challenged - even if it’s done in a flirty manner.

“I take my classes and the subject matter very seriously, Ms. McLeod, and therefore demand a professional atmosphere. This course has been designed as the first step for those who want to someday join the Cult Hunter Corps. If you’re looking for fun, then I suggest you find it in your art class.”

“What? How do you know I’m taking an art class?”

“You dripped some paint on your left shoe.”

She involuntarily glances at four tiny droplets of yellow paint on her brown shoe.

“Are you ready to make those sorts of detailed observations and piece hundreds of them together? If so, maybe you have a future in the Corps’ Investigations arm, where I worked. In the three years I’ve been teaching this course, you’re the first to have any real potential.”

Her body angles back by a centimeter. My final statement has thrown her off balance.

Better her than me, for once.

“Of all the students you’ve had, I’m the first you see with potential? Why?”

“You’re bright, you’re curious, and most of all, you’re driven.”

I look into those wonderful eyes again.

“There’s something in your eyes that tells me you want more from your life than sex, drugs, and whatever your com tells you to think and do. I never say so in lectures, but the Sunspot reactors, that give us everything we want, also gave us the most addictive drug ever created: apathy. People are content to sit around all day and exist. When I look into your eyes, I see that you don’t want to just exist - you want to live.”

Martha takes a step back, like she’s afraid of me, and I realize I was getting pretty intense. I back a half step away from her as well.

“I’m sorry Ms.... I’m sorry, Martha. I was in D.C. for most of the day and there’s a lot weighing on my mind. It wasn’t fair to dump it onto you; but I really did mean what I said about your potential.”

She’s done it again. She got me to lower my guard. Could she already work for the Corps and this is some sort of test?

“Wow,” she says.

Rather than answering, I prompt her to continue with an expectant look.

“Who would have thought it possible? The Cult Hunter is a human being.”

I drain all emotion from my face. It’s the only way I can avoid betraying just how many emotions are running through me.

“Human enough for that to hurt, *Ms. McLeod.*”

I step off the stage, which causes the lights to shut off, leaving her in the dark behind me.

I start to walk. I don’t want to speak to anyone. I don’t want to see anyone. I don’t want to think about what lies ahead of me, and I especially don’t want the burden of maintaining The Cult Hunter image. If anyone speaks to me, the best they can expect is a growl.

On the way home, I leave my usual route and stop at an ancient park that’s several blocks from my house. Few people ever come here because it’s been designated a historic park, which means it still has grass, trees, rose bushes, and an ancient bronze statue, rather than hover pads and interactive hologram statues.

I sit on a bench and close my eyes. This is the opposite of the endless noise offered by a com. Here I can empty my mind by feeling the sun on my face and listening to the wind rustle the leaves on the trees. It goes against all of my Corps training, but when I sit here, I always feel safe and at peace.

To my right, I hear the gentle swish of footsteps approaching me through the grass. I wonder if it’s a Corps agent coming to protect me, or a Christian assassin coming to end me. I don’t open my eyes to find out. Whoever it is, let them come.

“Professor?”

I don’t believe it. It’s Martha McLeod again. Why won’t she just take her sparkling blue eyes and go away?

“What is it now?”

“An apology.”

“Don’t waste it on a cult hunter. Save it for a human being.”

“Do you want the apology or not?”

“It won’t be the strangest thing to happen to me today, so - go ahead.”

“Like I said earlier, I’ve read all about you. I guess I wanted to impress you, but I didn’t know how. I mean, how do you impress The Cult Hunter? Everyone knows how you stopped another holy war by hunting and killing Christians - sometimes with nothing but your bare hands.”

“How many do you think I personally killed - bare hands or otherwise?”

“Well, according to one unofficial biography, you tortured and killed four dozen just to break the final Christian code.”

“Did I? I must have lost count after three dozen.”

Everyone thinks torture is the line I crossed to find the answer. If it had only been that simple.

“It’s also well-known that you traveled around Europe a few months before the code was broken, and there are rumors that you killed dozens more over there. And early in your career-”

“Stop.”

My voice is barely above a whisper.

Should I tell her the truth? In three years, I’ve never broken the persona I’m supposed to portray. If she works for the Corps, I’ll pay dearly, but if not, maybe I’d have someone I can talk to. Maybe this emptiness could come to an end.

“If you’d like the exact number, hand me your com. I can’t allow you to record it, and if it’s announced to the public – well - that would be a big mistake on your part, in the eyes of the Corps.”

I hold out my hand. She hesitates a long time before I feel her drop her com into it.

“The exact number is zero. I was never a field agent, and I never personally captured a single Christian. I’ve never even met one.”

Martha stands in silence, so I open my eyes - to find her staring into them.

Can she see eye sparkles too?

“That explains a lot,” she says. “Since I met you, I’ve had a hard time seeing you as a killer.”

“Then you’re asking the wrong question again. You asked how many I personally killed, but the real question is the number of dead Christians for which I’m personally responsible. The answer to that question is ‘all of them.’ I sat in my office and uncovered their hiding places. I killed them all.”

Chapter Seven

I don't have a class the next day, so I lie in the park, wondering if Martha will find me here again. It's so peaceful, that I'm even able to put up with having my com in my ear as I do my mandatory hours. After four hours, I remove my com and am almost asleep, when I hear the swishing of approaching feet in the grass.

Her footfalls are exactly like yesterday. She's as steady as a metronome.

As she gets closer, I can hear her humming a simple tune from my childhood. Actually, it's from everyone's collective childhood because it's a tune you learn in school.

I continue to lie in the grass with my eyes closed, choosing to study her voice instead of her face.

"You're humming a classic today, Ms. McLeod, but we'll need some more people if you're in the mood to play C&C."

"C and C?"

"You know - Christians and cult Hunters. The song you were humming is how each game would begin. You must have played C&C as a kid. It's been part of the international fitness initiative for decades."

"Oh, of course. We just didn't abbreviate it."

Her voice is slightly higher in pitch than normal. She has no clue what I'm talking about. Who in this world doesn't play C&C in grade school? Unless... she never went to grade school. She's a Christian. The Corps always suspected Christians were having children at home to keep them off the grid.

I sing the song the kid chosen as "cult hunter" would use to begin the game:

Where are you hiding, you children of the night?

Will you come out and see the sun and trade the truth for lies?

We'll find you. We'll find you. You cannot win this fight.

Stop hiding in the darkness now and we'll teach you what's right.

Martha remains silent for a while.

She's never heard the song before. I don't believe it. I've finally met a Christian and she's here to kill me.

"So that was your early cult hunter training," she says. "I bet even then you were the best cult hunter on the playground."

I'm lying here with my eyes closed. If she was sent to kill me, why not just do it now?

"I'm surprised you'd think that, considering I told you yesterday that I'm a big fraud."

Maybe that's what's keeping me alive.

I hear her first sit, and then lie in the grass beside me.

"I don't think of you as a fraud. If anything, my respect for you has increased. The world thinks you tortured people to break the final code. Some even say you butchered Christian's alive to get the information. The Corps admits that they had super computers working day and night, and they couldn't break it either. To think that you did it while sitting in a room alone and applying your intellect is mind boggling."

Of course. First they want to know how I did it. Then they'll kill me.

"So you don't think of me as a dangerous killer?" I ask.

"A killer? No, but you could be the most dangerous person in the world. They say the final code was so complex that you're still the only one who understands how it works. Anyone with that kind of ability must be dangerous."

"I told you, I just solve puzzles."

I feel her warm hand on top of mine.

When's the last time someone touched me? I don't think I know.

"That was a big sigh," she says.

Did I sigh? I wasn't aware of it.

My body stiffens as I re-exert control over my thoughts and emotions. I quickly regret it, because it causes Martha to remove her hand and sit up. I open my eyes and am disappointed to find she's looking at the sky rather than at me.

If the Corps had just let me talk to some Christians, maybe I'd be prepared for this. None of the usual Cult Hunter scare tactics are going to work on her.

I let her resume the conversation to see where she goes next.

"I've been thinking about the extra credit project you offered in World Religion class - about whether love for technology is a form of 'self-worship.' Care to help me with that puzzle?"

"How about we talk about it over an early dinner? I've hardly eaten all day," I reply.

Martha gets an uncomfortable look on her face. I never go out to eat, and I've forgotten that the social convention is to have sex with someone who buys you dinner.

"Oh my. I didn't mean to say-"

My face feels flushed.

"What I mean is we could go Dutch treat."

"I'd love to," she says.

She can barely contain laughing at my sudden discomfort.

"Do you like Lebanese?" she asks. "There's a great place just off campus."

I've never let my guard down like this. But maybe I can gain her trust.

When we leave the park, Martha pays no attention to the nearby hover bus stop and just keeps on walking. Most people would do just the opposite. I'm impressed that she likes to walk, but we continue in awkward silence to the edge of campus, until I think of a way to start a conversation.

"The retail district is a great opportunity to view man's creations. I think you might find your own answer if we just make observations as we walk to the restaurant. Tell me what you see."

"Unlimited electricity allows the world to be automated. Machines can be designed to do almost everything man used to do by hand," she says.

"Including that," I say.

I laugh and point to a storefront that rents realistic robotic prostitutes by the hour.

"What else do you see?" I ask.

"Well, since people no longer need to work, most choose to spend their time in leisure pursuits."

I want to laugh at her choice of words, but I don't. 'Leisure pursuits' is nothing more than a common euphemism for sex and drugs.

"Have you ever listened to the speeches that were given when Sunspot Three came on line?" I ask. "They went on and on about how once all of mankind was relieved of the drudgery of work, we could make great leaps forward because our time would be spent taking on scientific, intellectual, and cultural pursuits."

"Didn't we?"

"We did for one generation. They cleaned up the pollution; they cured the diseases; they invented things; and they created unprecedented amounts of literature, music, and art. Everyone was excited to work to make those things happen. When they passed the torch to their children, only about half were still choosing to work. Now, less than a tenth of the population works and most of them are designing and building the machines to make new leisure pursuits possible."

"You're saying you don't consider robotic prostitutes a great scientific, intellectual or cultural leap forward?"

Now I laugh.

I'm pretty sure that was flirting.

I thought it would be difficult to drop The Cult Hunter persona and gain her trust, but she's making it effortless for me, like we've been having conversations for years.

Just then, Martha and I approach a "selective pregnancy" kiosk, where a girl who looks to be about fourteen-years-old has her stomach exposed and the machine is scanning her. I look in another direction.

Ignoring it won't make it go away.

As we pass, the electronic voice says: "You are twelve hours and twenty-three minutes post implantation. How would you like to proceed?"

The screen in front of the girl has a menu of choices and the default setting is always the same: "abort." I'd like to say something but, as always, I bite my tongue.

"Move On," the girl says.

It's short for "move on with my life and pretend this never happened." I wonder if the abort rate would be so high if the girl was required to say "kill it."

A finely-calibrated hypersonic pulse will now break up the small ball of life inside her, without harming any of her tissues in the process. Some say the sensation is even pleasant. As we walk away, she's talking into her com and saying she missed her record by just twelve minutes.

Going, going, gone forever. Three billion killed in the Final Holy War is a drop in the bucket compared to the death toll from these machines.

The thought of what's happening inside the girl's body leaves me lost in sadness. I've spoken with colleagues about it, and while they all agree it's a shame to lose the evolutionary potential, none understand why it should make me feel sad. Selective pregnancy is the basic right of all women once they reach the age of sexual maturity and, therefore, I'm expected to mind my own business when it comes to the choices that others make. Even so, that small bundle of life represented an unimaginably complex and unique combination of genes that can't be duplicated by all of our amazing technology. Whatever potential was inside that girl, it's been blasted away by the hypersonic pulse and is never coming back.

"Paradise," Martha says beside me, snapping me out of my thoughts.

"What?" I find that she's staring at me again, like she's trying to hear my thoughts by watching my face.

Oh, man, she's good. I had no idea the Christians were so well-trained at undercover work.

"Isn't that how you described our world in your advanced lecture? Our own Garden of Eden? No more disease, everyone has whatever they want, so there's no envy and therefore no reason for wars. Everything is clean and perfect."

"Perfect? I suppose it depends on how you choose to define perfection."

"What do you mean?"

"What some might call perfection another might see as a simple lack of consequences," I say. "There are no diseases, and pregnancies are ended with a simple voice command, so there are no consequences for casual sex. Once natural alcohols and tobacco were made illegal, synthetic versions - as well as drugs - became engineered to get you drunk or give you highs without being addictive, so there are no consequences for intoxication. Obesity is fixed with metabolism bots, so there's no consequence for being a glutton. Even basic food and housing are free, so there's no consequence for laziness. From the perspective of an ancient Christian, our man-made Garden of Eden is an all-you-can-eat buffet of forbidden apples."

"Since the Bible was banned, I don't know much about the Garden of Eden, but wasn't it bad when they ate the apple and got thrown out of the garden? Aren't we better off without the consequences?" she asks.

“Our bodies are better off without the consequences, but what about our minds?”

It would have been fun to use the word “soul” and watch her reaction, but I don’t dare say it aloud on the public streets.

“Maybe man still needs some consequences in his life to help guide him - to keep him striving for more than this,” I say.

Martha stops walking and cocks her head to give me another intense stare.

“You really are an unsolved puzzle, Cephas. Tell me then, what are the consequences in your life that keep you striving for more? What keeps a cult-hunting history professor motivated?”

“If there are any consequences in my life, I guess they’re all self-imposed,” I reply. “Though I do sometimes wonder why I continue to do research into the past. Why did I bother to learn ancient languages? Why are a few doctors still striving to find new cures for diseases that were cured by their great-grandfathers? Why are a few scientists still trying to find new energy sources in a world that has more than it needs? If this is so perfect, why does it need further perfection? But most of all, if it’s all so perfect, why do I see signs like that one?”

We’ve arrived at the Lebanese restaurant. On the roof of the building across the street is a billboard that reads: “Tried it all and ready to be done? Maybe it’s time for assisted suicide. Guaranteed painless.”

I point to the sign.

“If this is paradise, why would anyone want to leave it? Why did that girl abort a baby rather than sharing paradise with it?”

Martha’s jaw hangs open.

“Professor, I...”

“I’m sorry, Martha, I didn’t mean to put you on the spot like that. I still have a lot on my mind. Why don’t we just end by saying that even a lack of consequences has its own set of consequences?”

“We can end on that note if I can add that you really should be teaching philosophy instead of history.”

During dinner, Martha continues to swing back and forth over whether faith in man’s ingenuity is a form of self-worship or not. When dessert is over, she still hasn’t resolved which way she should write the essay. She starts drumming her fingers in frustration.

“Did you run out of nail polish?” I ask.

She laughs and looks at her hands. The eight fingers are done with a light pink polish, but her thumbs are still natural.

“No, I ran out of time.”

“I thought everyone had a machine to do all ten at once.”

“I still use an old machine that belonged to my grand-mother. It does one at a time.”

I’ve been enjoying the conversation so much that when the check arrives, I tell my com to pay the bill, without thinking about the implications.

“Professor. I’ve had a great time and I appreciate you picking up the tab, but I’m hoping you won’t be insulted if the evening ends here.”

“Of course I won’t be insulted. In fact, I think I might have been a little insulted if you’d expected the evening to continue. You know from class that sex with my students isn’t my style.”

“I hoped you’d say that, although you do know I’d be passing up the chance of a lifetime.”

“The chance of a lifetime?” I ask.

“I’d be beating all the statistics,” she says. “The University keeps statistics on student-professor sexual encounters, and you’re ranked the number one hardest to get. You’re considered impossible, really.”

“I am?”

“Yes, and that includes Professor Cooper, who’s at least ninety-years-old.”

“If I’m the chance of a lifetime, why aren’t you trying to talk me into it?”

“It’s not my style either.”

She pauses.

“Besides, in a way it would ruin you.”

“Ruin me? Now I’m intrigued.”

“I can’t explain it, but somehow it would lessen you and your accomplishments. It would make you just another professor.”

“My accomplishments? My primary accomplishments all revolve around silencing people I’d rather have sat down and spoken with. I never wanted to be The Cult Hunter. I just wanted to understand faith.”

Martha cocks her head, but says nothing. If she’s a Christian, then she naturally wants to hate me and I’m not making it easy for her.

You’ve pushed too far again. Give her an out.

“Martha, I’ve seen the look that just crossed your face before. You made a mental shift about me when you realized I’m not the person you thought I was. I’d like to get to know you better and I’d hoped you wanted to know me as well, but if this is just another case of hero worship from a student, it’s best to walk away now, before we’re both disappointed.”

“You weren’t just hunting them down? You were trying to understand the nature of Christian faith? Why?”

Amazing. She didn’t back off.

“I keep telling you, I solve puzzles. Faith is a puzzle I can’t seem to crack, so I just need to know what they know.”

You can’t admit it to her yet, but what you really desire is to feel what they feel. You want to know firsthand if faith is a real feeling that will fill this emptiness or just self-delusion, like the atheists insist.

Martha stares at me with a curious look for a long time.

“I think I get it. Your powers of observation and ability to solve puzzles are all about making connections. You were trying to make connections about ancient religions, and hunting modern cultists was just a byproduct.”

“So which is more pathetic? Making connections to people who have been dead for centuries, or renting a robotic prostitute for an hour?”

“Definitely the robot, but in your defense, many of the people in our generation aren’t much better than robots or dead people. How can you seek connections to people who spend their lives dazed by drugs and free entertainment? I’d never want to suggest that your life studying religion has been wasted, but I might suggest you’ve been seeking connections in the wrong places.”

We both know this is a game, but does she suspect my true goal?

“Tell me, Martha, where’s the right place?”

“I think you’ll know it when you find it.”

As we walk back onto the campus and prepare to each take a hover bus in opposite directions, Martha stops me by grabbing my hand and pulling me to face her. She looks me deep in the eyes, like she’s trying to see inside of me, then, without warning, kisses me on the lips. I respond with a passion I’ve never known existed inside of me - like my entire reason for being is to kiss her. She ends the kiss and pulls back abruptly.

“I don’t know why I just did that. But how was *that* for a connection?” she whispers into my ear and is gone before I can respond.

Chapter Eight

The University hover bus includes a private section reserved for faculty, which I use so I can be alone with my thoughts. I'm barely inside when my thoughts are invaded by a buzzing in my pocket. It's my com, which should have deactivated when I removed it from my ear. I put it back in.

"Cephas, it's Henry."

"You can activate my com when it's out? I didn't know that was possible."

"Just one of the perks of being the Director. Besides, they're never truly deactivated. Listen, now you're alone, we need to talk for a minute. I've assigned a special agent to you to act as a liaison. She's deep cover, and nobody knows she works directly for me. I see you've got a new book, so we're sending you on a book tour. She's going to act as your new press secretary and personal assistant. Her name is Janet Tucker and she's in the front section of your bus. When you get off the bus, greet her when you get off like you already know her. We think there are at least two people following you right now."

Public databases are supposed to be secure. They searched your files and stole your book for their own purposes.

I look through the glass to the front section of the bus, which has about a dozen people in it. There are three different couples, in various states of undress, and three student-aged guys cheering them on. There's a young man with a purple Mohawk hairdo, formed up into four gigantic spikes, who's ignoring the spectacle while reading something on a tablet. That leaves a tall woman who's wearing an expensive, but outlandish outfit, with oversized matching jewelry. As I wonder if her face is painted on each morning, she winks at me with eyelashes that are three times longer than normal, confirming that she's Janet.

As we get off the hover bus, I see that Janet must wiggle back and forth to walk because her outfit is so tight, and she's carrying a very large purse, which I presume holds some sort of weapon.

"Cephas!" she squeals in an annoying, high-pitched voice, as she wiggle-runs towards me.

"Janet, it's nice to see you again. I'm so happy that you decided to come and work with me."

"You know I could never say no to you, Cephas."

When she reaches me, I move to take her hand, as I would with any old acquaintance, but she avoids my hand and crushes her body up against mine. Before I know it, she's trying to stick her tongue in my mouth and is grinding her body against mine. I'm struck by the contrast with Martha's kiss. This kiss is igniting revolt inside me, and I break her grasp as quickly as I can.

"It's been a long time, Janet. I think we need to stay a little more professional than when we were young."

"Then how about just a hug?"

She grabs me before I can respond.

"Deep cover, you fool. Treat me like an old flame."

"Trying to lick my vocal cords was a little too deep."

I break her grasp for the second time.

"Shall we go to my office?"

"Sex in your office? Great! I hope you still have that sturdy desk," she announces to everyone around us, as she returns to character.

Luckily, my office isn't far, so it doesn't take too long to walk and wiggle to it. When we get there, Janet takes a device out of her purse and starts walking around the room. I stand at the door.

"It's clean. We've been sweeping it for bugs and cameras for a week, but it never hurts to do it again."

Her voice is no longer the high-pitched annoyance it was when we were in public.

"So you're my new personal assistant and press secretary? Why didn't they send a guy?"

“We didn’t think you went that way. I saw the replay of your kiss with Martha McLeod, so I’d say we were right.”

I know there are cameras everywhere, but the feeling I’ve been violated is immediate.

My office has a couch and as Janet walks to it, she begins to unbutton her top.

“What are you doing?”

“We’re in your office after hours. The people watching you expect we’re in here having sex, so to maintain my cover...”

I look her figure up and down twice. It’s the current standard of beauty, with a big bust and hips, and a tiny waist, but it’s unnatural, the product of enhancements. I should be eager, but instead the feeling of revulsion I got when she kissed me returns. I force myself to look into her eyes. They’re definitely doll eyes, but they’re even more difficult to look at than most. For someone with such an animated face, she has the saddest doll eyes I’ve ever seen.

“You’re kidding,” I say.

“We need to make it look right in case they had us on video as we entered the building. Besides, your expertise is a legend in D.C., and I want some stories to tell when the assignment is over.”

The Corps made me a sexual legend too?

“Sorry, Janet, but you’re not going to write any epic poems about me today.”

Janet sighs.

“They did warn me that membership in The Cult Hunter conquest club is very exclusive.”

There’s a mirror on the office wall and she walks to it, and starts messing up her hair and make-up.

“What are you doing now?”

“I still need to make it look right in case we were on video as we entered the building. They say you don’t like it rough and that it’s almost as much an intellectual experience as it is physical, so just a few little changes should do.”

“You do look like you prefer it rough. Shall I tear my shirt or pop off some buttons?”

Rather than answering, she kisses me on the cheek, then smudges the lipstick she left behind.

“Nope, that should do it - as long as the Christians watching you don’t have heat scanners.”

“Heat scanners?”

“Sure. A heat scanner can determine whether we had sex just by reading the heat coming off our...”

Her eyes trail down to my waist.

“Enough. I get it.”

“Oh, wait - I just might be able to cover us on that too.”

She rummages through her purse, then hands me a small piece of foil.

“Bend it once and stick it in your pants. It’ll give off a heat signature to fool any scans. From what I’ve heard, I’ll need to use this extra-hot one to make it believable. You take the colder one, but if anyone asks, please talk me up.”

“Exactly how long are you going to be my personal assistant?”

“I’ll be here as long as you need protection. Right now, that means through your mission, but I suspect you’ll need even more protection when you get back. In the meantime, we’ve already sent your new book to your usual publisher and told them to have it publication-ready the day after tomorrow. We’ve scheduled a media blitz to start at the same time. It’s a pretty aggressive schedule. You’ll have media appearances on the morning shows, and parties every night with the social crowd.”

“But my book isn’t ready. I’m still revising it.”

“It doesn’t matter what it says. We’re selling the sizzle, not the steak. Speaking of which - we’ve decided on an image change. The whole cold, calculating agent-of-fear thing doesn’t work anymore.

You're now a superstar. You fight the cults during the day, and are the life of the party at night. You have a heart of gold and everyone trusts you. Kids want to be you, and women swoon at the sight of you. Got it?"

For one brief moment, I thought I was free of being "The Cult Hunter," but I'm not. It's just a new mask to wear; a whole new set of facial expressions to master.

"I'd still like to teach my classes. How do I do that?"

"Your classes have already been figured into the plan. We have studios set up on the road."

"It sounds like you have my life all planned out for me. Can I go home and get one last night of sleep?"

In response, she walks over and grabs at the heat pack in my pants, sending a wave of nausea through me.

My book, my dinner with Martha, and now even my body. Nothing is beyond the Corps' touch.

"Okay, I think you're hot enough now. One last thing, leave your com in your ear from now on."

"Not a chance."

I leave her standing alone in my office.

What is happening to my quiet, simple life?

I walk off campus and enter the comfort of the old trees and the old houses in my section of town. Like the people who live in them, the beauty of the houses is only skin-deep. Most of the original houses were demolished decades ago, and replaced with modern structures constructed to look old to the untrained eye. Even most of those that are original on the outside have been gutted multiple times for upgrading to new technologies. My house is the only one I've seen that has real wood floors and trim. I've even furnished it with antiques to preserve the effect.

I remove my com and swear that if the Corps activates it in my pocket, I'll stomp the life out of it for good. If they want to talk to me, one of the agents following me can just break cover and force it back into my ear. I go back to the park and choose a bench that's out in the open. Sitting in such an exposed place must be driving the Corps guys crazy. I watch as a big, young guy awkwardly sniffs the blooms on a rosebush. He's probably never been in a historic park before.

They're watching wherever I go; they're listening in on my com; and they're monitoring my computer. For all I know, the Christians who want me dead are doing the same things. The only privacy I have left is my thoughts. I suddenly feel like a hunted animal that's being watched by predators from behind every bush.

Is this how the Christians I hunted felt?

The agent protecting me sits on a bench and pretends to watch a tablet, but I can see his eyes constantly scanning the park for any danger, and escape routes. I'm scanning too, and the thought occurs to me that there's only one way out, and I'm not talking about the park.

I take out my small computer pad and manually shut off the uplink connection. The Corps will instantly see the device go dark, but if I work quickly, they may believe it's a simple malfunction. The computer itself has very little memory because all information is uploaded onto free public databases, but there's one thing I save locally, my class lists. I find Martha's home address and am surprised to find it's not far from my house. Students usually choose to live in modern apartments rather than the old section of town, but I guess it's good to live near your target. I reactivate the uplink, then spend some time just reading the news of the day, as if that was my purpose all along.

It's a warm day in September, but even so, the light is starting to fail when I judge the time is right. I walk towards the agent and notice another figure on a parallel course about twenty meters away. The agent sees it too, and abruptly turns off his device and walks to put himself between me and the other person.

I stop at the same rosebush the agent sniffed and while I sniff one at nose-height I pluck a bloom off the bush at waist-height and slip it into my jacket pocket. If I continue along the path, I'll be headed straight home, but instead I slip between two bushes and exit the park in a way that takes me straight towards Martha's address.

I look up and realize how stupid I'm being. The guy with the spiked Mohawk from the hover bus is walking straight towards me. It can't be a coincidence; he's either another agent or he's an assassin who works with Martha. If she knows I'm on to her, she may have ordered the hit.

If he's here to kill me, I might be able to throw him off balance by recognizing his presence.

"Nice evening," I say, when he's still much farther away than one would normally start a conversation. "For a walk, I mean."

"For a walk, yes," he replies, as the gap between us continues to close.

As we pass, I hold my breath - expecting some sort of an impact. A gun, perhaps; a poison needle; maybe he can even kill me with his spiked hair. I release my breath a few steps later when nothing has happened, and glance over my shoulder. He continues on his way without further acknowledgement.

Paranoia has officially returned.

Two blocks later, I arrive at the address Martha listed as being her home. It's about the same age as my house, three-hundred years, give or take. Unlike my house, you can see it's been renovated to incorporate new technologies. I laugh when I see it still has an antique mailbox hanging near the front door, as paper mail has been gone for over a century. Three of the numbers are still on the box, but one in the center has fallen off. It hung there for so long that the rest of the paint faded around it, leaving just the outline of its presence so you can see it was the number four.

I feel my com buzz in my pocket and choose not to answer it. I assume I lost my security detail and either Henry or Janet are activating it in order to track me. I turn the corner so I'm heading back towards my house and see the same agent doing a light jog in my direction. His attempt to stop jogging and act natural when he sees me is almost comical. I'm right, they were tracking me through my com.

My com is now buzzing continuously, so I relent and put it into my ear.

"Hello, Mom."

"Very funny," Janet says. "What were you thinking with that little stunt?"

"I was thinking that I should get out of the park and let your man handle whoever was following me. How was I supposed to know you only had one guy protecting me?"

"Go straight home, Cephas."

She hangs up.

I should have crushed the stupid thing.

When I get home, I take the rose bloom out of my pocket. In my line of work, I like to collect antiques, so I happen to have a couple of pens and pencils. I take one of the pens and peel back an outer petal, and start to write on the next petal in. The ink dried up long ago, but leaving an impression with the tip should cause the petal to delicately bruise, revealing what I've written as the bruise turns brown. I fold the outer petals back into place to hide the message and stick the bloom into a glass of water.

Chapter Nine

I walk into World Religion class with one thing on my mind: seeing Martha's smiling face in the front row. As I hit the stage, I'm not disappointed. She's looking radiant and I can't help but smile at her, which she returns.

My mood changes when I see Janet in the small control booth at the back of the room. The class doesn't start with the same old announcement of the lecture number and my name. Instead, the congenial voice announces: "See Dr. Paulson on his upcoming book tour and be the first to get your copy of what is predicted to be another instant classic." The process of transforming me from cold killer to life of the party has begun. There are the usual two dozen offers to have sex with me, so I hit a button and accept them all. Every head in the class, including Martha's, instantly snaps up to look at me.

Great! Now they actually see me.

I lock eyes with Martha and smile, then I hit another button which causes groans, as it rejects and deletes all the offers. I enjoy watching every millimeter of Martha's lips as they transform from shock to smile, and she knows it.

"In our last class, we were discussing the Final Holy War, which took us into a discussion of belief systems. Today I want to backtrack and discuss what was happening in the world just prior to the Final Holy War. Who can tell me what the First Amendment to the Constitution says?"

There are no volunteers, but I can see students in the audience looking up the answer. A girl named Makenzie volunteers and reads it verbatim:

"Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the private exercise thereof; or abridging freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances."

"Correct," I say. "Now, who can tell me what one word was changed in 2052, compared to the original?"

One word. Religious freedom was so fragile that it hung on just one word.

Again there are no volunteers, but this time they have a much harder time looking up the answer. The Corps sees to it that certain parts of our history are not easy to find.

"The answer is the word 'free,' which was removed and the word 'private' was put in its place." I say. "Today we're going to explore how that change came about. Throughout the 2020's and into the 2030's, the world saw a period of religious radicalization and violence. If you can imagine, men and women would strap bombs on their chests and blow themselves up to kill members of other faiths. After countless bombings, both here and worldwide, the United States government chose a path of religious appeasement it hoped would make the country stand out as a shining example of religious liberty, and thus not a target for radicals."

"Now known as 'The Equalization' period, the U.S. launched a comprehensive program to ensure all religions were publicly viewed as valid and equal under the law. The concept was that once everyone perceived themselves as equal, there would be no reason for religious hatred. To accomplish this, the government created the Department of Religious Affairs. Its job was to ensure that even the smallest splinter group of any religion was scrupulously given legal recognition. Almost every day of the year became a religious holiday for one group or another, each of which had to be officially recognized by the government and private businesses alike. In time, even individuals could declare that they represented a solo religion, and the government recognized each of them as distinct and legitimate."

My podium lights with a question from Mr. McCord in San Diego.

“How could that be?” he asks. “Officially recognizing any religion shouldn’t have been allowed under the First Amendment.”

“That’s not quite true, Mr. McCord. The First Amendment says there can be no laws respecting *establishment* of religion because the founding fathers didn’t want a majority to declare one religion as the official religion of the country. That’s not the same as the government *recognizing* religions. The government had long been involved at the fringes of religion, such as giving religious groups favorable tax treatment or using the words “In God We Trust” on money - neither of which was ever a violation of the First Amendment. Equalization just extended government recognition of religion by applying the Equal Protection Clause. In essence, the government argued it was obligated to recognize all religions because recognition of one group - but not another - as a religion was resulting in racial, ethnic or social injustice. In the end, any group or individual claiming a deeply held religious belief was officially recognized as a religion so they could be tracked and categorized by the government in order to protect their religious freedom.”

But who was protecting them from the government?

Just then, I’m distracted by my podium screen going momentarily blank and then coming back up with a message on it from Janet, saying: “This is too general. You need to emphasize Christian cults more.”

I write “Butt out” back to her.

“Unfortunately, the Equalization approach not only failed to end the violence, it exacerbated it, culminating in the Final Holy War of 2036.”

Martha raises her hand.

“Class, Ms. McLeod has a question - but before I call on her, I want you all to know that Ms. McLeod has asked me to drop formalities such as “Ms.” or “Mr.” and call you by your first names. I know you’ll all find this hard to believe, but she perceived me as sounding a bit stuffy.”

There are sporadic snickers in the live audience.

“So in the interest of loosening up a bit, I’d like to do two things. First, I’m going to loosen my tie.”

I loosen it just a hair.

“And next I’m going to say, yes, Martha, what’s your question?”

Janet gives me an enthusiastic smile from the booth. This change fits well with her plans to remake my image.

“It didn’t end the violence, but wasn’t Equalization still a success?” Martha asks.

“How so?”

“Didn’t it fulfill the founders’ original First Amendment goal of securing religious freedom? Didn’t millions of distinct religions translate into millions of people worshiping as they saw fit?”

“From an overall perspective, you’re right, but Equalization also had the unintended effect of accelerating religious fractionation.”

Or maybe that was the intended effect?

“Accelerating? What do you mean?”

“Religion had already been fracturing itself for centuries. By the year 2020, there were already over sixteen thousand different denominations of Christianity in the United States alone. Fifteen years into Equalization, the number had jumped to over one hundred thousand. Once you counted up all the individual religions, the United States had over ten million recognized religious groups.”

“So you’re saying religion would have faded away regardless, but Equalization sped up the process?” Martha asks.

“I don’t know that the collapse of religion was inevitable, but I will say that Equalization focused on celebrating religious differences rather than similarities, and the anger that arose from those differences started a war that killed three billion people.”

“And that’s why the word ‘free’ was removed from the First Amendment,” Martha says.

“That’s right. We still had ten million officially recognized religions, many of which found all other religious symbols offensive to their faith - even to the point of inciting them to violence. To calm the waters, the First Amendment was changed. There was just no going back after the Equalization. Religion had to be redefined as a private right rather than a public right.”

“So public display of religious symbols was banned as a form of hate speech,” Martha adds.

She’s miles ahead of anyone I’ve ever taught.

“Yes. The courts interpreted the private exercise of religion to mean that no religious symbols could be viewable from any public property. Crosses came off of church steeples; an old tradition of Christian’s called the Christmas tree could no longer be visible through windows; and even ancient grave markers bearing all sorts of symbols were altered or removed.”

“But didn’t that just create another legal conflict?” Martha asks. “Aren’t all of those things also part of Freedom of Speech?”

“You’re on your game today, Martha.”

She rewards me with a smile.

“That very issue went to the Supreme Court in 2013 and in a six-to-five split, they ruled that the First Amendment specifically carves out expression of religion as a private right, while all other forms of expression are public rights.”

For the rest of the class, I spend time talking about the major eastern religions, as well as various pagan religions, just to irk Janet. She tries once more to steer me towards beating up Christianity, and then gives up.

When I’ve finished the lecture, I step off the stage and once the cameras and lights are off, I say: “Martha, may I have a word with you?”

Martha continues to dictate notes through her com until the rest of the class is gone and then walks to the stage. Over Martha’s shoulder, I see Janet leave the control room and start wiggling her way towards us.

“I was thinking more about your essay ideas, and I think they merit further discussion,” I say to Martha.

I reach into my pocket and hand her the rose.

“Are you trying to tell me something about my essay?”

She slips the rose into her pocket.

“I’m doing my best to send you a message,” I reply, just as Janet reaches us.

“Cephas, you’re the best - just the best.”

Janet uses her shrill voice and tries to kiss me full on the lips. I turn my cheek, so she coats me in lipstick in retaliation.

“And I’m not talking just about your lectures, big boy.”

“Thank you, professor. I’ll keep that in mind,” Martha says and turns to go.

“It’s a complex subject, Martha, but I’m sure you’ll manage to peel back the layers.”

Martha smiles as she gets the hint.

“Cephas. Aren’t you going to introduce me to your little friend?” Janet asks.

“Janet, this is Martha McLeod, the star student who you saw asking such insightful questions. Martha, this is Janet, my new press secretary and personal assistant for the book tour you heard mentioned at the beginning of class.”

“Star student, you say? And so young and natural looking too?” Janet says. “It looks like someone is trying to be the teacher’s pet - or maybe she wants to pet the teacher?”

“As you can see, Martha, being a good press secretary requires a very special sort of personality. It’s a part Janet plays a little too well at times.”

Martha leaves and I turn to Janet.

“Stop interrupting my lectures with your useless messages. This class covers all religions and I can’t go changing the class just to suit you. If you want to hear me talk about Christianity, then come to my other class.”

Set jaw and narrow your eyes.

“I have my job to do too,” she replies in her normal voice. “Ignore me all you want, but I’m going on record as having tried to keep you on task. I’ve got just six months to take you from being a cold killing machine to someone everyone in the world likes and trusts. And that look you’re giving doesn’t make my job any easier. Study up on how to look friendly and fun.”

I glare at her while she smiles brightly and tries to get me to imitate her expressions.

“Now about your other class,” she says as she gives up. “I had to bump it up a day due to the tour schedule. You teach it tonight instead of tomorrow. Be ready.”

“I’ll be here.”

Shedding the cold, hard “Cult Hunter” look and becoming the life of the party is harder than I thought it would be. Has The Cult Hunter mask become such a part of me that I can’t take it off anymore?

I’ve been waiting at the Lebanese restaurant for half an hour, when Martha shows up, right on schedule. She found the message in the rose.

“I guess I got you hooked on this place,” she says, acting like it was a chance encounter.

She knows we’re being watched.

“I was just finishing up, but I can sit for a minute, if you like.”

There’s one Corps guy in the restaurant and another on a bench across the street. If Martha keeps standing, she’ll block all view of what I’m about to do. I’ve brought one of my pencils with me, and Martha’s eyes widen at the sight of it.

I write on my napkin: “Not here. Somewhere private.”

“Actually, I’m not eating. I just saw you through the window. I’m going back to my house now.”

I write “No, not your house. I’m being followed.”

Her eyebrows go up.

“But first I have to stop by a friend’s house. I promised her I’d drop off some Lebanese food.”

She writes the address on the napkin. The address is just a block from my house.

Her handwriting is beautiful. Only Christians write on paper these days.

She buys some food and is on her way. I contemplate her ability to write with a pencil, and how easy I’m making it for her to kill me by meeting her privately.

For once, I leave my com in my ear. I want the Corps guys tracking me.

With my com active, it’s fun to watch the Corps guys take turns following me. I’ve identified three of them who work the day shift, though I have no doubt there are others. Since there are three, and I’m being tracked through my com, their movements can outwardly appear more random than before. They no longer get off the hover bus when I do, because another agent is already waiting at my usual stop, and he only follows me for half a block before another swoops in to take his place. Then the original guy from the hover bus is waiting in a private hover car outside my house. It’s like a dance.

When I get inside, I remove my com and throw it into a bowl by the front door. If they’ve been watching me for a week, then they know removing it is my normal routine. I instruct the house computer to play some music as a cover noise in case the house is bugged and change clothes, just to be thorough. The back door is also being watched, but this house is so old, it has a basement with a side exit that’s locked from the inside. It’s hidden by bushes and a fence, so if they’re being lazy, I should be able to leave the house undetected.

I wince when the old, metal bulkhead door betrays me with squeaks and groans as I open it. I remember that my basement has an old oilcan that was sitting on a shelf when I moved in, so I find it and act like I'm just doing some home repairs in my spare time. I oil the hinges and latch, expecting a Corps guy to poke his head around the corner to investigate the noise, but nobody comes.

They rely too heavily on electronic tracking.

I close the bulkhead and slip through the bushes into my neighbor's yard, still expecting the Corps guys to appear - and still surprised when they don't. I take a circle route to the address, looking over my shoulder the entire time, but as far as I can tell, I'm not followed. Janet will have informed them that I'm now teaching an evening class, so they shouldn't expect me to leave the house again for several hours. I reach the address that Martha wrote on the napkin and see that although it's in the old section of town, it's a modern structure.

Thankfully, Martha answers when I knock lightly on the door.

"You probably think I've gone insane," I say, as I enter.

Keep playing the game. Maybe you're wrong and she doesn't know you're onto her.

"The thought had crossed my mind."

I look around the room to confirm we're alone, and am taken by surprise when I see the furnishings. Despite the modern exterior, the place has more antiques than my house does.

"Wow. This is quite a collection. Some of these things you couldn't even take out onto the street."

"Really? What do you mean?" she asks.

"Look at that old clock, for example. The patterning between the three and the nine, and the twelve and the six, form a cross. You can only see it when you stand at an angle. When you look straight on, it disappears. I'd bet it once sat in a church."

First the handwriting and now her "friends" have Christian antiques? If she's really studied my life, she knows I'll notice all these things and conclude she's Christian. Why bring me here?

"I would never have noticed," she says. "But enough about this old stuff. Why in the world would you think you're being followed?"

"Well, the Corps is following me to protect me, because they think a Christian cultist group is following me to kill me."

Martha starts to laugh, but when I don't join her, she stops.

"I thought that was just the dumbest pick up line I'd ever heard - but you're serious, aren't you?"

She's still playing the game. Is she a step behind me? Or a step ahead?

"Do you think I'd put up with someone like Janet without a good reason? She's Corps."

"She's pretty awful, isn't she? And by the way, you didn't get all of her lipstick off your cheek. You'd better be careful. It may be a Corps tracking device."

I continue to scan the room and find a print of a van Gogh painting. Anyone else would see a famous painting, but I remember this one has a Christian image hidden in it.

"So why does the Corps think someone wants to kill you? Is it because of all the work you've done for them to break the Christian codes?"

"Probably. They found some papers in a house they raided, indicating leading Christians were watching me and reading my writings. The last one says it would be a powerful message if I were to die. That's a pretty clear message."

"So the rose, the secret meetings, and the pencil are all so you can give these Christians the slip?"

"No. It's to give the Corps guys the slip."

"I don't understand. You just said they're protecting you."

“Do you remember what I said about perspectives? The Corps would say it’s protecting me. I’d say it’s controlling me. They listen to my com, watch my lectures, and follow me everywhere. Now they’re running this book tour.”

“If they want to keep you safe, why do a book tour at all?”

She’s quick. She knows something more is going on and wants to know what it is.

“Why raise your public profile? Is it to increase a backlash against Christians if they succeed in killing you?”

I can’t tell her about the time travel project. Not yet.

“Since I don’t plan to die, I hadn’t thought about it like that,” I reply, and then pause. “I’ve been thinking about the things you said yesterday - in particular about how hard it is to make connections with people. Even before we had lunch yesterday, I felt like you and I could be friends, possibly very good friends.”

“Or maybe more than friends?” she asks, making me feel like a schoolboy who has been accused of “liking” a girl.

“The thing I came here to say is that I want to see you, without them watching and listening. This isn’t about our kiss yesterday. It’s just the opposite. It’s about the fact that I need a friend. Although I enjoyed it, we can leave the kissing as optional.”

“I shouldn’t have done that,” she says. “I don’t even know why I did that. Please believe me when I say it was the last thing I expected to happen when you asked me out to dinner.”

She stares into my eyes.

Kiss her.

I lean towards her and she responds with another kiss, but it isn’t quite the same as yesterday. I still have the feeling I don’t want to be kissed by anyone else for the rest of my life, but this time there’s even more. This time, I want to know everything there is to know about her. I want to know her soul.

Did I really just think I want to connect with her soul? That’s not the sort of atheist thinking that’s been drilled into me since I was a child.

We both pull back from the kiss abruptly, as if someone has flung open the door and caught us in the act. I’m too flustered by my own thoughts to wonder why she pulled back.

“Okay - so that was the last kiss, right?” she asks. “Outside of class, it’s just talking from now on.”

“Right. That’s a line we should stop crossing.”

We both stand awkwardly for a moment, not knowing what to say or do next.

“I head out on this book tour soon, so I’ll be teaching remotely for a week,” I say, to break the silence. “After that, it’s mostly weekends I’ll be gone. If you can work it into your schedule, maybe you could come see me on one of the stops?”

“I’d love to. I’ll look at the tour schedule and figure out which one works best. You should go before you’re missed.”

I grab her hand and kiss it. She found the time to paint her thumbnails, but in a different color from the rest.

“Janet moved my Modern Christian History class to this evening. Come if you can,” I say, as I slip out the door.

“I wouldn’t miss it.”

Chapter Ten

On the way back to my house, all I can think of is Martha McLeod. I've never felt so confused in my life. I can't ignore all the signs that are telling me she's a Christian and may even be my assassin. I played cat and mouse with Christians for years, but it was never like this.

Why did she pull back from the second kiss, when she initiated the first one? Did she realize she was getting too close to her target?

I also can't ignore the way she looks at me, and the thoughts and feelings she stirs. If it's all an act, then she belongs in the movies rather than a Christian cult.

I make it back into my house, change my clothes, and look out the window. The Corps guy is still sitting in his hover car. I pick up my com and put it into my ear, and the instant I do his head twitches ever so slightly towards the house. He knows when it's active and is using it to track me.

Reliance on technology has made them lazy.

I'm barely out the door and heading for campus, when Janet calls.

"Don't make any plans for dinner. Ray, Riemann, and Henry are on their way here and you're having dinner with them."

She hangs up before I can reply.

Now what?

I have an idea. I walk through the park and pick another rose bloom. It's pretty safe to assume there are cameras in my office, so when I reach the University, I take it into the faculty bathroom and write "Henry here. Big mtg." over two inner petals.

Telling Martha about Corps movements is a dangerous path, but I need to know with absolute certainty that she's a Christian before I can proceed.

When I get to the studio, Janet is waiting for me.

"That suit is too old. As of tomorrow, I'm also your wardrobe coordinator."

She straightens my collar.

"Do you have to wear a tie? They've been out of style for fifty years."

"Yes to the tie. It's sort of my trademark when I'm teaching."

I might be the only person left on the planet who owns one, but it's one of the few things I have that belonged to my Dad.

"Fine. I'll work with that. I'll call it 'retro rebel' and use it as part of building up your independent nature. Then we'll show your fun side when you take it off at night. Speaking of your fun side, your groupie, Martha, is in the audience. I can work with that too."

I involuntarily look for Martha in the audience and find her uncharacteristically sitting near the back.

"She's a remarkable student," I reply. "You'd do well to have her working at the Bureau."

"You're on in ten."

Janet motions me to the stage.

This time as I walk onto the stage, the announcement gives the class and lecture number, and a deep male voice you would expect to hear used in an ad for a horror movie calls me "The cultist's worst nightmare."

I look at Janet in the control booth and she smirks.

I delete a higher than normal number of offers for sex and then look at the number of people watching remotely. It's higher than the number of students registered for the class. A large number of people have been authorized to watch as guests and when I check out the map, I see that it could be overlaid with a map of F.B.I. field offices. Henry is boosting my ratings by making most of the

Bureau watch. If he can reach a certain threshold, he'll start a trend where people will watch solely to see what other people are watching.

"For those who missed the previous lecture, we did a little review on the Final Holy War from the nuclear attack in 2036, the fifty years of terrorism that followed, and the Sunspot Initiative. Just this morning, in my World Religion class, we talked about religious equalization and amending the First Amendment to define religious expression as a private right. Here in the United States, that movement started all religions on a downward spiral at a time when religious fervor was on the rise elsewhere."

I see on my screen that the number of guest viewers is continuing to rise as I speak.

"That brings us to the Holt Theorem, which is named after my mentor, Dr. Theophilus Holt, who used to teach in this very classroom. Who can explain the Holt Theorem?"

I choose Franklin in Miami.

"The Holt Theorem states that religious fanaticism is directly proportional to economic inequality," he says.

"Yes- or in other words, poor people used to look to external forces, such as a god, when they were feeling economically disadvantaged," I say. "For over two thousand years, men conquered each other and the victors made off with the treasure. Much of the slaughter was done in the name of one god or another. So when the Sunspot reactors eliminated economic inequality and fulfilled all of man's needs, belief in a god was no longer necessary."

"I see we have a question from Oscar in Oregon. Please go ahead."

"So you're saying everyone's religious beliefs were bought off by prosperity?"

I hear a couple of giggles in the live audience.

"Dr. Holt might protest your choice of words, but that is the basis of the Holt Theorem."

Martha's desk has been activated - probably by Janet - but she still raises her hand to ask a question.

"At the end of the last class, you posed the question that if the whole world is now 'Man's Eden,' why are some people still practicing Christianity. Do you have an answer?"

My screen flashes with a message from Janet: "You're right, she's good."

"Professor Holt theorized that even in a world where there is no poverty, there'll always be a segment of the population that looks to external forces to find answers. He postulated that they're just too lazy to search out the answers to life's questions for themselves. A more contemporary view comes from the well-known religious abolitionist, Dr. Thomas, who once theorized - tongue-in-cheek - that religion is a form of insanity."

There are more giggles.

Now my screen flashes with a message from Henry: "Good work recognizing Dr. Thomas as a colleague. He's been watching and I'm patching him in as a guest speaker right now."

"Dr. Thomas doesn't say whether or not religious belief is a curable form of insanity," I add.

This comment sparks outright laughter.

The screens split and I'm suddenly sharing my podium with the well-known face of Dr. Thomas. Like me, he made a mark in his field early in life, so he's probably only in his mid-thirties. Estimating his true age is difficult because the skin on his face has been artificially tightened, but he's let his hair go gray at the temples.

"And here he is now. Welcome, Dr. Thomas."

"I'm curious, Cephas. If religion is a form of insanity, what does that make someone like you, who studies ancient religions?"

"I suppose the leading choices would be historian, psychologist, or a fellow madman."

"And where do you believe you fall on that scale, Cephas?"

“The jury’s still out on that one, Dr. Thomas, but for today’s lecture let’s stick to the Holt Theorem. I posed the question to the class that if our world represents a man-made Garden of Eden, why are there still practicing Christians in the world. I think the class would love to hear your perspective.”

“As much as I’d like to go with the insanity theory, I did indeed offer it as a tongue-in-cheek answer once at a press conference. I think Dr. Holt’s original suggestion, that religion is simply a lazy way to define the universe, is closer to the truth. People made up myths and gods to describe why the sun rose and set each day or why we have seasons. Christianity is just a more refined version of the same thing.”

“Okay. Although you don’t believe in him either, allow me to play devil’s advocate,” I say, and the class laughs. “If religion is a lazy way to define the universe, doesn’t it logically follow that what man has achieved is something less than perfection. Or to frame it as I believe a Christian would, ‘Man’s Eden’ must fall short of ‘God’s Eden,’ because in God’s Eden, everyone is happy.”

I’m walking a fine line here, considering Henry’s watching, but I need to keep Martha guessing.

“I love that argument because it’s so easy to turn on its head,” Thomas replies. “Of course our world isn’t perfect, but what some would say is man’s yearning for the perfection of God, I would say is really man’s yearning to achieve perfection on his own.”

“Careful, Thomas. What you just said sounds remarkably like the Christian principle that man is fallen.”

“When used in the Christian sense, the word ‘fallen’ is short for ‘fallen from grace,’” he replies. “It’s just as easy for me to say that we’re not fallen, that we’re in fact rising from our evolutionary roots and will eventually evolve to the point of achieving a perfect world solely through human ingenuity. In effect, we will be gods.”

“Wow. So would you agree that we’re currently stuck in a period where we’ve ceased evolving or, perhaps, may even be devolving a bit? There have been no major scientific breakthroughs in several generations now. Where’s the ‘yearning of man to achieve perfection’ you spoke about?”

“Evolution has been known to move in great leaps, though perhaps instead of saying we’re stuck, I would say we’re just resting for a while before the next great leap.”

As much as I dislike his arrogance, I have great respect for Thomas’ intellect, and enjoy sparring with him like this for the next twenty minutes. As you would expect, no conclusions are reached, but we have a lot of fun poking at each other.

After class, Martha meets me at the podium.

“You didn’t answer my question,” she says. “What I meant is do you have an answer? As a teacher, you expound on the beliefs and theories of others - without revealing your own beliefs.”

I wish I could kiss her. She was one step ahead and knows I want to explore faith.

I don’t have a chance to answer before Janet bustles in.

“Cephas, you are so right. This girl is fantastic!”

“I’m glad you feel that way. I’ve invited her to visit me on the book tour, if it fits her schedule.”

Martha blushes and I realize that the implication is we’ll be sharing a room.

“I’ll arrange a room for her, at my own expense.”

I turn to Martha.

“Do you remember the other day, when you were telling me about your mother’s rose garden? I saw this on my walk to campus and thought of you.”

I hand her the rose.

“That’s very thoughtful. Thanks for letting me come to class, but I should get going now,” she says, and escapes before Janet can draw her into a conversation.

When Martha is gone, Janet turns to me.

“A rose, Cephas? Don’t tell me you believe in outdated notions like love or romance.”

That’s the sadness in Janet’s eyes. She once believed in love and wants to again.

“Just call it another form of insanity, I guess.”

“Still, she could be very useful to me on the tour,” Janet says. “Having a groupie or two would be very good for your new image. Right now, we need to get to the tube station. Henry’s car should be arriving soon.”

When we get to the station, we go to a private elevator. The doors won’t even close until the system has checked our identities against a list of people who are currently authorized. Janet’s name comes up on a screen in red, and a moment later mine comes up in blue, both with the words “authorized user” next to them.

The elevator takes us to a level below the one where the public gets on and off the tube. There are six bays for the luxury cars that the very wealthy can use to charter private rides. The Bureau car is huge, about ten times the length of a normal car. When we get inside, I can see why it’s so big. The back of the car is filled with various electronic gadgets, the middle has a full kitchen and dining room, and the front has sleeping accommodations.

The first dinner course is already being set on the table when Janet and I join Henry, Raymond, and Riemann.

“Great lecture today, Cephas,” Henry says.

“Thanks, but I’d prefer you and Janet stop flashing messages to my podium. It’s very distracting.”

“There were some important people in the audience, you know. We already have pre-orders for thousands of copies of your new book.”

“You didn’t come all this way just to tell me that.”

“Straight to the point as always, I see. Okay, dig into some food and we’ll brief you as you eat.”

“Some strange things have happened since your visit to D.C., and we don’t think they’re a coincidence.”

Riemann stops eating and calls up images of the number “4” painted like graffiti on various objects.

“We think a new pagan cult has been growing right under our noses while we’ve been chasing the fish heads. They seem to call themselves ‘Four.’”

“Just the number four?” I ask. “That’s not consistent with the trinity of Christianity.”

“Our assumption is that they have some sort of a four-god system, like north, south, east and west,” Raymond says. “The paint attacks started in D.C. the night you were in town. It can’t be a coincidence. We kept it pretty hushed up, but they hit eleven other cities the next night. Cameras got nothing but people dressed in black, so we don’t have any suspects.”

“So you think they communicate electronically and you want me to look for their codes?”

“We’re not interested in shutting them down. They’ve come at just the right time to be useful to us,” Henry says. “We’ll cast this group as being at odds with the Christians and looking for a fight. Give us a couple of months to shape public opinion, and the world will be living in fear of another Holy War.”

I last heard that tone in his voice the day he used the final code to slaughter thousands of Christians. He’s overjoyed to be the cause of fear.

“So what do you need from me?”

“You’re still the knockout punch,” Henry says. “Once the world is living in fear of religion, you’ll knock the pins out from under all of them. We’re here because we’re accelerating the schedule of your trip to the crucifixion. You’ve got a week to push the book, and then we go public on the plan. The week after that, we announce the identities of the time travelers, and the big event

happens in December. I might even send you on December twenty-fifth, just to make it sting that much more.”

He knows the date people used to celebrate the birth of Christ?

“Mission control is at a NASA lab in Michigan. You report there for training on December first. The techies running the show are having a fit over the new timetable, but it has to be done. Our people still think that knocking out the roots of Christianity is the key to taking out other cults, like this new one.”

“Okay. December it is, but I still don’t understand why you came all the way here to tell me.”

Henry looks back and forth at the faces around the table.

“We think our security has been compromised by this new group. The computer security protocols we’re using have been the gold standard for decades, so it doesn’t seem likely they can intercept our communications. We assume they must have someone on the inside. We have no idea how much they know about the time travel project, and we didn’t want to risk it. Speaking of which, I’m increasing the security detail on you while you’re on the book tour - and no more walking around in public. You now have a private car and driver.”

“Do you have a guy watching me go to the bathroom and listening to me snore at night too?”

“Just let us fade into the background and forget we’re there,” he replies.

So in other words: ‘Yes, you do.’

“Henry, what most people call the background is where I focus my attention. It’s where I find interesting things most people miss. Can I assume, then, you’ve done security checks on all of my students?”

“All of them? Or just Martha McLeod?”

Betray nothing with your face. If they suspect anything, they’ll kill her... and you need her.

“She’s a special student to me. I’d like to be able to spend time with her, without your guys breathing down my neck.”

“She was the first one Janet cleared.”

Henry gives me an oily smile.

“Enjoy some special time with her.”

A private hover bus picks Janet and me up at the station, and heads straight for my house. Janet insists on seeing me all the way to the door. As we reach the front walk, I tell my com to unlock the front door and turn on the walkway lights, but only one of the five bulbs comes on. I hold up my arm to stop Janet, but she looks confused, since she doesn’t know that I have more than one.

“I have five lights on the front of the house.”

Janet still looks confused.

“*Four* lights are out.”

When she hears the emphasis on “four,” she gets it and taps her com. In seconds, there are armed agents beside us and I’m thrown back into the car. There’s only one Corps member standing guard outside the car, as the rest storm the house. Behind me, I hear a tapping sound and turn to see a dark figure write the number four on the window with a paint stick. The guard hears it too and draws his stunner, but as he makes his way around the front, a second figure kicks him from behind, while a third breaks his grip on the gun with some sort of martial art move. Rather than hurt him, all three of the dark figures then disappear into the darkness.

“The house is clean,” Janet says, when she returns.

“Is this glass bulletproof?”

“No, why?”

“If this new group wanted me dead, I’d be dead.”

I point to the paint on the window.

Janet taps her com and says, "Have the safe house ready for a guest."

"Tell me how it works out. I'm going to bed," I say, and proceed up my front walk before she can respond.

When I reach the last of the darkened bulbs, I notice that it isn't even broken. It's just unscrewed. I give it a slight turn and it lights back up. With the light on, I see that a tiny number four was written on the bulb itself, so that it casts a shadow four on my hand.

"Nice touch," I yell to the darkness, and head inside to bed.

Chapter Eleven

My com has been activated and is buzzing beside my head the next morning. I don't know how long it's been going, but it's nothing compared to the buzzing happening inside my head, as I pass from dreams to reality. I'm being watched by the Cult Hunter Corps, the Christians, and now some group called Four. I don't know who wants to kill me, protect me, or control me.

I reluctantly stick the com into my ear and it tells me that it's Janet calling.

"Good morning, Janet. Sleep well?"

"The only one who slept at all is you. Our new 'friends' in the Four group struck all over the country last night."

"How's it playing in the news?"

"Henry's playing it just like he said he would, the talking heads are working the holy war angle. So far, though, the public hasn't panicked because there have been no demands, no threats, nothing. Just lots of paint. Now get downstairs and try on your new suit. You leave for the book tour in an hour."

If my new suit isn't the ugliest one I've ever seen, it's close. It's light blue, with bright purple and pink pinstripes. Janet even provided me with a new purple tie that matches the stripes. Despite Janet's request, I can't bring myself to try it on. I find that I already dislike this "new" Cult Hunter as much as I did the old one.

There's a knock on my door and my com tells me that it's Martha. Coms aren't much for the pleasant surprise of opening a door to find out for yourself who it is.

Open eyes wider to show you're happy to see her. Wait. Just stop it. No masks with Martha. Just let your face do what your emotions naturally tell it to do.

"I brought you some breakfast to see you off on the book tour."

She holds up a container.

"Thanks. I'll set the table."

"I thought we could walk to the park and eat it there."

We make small talk on the way to the park, then, while we eat, she asks questions about my time at the Corps. It seems like she's still trying to sort fact from fiction when it comes to my past.

"Martha, it doesn't take great powers of observation to see you want to ask something. I can't tell you anything that's classified, but I think we've earned each other's trust enough for you to just spit it out."

"There's no point. I already know it's a question you can't answer. I want to know how you did it. I want to know how you broke the final Christian code."

So I was right.

"I suppose it's locked in the Corps most secure vault, and you'd have to kill me if you told me."

"You won't even find it at Corps Headquarters. I never told them either - but then - they never asked."

The look of surprise on her face is priceless.

"The secret's only in your head?"

"That's also a secret."

That was a stupid thing to admit. It'd be worth it to kill me right here, so the secret would die with me. Time to show my ace in the hole.

"You're right that I can't tell you, but I'll tell you a different secret - one that I never shared with the Corps. The Christian code master, Zach, never told anyone the basis of the code either, so there's no way for the remaining Christians to duplicate or modify his work."

Now I'm way too valuable to kill.

“How could you know that? You said you’ve never met a Christian, so you couldn’t have asked him.”

“He said so in a private communication to someone named ‘A.’”

The same “A” who ordered me killed.

“Zach thought it was too dangerous for anyone else to have that information if they were captured, so he kept it to himself. It just happened to be a message I decoded by hand instead of using the Corps’ computer, so it was never put into the Corps database. Zach died without giving up the basis of his code - but then - they never asked him either.”

“I guess it hardly matters now, since there are so few Christian left,” she says.

My plan only requires one Christian...and you’re it.

We walk back to my house so I can finish packing and start my life as the new and improved Cult Hunter. A large Bureau hover bus is waiting outside.

“Good luck on the tour. I hope this new incarnation of The Cult Hunter is what you’re looking for.”

“Thanks. It seems like a nice change of pace from being a cold-blooded killer, but in the end, it’s no less of a lie.”

I’m not sure what to do next to finish saying goodbye. A handshake would be awkward, and we agreed there’d be no more kissing, so I settle on offering a quick hug, which she accepts but doesn’t let it end quickly. We move to a loose embrace, with our hands around each other’s waists, and - with our faces close - look into each other’s eyes.

“Are we sure about the ‘no more kissing’ rule?” I ask.

She lands a sweet, gentle kiss on my lips, which lingers longer than I expect.

“That was a goodbye kiss. Goodbye kisses don’t count.”

After an hour in Henry’s private tube car, I’m in Los Angeles for the tour kickoff. Just a few days ago, I lived in my secluded but happy little world, studying religious history. In my own way, I suppose I’ve become like an ancient Christian monk: reading and contemplating the meaning of ancient texts and trying to relate them to my world. Now here I am, waiting to be catapulted to major celebrity status so I can tell the world that those same ancient texts are meaningless.

The tour begins with the largest morning show on the West Coast. Many authors have started tours on this particular stage, which makes me wonder if all tours are as contrived as this one is.

The host of the show, Brock Penner, is one of the most enhanced men I’ve ever seen. He was doing this show when I was a kid, but has since undergone countless procedures to maintain a semblance of youth. There are clear facial implants in his cheeks, chin, and forehead to eliminate wrinkles. I think there are even synthetic muscles in there so he can make creepy artificial versions of facial expressions that the implants no longer allow him to produce naturally.

A colleague of mine in the United States History Department calls such men “Kens,” and overly-enhanced women “Barbies.” I’ve asked him to explain the historical reference to me several times, but he just laughs. I guess they must have been the President and First Lady sometime in the early twenty-first century.

Brock starts off with bold exaggerations and a familiarity that’s unwarranted between two men who’ve never met. It’s clear that Janet told him to make me appear “fun” as part of the image change.

“Our next guest is the author of six international best-selling books, and is beloved by all as ‘The Cult Hunter’ for his heroic work in preventing another holy war. I realize that some in the audience still think of him as cold, but I’ve gotten to know him, and I must say he is one of the funniest and down-to-earth people I’ve ever met. Please welcome Dr. Cephas Paulson.”

Wild applause erupts on the set.

Plaster smile on face and wave while walking. Maybe even do a little jog to your chair to show enthusiasm.

I enter the stage area to find there's no live audience. The applause is either computer-generated or is from a remote audience. There are large screens behind the cameras, so I can see what's being broadcast. I almost burst out laughing when I see they have me in a long shot, but Brock is on constant close-up. It must be in his contract.

Adjust your smile. You don't look sincere.

Brock exaggerates the prerelease sales of my new book; exaggerates the work done with the Corps; and exaggerates his delight and fascination with the topic. His face is animated by the many enhancements, but his doll eyes tell me he could clearly care less. Every time I answer a question, he laughs and repeats: "I told you he was funny!" I could talk about dead puppies and he'd laugh on cue. I study his expressions to see how I can improve my own act.

We're about five minutes into the interview, when someone behind the camera says: "What is that?" I look up to the screen and see that a gray number 'four' is being superimposed over the broadcast.

"It looks like we're having some technical difficulties here in the studio, so we're going to take a quick break," Brock says.

When the "on air" light goes dark, Brock screams: "Get that thing off my close up!" and general pandemonium breaks out among the electronics guys. I hear comments like, "It's not being generated here," and "We've been hacked."

It can't be a coincidence that this is happening during my interview. Why is a pagan group so interested in me that they'd hack this broadcast?

"We need to switch gears," I say to Brock. "We might as well change this to a discussion of the number 'four' being painted all over the country last night."

"What are you talking about?"

"I thought you were a reporter. Don't you watch the news? There was a nationwide spree of painting the number 'four' on buildings last night. It may be a new cult. Just give me an intro and I'll take it."

Right on cue, Brock starts talking like he knew what was going on all along.

"As everyone knows, the nation woke up this morning to mysterious attacks of the number 'four' being plastered on buildings."

Brock tries to move so that the upright sections of the number 'four' on the screen will frame his face. Each time he does though, the 'four' drifts to cover his face again.

"We're fortunate enough to have cult expert Professor Cephas Paulson here in the studio, and we're hoping he can shed some light on this mystery. Professor, do you think this is the work of some new cult?"

When the broadcast goes back to the camera that's covering me, the 'four' moves to frame my face.

Raise eyebrows one millimeter, but adjust voice to denote serious nature of the topic.

"That's an excellent question, Brock. Appearances of the number 'four' started several weeks ago, but have been increasing in frequency leading up to last night."

The cameras try to switch back and forth from me to Brock, but each time, the 'four' moves to cover his face, while always framing mine. I want to laugh out loud at Brock's frustration.

"The Cult Hunter Corps has asked me to look into it, but there's so little information to go on, I imagine it'll take a while to sort it out. As you know, I'm an expert on Christian cult activities and there's little reason to believe this is Christian-related."

"If it isn't Christian, then who do you think it could be?"

Brock ducks his head first one way and then the other.

“The Corps has speculated that this is the work of some sort of pagan group, but I have an idea that might just give us some exclusive answers, right here on your show. Someone is controlling that ‘four’ in real time; so let’s see if they want to talk to us. To the person controlling the ‘four’ on the screen, if you want to be interviewed, wiggle the ‘four’ up and down.”

Excellent voice inflection to note curiosity and playfulness. I’m getting the hang of being Mr. Fun.

The ‘four’ moves up and down, to murmurs among the tech guys.

“Are you a cult?” Brock asks, and the ‘four’ heads for his face.

I put my hand up, to indicate to Brock that I should pose the questions.

“Do you prefer to speak me?”

The ‘four’ wiggles.

“Are you a religious group?”

The ‘four’ wiggles again.

“Would you describe yourself as a pagan group?”

Before it can move, it disappears completely.

“Why’d you block the ‘four’? It was just getting interesting,” I say to the tech guys.

That was good, just enough inflection to show disappointment, without being mean.

“It wasn’t us. They cut the transmission.”

“Well, that was exciting” Brock says.

He’s again acting like a strutting peacock. He doesn’t care one bit about what just happened. He’s just happy his close up is back.

Chapter Twelve

“These ‘four’ people are doing my job for me,” Janet says, as I’m ushered back into the private tube car. “That interview is being picked up all over the globe. Your face is everywhere!”

“I just wish they would have stuck around. Maybe I could have found out more about them.”

“That was our fault,” Janet says. “We were trying to trace their transmission and they knew it. They cut out before we could even get close.”

“The next time they hack one of my interviews, back off. If you want to find them, you need to understand who they are and what they want.”

“Stick to one cult at a time. Besides, you need to be nice to me, because I have a surprise lined up for you. Tonight you’re in San Francisco for a party, and I’ve arranged for you to have a date.”

“Martha?”

“Of course not. You can’t go to a party of the social elite with your little friend. You, my lucky boy, are hitting the red carpet with none other than Jocie!”

“Josie? I don’t know anyone named Josie.”

“Her name isn’t *Joe-see*, it’s *Jaw-see*,” Janet replies with emphasis.

“No last name?”

“Jocie doesn’t need a last name. Don’t you have a video screen in your dusty old house? I’m talking about *Jocie*.”

“Sorry. Doesn’t ring a bell.”

“Display images of Jocie,” Janet says to her com, and a screen on the wall lights up with images of a petite brunette. Well, her frame is petite - but other parts of her are enhanced to the point of exploding. I can see that they’re all top-of-the-line enhancements, but she still looks like another plastic doll to me.

“I landed you the hottest date on the planet.”

“I’ll count the seconds. How much time do I have?”

“You get the next six hours to yourself, so I suggest you take a nap. You’re in for a late night, assuming Jocie lets you sleep at all.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Let’s just say you won’t need a heat pack to fool scanners after a night out with Jocie.”

Rather than respond, I disappear into my room.

I shove my com into my ear and find that there are over one hundred messages. That’s more than I typically get in a year. I tell the com to display them on a screen and sort them alphabetically. Most are from old friends and new “fans” that saw the show this morning. There are two from Henry, giving me pointers for future interviews, and five from my publisher, telling me my new book is already a best-seller and giving me updates on the number of times it’s been downloaded. I skip down to the “M’s”, I find what I was hoping to see: two messages from Martha. The first one is short, she just writes: “Here’s a first draft of my essay.” The second one was sent after the show, and says: “You were brilliant on the show this morning, figuring out you could communicate through wiggling the ‘four’. Janet sent me a ticket to the show you’re doing in Minneapolis tomorrow afternoon. I can’t wait to see you.”

She only left voice messages instead of a video. Why?

I instruct the com to call Martha and am disappointed to find out her com isn’t active. Somehow, I thought she’d leave it on - just in case I called. I leave her a video message to say I’ll be at a party tonight with someone called Jocie, but that I wish it was her instead.

Janet wasn't kidding when she said this party was a red carpet event. As the hover bus makes one pass, I can see the security is very tight. We don't stop at the building though, instead the bus enters a private parking area.

"I thought I was going to the party," I say to Janet.

"You can't arrive at this sort of event in an ordinary bus like this, and you certainly can't arrive without Jocie on your arm."

The Bureau bus pulls up next to a bus that's so large and luxurious it should be called a hover yacht. We should just throw a party inside it rather than use it to arrive at one. The door opens as Janet and I approach.

"Is my eye candy here?" we hear from an inner room. When we enter the room, Jocie is standing stark naked on a little pedestal, with two attendants fussing over every part of her body.

"I guess that's me."

I try to look around the room rather than at her. As part of my new personality, I'd planned to portray more confidence around women, but confidence with naked women is too far of a stretch.

"Your press secretary said you were a bit primitive, but I did expect a little more. Tell the media people tomorrow's headline will be: 'Jocie deserves a genius.'"

A girl sitting at a computer begins working on a press release.

"Flavor-of-the-day, eyes over here," she says to me. "Every man on the planet wants to see what you have standing in front of you right now. In a week, you'll be crushed when I move on to someone more interesting, so drink it in while you can."

Confidence with a naked woman is a stretch, but confidence with an arrogant woman I can handle.

"If it's all the same to you, can you crush me tomorrow instead? I'm going to be kind of busy next week."

The fact that she's naked fades into the background for me, as I take command of this new persona.

That was good. It's just combining the old cool indifference with the new smile and open body language.

I'm also looking straight into her eyes as I say it. If I had to classify her doll eyes, I'd say they were designed to make the hair on the back of my neck stand on end.

"Primitive, but spunky," she laughs, and breaks eye contact to inspect her nails.

Staring into someone's eyes makes her uncomfortable.

She tries to return to looking at me, but when she realizes I'm continuing to stare right into her eyes, she can't handle it.

"Why are you doing that?"

"Doing what?"

I keep my eyes fixed on hers.

"You know."

She looks away again.

"You mean looking into your eyes? It's part of my genius. It's how I peer into people's innermost thoughts."

I try to sound somewhat crazy as I say it.

"Stop it. Look where other men look and have a fantasy or something. I don't like the whole eyes thing."

I continue to stare at Jocie's face, until Janet hits me in the arm.

"Is there anything I need to know for this party?" I ask Janet.

"Cling to me and speak as little as possible," Jocie replies, before Janet can say anything. Janet just nods her head.

When Jocie's judged ready to be seen by the public, even I have to admit she looks perfect. There's literally not a hair out of place. After seeing her naked, I expect her to wear an outfit that

leaves little to the imagination, so I'm surprised when she wears a mid-calf length dress with sleeves to match. The neckline, on the other hand, goes almost to her belly button.

When the hover bus arrives at the red carpet and the door opens, the lights are blinding. Jocie is a pro at these events, so she grabs my hand and pulls me outside.

Smile and wave, smile and wave.

I expect to walk straight into the party, but for the next five minutes I'm forced to stay on the red carpet, as Jocie rubs herself against me in every way imaginable for the cameras. Every time her ears come close to mine, I whisper something insulting about her acting skills and she pretends like I've just said the funniest or most clever thing she's ever heard.

They'll make over my image to be the life of the party, despite me.

When I've had enough, I wait for her to come close then; grab her cheeks and stare uncomfortably into her eyes. She gets the message, but in revenge, she leaps into my arms and makes me carry her inside as she blows kisses to the cameras. Although she's light as a feather, I tell her that she's much heavier than she looks.

The party is like nothing I've ever seen. I thought there'd be loud music and lights, but instead the room sounds like a buzz of conversations. The outer perimeter is lined with reporters and cameras, and the guests periodically make their way to them to pose, then move back into the crowd. The guests are all like Jocie, enhanced to the extreme and under the impression they're the most important person in the room. The advice to be quiet and stay close to Jocie is good. I may not like her, but I don't want to navigate this party alone.

As Jocie leads me around the room, I realize that what I mistook for conversation isn't conversation at all. People are just making statements about themselves, without listening to what anyone else is saying. Jocie drops the word "genius" into the "conversation" while also stopping and smiling and posing at the exact right moments for the cameras.

On the first pass around the room, I stay silent. By the second pass, I start saying random things, such as: "I'm the Cult Hunter;" "Hello, have you ever met a genius before?" or "Fun-loving killer here." When I'm bored with that game, I start listening again, and realize that people are repeating the things I heard on the first and second passes. I'm so tired of the whole thing, I start saying people's catch phrases before they can, which are things like: "you've starred in three major movies this year;" and "your song has been number one for the last six weeks."

The response to what I had regarded as mocking them is immediate and remarkable. Everyone is so pleased that I listened to them that they stop talking and notice me. Within a half an hour, the most common words being spoken in the room are "Cult Hunter." Fortunately, the second most common thing to hear is "Jocie," or she probably would have exploded over the fact that I'm getting more attention than she is. Jocie is a pro at capitalizing on popularity, and clings to me as we continue to circle.

Waiters have been putting drinks into my hand the entire time, but the party itself is enough to dull the senses, so I've managed to set them all down. Eventually a waiter comes behind me and says, "If you'd like a specialty drink, our bartender is excellent. His signature drink is called 'The Four Wise Men.' You should try it."

I freeze in my shoes at the name of the drink. Is this someone from the 'four' group? Or a Christian? The desire for fight-or-flight is great, but instead, I turn to look at him.

He has neat, short hair, with three thin shaved lines running from his forehead over his head to the back of his neck, but there's no doubt it's the guy with the spiked Mohawk from Colorado. He knows I recognize him, so I smile.

It's okay. Just relax and talk with him.

"The bartender sounds more interesting than these people. Perhaps I should meet him?"

"I think you'd find it... enlightening."

Jocie isn't about to let me go off by myself. She's talking at a woman even more enhanced than herself, and saying: "You must get your hands on a genius. They're brilliant in so many ways, if you know what I mean."

The waiter comes to my rescue by bumping into me and spilling some kind of a red drink all over my shirt.

"You clumsy idiot," I say, seeing my chance to escape. "I demand to speak with your boss this instant."

As I make my way behind the waiter, I hear Jocie say: "These geniuses can be so temperamental."

As I break the usual pattern, a photographer leaves his position and earns squeals of protest, as he walks in front of socialites who were about to have their pictures taken. A waiter also shadows me. They're wearing identical black shoes. They're Corps security, but they don't get too close before I reach the bar, so they both attempt to fade into the background again.

The bartender is older than I expected him to be, with a deeply wrinkled face that most people erase through enhancing. His hands immediately catch my attention. They're rough and scarred, like he's done manual labor his entire life rather than allowing robots to work for him.

"Your waiter here just improved an ugly shirt with a red drink. He tells me your signature drink is quite good. I'd like to try one."

The old man smiles.

"I always figured you for the curious sort."

"You know me then?"

"I've read your books."

Christians were encouraged to read the writings of 'DRCP.'

"I saw your interview with that idiot Brock this morning," he says. "What do you make of all this number 'four' business?"

"It's fascinating so far. The wiggly 'four' said they're a religious group. They're nationwide - perhaps even worldwide. They're organized and appear to be technically savvy. Yet they have no apparent demands and, as far as I can tell, are peaceful. Is there anything you could add about them?"

"I could, but I won't. You're a smart boy, and there are some things you just have to figure out on your own."

He hands me a red drink, which tastes just like any other red wine.

"Let me ask you a question," he says. "They call you 'The Cult Hunter.' When you meet the Christians you hunt down, what do they say to you?"

"I've never spoken to a cult member. I just help find them."

"Is that so? Never spoken to even one? Maybe you're not as curious as I thought."

Unlike Jocie, this man has no aversion to staring someone in the eyes. His eyes are deep and kind, and have a sparkle that's like a comfortable fireplace on a winter day.

"It bothers you, doesn't it? Hunting folks down and never getting to speak to them?"

"More than you could know. What were once just interesting puzzles to solve have become increasingly troubling to my heart. I want to know these people. I want to understand their faith."

"It's okay, son. This is my first time speaking with a cult hunter, and I've learned a lot more than I thought I would."

I can see Jocie working through the crowd towards me.

"Thanks for the drink. I hear it's called 'The Four Wise Men.' There were only three wise men in the Bible, you know."

That surprised him. He didn't expect to hear a Biblical reference from me.

"It's a special wine, but I think for you, perhaps, it could be renamed 'The Four Horsemen.'"

Not a good omen.

Jocie is quite drunk when we leave the party, but I somehow manage to get her back to her gigantic hover bus, stumbling and hanging off me all the way through what seems like an endless parade of cameras. Janet is waiting inside the hover bus, along with Jocie's attendants, who take her into the next room. They leave the door open so I can see them undressing her to prepare her for the remainder of our evening together.

"You're a lot stronger than you look," Janet says.

My eyes have stayed focused on Jocie.

I can do anything I like with her, and they say she's the best.

A month ago, I would have considered this to be the moment I've been waiting for, but now I'm torn. Part of me wants this night with Jocie - but a larger part can only hear Martha's voice saying: "It would ruin you."

"Would you like to hear what annoys me the most?" I ask Janet. "Both her security guys and yours shadowed us the entire time, and not one offered to help me drag her back here."

"I told them not to," Janet replies.

Anything you like, Cephas. All night long.

"What? Why?" I ask.

And it will ruin you.

"The way you had to manhandle her, some of those pictures are going to make it look like you are her knight in shining armor, and some will look like you are trying to haul her off for sex. Controversy and speculation are always news fodder and this was good for your new party boy image. Besides, Jocie is joining the tour for a few days, and this creates chemistry. Now, go ahead. Have a good time tonight."

You know what you have to do.

"I have three choice words for you, Janet, and you're not going to like them."

I move towards the door of the huge bus.

"Really? Let's hear them."

"Impromptu news conference."

Her eyes go wide as I step out of the bus. She gets as far as "You wouldn't" before I close the door with the manual switch and cut her off. The cameras surround me. They've never seen a man leave Jocie's hover bus before morning.

What persona do I use? Cult Hunter or fun guy?

"I have a statement to make. I won't be spending the night with Jocie, because Jocie is an over-enhanced, under-talented movie star who isn't worth my valuable time. Are there any questions, or is that pretty clear?"

Apparently nobody here is accustomed to honesty, because there's a moment of stunned silence, followed by a roar of stupid questions. I try to answer the ones that I can understand, but in less than a minute, three Bureau cars pull up and I'm thrown into one by some agents. They whisk me back to the tube station and deposit me in the private car.

The agent in charge also knows how to be clear. He says: "Don't try to leave."

Five minutes later, Janet arrives and pounds on my room door. I try to ignore her, but she overrides the lock and storms in.

"You!" she begins but can't finish. "You... you... you..." she continues to stammer. She turns her back to me and I look at the window to see if jumping out is possible.

"You're either the smartest press manager in the world, or you belong in a straitjacket. I'm not sure which."

She starts laughing.

“That little stunt is playing on every screen you can imagine. You’ve broken all records for number of views.”

“Because I called their pop idol names?”

“Because you turned down what everyone else wants. You just made yourself a mystery, and believe me - the speculation is rampant. Some think Jocie must have a hidden secret you uncovered; some think it was a publicity stunt to sell your book; and some think you’re just a lunatic.”

“I’m voting for the last one.”

“Well, whatever it is, you’d better have your story ready when you walk onto the stage in Minneapolis tomorrow.”

She leaves to monitor the news and plan her strategy.

Minneapolis is tomorrow? The last twenty-four hours feel more like days.

The bright spot of Martha’s face comes into my mind. I get to see her tomorrow. I bring up my messages on the screen. This time, there are almost five hundred, with more coming in. I ask the com to show me just messages from Martha. There are five, all from the last few hours. The first three contain pictures that the press ran of Jocie mauling me on the red carpet and me carrying her into the party. The text with them asks: “Did they photo shop drool off your face?”

I look at the pictures again. My face has been altered, but not in the way Martha is suggesting. I’ve been given a variety of lustful, leering expressions. The fourth message contains a picture of me hauling Jocie back to her bus. Janet was correct, the picture looks like I’m the one doing the mauling. Martha’s text says: “Enjoy your night.”

I almost don’t dare to open the fifth message. I still need Martha, and even if I didn’t need her for my plan, I just want to be around her. If the fifth message says “Drop dead,” or even “I’m not coming to Minneapolis,” I may need to jump out of the car after all.

I open the message. It contains a video of my impromptu press conference. Martha has not added any text, but at the point where the press is too stunned to speak, she’s added something she knows only I would notice. I ask the computer to isolate that second of audio - and listen a second, and then a third time. It’s barely audible, but it’s definitely Martha’s voice whispering: “Fight them, Cephas.”

Fight “them?”

Chapter Thirteen

I was certain that Martha was sent to kill me, or at least to get information out of me before letting some other Christian finish the job. Is asking me to fight the temptation of Jocie just part of the process of gaining my trust, or has it gone beyond that? Is she now trying to “save” me?

Even with those questions, and many others rolling around my brain, I manage to sleep soundly. In the morning, it’s clear that my best course is to allow Martha to convert me slowly. Moving quickly would set off too many alarm bells.

Janet has sent my schedule for the day to the screen in my room. I was supposed to be on an early afternoon show, but everyone wants to hear what I’ll say next, so I’ve been bumped to the morning. At least the schedule change allows me to teach my World Religion class at its usual time in the afternoon. She’s even scheduled an hour for me to be with Martha.

As we pull into the Minneapolis tube station, I can see quite a crowd has formed outside. The car dives down to the private parking areas, and I’m ushered to a private elevator that will take me out a back exit. The Bureau bus has a live news feed and I see that the crowd outside isn’t for me. Jocie beat us here and is doing her own press conference. She’s throwing out words like ‘impotent’ and ‘primitive.’

“I’m sure this wasn’t part of your plan. What do you want to do?” I ask Janet.

“I can get you onto the stage, if you like.”

“Do you trust my instincts?”

“Not for a second, but what the heck.”

She gets on her com to make things happen.

A few minutes later, I’m brought up the back of the stage, right behind Jocie. The crowd goes quiet and Jocie realizes something is happening. When she turns and sees me, she closes the distance and slaps me hard across the face - to the crowd’s delight.

“Would now be a convenient time to crush me? Break my heart, etcetera?” I ask, and the crowd gasps.

“Nobody goes on a date with me without having sex.”

“That’s because I’m the first genius you’ve taken out, or at least the first man smart enough to refuse you.”

She slaps me across the other cheek.

The Christian expression ‘turning the other cheek’ suddenly makes more sense.

“Since I’m the historian, let me say that there was a day when women slapped men for taking advantage of a drunk woman, rather than refusing to.”

She tries to slap me a third time, but I catch her hand and stare into her eyes. I hold her hand so the cameras can’t read my lips and whisper: “I *can* see inside you, and there is no beauty.”

She breaks my grasp and leaves the stage without another word. The media doesn’t know what to do. It’s like they’re collectively deciding if I need to be cast as a villain or a madman. I realize they’re all standing around waiting for what I’ll say next.

“If any of you are looking for a date tonight, Jocie is available.”

There’s another moment of silence, until someone snorts a stifled laugh. It starts to catch on, slowly at first and then faster, until most of the crowd is laughing. I’m at a loss for what to say next and Janet must see it, because I’m hustled back into a hover bus, bound for the studio where I’ll do this morning’s interview.

“So how was I?” I ask.

“Unbelievable - as usual - but it seems to be working for you. Better yet, in your own weird way, you’re building credibility as someone who speaks the truth - no matter the consequences - and that’s what this book tour is all about.”

“Any suggestions for this interview?”

“Well, you can forget about talking about the content of your book. Expect all of the questions to center around Jocie. If you’re lucky, you might be able to shift the topic to the number ‘four’ group from yesterday.”

“If ‘four’ tries to hack this interview, are you going to let them?”

“Yes, but we expect that they won’t. They’ve gone quiet. As far as we can tell, there wasn’t a ‘four’ painted anywhere nationwide last night.”

“Wow. That shows both remarkable communication and restraint. Usually the goal is to stay on top for as many news cycles as possible - not go dark just when you’ve gotten attention.”

“Our thoughts exactly,” Janet says. “We’re looking for something big to happen soon for just that reason, but we have no clue what it might be.”

At the studio, I’ve been given a spot to stand off stage until I get my cue to enter. Unlike Brock’s show in Los Angeles, I can see that there’s a sizeable studio audience here. The audience portion is pretty dark, but I go face by face, until I find Martha in the third row. Compared to a super-enhanced star like Jocie, most would say Martha is plain, but to me, she’s radiant. She’s smart, funny, pretty, and, of course, possibly out to capture or kill me.

I’m thinking about her so intently that I miss my cue to go on stage. Luckily a crew member is there to give me a gentle push. There’s wild applause when I step into view. The hosts are a man and woman team named Stephanie and Stewart, or “Steph and Stew.” As expected, they both have visible enhancements, but they’re still young enough that they don’t look made of plastic.

“Here’s the man who’s taking the nation by storm, Professor Cephias Paulson,” Stew announces.

“And also ruffling a few feathers along the way,” Steph adds.

“Does Jocie have feather implants?” I ask. “I wouldn’t know.”

Funny and personable. Check.

The crowd laughs, which seems to throw off my hosts. I guess they’d planned to cast me as ‘villain’ and will need to scramble to adjust.

“We’d planned to talk about your new book, but since you raised the topic, what’s the story with you and Jocie?” Steph asks.

“I met her for the first time yesterday. I know the news moves fast, but if we have a story, it’s a short one.”

Forthright, with a touch of humility. Check.

“Come now, Cephias. Nobody’s ever refused sex with Jocie. She’s been at the top of the “Best Hollywood Sex Partners” list for the last eight years in a row. If you don’t mind my saying so, you don’t look like you’re in her usual league. So, how did you pass up a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity that any other man on the globe would have taken?”

Janet said that mystery and conflict are good for building buzz.

I take a deep breath for effect.

“I didn’t want to embarrass Jocie any further, but I see you have me on the spot. I don’t blame you, it’s just what great reporters do when they’re chasing a story.”

“I’m sorry, Cephias, we do hold an unfair advantage,” Steph says. “I’m glad you can forgive us.”

It’s hard not to roll my eyes.

“The truth is - I have a secret relationship with someone more attractive than Jocie; a woman who surpasses Jocie in every way possible.”

I look at Martha and she smiles. The crowd holds its breath, waiting to find out who could possibly exceed Jocie.

“Did you go out with Jocie to make this other woman jealous?” Stew asks.

He’s smarter than I thought. He’s teasing the audience and making them wait. He won’t let them off the hook until they’re drooling like hungry dogs.

“No, Stew. I went out with Jocie to prove to myself that there is nobody else, and I was right.”

“Let’s come back to the identity of your mystery woman. I want to ask you something else,” Stew says. “This morning you said something to Jocie that made her leave the stage at the tube station. You did it with your hands blocking the cameras so nobody could discover what you said. I’ve never seen anyone get the last word on Jocie. Did you reveal the name of your secret lover to Jocie this morning?”

“No. Jocie didn’t even know about my secret relationship. Remember, Stew, I’m a puzzle solver. This morning I told Jocie I’ve discovered her deepest, darkest secret. A secret so dark, that to reveal it would leave her just a broken shell of her former self.”

The audience gasps and I don’t know how I keep from laughing.

How can these people not see I’m making a mockery of the situation?

“Please don’t ask me to reveal Jocie’s secret. Despite all the things she’s said about me, I know I must do the honorable thing and protect it.”

Heart of gold, check. Truthful and honest, check.

“Cephas,” Steph says. “You are truly a gentleman, but I can see that these secrets are crushing you. If you can’t tell Jocie’s secret, then at least tell us yours. Tell us who this mystery woman is.”

“If only I could, Steph.”

A collective groan comes from the audience.

“If only I could.”

“So now there are two secrets for us to uncover. Do you have any other mysteries to spring on us this morning?”

“Just one.”

Steph and Stew lean closer. I wait for an extra-long dramatic pause, then take another deep breath.

“It’s about what my mystery woman brings to the table that Jocie lacks.”

I hesitate again. They’re expecting me to disclose some kind of new sex move, or maybe an enhancement they’ve never heard of.

“I’m sorry. I can’t. I just can’t,” I say.

Groans erupt all around.

“Please, Cephas. I think you owe it to Jocie,” Steph begs.

Now who’s drooling like a dog?

“Okay. You two are just too good. I’ll tell. As you know, I study modern and ancient history. I’ve found someone who has rediscovered an ancient secret that’s been lost to us. A secret that allows us to connect to each other so deeply, that at times, you think your brain will explode from the enormity of it.”

“Like something left by aliens in an Egyptian pyramid?”

Okay, so maybe he’s not as smart as I thought.

“Older,” I reply.

“Please, Cephas. You can’t keep this information from the world.”

“Love. I have a lot left to learn, but whether she realizes it or not, she’s teaching me about love.”

I expect the audience to laugh or groan, but they do nothing. When I figure out why, I think I’m even more stunned than they are.

Have generations of self-gratification left them amazed by the simple concept of "love"?

"Master this, and you'll understand why sex with Jocie would have been nothing but a disappointment for me."

Then, without any cue or dismissal from my hosts, I get up and walk off the stage.

"I've been creating and shaping the news for years, and I've never seen anything like it," Janet says, when we arrive back in the tube car. "Your face is everywhere, your books are selling so fast your publisher's system keeps crashing - and it's all because you refused to have sex. Some major movie stars are now refusing sex offers, just to ride on your wave. Oh, and speaking of movie stars, you have a message from Jocie."

She pulls the video message up onto the screen. Jocie is staring straight into the camera. "Look into my eyes, professor. Know that you're going to pay."

"Charming. Does this mean she's off the book tour?" I ask.

"You think? You've ruined all of my plans, you know. By now you two were supposed to be an item and next week, after she crushed you, she was set to launch a major anti-cult public service campaign. Oh well, those plans were nothing compared to what you've delivered. You can expect a huge audience for the class you teach this afternoon."

"Speaking of classes - when is Martha going to arrive? I teach her class this afternoon and I thought I could talk it through with her."

"I thought you might want to talk privately with Ms. McLeod. She should be here soon. By the way, did you mean what you said about love?"

There they are again - the saddest doll eyes I've ever seen.

"Every word."

"I thought so. Maybe you could tell me more about it sometime?"

"Sure."

Janet says something in response, but I don't hear it because Martha comes into view behind her. I think my heart skips a beat when our eyes meet. Janet looks back and forth at us in amazement as we continue to just smile and stare, then shakes her head and leaves us.

This is more than just needing a Christian. I really am falling in love with her.

"We don't have much time. I go back to the studio to teach World Religion soon."

"I know. I'm in the audience."

"The tour goes to Dallas next. Can you ride with us, and then catch a late tube up to Colorado?"

"I can stay in Dallas, if you want. I have an aunt who lives there," she replies.

We stand in silence for a moment.

"Did you read my essay?" she asks.

"I completely forgot about it. Jocie isn't exactly the sit-down-and-read-together type."

Martha looks hurt that I dropped the ball.

"I'll read it tonight on the ride to Dallas. I promise."

"I'm glad you got my messages - *all* of them," Martha says.

"I was scared to open the last one. I was afraid the whole Jocie thing would keep you from coming here. Did you look carefully at the media shots? Could you tell they altered my face so I'd be smiling, leering, whatever they thought fit the story they wanted to tell?"

"No way. I didn't look that carefully. I guess I was too upset. Look, I know I have no right to lay claim to you. We're all free to do whatever we want, but..."

Don't be afraid, Martha. Lay claim to me.

"But what?" I ask. "Is it that you want me all to yourself?"

"Yes - and I'm sorry."

“Sorry? For what?”

“The allure of someone like Jocie is very powerful. I’m sorry for assuming you’d be overcome by it. I should have had more faith that even she couldn’t ruin you.”

“I’m already ruined, Martha. I’m starting to think that we all come into this world ruined.”

She can’t help herself. Her eyelids go up slightly in response to the Biblical reference.

“As for having me all to yourself, you have it - and I now have the topic for today’s class.”

If everything works out as I’m planning, I won’t have to worry about the Christians killing me. I’ll have to worry about the Corps beating them to it.

Chapter Fourteen

The studio Janet borrowed for my lecture is much larger than the one at the University. It seats at least five hundred people and all seats are full. There are even people standing. Janet saved seats in the front row for Martha and herself.

The introduction sequence is even more outrageous than before and I walk onto the stage to loud applause. When I get to the podium screen, I see that all of my registered students are watching live and fifty thousand guests were authorized. The system could easily handle millions of guest viewers, but Janet's trying to create a "hot ticket" event. There are over four thousand offers for sex, and when I delete them the live audience cheers.

"I see we have a larger audience than usual. I assume our guests have watched the last few lectures, so I don't need to review. Please note that I will *not* be taking questions relating to Jocie."

"In our previous classes, we discussed how the First Amendment guarantees freedom from religious influence, and how the Sunspot Initiative largely released man from working to survive. This gives us time to pursue the pleasures that we choose to pursue. In the fifty years following the completion of Sunspot Three, mankind experienced a period which we now call 'The Second Renaissance.' We call it The Second Renaissance because, like the Renaissance of the fourteenth century, mankind experienced a period of intellectual growth. Technology and art leaped forward. All major diseases were cured and the earth generally entered a state of peace."

I pause for a moment.

"The next generation didn't continue on that path. Advances since the waning of the Second Renaissance have been minor in comparison. The occupants of this room today are the great-grandchildren of that second generation.

That makes you the fourth generation to choose to wander and stagnate without any driving force; without any kind of compass telling you where to go next.

"So, that's a quick review for all the guests we have watching today. Let's switch gears now. Earlier I had an idea that I think might make for an interesting discussion. It's not in the book or syllabus, but I thought we might discuss some of the ancient religious rituals that mankind no longer observes. In particular, let's think about the concept of marriage. Who can describe marriage for me?"

I choose Rolf in Sweden. "Marriage was an ancient form of slavery in which men made exclusive sexual claims over women."

"Okay. How about another one."

I choose Nikki in Toronto, who's wearing more clothing than usual. "Marriage was also a method by which women claimed sexual exclusivity over men in exchange for the resources he could provide. In biological terms, it was an evolved method by which women tried to ensure survival of their offspring."

Clever, aren't they? Making marriage an 'evolved' trait rather than a blessing of God.

"Those are good answers, but you're viewing the world through our modern standards. Try to think more like an ancient religious person."

I choose Martha.

"To an ancient religious person, marriage signified a spiritual bond between a man and a woman."

"Exactly. Thank you, Martha."

"The key words in Martha's answer are 'spiritual bond.' Let's see how this played out in the eventual end of marriage worldwide. Using the United States as an example, the first few decades of the 2000's saw a hot political battle, where attempts were made to open the definition of marriage to

include marriage between people of the same gender. From 2015 to 2025, the U.S. Supreme Court shifted its stance on the legality of homosexual marriage four different times as the political winds that drove it shifted back and forth, fueled by religious extremism.

With the Supreme Court unable to settle on an answer, the country sought a legislative solution and activists on both sides engaged in fierce lobbying to influence federal law. Those efforts came to a head in 2025 when a homosexual marriage bill was defeated by a single vote in the U.S. Senate. To echo Martha, the opponents of the law argued that marriage is a matter of spiritual tradition rather than a legal issue, and therefore the U.S. Government should not impose its own definitions over long-held religious doctrines.”

I wait a moment for the information to sink into their heads.

“While the traditional religious activists celebrated their victory, the people behind the Equalization of Religion movement saw this as an opportunity, rather than a defeat. Through the late 2020’s and the early 2030’s, the movement turned the argument around. It did this by arguing that in the absence of a government definition of marriage, the equal recognition of all religions required that each religion could define marriage as it saw fit.”

My screen lights up to indicate Martha has a question.

“Are you saying that one of the purposes of Religious Equalization was the abolition of marriage?”

“Some would say abolish, some would say dilute it to the point of becoming meaningless. The end effect was the same, traditional religious marriage was over. A few years later, the Final Holy War began and the world had more important issues to address. Fifty years later, in the 2080’s, a short-lived movement began calling to legally abolish marriage altogether. Who knows what group started that movement?”

Nobody offers the answer.

“Ironically, it was homosexuals. After their parents and grandparents fought so hard fifty years earlier for the recognition of homosexual marriage, and once the term ‘marriage’ was made meaningless by Equalization, the next generation wanted it gone completely. So why don’t we have an amendment - or even laws - that officially abolish marriage?”

I choose Alice back in Colorado. “Because of Sunspot.”

“Exactly. To bring many of the concepts back together, ancient partnerships were no longer needed to ensure survival of offspring, and so arguing over the definition of marriage died off as irrelevant.”

My screen indicates Martha has another question.

“So to echo what Oscar said about religion in general in another class, marriage was also ‘bought off’ when Sunspot came online?”

“That sums it up, but it does bring us back to the sticky concept you raised earlier, Martha. There are no evolutionary or economic reasons remaining for marriage, but is there a spiritual reason? Do people still want to be spiritually connected to one another? I’ll leave you with that thought, and this one. I said the marriage abolition movement died out without a change in the law. Although there are no longer legal or economic reasons for getting married, there’s also no law against it.”

After that, Martha - and every Christian watching - should be confused as to where I stand on religion. They don’t have enough puzzle pieces to know what’s really going on here.

At that moment, I see Janet lean forward and her eyes widen as she looks at the screen at her seat. My podium screen flashes and I call on her.

“Professor, you may want to see this news feed.”

She transfers it to the big screens behind me.

Jocie is on the screen holding a news conference, and no matter where she walks on the stage, she's covered by the number 'four.'

"That was clever," Janet says as the private tube car departs for Dallas. "We were so busy watching for a hack attack on your appearances, they were able to make a splash on an even bigger audience."

"Did anyone try to communicate with them this time?" Martha asks.

"If by 'communicate' you mean shriek insults, then Jocie did a good job of it."

"If they have a message or an agenda, why aren't they getting it out?" I think out loud. "Just flashing a 'four' doesn't tell anyone what they want, or why."

"Maybe they're waiting," Martha says.

"Waiting for what?" I ask.

"They know," Janet says. "The Fours know about the project."

"What project?" Martha asks.

She doesn't know, I'm sure of it. Could it be that this Four group is better informed than the Christians?

"Sorry. It's classified," Janet replies to Martha while giving me a warning look then bustles off to the room with the top secret electronic gadgets.

"You know what she's talking about, don't you?" Martha asks. "This whole book tour never made any sense. Please tell me, Cephas. What's going on?"

"If I tell you, Janet won't let you go back to Colorado Springs. You'll have to stay secluded until the project becomes public."

"It's only an issue for one day. We go public tomorrow morning," Janet says, as she returns to the room. "You'll be spending the night with us, Martha. Your com is now jammed, and don't try to leave this car."

"And here I was hoping we'd end up secluded for a week," I say.

Janet gives Martha a brief overview of the time travel project, including the fact that I've already been chosen to go.

"This is crazy," Martha says when Janet is finished. "You're going to time travel to prove that the foundation of a dying religion wasn't the Son of God?"

"It turns out Christianity isn't as dead as most believe," I say. "In fact, it appears to be growing rapidly. Add in this new group, Four, and you can see why the government wants to stop religion once and for all. What if the Christians and the Fours don't get along? Does the world need another full-scale holy war or even years of religious terrorism?"

I expect Martha to argue, but instead she unexpectedly hugs me tight.

"Please don't go. I can't lose you. I just can't."

Is she trying to protect me? Or is she protecting her religion?

"He no longer has a choice," Janet says. "He's the only one who speaks and reads the ancient languages."

"How can I pass up the adventure of a lifetime?" I ask Martha. "I'll come back to you. I promise."

That's an easy promise to keep, considering I have no intention of going.

Although Janet can't seem to understand why anyone would choose to sleep alone, she agrees to give Martha the extra stateroom in the tube car.

Once Martha is asleep, I try to sort through the messages on my com. There are thousands of them, so I give up and decide to read Martha's essay, as I promised I would. The title is "Man Needs to Believe in Something." Her central theme is happiness. She talks about the accumulation of wealth and power, and how it doesn't bring happiness. She talks about worldly pleasures, like sex

and drugs, and how they don't bring happiness. She talks about hard work and knowledge, and how that doesn't bring happiness. She wraps it all up by talking about hope, and how mankind needs to feel that it's part of something greater than its own creations.

The last line states: "That's why there are still Christians walking around in 'Man's Eden.' You said in class that Sunspot 'eliminated economic inequality and fulfills all of man's needs,' but apparently you're wrong. Apparently there are some needs that man can't fulfill himself."

If this essay doesn't prove Martha's a Christian, then I don't know what will. Everything is coming into place.

I hear a shuffling sound at my open door and look up to see Martha. She's dressed in a very modest nightgown, but I'm still able to see the curves of her body. Maybe there is a God. Sometimes it's hard to believe a creature this beautiful came about through random mutations and evolution.

"Couldn't sleep?" I ask.

"Nightmare."

"Sometimes it helps to tell someone."

"A friend was in trouble. He was asked to go somewhere he didn't belong, and to meddle with things that no man should meddle with."

"A good friend?" I ask.

"Someone I've come to care about deeply, even if I haven't shown him yet."

"How did the nightmare end?"

"It hasn't."

Martha crosses my room and lies on the bed.

"Will you hold me while I fall back to sleep?"

You'd think I'd be having thoughts about sex, as I snuggle up and put my arm around her - but I don't.

We arrive in Dallas sometime in the middle of the night, but Janet lets us sleep in. The public announcement of the time travel project will be made from Bureau headquarters, so we plan to watch it in the private car while we eat breakfast. The President himself opens the press conference with a rambling and incoherent speech about the recent attacks of cultists worldwide. He implies it's only a matter of time before there's a return to religious violence, and then hands the podium to Ray Lewis to describe the time travel project. Ray explains the need to protect the public safety, and says it's for the good of all mankind that we grow beyond belief in God and rely on ourselves to build a perfect world. I recognize key phrases that tell me the speech was written by Henry.

What he says next is the greatest shock the world has had in a generation. He explains that the power requirements needed to send three travelers and their equipment through time will require the combined output of all three Sunspot reactors. The entire world will know when the travelers have left and when they return because, for the first time in generations, the power will go out for everyone on earth at the same time. It'll only last a minute, but the earth will go dark. He wraps it all up by saying the three travelers will be chosen soon, and their identities will be announced in a week.

When the press conference is over, Martha asks: "Who's the Christian they plan to send back?"

"I have no clue. I suppose they have Christians in a prison somewhere, but there aren't any high profile Christians I know of. They'll need someone who's recognizable."

I've never heard of a jailed Christian. When arrests are made, they simply disappear.

"That's not for you to worry about," Janet says as she re-enters the room. "I have it from high sources that the Christian traveler is being worked out as we speak. Get dressed. You do another show in an hour, and then it's back to Colorado. The rest of the book tour is no longer necessary, due to the schedule changes. You get a week off, and then you start a traveler's tour the day we announce the travelers' identities."

Chapter Fifteen

The Dallas show looks like all the others. There's an overly enhanced host named Kent, who introduces me as the "New Cult Hunter," then replays some of the events involving Four. There isn't a mention of Jocie anywhere. The announcement of the time travel project has made her yesterday's news.

"Professor, you'll be happy to know that I've instructed our technical people to open up our usual security to see if we can get a big number four plastered across our screen today. I'm sure you'd love to talk to them and get inside their heads."

"I think the whole world would like to get inside their heads, Kent. We really know nothing about them."

"As we wait to see if the Four shows up, let's talk about this morning's announcement of the time travel project. Some are already saying that this will bring the world together in ways we haven't seen since Sunspot Three came online. As a religious historian, what are your thoughts?"

"As a religious historian, I can say with certainty that mankind has never had a single belief system. The Sunspot Initiative brought us close to the common belief that man alone controls our destiny, and perhaps the 'Travelers Initiative,' as I call it, will put us over that edge."

"So here's the question that's on many people's minds today. If you were picked, would you go?"

"I don't know how anyone could turn down that sort of adventure, but this is a project to obtain photographic evidence. I'm sure they'll want a top cinematographer and some technical people. Do they really need a historian?"

"Perhaps not, but what's needed is someone the world trusts to tell the truth, and right now, you fit that bill."

He didn't come up with that on his own. He's just part of the act.

"I suppose I do have a reputation for calling things as I see them."

"I guess our friends from the Four group don't want to hack us today," Kent says. "When you were hacked in L.A., they confirmed they're a religious organization, but left before you could find out anything else. When the Travelers Initiative is concluded and we have proof Christ didn't rise from the dead, do you think that will be the end of such organizations?"

"It seems like that outcome would mean the end of Christians, but it's hard to tell what it will do to other belief systems. A bright student of mine suggested to me that man seems to want to believe in something. The great hope of the Travelers Initiative is that man will finally believe solely in man."

The time off in Colorado is welcome, even though we know it's only temporary. Jocie has been out of the news, and Janet has gone back to D.C. to prepare for the next announcement, though I'm still surrounded by a Corps security detail at all times.

Martha and I have been inseparable since returning from Dallas. When neither of us are in class, we spend our time going for walks and just talking and laughing about the world in which we live. She even lets me treat her to many meals and knows there are no expectations from her other than companionship. I test her from time to time by inserting Christian ideas into our conversations and she's gotten bolder about agreeing with them.

Unlike Jocie, Martha and I stare into each other's eyes often. It's as if there's an entire herd of elephants in the room that we can't talk about, so we're each trying to pull the information from the other with our eyes.

Today we get away for a walk in a set of rock formations known as “The Garden of the Gods.” Somehow it managed to escape renaming one hundred and fifty years ago when religious symbols were being torn down nationwide. We chose it because there are many places where we can climb on rocks in full sight of the Corps agents, but be far enough away that we can speak privately.

“I’ve been wondering about something,” she says, when we reach our perch on the ancient red rocks.

It’s a cool fall day, so I put my arm around her to keep her warm.

“What’s that?”

“What did you say to Jocie that made her leave the stage in Minneapolis? You’ve never told anyone.”

“She hates to have anyone look her in the eyes. So I told her I can see inside her mind and there is no beauty there.”

“So she doesn’t have a deep, dark secret you’ve uncovered?”

“Actually, I nailed it on the head. By all accounts, she’s the definition of physical beauty, but I think she’s empty inside and she knows it.”

“I think the whole world is feeling empty on the inside,” Martha says. “We try to fill ourselves up with enhancements, or sex or drugs, but none of it works for long.”

I turn her cheek towards me and stare into her eyes.

“I hope you’re not looking for my deep, dark secrets,” she says. “I’d like to keep them to myself.”

I smile.

Too late.

“I think perhaps I’m having thoughts more dangerous than your secrets.”

“Are you sure? You don’t know my secrets.”

“I’m sure. I’m thinking that if I prove there is no God, and man is all there is, then it would also have to be true that you and I have no souls. I don’t want this to be all there is. I think I’m falling in love with you, and if that happens, I want to love you forever.”

That wasn’t another test to see if she’s a Christian and you know it, Cephas.

“Those are dangerous thoughts. They sound almost religious.”

“Don’t tell Janet,” I say.

“Maybe I will tell Janet - so you’ll get kicked out of the project.”

I wouldn’t have thought it possible, but she somehow intensifies her gaze into my eyes. She leans forward and I think she’s going to kiss me, but she doesn’t.

The part of me that grew up in this world of public sex yearns to kiss her again, but there’s now a growing part of me urging caution. You’d think that second part of me would be worried about falling in love with my own assassin, but that isn’t it at all. Instead, that second part is telling me to court her.

Court her? That’s a notion that ended two centuries ago. Atheists don’t court. Atheists rip off each other’s clothing, wherever and whenever they feel like it.

I break our gaze and look over her face.

“You haven’t been enhanced at all, have you?” I ask.

“Not even once. My parents wouldn’t allow it. You haven’t either, have you?”

“Just once,” I say. “It was done when I was a baby, so it was more of a correction than an enhancement. My vocal cords were deformed, so they performed a surgery so the world could hear my golden voice. There are two small chips just under the skin in my neck. They went inactive after I hit puberty, but there was never a reason to take them out.”

“I take it your parents didn’t allow enhancements either?” she asks.

“My parents were killed in an accident when I was eight. My aunt, who raised me, told me I had an allergic reaction to the vocal chips and couldn’t risk any more. By the time I figured out she was stretching the truth, I didn’t care about getting enhanced. Actually, it made me feel sort of unique to not follow the crowd.”

“You’ll never follow the crowd, Cephas. Deep down, you’re one of the few who’ll follow his heart.”

She’s ready.

As we climb off the rocks, the security detail moves around us in unison. They don’t even try to blend in anymore. A private hover bus is waiting at the end of the path. Sometimes I enjoy the high class treatment, sometimes I think I’ve been bought.

Martha rides all the way back to my house with me. She’s a regular fixture there, and the Corps people let her come and go without comment. I even instructed the security system to recognize her com and unlock the door for her.

“There’s something else I’ve been meaning to ask you,” she says, after she closes the door.

“Me too. Let me go first,” I say. “I don’t have much family, just my aging aunt, and I need someone to watch over my house and look after my affairs while I’m gone.”

“I’d be happy to do that.”

“Good. I’ve already given you full access to everything. Now, what did you want to ask me?”

“Well, it’s pretty small compared to time travel, but I’m curious. You gave me the full extra credit for the essay I wrote, but there were no comments on it. What did you think about it?”

“I’m glad you asked. Your arguments were similar to a much older essay I’ve read many times.”

She gets a curious look on her face.

“Come upstairs. I’d like to show it to you.”

We go upstairs and she starts to head into my office, but I pull down the old folding stairs into the attic. If the Corps has bugged my house, they probably didn’t bother with the attic. I go to an ancient footlocker, then reach up and retrieve the key which is hidden in the rafters above it. Once I’ve turned the key in the lock, I hesitate.

“What’s wrong?” Martha asks.

“I have my own deep, dark secrets. Opening this box is beyond saying that I love you. If I open this box, I’m literally placing my life into your hands.”

“And you’ve realized you’re not ready to do that?”

“That’s just it, I am ready. It feels like everything else I’ve done in my life is a lie, and this simple step is the truth I’ve been waiting a lifetime to tell someone.”

I open a box and take out an ancient book.

“Is that what I think it is?” she asks in a whisper.

“Yes, it’s a paper copy of the Christian Bible.”

“Isn’t it illegal?”

“That’s right. Decades before we were born technology it was banned as subversive and dangerous to the greater public good. Not even The Cult Hunter is allowed to have this.”

Martha’s eyes go wide when she connects the dots in her head.

“This is how you did it. This is how you broke the final Christian code.”

“Very good. One day I saw the word “book” written in ancient Hebrew and it hit me. I realized that simply reading ancient languages was no longer enough because the code had some sort of context to it. I knew that breaking the code would require me to read - and understand - the Bible. I asked for special permission to obtain a copy, but instead of seeing the logic in my request, I was suspended for a week and interrogated - just for asking. When the week was up, I convinced the

assistant director that the request was due to extreme stress, and asked for a month off to travel and relax.”

“My first stop was my hometown. I’d read a little of a dusty old Bible that had been long forgotten in the basement of the town historical society when I was a kid. It was still there, so I stole it. Then I traveled to Europe and Asia, and visited every old Christian site I could find. According to the biographers you’ve read, I was in Europe torturing Christians, but my real mission was to find old Bibles. In the end, I obtained Bibles in every ancient language I know. When I returned from my travels, I locked myself in my office for a month and secretly absorbed the word of God.

“Are you saying you’re a Christian? You can’t be a Christian. You’re ‘The Cult Hunter.’”

“I don’t know what I am anymore, Martha. I read the words in multiple languages and found what I needed to crack the code. Sometimes it seemed like the more I read, the farther I got from understanding what the words were trying to tell me. But other times, well - at other times it felt more like the words were calling to me.”

It’s done. Now I can talk openly with her.

She stands unexpectedly.

“I have to go. This is too much to process. I just have to go.”

I catch her hand.

“Not yet. I have something for you.”

I dig around in the box until I find a very small copy with an orange cover called a Gideon’s Bible.

“Here, take this one with you. It’s easy enough to put into your pocket. I want you to read the book called Ecclesiastes. Your essay reminded me very much of the lessons written in that book.”

She receives the small book like she’s afraid to touch it.

“I can’t accept this. This is a gift that can’t be found or bought at any price.”

So is my freedom, and you’re going to give it to me.

She takes the small Bible, but virtually runs from my house. This isn’t the sort of reaction I’d expected. I’d hoped to be welcomed home by a fellow Christian, not have her run from me in terror.

I’ve missed something. What is it?

Martha has ridden to class with me in the Bureau car all week, so I find that I’m lonely as I ride to teach my last class. For years I sought to be alone with my thoughts, but today I want nothing more than to hear her voice. I gave her everything she needs to call off killing me and instead take me away to a new life. Running from my house makes no sense.

Without Janet around, I’ve switched my class introduction back to the low-key standard. The University relented to Henry and has made my classes open for public viewing, though only registered students can participate in the discussions. I suspect the decision involved a large pile of money from an anonymous donor. When I step onto the stage, I’m disappointed to see that Martha’s not in her usual spot in the front row.

There are about seventy thousand people viewing the class live, though the number of total views will be in the hundreds of thousands as people watch the replay. The University took the annoying step of allowing guest viewers to submit sex offers, so there are now tens of thousands of them. Everyone knows they’ll all be deleted, but it’s become popular to say you were turned down by the same guy who rejected Jocie.

“Good afternoon, everyone. As you all know, tomorrow is a pretty special day in the history of religion. Tomorrow is the day we find out who’ll be traveling back in time to gather proof that Jesus Christ wasn’t the son of God. The government is very tight-lipped about the identities of the travelers, but media speculation has been rampant. Even my name has been thrown about as a candidate. So let me ask you all: if I’m chosen, should I go?”

My podium lights up with dozens of responses. I choose Mary in Wisconsin.

“Mary, you share your name with the mother of Christ, so how could I not choose you?”

“You should go.”

“Why?”

“You’ve seen the ads and documentaries that have been in the news since the announcement. This is for the good of all mankind. Religion led to hatred and hatred led to wars. Mankind needs to finish growing up and leave those things behind.”

She sounds like she’s reading from a government script.

“Okay then, why me?”

Mary doesn’t have an answer, but Mr. Taylor in the studio does.

“Because you are the cult-hunting man. This would be like your final and ultimate mission!”

“Anyone else?”

I see a familiar hand rise up in the middle of the audience. It’s Martha, sitting next to one of the girls who joined the class when she did. I call on her.

“You should go because we trust you. Or at least I do.”

“Facts are facts, Martha. What does it matter who shoots the video and brings it back to show the world?”

“Are you so sure, Professor, that ‘facts are facts’? May I show the class something?”

I give her control of the big screens. She didn’t warn me about this and I’m curious to see what she’s up to. She puts two nearly identical pictures of me and Jocie, taken in San Francisco, onto the screen. It’s one where Jocie is rubbing herself all over me. There’s giggling in the room and Mr. Taylor says: “Oh yeah, baby.”

“The first picture is Professor Paulson as you saw him in the media,” Martha says. “His face has been altered to look like he’s lusting for Jocie. The second picture is the raw photo, where it appears he’s disgusted by her. Here are more.”

How’d she get the raw photos?

Next she puts up a series of pictures from after the party, where I’m catching a drunk Jocie as she almost falls. The sixth picture in the series is circled. In it, I appear to be groping Jocie.

“The circled picture is the one that appeared in the media. Alone it doesn’t tell the whole story,” Martha explains.

“Are you suggesting, Martha, that I should be one of the time travelers because I have the integrity to tell the world the whole story, no matter the consequences?”

“As far as I can tell, Cephas, when you have something to say, nobody can shut you up.”

Martha’s statement sparks laughter in the audience, but her eyes are tearing up as she says it. The podium flashes with a message from Janet: “That girl is pure gold.”

Janet may have left Colorado, but she’s still watching me.

A young woman in the live audience named Hope Dubois indicates that she has a question. She’s never asked a question before, so I call on her. When her face comes up on the big screens, she blushes and looks uncomfortable.

“Professor, what if they’re wrong?”

“I don’t understand the question, Hope. Who are ‘they’ and what are ‘they’ wrong about?”

“Well, everyone. Everyone seems certain there’ll be proof that Jesus is a fraud. What if they’re wrong? What if he really is the Son of God? What if you see him die and then resurrected?”

“What if I were to come back with a video showing Christ dying, resurrected, and ascending into heaven? I guess all I can say is that it would change everything.”

“But would you tell the story?”

Janet doesn’t bother with a text. Her face appears on my podium screen: “Shut that girl up.”

I pause to think. I can’t just ignore the question. I have to say something.

“Well, Hope, according to Martha I’m not an easy person to shut up,” is all I can come up with on the spot and the class laughs.

I switch the topic by asking the students what other points in history would be interesting to go back and visit. Martha usually hangs around after class, but today I watch her slip out of class with the crowd. By the time I’m done answering all the after-class questions, she’s slipped back into the room. As she approaches me, I notice a rose in her hand.

“Trying to send me a message, Martha?”

She doesn’t respond except to smile, then leaves.

I go straight to the bathroom after class and find that two rose petals have writing on them. The message says: “Corps following Hope.”

Chapter Sixteen

I disconnect the uplink connection on my computer and go to the class list, just like I did when I wanted to know Martha's address. I find Hope's address and reconnect everything. It's the address where I secretly met Martha. It's the house that had the clock with a hidden cross on its face.

The private car with a Corps driver is waiting outside my office building. If I try to walk home, they'll activate my com and track me, and then insist that I get into the car. I can't leave the com in my office and make a break for it because I'm pretty sure my office has a hidden camera, or at least that they watch me from an adjacent building.

I go to the car and ask the driver to take me home. As we're leaving campus, I say to him: "I'm going to be out of town for a while. Let's drive around a bit instead of going straight home today."

As we drive, I start telling him about the history of the town and point out different aspects of the architecture. If he's listening, he shows no signs of it. That's okay. I know very little about architecture and I'm making most of it up anyway.

As we approach the street where Hope lives, I say: "Turn left at the next street. There are some very interesting houses down there."

He drives past.

"You missed the turn," I say, but as we pass, I look down the street and see several large black buses near the house.

"Current op chart says the street is APO."

"What does that mean in English?"

"It means pick a different street."

We drive along several more streets, and I continue to blather on about fictional history and architecture. I direct him past Martha's address, but there are no lights on, so I have him take me home. I try to contact her many times, but Martha's com is inactive.

As I sit at my desk, staring into space, I try to think through what I know and don't know. Although I'm sure these women are Christians, it's still not clear why they were sent to sit in my class. Were they sent to kill me? Or were they just an advance team, sent to see if I could be converted?

What am I missing?

Martha could have killed me dozens of times, and the thought of her being my assassin still makes me shutter. If she's been sent to kill me, she won't need to use poison or a weapon. She can kill me at any time by breaking my heart - because I'm in love with her.

But is it really her? Or have I fallen in love with a character portrayed by a skilled actress?

At midnight, I try one last time to reach her, but her com still isn't active. For the first time in my life, I leave my com in my ear while I sleep.

The next morning, as I'm packing for my trip to D.C., the doorbell rings. My com tells me it's Martha. When I open the door, she's standing there with a bright smile on her face - as if none of the events of yesterday ever happened.

"Good morning. I thought I'd come to see you off."

She puts her fingers to her lips and motions to indicate that my house is bugged.

How did she know?

"That's very thoughtful. Is it just you? I'd *hoped* perhaps some others from class would stop by too."

"Sorry, it's just me. I'd *hoped* to get a friend to come along, but she seems to be out of town.

"Is she on a vacation?"

“Yes. She just needed a little escape I guess.”

So Hope was being sought for questioning, and she somehow managed to escape. If Martha’s cover was blown, she wouldn’t be standing here. So now it’s just a matter of finding the true purpose of this visit. Is she here to kill me? Or have I convinced her and her leaders that I’m sincere? If I don’t die in the next few minutes, I’ll ask to join them, and will spend the rest of my life in hiding and studying the Bible.

“And how about you? Do you need a little escape too?” I ask.

“Pretty soon, I think.”

If she were here to kill me, she could have done it by now, so I invite her to the kitchen. The one last piece of the puzzle I need to know is if those kisses meant as much to her as they did to me.

“Today I go to D.C. and become a traveler. There are some things I need to say, and some things I need to ask, before I leave.”

“Me too,” Martha replies, “but go ahead and finish packing. I’d like to think through what I want to say.”

She takes off her shoe, removes the insole, and brings out a piece of paper.

“I don’t know how to start,” she writes in her pretty script.

“How about your deep dark secret?” I reply on the next line.

“Not dark, just deep,” she writes and smiles at me.

“Why did they send you?”

She looks startled for a moment and then smiles again, when she realizes that I’ve suspected all along.

“To watch.”

“And?” I reply.

“To get close to you.”

“Were those kisses real -or just part of the act?” I write.

A tear rolls down each of my cheeks.

“I was just supposed to watch. We got closer than anyone expected, especially me.”

“Were you sent here to kill me?”

A broad smile covers her face.

“It’s not what you think. I’m here to prepare you,” she writes.

“Prepare me for what?”

“To choose.”

She sits there, drumming her fingers as she thinks of what to write next. I stare at them, the four fingers beating up and down in one color, while her thumb sits motionless in another. It’s like they’re drumming in slow motion, and I can hear the echo of each finger as it hits the table.

The four drops of paint on her shoes; the missing number four on her mailbox; and now the four drumming fingers. I was so eager to meet a Christian that I missed huge pieces in the puzzle, and misread the ones I did have.

“You’re not a Christian. You’re from Four!” I burst out loud, before I can stop myself.

She’s taken aback for a moment by the broken silence.

“We won’t stay in the shadows,” she says in a whisper, then turns to run. She knew the house is bugged - which means she also knows there will be a Corps guy coming through each door in seconds. To my shock, she turns back, leans down, and kisses me on the lips.

“Goodbye kisses don’t count.”

The time spent on the kiss costs her. The Corps guy kicks in the back door when she’s still two meters from it. Capturing her will not be a priority and he’ll have already received orders to kill her, if necessary, to insure my safety. They’re called “kill teams” for a reason.

The image of Martha I’ve built in my head - as a quiet and gentle young woman - is shattered in an instant. Her hands and feet are a blur as she hits the kill team member with a flying kick that

causes his gun to crash to the floor and then takes him across the face with a spinning back fist. He's so stunned that his own swinging fist is easily caught and used to flip him to the floor. A second later, the front door bursts open, but she's already gone. The second agent doesn't try to pursue. He makes sure I'm safe, then calls for help.

While he's busy, I slip the paper and pencil into my pocket, and lay my head on the table. There are pieces of a shattered puzzle flying through my head and, for the first time in my life, I can't begin to fit them together.

Four? She's a pagan? What about the clock face? What about her essay?

There's only one puzzle piece left for me to hold onto - love. I'm in love with her, no matter what her beliefs are, and I'm not ready to let her go until I know more.

Within two minutes the house is surrounded. Within five they've cordoned off a ten-block radius and put surveillance drones over the neighborhood, but Martha has disappeared without a trace.

An hour later, I'm in the Bureau's private tube car with Janet, on my way to D.C. It was an hour in which it felt like the life was being sucked out of me. I couldn't focus enough to pack my bag, so Janet did it for me and then literally led me by the hand down my front steps and into the waiting car.

I need to find her. I need to know.

"Whoever she is, her cover is even deeper than mine," Janet says. "We ran multiple checks on her, and everyone else in the class, and didn't find a thing. The other girl - Hope Dubois - has fallen off the map, along with a third named Cindi Stone. Do you know anything about them?"

"They were all students in my class," I hear myself say in a voice that sounds like I'm hypnotized. "They all lived in town and attended classes live instead of watching remotely. Martha sat next to Cindi in class yesterday, but before that they'd never even spoken to each other, as far as I know."

"I listened to the audio from your house. You were just sitting there quietly and then you suddenly blurted out she was from Four. What tipped you off? For that matter, what made you suspect she wasn't who she claimed to be, and why didn't you tell anyone?"

I sit in silence, so Janet continues.

"I see what happened. You really were in love, weren't you? I told you love is an outdated notion."

As she says it, Janet gets a faraway look.

"An outdated notion perhaps, but still a pleasant one," I reply softly.

"You're the right person for this job, Cephas. You almost had me believing in love..."

The word "again" was on the tip of her tongue. She wanted to say I almost had her believing in love *again*. For a moment, she isn't an undercover agent, she isn't even a woman. All I can see is a wounded soul. I watch my hand reach out and touch her cheek in time to catch a tear as it rolls down her face. I want to help her. I want to help heal her soul.

"But I'm glad it turned out this way. It should give you more focus for the mission," Janet says, as she snaps out of her memories and moves back from my hand.

"Really? And why is that?"

"Because you're seeing firsthand the division and conflict religion causes. The fish heads and the Fours must already be fighting. Maybe this time we can finish the job."

Her words sound like the pieces of a puzzle that's been set before me, and I find the fog lifting from my mind.

This time? What does she mean by 'this time'?

"So are you going to tell me how you figured out that Martha McLeod is from Four?" she asks.

There's a mirror on the wall behind Janet, so instead of answering, I voluntarily stare into my own eyes.

What now, little sparkle? My plan to disappear into the Christian world and seek answers has been shattered. My dream of exploring love with Martha is gone. I have no choice but to go back to being what I hate. The legend of the Cult Hunter will continue, but now it's my turn to write the script.

I was wrong about Martha's beliefs. I was wrong about whom to trust. But if there's one thing I was right about, it's that the only measure of privacy I have left is the privacy of my own thoughts. Everything else the Corps seems to be able to watch or listen in on as it pleased. If I'm to ever find out who Martha really is and how she feels about me, then our next meeting must be on my terms, not on the Corps' terms.

These jumbled thoughts combine to make me seethe with anger. I'm mad at myself. I'm mad at the Corps. I'm even mad at the God that I'm not supposed to believe exists. I turn my anger onto Janet.

"I'm not telling you anything about Martha McLeod or Four."

I find myself speaking through a clenched and angry jaw, the opposite of the carefully controlled Cult Hunter.

"In the past, I was just an analyst who left the hunting to others. Not this time. The Corps created the image of The Cult Hunter and now you have one for real. Nobody hunts Martha McLeod but me."

The big announcement ceremony is happening at the National Institute of Science building. The three travelers will be raised from below on small elevators, one at a time, onto the giant stage while a massive live audience looks on. I still have no clue who the Christian will be. I can hear the President speaking over my com. He drones on and on about the importance of the project to the entire world, and how past intolerances of the religious must be put behind mankind. I'm contemplating a nap, when he finally gets to announcing who the three travelers will be.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we've reached the point of revealing to the world the identities of the three time traveler. The truth is that they need no introductions. To ensure non-believers everywhere are represented, our first traveler is internationally renowned religious abolitionist, Dr. Thomas."

Loud applause erupts above me as Dr. Thomas is raised onto the stage.

"Our second traveler," the President continues, as a small elevator begins to raise me to the stage, "is the world's leading expert on religious history. He speaks the ancient languages necessary to accomplish the mission, but even more importantly, he's a man of unquestioned integrity. Dr. Cephas Paulson."

The applause are thunderous. I do my best to smile and wave.

"Our third traveler is here to ensure that believers hear from one of their own that Christ is a fraud. Until now, I thought all Christians led sad, solitary lives watching for their sky daddy to ride his sun chariot across the sky, or some other such nonsense. As it turns out, at least one Christian has been leading a very public life right under our noses."

Instead of more applause, I hear the crowd gasp, followed by murmurs. I don't hear the rest of his speech. I look to my left, and there being raised up onto the stage - wearing a massive gold cross - is Jocie.

Chapter Seventeen

The three travelers stand for an obligatory picture with the President, then we're hustled off the stage before I can grab a microphone and say something truthful. We're moved to a small room where we can get acquainted and meet our press handler, Janet.

"Was this your idea?" I ask Janet while pointing at Jocie.

"No, Cephas, it was mine," Jocie says. "You crashed my world, so I thought I would return the favor. Besides, it's the role of a lifetime."

"Wait. So you're not a believer?" Thomas asks, trying to catch up.

"Oh, I believe. I believe my name will live forever. We'll come back and I'll be crushed that Christ wasn't real, but I'll come out of it, and the public will see me as being stronger and braver than ever before. I'll star as myself in the movie, but of course we'll find men who are better looking to play you two."

"She'll never pull it off," I say, turning back to Janet. "We have a one week tour full of interviews and party appearances. Any believers who pay attention will know she's a fraud."

"I think I'll have this melted down," Jocie says, looking at the gold cross.

"She isn't here to convince the believers, Cephas. That's your job. Jocie is here to entertain the people who sit stoned in front of their screens all day, not knowing which is real, their life or the video. They'll live the story through Jocie, like it's their own."

"Then what's my job?" Thomas asks.

"To validate the beliefs of the abolitionists," Janet replies.

"And to complete the love triangle," Jocie says, then walks to Thomas and engages him in a very provocative kiss.

"So it's a triangle because you have Thomas, while you secretly pine for me?" I ask.

"I was thinking something more like you regret letting me slip through your fingers, and I crush you and Christianity out of existence at the same time."

The Corps puts us into the finest hotel in D.C. where, it turns out, the top three floors are permanently leased to the Corps for use as a safe house. Thankfully each of the travelers has an entire floor to themselves - if you don't count sharing it with a dozen security personnel each. There are even patrol drones silently circling around in the air outside.

I turn on a screen and find the news feed is split between the announcement earlier today and a live shot of Jocie and Thomas walking hand in hand in a park somewhere nearby. Every once in a while, they do something lewd for the cameras. Thomas seems to be enjoying Jocie's attention, so I'm guessing he won't need his suite in the hotel tonight.

Thomas doesn't have many obvious physical enhancements, but when he leans his head forward to stick his tongue into Jocie's mouth, you can see he has some kind of data port low on his neck. I can tell that it's expensive gear, but there's no way to tell what it does.

I tell my com to interface with Corps computers. Janet reinstated my old clearance, so I have access to all of the world's knowledge, except - of course - for banned religious writings. I ask the computer to pull up all information on the group Four. There isn't much and it wouldn't matter anyway, because the only thing in my head is an image of Martha's face. I feel like I'm being haunted, as if a spirit has been sent to torture me with her image until I go insane.

Snap out of it, Cephas. You'll get the answers you seek in time, but right now you have a job to do.

There's no doubt that everything I view is being monitored, so I start pulling up ancient texts on Aramaic, Greek and Hebrew. I try to look at so much information that anyone watching me will be overwhelmed, and not be able to see which information I cared about and which I ignored. Next

I pull up ancient maps of Jerusalem and the surrounding country, and ask the computer to extrapolate the predicted location of Christ over a three-year period.

While the computer works on the map, I start thinking more about Janet's comment about finishing the job "this time."

I ask the computer to give me a list of the top one hundred public figures who led the Equalization movement in the 2020's and the push to change the First Amendment in the 2050's, and then to cross-reference them for any names that appear on both lists. There are two names that stand out: Robert Marco and Tyco Leonard. I'm a religious historian and I've never heard of either of them. I discover why. The materials I'm looking at are not part of the public access databases. Once again, my instincts tell me that these are interesting pieces of a larger puzzle, so I keep going.

I pull up their biographies and find both were extremely rich, and both inherited a great deal of their wealth. I ask the computer to expand the search to include all known relatives of these two men, including non-blood relatives related by marriage. The combined list now brings up a total of twenty people who were involved in both periods of history. It seems the abolition of religion was a family affair that included a fair bit of intermarriage between the two families.

The Marco family made its original fortune on land speculation in Siberia. The land turned out to have large volumes of oil and gas, which were important fuel sources back then. The Leonard family made its original fortune in Finland, in early robotics technology. Both families later immigrated to the United States, with both Robert and Tyco being born here in the late 1990's. That means both were in their mid-thirties when they started contributing to the religious Equalization movement, and were in their sixties when they helped change the First Amendment. They're both interesting historical figures, but they're both long dead. It all looks like a waste of time.

No, keep at it. Something here isn't right.

The computer indicates it's finished with the map of Christ's travels, so I switch back to it. It's extremely detailed, giving known locations and predicted routes of travel, based on the topography and likely ancient roads. I tell the computer to mark the day and site of the crucifixion in red and call it "C," and then label all known locations and dates in terms of "C minus." The day before the crucifixion shows up as C-1, the day before that as C-2, etcetera. There are many known locations where we should be able to find - and film - Jesus.

Then I notice locations still marked in green. My jaw drops when one stands out as "C+3." The database recognizes a location for Christ three days after he died on the cross. I save the map to my computer. After decades of denying the deity of Christ, why would government computers still show a location for Jesus after he died?

I jump when there's a loud knock on my door.

When I open the door, I find three hotel employees and a Corps agent. The employees have hover carts covered with various gifts from fans and well-wishers. There are edible treats of all kinds, some cameras with requests that I take pictures for them, and a number of flower arrangements. On the third cart, I see something that nearly makes my heart stop, a vase with a single stemmed white rose.

Has Four penetrated security? Or is sending a rose all they can manage?

There's no hidden surveillance here, it's all out in the open. There are cameras in every corner of the room, each of which can no doubt zoom in on the slightest detail, so although I want to rip its petals off and find a message, the white rose will have to wait. I casually look over the gifts and eat one of the pieces of chocolate, then go back to the computer and bring up a massive three-hundred-year-old text about conjugating verbs in Aramaic.

Three hours later, I'm continuing my research, when again I jump at a loud knock on my door. I expect another load of gifts, but when I open it, I'm stunned to find a drunken Jocie, wearing in a bathrobe.

“Hello, Professor.”

“Hello, Jocie. Where’s Thomas? Shouldn’t you two be enjoying a night together about now?”

“If by that you mean having some sex, I tired him out and he’s sleeping. We’re just one floor up, I’m surprised you didn’t hear us.”

She tries to brush past me and into the room, but I block her entry.

“What do you want, Jocie?”

“Thomas is tired out, but I’m not. I think you deserve a second chance.”

She drops her robe and stands in front of me, stark naked. I hear the electronic hum of security cameras all changing positions to focus on her.

“Put your robe back on.”

I pick it up and toss it to her.

“I refused the first chance, and I certainly don’t want the second.”

“How?” she asks, with a bewildered look on her face.

“How what?”

“How do you resist? I’m Jocie. I don’t *have* sex. I *am* sex. You’ll love it. I promise.”

She reaches out and caresses my face, but I spring backwards as if I’ve been stung by a wasp.

“Don’t touch me. I can still see right through you.”

I stare into her eyes.

“The most beautiful tree in the forest is a rotten, hollow log inside. When a storm comes, you’ll blow down and be forgotten.”

She closes her eyes, obviously furious.

“This isn’t how things are supposed to be!”

She turns to leave.

“For once, I agree,” I reply with gentleness in my voice that surprises me as much as it does her.

She turns back to face me.

“You don’t act how men are supposed to act.”

“That’s where you’re wrong, Jocie. I act exactly how men *are* supposed to act. Sometimes I feel like I’m the only man left.”

Her face flushes with renewed anger. She opens her robe again.

“Take a good look, Professor. For the rest of your life, you’ll wonder about what you missed.”

For the first time, she meets my eyes and doesn’t break off the stare.

My eyes stay fixed on her eyes. This is a contest: a battle between the allure of her body and the strength of my will; and although there’s a small part of me that wants to carry her off to my bed, I refuse to let my eyes waver for even a moment.

The flesh is weak, but the will is strong.

The corner of my mouth starts to curl into a smile, as the smile simultaneously drains from her face. She sees I won’t be broken.

“Thank you, Jocie,”

“For what?” she asks, refusing to break eye contact, but bewildered by my change in demeanor.

“For this. For sharing your eyes with me again. I was wrong in Minneapolis, you do have some beauty on the inside. I just hope you can see it in yourself someday.”

She breaks off the staring contest, closes her robe, and leaves in silence.

The next morning, Janet has me up early. The travelers are appearing together in New York this morning. I put on the clothes and jacket that Janet wants me to wear, and as I reach the door, I look back at the cart filled with gifts. I look over the choices and try to appear as if I’ve randomly chosen the single white rose to grace my lapel for the day.

Once we're all in the private tube car, I head for the bathroom and peel back the outer petals. There are two messages spread over the petals: "Ur com hacked" and "Kisses real."

My com is hacked? By who? The Corps? The Christians? Four?

I replace the rose in my lapel. I hope Martha will somehow see me wearing it and read it as a sign that, even though I'm being torn apart, I'm thinking about her. When I return to the main room, the only one there is Janet. I assume Thomas and Jocie are in a room together.

"We dug deeper on the three girls from your class," Janet says. "There were girls born under those names, but they all died as children. Your students seem to have stolen the identities of dead girls, which shouldn't be possible."

"I'm just glad their mission wasn't to kill me, or I'd be dead. Is it possible they were there to protect me from the Christians?"

"Henry asked the same question, but we may never know the answer," Janet replies.

"Thanks for access to the Corps computers," I say. "I read some interesting things yesterday."

"I know. I saw you started your hunt for Martha McLeod. I tried to plow through the rest of it, but the verb conjugation stuff put me to sleep. You hit a range of topics from the ancient to the modern. Why study the 2000's when you're going back to year zero?"

I start to smile.

"What?" Janet asks.

"You said 'year zero.' Sometimes I just find it funny that our society has gone to such great lengths to wipe out religion and yet we still define the years in relation to the life of Christ. We call this year 2202 A.D. The "A.D." translates from Latin as roughly "the year of our Lord." It's just funny you would send us to "year zero" in order to prove the designation zero is meaningless."

"I suppose it has a certain irony."

"Oh, and you can call it 'year zero' if you like, but the most likely date of the crucifixion is in A.D. 33."

"Whatever you say, Professor. Year zero is what the project scientists call it, so that's what I'm sticking with."

Thomas and Jocie rejoin us, looking somewhat disheveled. Apparently she's been consoling herself with his company after our encounter last night. Thomas sits next to me.

"You should've done it with her at least once," Thomas says to me. "She's amazing."

When he speaks, he leans towards me so I can see the enhancement on his neck.

"Be careful. If she gets lipstick in that port on your neck, it may fry your enhancing."

Thomas pulls his shirt up to cover the port.

"There's no point in covering it now that I've seen it. What is it anyway?"

"It does a lot of things," Thomas replies. "My heart is probably ten times stronger than yours, I have increased sight and hearing-

"And an amazing sense of touch," Jocie says, then smirks at me.

"And improved stamina," Thomas whispers to me, revealing that Jocie didn't tell him that she tried to visit me after tiring him out last night.

"We'll be in New York in just a few minutes," Janet says. "You're all used to the drill by now. Any questions?"

"Can I ask Jocie questions about her faith?" I ask.

Janet doesn't bother to respond.

The show hosts are Buffy and Binky, highly enhanced identical twin women who are most likely in their forties, but trying to look as if they're still teens. Today is going to be a fluff show if I've ever seen one. Jocie is intentionally seated between Thomas and me to play up the "love triangle," angle

which the press is eating perpetuating. Jocie has chosen to drape herself on Thomas and turns her back to me.

"Jocie, you and Dr. Thomas seem to be quite friendly," Buffy says to lead off the interview. "How is it that a devout Christian can be so interested in the world's leading religious abolitionist?"

"We're trying to convert each other," Jocie replies, "That takes a lot of close contact."

"Are either of you coming around?" Buffy asks. "I mean, to the other's way of thinking?"

"Not yet," Thomas says, "but I'm looking forward to more close contact."

"Professor Paulson," Binky says. "How are you doing with all of this?"

"I'm looking forward to the mission. Going back in time is every historian's dream."

"I meant, how are you doing with Thomas and Jocie being together? Any regrets?"

"Regrets? Not in the slightest. I guess my Cult Hunter instincts were subconsciously telling me to avoid Jocie, then lo and behold, she turns out to be a Christian. In fact, I tip my hat to Jocie for doing such a remarkable job of hiding her faith. Jocie, I think it would be fascinating to hear the story of how you became a Christian."

"Yes, Jocie, that would be interesting to hear," Buffy says.

Let's see how Jocie's acting skills handle that little challenge.

"Well, it started when I was filming a new movie. I'd rather not say which one because I don't want to implicate any of the other actors who were there. One of the actors invited some of us over for a party, and it turned out to be one of their cult meetings."

"So the Christian faith spoke to your heart?" I ask.

Jocie gives me a look of pure hatred, but manages to stay in character.

"Not at first. There was some stuff that scared me."

"Like sacrificing live animals?" Binky asks.

"Well, not the first time. Look - this is getting a little uncomfortable for me. Discussing private matters of being a Christian isn't easy, after spending so many years in secrecy."

"Of course, of course," Buffy says, with a look of grave understanding.

"I've been working with Jocie to show her that such belief systems carry an inherent danger," Thomas says.

Trying to be the knight riding to her rescue, Thomas? Here's a lance for you to dodge.

"I was just thinking about that this morning, Thomas," I say. "Have you ever thought about the fact that your lack of a belief system could be considered a belief system in and of itself?"

"I don't believe in any god."

"But isn't that still a belief system?" I ask.

"Certainly not. There is no God - there's just man. I believe that man controls his own life."

"Then that's a belief system. You're the head priest in the church of man."

If Janet had the ability to send an electric shock through a com, I'd be fried by now, but I don't care. They brought this on themselves and I'm finally having fun.

"You're twisting my words," Thomas says. "You're just jealous because I have Jocie and you don't."

"Yes, and I'm the best," Jocie adds.

"This should be one very interesting expedition," Binky says. "And we'll be right back."

When the cameras switch off, Janet hits the stage and heads straight for me.

"Play nice," she says to me. "I guarantee this isn't going to spin well for you."

The twins must have been told to move away from the love triangle issue because, when we come back from the break, they unexpectedly shift their focus to me.

"Professor Paulson, when you get back in time, what do you expect the greatest challenges to be?"

“I’m glad you asked Buffy. As I’m sure you realize, it’s imperative we don’t do anything to change history while we’re there, so the biggest challenge will be fitting in and remaining anonymous among the people we meet. I expect we’ll be taller than everyone else, due to better nutrition. In comparison, we’ll also have perfect teeth and perfect skin since, we haven’t suffered the same diseases that were common in that time.”

“Then how will you manage to fit in?”

“I should think the plan will be to pretend to be foreign travelers, which I guess we are. “Since I speak the language, I’ll be the guide. Frankly, it seems like I’ll lead the expedition and Jocie will need to rely on her inherent acting skills to play the part. Maybe we’ll pretend Thomas is our slave.”

“Or I could be a foreign king, and you could be my local servant and guide,” Thomas replies.

“As Binky said, this should be an interesting expedition,” I say.

Chapter Eighteen

“I told you it wouldn’t spin well,” Janet says, as she and I travel back to the tube station in a separate hover bus from Jocie and Thomas. “The media is ignoring that you rejected Jocie and is eating up the love triangle thing. I’m splitting you off from them so you can’t cause more trouble. You now go straight to Michigan for training. Jocie and Thomas have been given strict instructions to play up your integrity for the remainder of the tour. Jocie has already declared victory, so she shouldn’t be a problem.”

“Thanks. I’d rather be alone than touring with those two.”

“You’re still thinking of Martha McLeod, aren’t you?”

Thinking of her, picturing her, hearing her voice.

“Yes.”

“That’s why you intend to hunt her yourself, isn’t it? You actually think you’re in love with her and you want to know if any of it was real. Take it from someone who’s been working under deep cover for years, you can’t believe anything she said.”

“Maybe not, but I still need to hear it from her lips.”

“Nobody can hide in the shadows forever, Cephas. We’ll find her someday and you can ask her. Just don’t get your hopes up about her answer.”

In the shadows.

I’m thinking about Janet’s advice and what Martha said: “We won’t stay in the shadows,” before she ran from my house. Before the Corps made me The Cult Hunter, I was a creature of the shadows too. It was an entire war of shadows fighting shadows.

Time to shine a light.

“Computer, restore all the research I conducted in my room in D.C., and then bring up copies of all the citations listed.”

That’ll be hundreds of references - enough to keep anyone who’s watching my activities busy for months.

“Now, create a list of all known living relatives of Robert Marco and Tyco Leonard; including non-blood descendants as far as fifth cousins.”

There are hundreds of them, living all over the world.

“List them alphabetically.”

I read through the list and find there are very few that still carry the name Marco or Leonard. The list is tedious, so I play a hunch.

“Now list all who currently work for the United States Government.”

Many names come up, most of which sit in positions of power in places like the Department of Energy. There’s one name I know personally: Henry Portman, Director of the F.B.I.

Does this family tree bear bad fruit?

“Computer, compile a list of the companies controlled by Robert Marco and Tyco Leonard during their lifetimes.”

The list is substantial. Tyco Leonard even owned a publishing company that was well-known for producing copies of the Bible, the Torah, and the Koran.

“So, how do two extremely rich guys go about getting rid of all religion worldwide?” I ask myself. “You buy them off,” I say, imitating Oscar from my class.

Hmmm. I wonder...

“Computer, list contributions made to the Sunspot Initiative by the relatives of Marco and Leonard, and the companies they controlled.”

The number is in the billions of dollars.

“Now, list contributions made to the Travelers Initiative from those same sources.”

The number is in the billions again.

“These people have hated religion for generations,” I say to myself. “They were there for Equalization; for changing the First Amendment; for Sunspot; and now for Travelers. The only thing they didn’t do was start the Final Holy War.”

I get a sinking feeling in my chest as I think it, and remember how Janet said: “This time.”

“Computer, of the companies listed as under the control of Marco and Leonard, did any of them make components for nuclear or biological weapons?”

Four companies come up. Marco controlled a company that made nuclear triggers, and another that made advanced guidance systems. Leonard controlled a company that made advanced components to evade launch detection and missile defense systems and a large genetics research company that had a division working on biological warheads.

If you put those together, all you need is someone angry enough to push the button.

I save all of these materials directly to the hard drive of my computer.

I think again of Janet’s use of the expression: “Maybe this time we can finish the job,” and wonder if the Final Holy War is still being fought. What the Jews, Muslims and Christians didn’t realize was that they were actually all on the same side - fighting a patient, hidden enemy that wanted all of them dead.

I’m snapped out of my thoughts when my com tells me I have an incoming communication from my Aunt Jennifer. We haven’t spoken to each other in many years. When my parents died, I went from being the center of my parent’s world to living in the loveless, sterile environment of my aunt. To her, I was nothing more than a tool that she couldn’t wait to have grown up and out of the house to do her bidding.

Although I was a very mature eight-year-old, she got a babysitting robot to watch over me. It didn’t do much, it mostly just recorded my activities for Aunt Jennifer to review. I smile when I remember debating myself on the subject of who was more lifelike: Aunt Jennifer or the robot. Needless to say, when I was given the opportunity to start college at ten, I left and never looked back.

I don’t know why, but I decide to receive the call. I’m not surprised to see she’s had multiple facial enhancements since I last saw her. When I was younger, she was already well on her way to becoming another over-enhanced, plastic-faced woman trying to deny her age. All the work has served to make her look even more stern and hawkish than she did when I was a child.

“Hello, Aunt Jennifer. It’s been a long time.”

“Yes, it has,” she says, with an uncharacteristic warmth.

“Is everything okay?”

“I just wanted to see you before you go, and let you know how proud I am you’ve been selected to be a Traveler. Of course, I’m also proud of myself for helping you to see the importance of studying ancient languages. I always told you that someday you’d be the world’s greatest cult hunter, and I was right.”

Everything is always about her.

“Thanks for the good wishes. I’m sure it’ll be a fantastic adventure.”

I remain silent to see what she really called to say.

“Cephas, I hope you realize just how important this mission is to our cause. We may finally be able to break all religions, once and for all. You understand how much the world is depending on you, don’t you?”

Getting closer.

“Of course I know that. As a matter of fact, I’ve got a lot of training to do-”

“Wait, Cephas.”

Please, just spit it out.

I know my aunt. She wants something, and she’s calculating what she needs to do to put herself into the position she desires. When I was a child, I watched her manipulate many people, though sometimes I think she did it just to prove she could.

“It’s okay. You should get back to work. We can talk about it when you come back.”

She’s letting me off the hook? It must be part of the calculation.

“I’d like it if you’d come see me in person, Cephas.”

“Sure. We’ll find a time when I get back.”

She uncharacteristically smiles again, and ends the call.

What in the world was that about?

A few days later, Jocie and Thomas arrive from the tour and we all begin training together. The first day of training at the NASA site isn’t “training” at all. We’re all given intensive physical examinations to ensure there’s no way we can take any diseases either backward or forward through time, and DNA samples are taken from each of us. Bringing a disease forward wouldn’t be a big deal; there are no ancient diseases that modern doctors can’t cure. The much larger concern would be taking something back with us that would wipe out mankind. Fortunately, we’re all given a clean bill of health, though I did notice the doctors gave Jocie a particularly thorough examination. The fact she’s willing to stand naked during the examination may have contributed to it.

The next part of our training consists of time with the tech guys. We’re each being issued very complicated cloaks. We can’t walk around with cameras in our hands, so the cloaks are imbedded with shoulder cameras and a network of solar cells to run them, plus memory chips to store hundreds of hours of footage. They’re activated with a simple on/off switch in the sleeve.

The tech guys almost flip out when I tell them we can’t go back to “Year Zero” wearing bright purple cloaks with orange stripes, and Jocie flips out when I suggest a simple brown or dull red cloak. She seems to have forgotten that the objective includes being anonymous observers. After days of fittings, and practice shooting video with our cloaks, they’re deemed ready.

Today, most people are kept thin by chips that circulate in their bloodstreams to regulate their metabolism and purge excess fat. These “electronic tapeworms,” as they’re called, keep the fat off, but do little for muscle tone, so the training team makes us walk many kilometers per day to prepare our feet and muscles for the work ahead. All the while, there are camera crews documenting our progress and sending it out to the world. Jocie and Thomas treat their presence like a personal photo shoot, while I do my best to avoid them.

I have the extra duty of trying to teach Jocie and Thomas a few words in Aramaic. They’re not willing students and choose instead to act like they’re the king and queen of Sheba - including treating me like their local guide and servant. I threaten to sell them both into slavery as soon as we go back in time.

It’s finally time for the briefing I’ve been waiting for, the one where someone will describe to me how this whole thing works and answer my questions. The lead scientist is a physicist by the name of Franklin Davis. He gives a very short description of the principles of time travel that leaves me scratching my head, then gets down to more practical matters.

“You’ve all been told, I assume, that we’ve successfully tested the device by sending two mice back in time on different occasions. We brought one mouse back to the present, the other we intentionally left in the past. The one we brought back was studied extensively and we could find no ill effects of the process whatsoever.”

“Why haven’t you tested the machine on something bigger - like a monkey?” Jocie asks.

“Because the power requirements increase exponentially as the amount of matter transported and the distance through time increase. To transport a mouse took enough power to supply a small city, which is why transporting you three will take everything we’ve got from three fusion reactors.”

“Do you transport us from here?” Thomas asks.

“No. The device sends you only through time - not through space. We’re set up in Israel, not far from Jerusalem.”

“But the topography has changed over time,” I say. “How do you know we won’t end up in the wall of someone’s house, or under a hill?”

“Excellent question. Outside Jerusalem is an ancient cave that’s now an archeological site. Based on the artifacts found, its use predates our target date, but it wasn’t in use at Year Zero due to a landslide that buried it several hundred years B.C. It would still be buried today, but ironically the site was uncovered when a nuclear missile aimed at Jerusalem went off target and created a crater that exposed it.”

I smile to myself. He’s talking about the first nuke the Israeli sub commander fired after the massacre of Jerusalem. I wonder if “irony” is the best word to describe the errant missile. Maybe “providence” would be more accurate.

“You want to send us to a cave where we’ll be buried alive?” I ask.

“According to our calculations, you’ll need to dig through no more than a meter or two of loose sand and debris to expose the cave entrance. We’ve made a simulation of the cave and you start digging practice tomorrow.”

“How do we get back to the present?” Thomas asks.

“I was hoping you’d ask that question.”

Dr. Davis pulls the cover off a structure that’s been sitting to one side, revealing what looks like a tall metal bird cage.

“This is how we get you back. This transport arena is made of alloys that didn’t exist until just a few years ago, much less in Year Zero. We send you back in a first arena and then we set up an identical arena in precisely the same spot. This creates a link - or bridge through time - that we can lock onto. Once per day, at noon, we’ll attempt a transport. Anything that’s inside the arena at that time will come back to the present. You can send us video messages and we can send you small items that you request.”

“Is that the device above the arena?” I ask.

I point to something that looks like a few hundred laser pointers attached to a giant ball of tinfoil.

“No. That’s just the prototype device we used for transporting the mice. It’s less powerful than the device you’ll be using; it could transport two people, at most, assuming they don’t weigh much and don’t have any heavy gear. Besides, we calculate it only has one or two transports left in it before it fries. Don’t worry, the second generation device that you’ll be using is much more advanced.”

“What about the third generation?” I ask.

“There won’t be one. The devices depend on large native crystals of tellurium 120. It took decades to amass enough for these devices, and effectively exhausted the world’s mineable supply. Any other questions?”

“The precise timing of Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection are open to debate,” I say. “How do you know exactly *when* to send us?”

Dr. Davis gets a somewhat sheepish look on his face.

“We’re taking our best guess, but the truth is we could be off a month or two. You could be there for a little while.”

“What?” Jocie yells. “A couple of months of walking around in the dirt and scraping for every meal? I thought we’d see him hung up on the sticks and three days later we’d have our proof and be out of there.”

“We’ve allotted enough weight for silver and gold coins to buy whatever you need.” You’ll live quite well while you’re there.”

“A month is a long time to be away from her attendants. You’d better learn how to do her hair and make-up, Thomas,” I say.

The scientists start to laugh, but stop when they receive sour looks from Jocie and Thomas.

Chapter Nineteen

We all head back to our respective rooms for some rest. The accommodations are pretty Spartan, but I refuse to complain. The staff here already has enough complaints from Jocie to keep them all running.

I'm studying the plant life of Israel - in case we end up in a bind for food - when there's a knock on my door. It's Jocie. She's been cold towards me since I refused her company in D.C., but for the most part she hasn't been outwardly hostile.

"Where's Thomas? We can't make a love triangle with only two sides."

"I didn't come here to fight, Cephias."

Her tone is surprisingly gentle and I feel guilty for starting off with a snide comment.

"I'm sorry. What can I do for you then?"

She walks past me and sits on a small couch.

"I thought we might just talk for a while. I thought maybe we should get to know each other better. I have millions of fans, but I don't have many friends. Lately, I've been thinking about the things you've said and wondering if you're the closest thing I have to a real friend."

"So, no more trying to seduce me?"

"That's right. I respect you, Cephias - more than anyone I've ever known. You say what you think I need to hear, instead of what you think I want to hear. Nobody has ever done that before."

I sit beside her.

"What about Thomas?"

"He's like the rest. He's part of the show."

"What do you two talk about anyway?"

"We don't talk much in private. When we're not sleeping or having sex, he mostly just lectures me on atheism. Actually, I usually find myself thinking about you."

She inches closer and takes my hand.

"Your refusal to sleep with me was the best thing that ever happened to me."

"I'm glad I could be of help."

She moves her hand onto my thigh and my entire body tenses with discomfort at her touch.

"I want what you have, Cephias. I want people to respect me for who I am and not for my body. Do you think you could find respect for me?"

She leans closer to me.

"I really want it to be mutual."

I believe this is the most seductive woman on the planet - but I'm seeing right through her reason for being here - and am not tempted in the least.

She leans in even closer and whispers: "Come on, Cephias. Let's make it mutual."

She puckers for a kiss and although I want to laugh, I'm also angry. I stand up and back away.

"Enough of your games. Why Jocie? Why is it so important for you to sleep with me? What is it you think I can give to you that other men haven't already done, hundreds of times?"

"It's not what you can give to me - it's what you've taken from me. This is who I am."

She runs her hands along her curves to drive the point home.

"This is what I do and nobody had ever said 'no' to me - until you came along. What am I, now that you've taken this from me? I'll tell you what I am now. I'm nothing."

Nothing? That sounds like the perfect place to start.

I look into her eyes and for the first time, they don't look like doll eyes to me.

Is something different? Is that a twinkle?

“Is your entire world about what’s taken from you and what you can take from others?” I ask. “Is there no room in your world to consider what you can give? You asked to play the part of the Christian in this project, so why don’t you try playing it? Christians believe Jesus suffered an unimaginably painful death to save the world from its sins. He didn’t take, he gave. He chose to give everything for others, including His life.”

I pause to reflect on my own words, as we continue to stare at each other in silence.

“You just asked me what you are now,” I say gently. “I think the question you should be asking is: ‘What do you want to be?’ You claim I’ve taken something from you. Well, I think maybe I’ve released you from a burden - a burden that’s been holding you back from becoming something even greater.”

She doesn’t break off my stare. She’s furious, but as the staring contest continues, her features begin to soften, and then her eyes begin to well up in tears.

“I don’t know how to be anything else.”

She buries her face in her hands.

“I know, Jocie.”

I sit, then reach out and place my hand on her shoulder. At my touch, she leaps at me, buries her face in my shoulder, and cries. I can’t help but put my arm around her. This isn’t another seduction trick.

“I knew I’d find you someday,” I say. “I’ve wanted to meet the real Jocie since that first ridiculous date. All I’ve ever seen is the Jocie who follows a script; the Jocie who plays the role she thinks others want to see. Now I’m finally going to meet the real woman inside.”

Jocie and Martha are just two sides of the same coin; master illusionists. Who would have dreamed I’d end up seeing the real Jocie before seeing the real Martha?

“I don’t want my life anymore,” she says, through sobs. “I haven’t for a long time. The whole world says it wants to be my friend, but I’m so lonely.”

“I’m sorry, Jocie. That’s a burden I can’t take from you.”

She sits up and looks at me through teary eyes.

“Look into my eyes. Tell me again you see some beauty inside.”

I find myself thrilled to stare into her eyes.

“Yes. It was hard to see before, but I can see it clearly now. It’s like a little flickering spark of inner beauty that’s just been born.”

“Really?”

She wipes away tears.

“Or are you just making fun of me again?”

“I’m not making fun of you. It’s real, and I think it’s growing. Like any flame, it’ll grow more if you feed it.”

“How do I feed it?”

“You feed it by showing kindness, caring, and patience for others.”

Like Christ would.

As the days roll by, the training becomes much harder. We walk ten kilometers per day in cloaks and sandals, and practice digging through a couple of meters of loose debris. The food quality goes down too, as they feed us rough breads and dried meats to get us used to the diet they anticipate we’ll find waiting for us in the past. Jocie isn’t complaining so much anymore, and I notice she’s spending less time with Thomas.

Every evening she stops by my room just to talk, and sometimes we’re together until late into the night. When she leaves, there’s usually a member of the security team nearby who smiles and gives me a knowing nod, because he assumes I’ve finally given in to Jocie’s seduction. He’d never

guess that I've been explaining the foundation of Christianity to her - and that she's really listening. We call it 'mission preparation,' but the truth is I think I'm ministering to her. Sometimes it seems that I'm watching a spark grow in her eyes nightly.

I try to keep her focused on the joy of the message of Christ, but often she slips into deep remorse, as she tells me about things from her past that she regrets. She cries nearly every night, and I hold her while stroking her hair and kissing her on the head. She doesn't know it, but I stroke her hair to dry off my own tears as they fall onto her head.

Many of those tears fall on Jocie's behalf, but even more fall for Martha. The haunting image of her face and the sound of her voice are still with me, and I secretly devote time every day to finding Four, - without much success. I hate to admit it, but Jocie's company in the evenings has been a great comfort to me, as I struggle to let go of my feelings for Martha.

In mid-December, the tech team decides all is ready and it's time to ship us to Israel. The nearest city to the training facility is Marquette, Michigan; so I ask Janet if we can all have one last day off to enjoy modern civilization before we go back in time. She eventually relents - on the condition that we take security and camera crews along with us. Jocie stops by my room as I'm grabbing my jacket for the trip.

"So where have you decided to go on your last visit to modern society?" I ask.

"Any place where there are people. My fans need to see me in person."

"What about Thomas? Where's he going?"

"He asked to tag along with me. Janet convinced me to let him."

"You and Thomas mingling with the crowds will make the national news."

"I'm counting on it."

I say nothing.

"Don't give me that look, Cephas. This is hard for me. I may no longer want all the things that come with fame, but it's okay to be in the spotlight once and awhile. There has to be a way to have both fame and a different life from my old one."

"If there's a way to have both, I'm sure you'll find it."

"So where are you going?"

"I'm going to Presque Isle Park to walk the nature trails. I just want to walk and think and be by myself."

"And you're giving me a hard time about falling into my old ways?"

She sits next to me and puts her hand on my arm. A month ago, I would have recoiled from her touch, but now it's clear she's just being a friend.

"If there's one thing I'm an expert at, it's recognizing when a man has been crushed by a woman. I used to take joy in seeing men crushed over me, but seeing it in you is breaking my heart. Did you really think I couldn't feel your tears on my head? Janet told me about Martha. I think I could help you get over her, if you'd let me."

I shudder and bury my face in my hands. I don't want to look her in the eyes. I'm afraid of what she'll see. She puts her arms around me and holds me, just like I've been holding her each night. I can't hold it inside any longer.

"Have you ever been in love, Jocie?"

"I know I have a little flicker of real love for one man."

"I have an inferno. It used to be a light to guide me through darkness, but it's become a lake of fire that's burning me alive."

"She was an actress," Jocie replies. "She was no more real than a character in a movie."

"No. I looked into her eyes - just like I've looked into yours. She was able to hide a lot from me, but not that. The moment she kissed me, I knew."

“Grow up, Cephas. As an actress, I’ve done hundreds of kiss scenes. Anyone can learn to make a kiss look and feel like more than it really means to them. I’ll prove it to you. Close your eyes and kiss me like you kissed her.”

I close my eyes and picture Martha with the sun shining through her hair, then I feel Jocie’s soft lips touch mine. I remember the feeling that I was created just for the purpose of kissing Martha, and let it flow through me and into Jocie. It only lasts a second, before I’m pulled back to reality when Jocie withdraws. I keep my eyes closed, trying to hold onto Martha for even a moment longer.

When I open my eyes, tears are rolling down Jocie’s cheeks.

“I’m now guilty of another sin. Envy,” she says.

I look into Jocie’s eyes and nearly gasp at what I see.

“You may be feeling some envy, but that’s not why you’re crying.”

“No. It’s not.”

“You’re crying for me because I’m in pain. You’re crying because you love me.”

“Yes.”

A half hour later, Janet calls me to say Jocie has requested separate transportation to and from Marquette. I stick to my plan and seclude myself in the park. The nature trails are as beautiful as any I’ve seen. I even spot a deer that the security guys have not managed to scare away, but nothing can remove the weight I’m feeling inside. I’ve brought a small tablet, so I sit and read for a while. Although it’s a warm day for December, my hands get cold, and I decide to stop at the snack shop for a hot drink.

Outside the snack shop, a young woman is arguing with a young man. He has six long-stemmed white roses in his hand and is trying to apologize for something he’s done. As I approach, I almost freeze. The woman is Cindi Stone from my class back in Colorado. Her hair color has been changed and she’s wearing a hat and sunglasses, but it’s definitely her.

When I’m just a few meters away, the young man yells: “That’s it. Just forget it,” then he turns to me and says: “I bet you know someone who’d appreciate these more than her. Here, take them,” and he storms off.

Cindi smiles at me.

“They say the booth way in the back is for lovers,” she whispers, then she stalks off too.

The camera guy and two security people were close enough to see the exchange, but I’m sure all they saw was a random encounter as I walked into a snack shop.

Oh, please, let Martha be here. But if she’s here, is it to kill me or protect me, or maybe, - just maybe - to tell me she loves me?

The security people should feel at ease, the place is empty and the booth Cindi suggested is positioned such that nobody can approach me without them seeing it. The camera crew and a couple of Corps guys take a table near the door, and start talking. They order from the computer and a motorized service cart brings them drinks.

As I take the booth, I see why Cindi chose it. The wall is mirrored such that anyone who approaches me will be able to watch the security team over their shoulder.

A waitress approaches me and, in a mid-western twang, says: “The cart for this area is broken. What can I get for ya?”

I barely keep from gasping, as I recognize the voice as Martha’s. Her blonde hair has been dyed red and pulled into a bun that’s hidden by a small hat, but it’s Martha. I’m speechless. I desperately wanted her to be here, but what do you say to a woman you’ve fallen in love with when you don’t know if it was her - or just an illusion she created?

The security team acknowledged her reason for approaching me and has gone back to their conversation. Martha watches their every move in the mirror.

“Please, look at me,” I say under my breath.

Her eyes slowly drop from the mirror to meet mine, as if she’s fighting a battle of wills to make them move. When our eyes finally meet, I see hers start to water up and she closes them, squeezing out a tear. Her eyes return to the mirror and refuse to move again.

“I still don’t know what I am,” I say, “but I do know that I’ll leave with you right now, if you ask me.”

“That’s why I came here, but now that I see you in person, I know that I have to follow orders and let you go. I need to know the truth as much as you do.”

“You also know that no matter whether I prove Christ real or a fraud, when I get back, there’s going to be someone waiting to kill me for it. The question is: Will it be you?”

“I’ve already told you: Four is not what you think.”

“You said you were sent to prepare me to choose. What does that mean? What does Four need me to choose?”

One of the Corps guards gets uncomfortable over how long Martha has spent taking my order and begins to stand up. She takes two of the roses from the table, then spins on her heel and leaves without a word. When the guard sees the roses in her hand, he smiles and assumes I was hitting on her.

Ten minutes later, she returns with a cup of mint tea. She’s cut the stems short and placed the roses on either side of the cup as decorations. Her eyes are once again focused on the mirror, but when I look at her face, it’s clear she’s been crying.

“I made a choice. Maybe these roses will help you make a choice too.”

She turns to leave.

“Oh, Miss,” I say

She turns back towards me.

“Take the rest of the roses.”

As she reaches for them, I drop one to the floor, and as we both reach to pick it up I’m close enough to her ear to whisper without being overheard.

“I choose you,” I say and slip my tablet computer into her waitress apron.

“Bad choice.”

She closes her eyes tightly and more tears squeeze out.

She disappears into the kitchen, and a moment later I see her outside, running for the nearby woods with the roses in her hand. The Corps people don’t notice a thing, nor do they notice when I slip the roses Martha left into my pocket.

I raise the cup of tea that Martha brought.

If it’s not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may Your will be done.

On the drive back to NASA, the hover bus has a newsfeed that’s showing the surprise public appearance. There’s just a quick shot of me walking by myself, but a lot of footage of Jocie and Thomas. Despite goading from the audience, Jocie wouldn’t even hold Thomas’ hand, much less kiss him like the audience wanted. Instead, she spent her time talking with people rather than playing for the cameras. More than that, she looks like she’s enjoying the conversations.

She really has changed.

When we get back to NASA, I retreat to my suite and lock myself in the bathroom. Each of the roses has a single word imprinted on it, to give me a clue as to the choice Martha says I need to make.

One says “Life.” The other says “Death.”

Chapter Twenty

Although there have been many proposals to build a floating tube system to cross the Atlantic, it still hasn't happened, so we're on a private flight to Israel. Each of the time travelers has a private room, but when I try to speak with Jocie through the door, she tells me to go away. She apparently sent Thomas away as well.

"Just promise me you won't let that inner beauty stop growing, okay?" I say through the door, which flings open to reveal a tear-streaked Jocie.

"Why bother? It's never going to be enough."

"Enough for what?"

"It's never going to be enough to get you to kiss me like you kissed her. Nobody in this world will ever kiss me like that again. The only consolation I have is that I didn't destroy your memory of her kiss, like I destroy everything else I touch."

"Close your eyes," I say.

"Why?"

"I'm going to kiss you like I kissed Martha, straight from my heart to yours, with every bit of the love that I feel for you. It's going to be like no kiss you've received before - or will ever receive again - and you're going to remember it for the rest of your life. It'll be yours alone, and nothing will ever destroy the memory of it."

She closes her eyes and waits, with her chin raised and her lips just slightly pursed.

Instead of kissing her right away, I take her into my arms and hold her. She's quite a bit shorter than I am, so her head naturally falls onto my chest. I deliver the kiss that expresses my true feelings for her, onto her forehead. I imagine my kiss slowly spreading warmth over her entire body until it reaches her - well - her soul.

There. I dared to think it.

I expect her to be mad or upset that she didn't receive the romantic kiss she was expecting, but instead she snuggles into me.

"Perfect," is all she says.

Unlike most of the others on the plane, I've been to Jerusalem many times. Even so, I'm filled with a sense of awe whenever I visit. I wish the awe stemmed from appreciating its beauty and history, but instead it comes from the overwhelming feeling of evil that permeates this place. The residual radiation from the bombs was cleaned up decades ago, but it was decided to leave most of the city in its desolated state as a massive war memorial.

It's been more than one hundred years since the Final Holy War ended, and still practically no one lives here. There are no prayers said at the Wailing Wall or on the Temple Mount because they are now nothing more than a crater. The rim of the crater has a walkway for tourists, but few know what used to stand at ground zero.

Nor do they know that the walkway was paid for by those same powerful atheist families. It was their way of gloating.

Our destination is about ten kilometers away from Jerusalem, on a hillside overlooking the Prat River. The area is far from where a tourist would normally venture, so I'm amazed to see a large crowd of people as we approach. The side of the mountain where the cave stands has been carved away to create an amphitheater, so the open side now resembles the set of a movie studio. Hundreds of people can sit and watch as we're sent back in time, as if they're the studio audience watching a new drama being created.

Jocie is thrilled to be in her element - in front of the lights and cameras - and walks into the cave to wave and blow kisses to an adoring crowd. Not one person has asked her about her "Christian beliefs," and I haven't seen the massive gold cross for weeks. Janet is correct; they just want to be entertained.

I don't think I've ever missed Martha as much as I do at this moment. Luckily, the tech guys come and gather us travelers to explain what we can expect, as they put on their show for the crowd. Once they have the crowd settled, Dr. Davis gives us - and the entire world - a tour of the cave.

"The original cave wall is indicated by this line on the floor. You can see that when you arrive the space will be limited, but not overly cramped. We've also raised the ceiling a bit to accommodate our equipment and to improve the quality of the video, but the original height is still high enough for all of you to stand."

"What's the approximate volume of the original cave?" I ask. "Since we have to dig ourselves out, how long will the air last?"

"With three of you working together, we estimate it'll take no more than an hour to dig through the meter or so of debris," he replies. "You'll have more than enough time to get through and refresh the air. Since you've raised the subject, here's the cave entrance that you need to excavate. As you can see, it's identical to the replica we built at our training facility."

"Now, let's show the audience the travel arena," Dr. Davis says, as the giant birdcage is brought out. "Once the arena is placed here in the cave, its position will be mapped to one-tenth of a micron. When the initial transport is done, the arena will travel with the travelers. Once they're gone, an identical arena will be placed in precisely the same spot. We can then bring anything that's inside the first arena back to our time."

"How do you get the first arena back here when this is all done?" I ask. It had never occurred to me before. "If you don't bring it back, then it would have been sitting inside the cave when you first unearthed it."

"In fact, Dr. Paulson, it *was* sitting inside the cave!"

Some stagehands bring out an old, beat-up arena. It still has two thousand years of dust and black stains on it from sitting inside the cave for so long. The crowd claps at his clever and dramatic answer my question. I must admit, for a scientist, he's a real showman. I want to inspect the "old" cage, but the stagehands cover and remove it.

"Thank you all for coming. Now, it's time for the travelers to do one last equipment check, and get some sleep before tomorrow's big event."

A large curtain is drawn around the cave area and we can hear the crowd disperse.

"We're seeing a last-minute complication," Dr. Davis says, when he has us to himself. "It's going to be a much tighter fit inside the arena than we thought."

"How tight?" Thomas asks.

"Have you ever heard of sardines? We have two cases of equipment that need to go, plus a case with the money and food. You'll need to stack the cases behind you, and then squeeze yourselves together. We suggest you arrange yourselves in height order, with Dr. Thomas standing, since he's the tallest. It's the only way the production people think they can get all three of your faces together for the departure shot."

"Why does Thomas get to be on top?" Jocie asks.

I look at Jocie. It's often hard to see how much she's changed. She gives me a look to indicate she'll be kind and compassionate only when it's convenient for her, and now is not the time.

For the next thirty minutes, we try to squeeze ourselves into the arena in various ways. The production people are correct. The only way we can all be facing the crowd is the arrangement they suggest.

"You'll have to figure out something else," Jocie says. "I'm not going to be on the bottom."

I bite my tongue rather than deliver the retort I'd like to say.

"Why don't we throw out one of these cases?"

Jocie opens the nearest case and begins to rummage through it to find things that aren't needed.

"No, Jocie," Dr. Davis says. "You'll need everything we've packed."

They begin to squabble.

"Enough!" I say. "I volunteer to be lowest in the shot. Thomas can stand; Jocie can stand on a case and be at his shoulder height; and I'll sit on the other cases and be the lowest and to one side."

We try it and it works fairly well, although not as well as the original arrangement.

"I still don't want to be lower than Thomas," Jocie says, and the squabbling begins all over again.

I produce a loud whistle with my fingers, and everyone stops to look at me.

"Jocie, the only way you can be the same height as Thomas is if we stack two cases and you stand on them with you and Thomas facing each other. If we do that, I'll be on the ground, with my back to you two and the crowd. My face will be out of the shot - but I don't care anymore."

When we practice the arrangement with my face out of the shot, Thomas is even more pleased than Jocie. They look like two lovers, facing each other, while I look like a bitter, jilted ex-lover who has been squeezed out of the love triangle. It suits me.

Nobody will remember your departure.

We're housed in a secure area that's been erected near the cave, and are given one last medical exam to be sure we won't carry diseases back in time. I choose to dine alone, but I'm only half done, when there's a knock at my door. I open it to find Jocie standing in a bathrobe.

"I'm here to give you a look at something you've been wanting to see."

She opens the robe, revealing that she's fully clothed, and wearing the large gold cross she wore to the big announcement.

My head hits my chest with a sigh, while Jocie laughs about the look on my face - and I can't help but join her. When the laughter ends, I share what's on my mind.

"You've come a long way since the first time we met, but I couldn't help but notice you had some selfish motivations regarding the arrangement in the travel arena."

"I know. It's still really hard for me. I'm still an actress, and we're still walking onto the largest stage the world has ever seen. How do you do it? How do you keep the world from deciding who you are for you?"

"I guess it must be my armor."

"What are you talking about?"

"It's something my mother said before she died. She told me the world tries to make us into whatever it wants us to be, and the only way we can be the person we want to be on the inside is to build a suit of armor. After the accident that killed her, I even wrote a little poem about it in her honor. The last two lines of the poem are:

The boy in the armor, he is my core.

Without Him, I wouldn't be me anymore."

Jocie closes her eyes.

"Let me picture you in a suit of armor. Do you have a sword and shield too?"

In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

"Cephas? Earth to Cephas. Man, can you ever zone out?"

"I'm sorry. I was just struck by a memory of something I once read. Yes, I think I'm going to need a sword and shield. I think we're all going to need swords and shields, if we want to define who we are for ourselves, instead of letting the world do it for us."

There's another knock on the door and Henry Portman walks in, without waiting for an invitation.

"Cephas! Jocie! I'm glad I was able to see you off. You know, Jocie, you don't have to dress the part in private. That ugly hunk of gold is ruining my view of you."

"It's good to see you, Henry, I say. "Let me pour you each a glass of wine while I finish my dinner."

"None for me," Jocie says. "I have some personal matters I need to finish."

She heads for the door.

"I'm planning to pay you a personal visit later, Jocie," Henry says, and watches Jocie walk away as she makes her escape.

Soon Henry and I are into a second bottle of wine.

"I haven't seen news for weeks. How are things going with tracking down Four?" I ask.

"Janet's report said you've started your own personal hunt for Martha McLeod. I wish we had you on it full time, but the Travelers Initiative needs you more."

"I take it that it's not going well?"

"The movement has gone worldwide. The number 'four' has shown up on walls in any city you can imagine, but we have nothing in terms of finding out who they are or what they want. The fish heads have gone dark too. It's like they're all holding their breath and waiting on the travelers. The whole world is depending on you to come back and tell them there is no God."

"Thanks. I work better under pressure."

Henry takes a long drink, so I continue.

"Can I ask you a question, Henry? I've spent a third of my life chasing Christians, and now I'm going back in time. Why do we do it? Why do we care that a few people still believe Jesus was the Son of God? Is it all worth it?"

"It's worth it to me. From the time I was young, my family has told me that religion is like drunkenness. It robs people of their right to choose the course of their own life. It steals their resources and gives them excuses to hate. They waste their lives dreaming of heaven, when they should be living the only life they have: the one here on earth. It's a public service to detox them and put them back on the same path as the rest of us."

Henry is on his own holy crusade.

"Henry? What if we're wrong? What if there is a God?"

Henry stares at me in a way that makes me wonder if my death will be ordered tonight.

"Cephas, I'm cutting you off. Get to bed. You need to sober up and get me my proof so we can finally be done with our work."

Our work?

My com wakes me up from a nightmare. In the dream, we've traveled back in time, but the cave is dark and we can't see what we're doing. As Jocie and I dig, we keep seeing pinpricks of light, showing us we're digging in the right direction; but Thomas keeps covering them over as he digs in a different direction.

I grab a quick breakfast and go to talk to the tech team, which is bustling about in the cave. I see Earnest, the guy who designed the technology incorporated into our cloaks.

"Earnest, I have a last-minute question."

"Sure Doc. What can I do for you?"

"How many lights will we have in the cave for digging out?"

"One headlamp each. Don't worry, Doc. The batteries are good for twenty hours minimum. You'll have plenty of light."

"Can you throw in an extra battery pack?"

“Sorry, Doc. Too heavy. We don’t have much weight margin.”

“What about something light that doesn’t use batteries then? How about something like a light stick? Would that be too heavy?”

“A light stick? The kid’s toy with the chemicals that glow when they mix?”

“Yes, exactly. They weigh almost nothing.”

“I don’t know, Doc. We’re not supposed to allow anything extra. They’re even going to make you empty your bowels and bladders minutes before you go, just to get down to the last gram.”

I see the three cases that are going back with us sitting next to a tool bench. I walk over to the bench and pick up a hammer. With a couple of loud swings that make the crew cringe, I snap the handle off the smallest case. I pick it up and hand it over to Earnest.

“A man can only pee so much. Does this save enough weight that can I have a light stick?”

I think the team is going to get mad, but Earnest - and every other tech who saw what I’ve done - start to laugh.

“What’s so funny?”

“You just solved a two thousand-year-old mystery, Doc.

I give him a blank look.

“That case was found in the cave near the arena when the excavation began. Nobody could figure out what happened to the handle. Okay, Doc. I’ll find you a light stick or two.”

He picks up the handle and weighs it, so he’ll know the new weight allotment.

The final hour before we go is nothing less than a circus. The curtain is still drawn and the scene backstage is one of technical people running in all directions. Outside the curtain, people have crowded the amphitheater and the surrounding hillsides to watch the show. Leaders from all over the world give speeches, reminding us of the grave importance of this mission to mankind and, of course, because they want to be seen by an all-time record, world-wide audience.

The funniest part - to me - is that, just when we make our climactic exit, the power will go off worldwide, and everyone’s screens will go dark. Luckily, there’ll be power at the site to record the event, and everyone will be able to watch it a few minutes later when the power comes back on.

When we change into our high tech cloaks, the only modern item we’re allowed to bring is our underwear. I reach into the hidden pocket of the cloak and find that Earnest has, indeed, provided me with some modern light sticks. I look at him and smile as the stagehands motion the three of us to our marks and the curtains open to wild applause. We all smile and wave. This is one of those moments in history where people will ask: “Where were you when...”

I expect more speeches, or to give one last interview, but apparently there’s just nothing left to be said, and we’re motioned to enter the arena for departure. We begin to squeeze ourselves in, just as we practiced it the day before, with Thomas and Jocie facing each other, and me low, with my back towards them. There’s no way for the three of us to enter this space without looking comical, but Jocie keeps the crowd laughing by pretending Thomas is enjoying the close contact.

“We think you might feel a slight tingling sensation and be dizzy for a moment or two when you arrive,” Dr. Davis says.

“Jocie’s already giving me a tingling sensation,” Thomas says.

“You can touch the bars, but make sure you’re completely inside,” Earnest reminds us. “We wouldn’t want any pieces left behind.”

A laser light show begins, as beams map out the exact location of the arena to the micrometer and the time travel device is lowered from above. I suddenly wish I understood how this thing works.

I hear someone tell the audience to put on their protective goggles, and start a countdown from twenty.

Eleven, ten... *Why did I agree to this?*

Six, five... *You're most likely about to die.*

Two, one... *I love you Martha. I wish I had said it to you at least once.*

Zero.

Chapter Twenty-One

I thought the process would be instantaneous: one moment I'd be here, and the next moment I'd be there. In reality, traveling through time feels more like years spent in complete darkness and silence, where your only company is what you can think about and picture in your mind. I have time to see and think about every important moment of my life. I think about how little time I had with my parents; I revisit childhood friends; I re-experience painful memories and remember moments of joy that have been hidden inside of me for years.

My time as a cult hunter is painfully vivid. I see the faces of all the people who shrank from me in fear, and watch as my own face moves with precision to ensure that they would. I've always been proud of the fact that I don't have enhancements, yet whenever I was being "The Cult Hunter," my face moved like it too was made of plastic.

Is that why I've always avoided my own eyes? Were they the one thing left of "me" that couldn't be covered by the mask?

For a long time, I forget Thomas and Jocie are traveling with me - until I realize I can sense their presence. I can't feel my body, so I try to reach out to them with my mind, until I can hear their thoughts. I push Thomas back and focus on Jocie.

"Cephas? Are you there?" Jocie says in my mind.

Sharing thoughts is the most intimate experience conceivable. Jocie is in my mind and I'm in hers. Although I've come to care deeply for Jocie, the idea of laying bare my innermost thoughts is too frightening, so I resist her probing and build a mental wall around the things I don't want her to see. To my surprise, she can't - or doesn't - do the same, and I find myself flooded by all the pain and joy of her life.

Pain is a dominant force in her memories. I see her neglected as a child, as her parents relied on a nanny robot to watch her so they could lose themselves in the stupor of drugs. I see her swearing that someday she'd find a way to control people, rather than allow others to have control over her. I see the terrible things she did to people after making that vow to herself as a child. She stepped on whoever she had to in order to make it to the top, leaving a path of ruined careers and broken hearts in her wake. The worst part is that she's conscious of me watching her memories, and having them open to me is causing her to feel guilt and pain.

"Cephas? Please answer me."

"Yes, Jocie. I'm here."

"Cephas. Please stop looking at my life. I can't bear it anymore. If I could show it to the world like a movie, I would, but not you. Anyone but you. Your memories, your thoughts. I understand you now in a way I wouldn't have thought possible. I saw you on the night your parents died. I saw your life - growing up with your aunt and your time at the Corps. I saw your knight-in-armor. I think you're the most beautiful person I've ever known."

"Jocie, I know you too, and there's so much more inside you than I could have imagined. To have said that you have only a small spark of inner beauty was cruel. I was treating you unfairly because I was seeing you through the veil imposed by the world, rather than knowing you like I do now."

"How I wish that were true. Your judgment of me was kind beyond words. Your ability to see even a small spark of light in me was a reflection of your own goodness rather than mine."

"Please don't use the word 'judgment,' Jocie. I can't... It's not mine..."

I stammer in our minds.

"I know, Cephas. I saw your whole life, and I even read the Bible through your memories. I feel like I've had an eternity to replay and think about my life, and I know now that I want what you have. I don't care what happens on this mission. I'm ready to follow Christ."

"Noooooo."

Thomas screams into our heads. His entry is an intrusion of the most unspeakable sort. If there's such a thing as mind rape, then Thomas has forced it upon Jocie and me.

"I see you for what you are, Cephas. Bible reader! How dare you call yourself The Cult Hunter? He's poisoned himself, Jocie, and now he wants to poison you with his sick thoughts. You must listen to me instead. Don't let him deceive you. Destroying the memory of Christ is our mission and I need you on my side."

"Thomas, you've looked inside my mind and Cephas.' How can you deny the truth that's right in front of you? What more proof do you need that we all have souls?"

"Noooooo."

Thomas continues to scream.

"Religion is all lies. Lies and deception."

Jocie sends both of us an image of flaming arrows bouncing off a shield, then laughs.

"Your mission has failed, Thomas. Be gone."

I can still hear Thomas' voice, but it's been pushed aside - like a whisper.

"Cephas? That small spark only you can see inside of me? It loves you. It loves you with a love I've never known until now."

"I love you too, Jocie."

I want to add "you are my sister," but she knows what I mean before I can think it.

I suddenly become aware of my physical body again, due to a sudden sensation of pain on one shoulder and then the other. Tiny pinpricks of pain begin to erupt just about everywhere, and I know in my mind that both Jocie and Thomas are feeling physical pain as well. If this is the tingling that Dr. Davis mentioned, then it's much worse than the scientists anticipated.

"There isn't much time, Cephas. You need to listen. You see things that other people don't see, but you're so focused on the external that you're blind to the most important thing you possess. I see the storm that rages inside you, every time you desire to feel what the Christians feel. Cephas, the storm is you denying your relationship with Christ. He's already with you - if you'll just let Him in."

Thomas' voice in my head goes silent, but Jocie is still there.

"Thank you, Cephas. I think the spark you lit has saved me."

"Jocie? I think you're beautiful on the inside."

Then I can't hear her voice anymore either.

The pain continues to cover my body, but the worst pain of all is in my throat, near my Adam's apple. It's as if someone is holding a red hot coal against that spot, until it makes my blood boil. I think it may have boiled, because I feel two distinct pops - as if steam has been released - followed by a new flood of pain, before everything goes blank.

I slowly become aware that I'm slumped against the arena wall, with Thomas and Jocie on top of me, and that the air is now cool and damp. The transport is complete. I'm not sure if I lost consciousness or not, but it's clear Thomas and Jocie are not awake. It's pitch black, but I can see tiny glowing spots on my cloak and feel burning sensations everywhere the cloak touches my skin. I feel around for the door latch, and when I hit it, I tumble out onto the cave floor. Based upon the glowing spots on their cloaks, it looks like Jocie is hanging half out of the arena, with Thomas on top of her.

I try to say "wake up," but only a grunt-like gurgle comes out of my mouth. My throat still hurts, and when I reach up to touch my neck, my hand comes away sticky with blood.

I can't get to the case with the headlamps until Thomas and Jocie get out of the arena, so I try to slap Jocie awake. My hand comes away with even more blood. Thomas doesn't have blood on his face, but it feels cool to my touch. I find Jocie's wrist and feel for a pulse. There is none. I find Thomas' neck and he also has no pulse.

Despite the pain in my neck, I start an anguished gasping for air, but it isn't the physical pain that bothers me the most.

Dead? How can they be dead?

When I get my breathing under control, I remember that the light stick Earnest gave me is inside my cloak pocket. I bend it to start the chemicals mixing, which bathes my immediate area in a pale blue light. I wish I hadn't. Thomas and Jocie are both distorted messes. In places, it looks like the skin has been boiled off of them.

She can't be dead. We shared thoughts and she became my sister. Her new spark ... I'll never see it again. I'll never see it grow into a bright fire.

As the cobwebs continue to leave my brain, I look at their injuries and it becomes clear how they died. The technology left over in our bodies from enhancements exploded. Thomas had bragged about his super strong heart and now there's a gaping hole in his chest. Jocie had enhancements in places I would never think to enhance, all of which blew up. The only tech inside my body was the two chips left in my neck from when I was a baby.

Enhancements. They make you beautiful on the outside, but destroy you inside.

I want to laugh and cry at the same time when I realize that Jocie and Thomas' enhancements were exploding out of them - and into each other. Their selfish arrangement in the arena, with them facing each other and me turning my back to them, shielded me from the force.

Did their selfishness save your life? Or was your own kindness the 'armor' that saved you?

With the aid of the light, I'm able to retrieve the cases and push Jocie and Thomas' bodies back inside. There's nothing usable left. All of the technology in the cases exploded and melted into a fused mass of wires and chips, so I throw it all back into the arena. The only case left is the small one with the handle smashed off. In it, I find food, water, coins, and a first aid kit.

I'm able to swallow water without much pain, so I assume my esophagus isn't shredded. My breathing is raspy, but there doesn't appear to be any air escaping through my neck. Luckily, the old chips were pretty close to the surface.

If they'd been deeper, the damage might have severed a major blood vessel, and killed me too.

The plan was for us to make a short video, telling the world that we arrived safely. It would then be pulled forward in time thirty minutes after our arrival. All of the camera equipment in my robe is destroyed, so I need to send a message in some other way. The arena doesn't transport the dirt from the cave floor, so I can't scratch a message there. Next, I try using some water to make mud to write on the equipment cases, but it doesn't stick.

I cough, and end up holding my neck from the pain. When I place my hand on the case, I leave a clear fingerprint in blood. I'm able to write just a couple of letters, using blood from my neck, before I run out. I look at Thomas and Jocie, and want to cry over what I know I need to do. I don't want to touch them - but I have no choice. Wincing, I put my hand into the hole in Thomas' chest, and find more than enough blood.

Dipping my finger into his chest, over and over like an old quill pen into an ink bottle, I write: "Tech explodes. Send paper and light sticks. Dr. C.P."

How dumb is it to write your initials? Who else could it be?

There'll be a live audience to witness the bodies of Jocie and Thomas as they arrive back in our time, and most of the world will know they're back - due to the sudden and unexpected power drain. There'll be no way to hide what's happened to them. Their cloaks are torn full of holes from the explosions caused by their enhancements, but I cover them as best I can.

They deserve some final dignity.

I remove my cloak and use it to cover them both. In the dim light, I can see small burns all over my body, where the pieces of technology incorporated into the cloak exploded and burned.

Part of me wants to go back with them, but the thought of waiting in the arena with their bodies isn't very appealing, so I begin to inspect the cave. It's much larger than the size indicated by Dr. Davis, and there's a second chamber which must get filled up somehow, over time, because it isn't there in the future.

The small shovel is intact, so I work my way to the cave entrance and begin to dig my way out. I've been digging for just a few minutes, when the cave becomes blindingly light from the transport. Luckily, I was facing away, so I'm not blinded for long. When my night vision returns, I confirm that the bodies of Thomas and Jocie are gone from the arena. I imagine the pandemonium that's happening in my time.

I notice there's still blood clinging to the bars of the arena. That explains the two thousand-year-old black stains on the "old" arena in the future. I wish they'd let me inspect the arena, maybe I would have asked more questions.

There's nothing to do but dig. The material is sandy and loose, so as I try to form a tunnel, the walls keep caving in around me. This was supposed to be a job for three people, but since the material is loose, I work through a meter quickly.

So much for their estimate of just one meter of digging. I can't wait to find out what else they're wrong about.

As I'm approaching two meters, the whole tunnel collapses. I'm going to have to dig up and along the solid rock to avoid cave-ins. There's no telling how many feet of digging will be required to escape.

I lie back on the pile of dirt that I've already moved. It's quite large and will start to spill into the arena eventually. The tech guys won't be happy about using large amounts of power to transport dirt forward in time, and as I start to adjust the pile, it hits me. The second chamber is full in the future - because I'm going to fill it up as I dig myself out.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Does the fact that the second chamber is full in the future mean I'm going to succeed?

I estimate it would take a small dump truck to fill the second chamber. It's clear I'm going to be here for a while. I still have the metal case in which the food and water were stored, so I take out those supplies and use the case to carry loads of dirt. I'm dumping one load, when there's a brilliant flash of light behind me, indicating something has been sent through time.

The arena now contains a box of light sticks, additional food and water, a large sheaf of paper, an antique pencil, a small knife, and an envelope with a letter inside. The letter is unsigned, but was most likely directed from behind the scenes by Henry Portman. It's done with remarkably poor penmanship, probably because whoever wrote it has never used a paper and pencil before.

Dear Cephas:

The world is very sad about the loss of Thomas and Jocie, but overjoyed that you survived. Everyone wants to know how you escaped death. Please use the paper and pencil to write a letter to the world. Have you dug out yet? Tell us what you need and it's yours. The world is behind you. We'll transport in one hour.

That was the letter Henry told the team to show to the media. There's a second sheet I'm sure he didn't share:

Cephas, I expect you to complete your work, despite the setback. Now that you can't get evidence on video, we've doubled our campaign to make sure the world views you as the most trusted man of our time. Don't let me down.

Henry

A setback? Two people are dead, and to him it's just a setback?

I start a response.

People of the World:

Thank you for your kind thoughts. As you've seen, modern technology explodes when travelling through time. I'm sure the scientists will uncover the reason. I ask you to not blame these amazing men and women for the deaths of our beloved Thomas and Jocie, as there was simply no way to predict this would happen.

There are two reasons I'm still alive. First, the only enhancements in my body were two small chips in my neck that were placed there when I was very young. The chips were close to the surface, so I wasn't killed. However, the explosion has rendered me mute. I've stopped the bleeding and hope to regain my voice, in time. The second reason I'm alive is due to the heroic sacrifice of Thomas and Jocie. As they stood facing each other, their bodies shielded me from the force as their enhancements exploded.

I've begun digging out, but the process is going to take longer than expected - perhaps several days. With the world behind me, I'm confident in success.

Cephas

P.S. It seemed only right to cover Thomas and Jocie with my cloak. Can you send another? It's quite cold in this cave.

My true thoughts about Thomas' and Jocie's motives for rearranging how we stood in the arena aren't important anymore, so I might as well contribute to the myth that they were both heroes. I'm truly sad about their loss - particularly Jocie.

At the last moment, she believed, and hoped to be saved. I pray that she was.

I then write a short note to Henry.

Henry, the dig estimates were wrong. I need to move several tons of material to get out. Have the techs estimate the oxygen supply and see what they can do for me.

Cephas

With nothing else to do, I return to digging. Now that I'm digging upwards to follow the cave roof, the going is fast. All I need to do is dislodge the loose soil and let it fall around me. Once enough dirt has fallen to bury my feet, I move it to the other chamber, then start over again. If I'm lucky, it'll be a constant angle upwards and I'll be out. If I'm unlucky, the cave roof is arched and I'll need to dig first up, and then down, to find the surface.

I dig and move dirt in an endless series of trips back and forth. I give up counting how many. I estimate it took at least two hours to dig upwards -maybe seven meters - when I finally hit the top of the cave and see that it's indeed going to curve back downwards. The second chamber is over half-full now, which I suppose means I'm now halfway done. My hands are cut and bleeding, so I wash and bandage them, and lie down for a short rest.

I must have fallen asleep, because when I wake up, I see there's a new cloak and letter in the arena. Under the cloak I find something that looks like a centuries-old gas mask. I read the letter.

From the People of the World

Cephas, your courage and perseverance are an inspiration to us all. Please take a moment to tell us what's happening.

Henry is laying it on thick in his public notes. From Henry, I get the following:

All of the air tanks we have use electronic pressure controls that we worry will explode in transport, so we're looking to find or build one with a manual valve. In the meantime, the mask has a carbon dioxide scrubber that should help. Tech guys say you'll be out of air in about twelve more hours. They also say you must be wrong about the dig distance because you have no place to put several tons of dirt and the cave was empty when they found it.

Henry

I forgot to mention the second chamber to the scientists in my previous note forward. I hope this means I have something closer to twenty hours of air remaining. I'm about to start a new letter, when there's a flash in the arena. I must have slept for nearly an hour, because they just attempted to pull a note forward. They're going to panic when they get nothing.

I write a quick note:

People of the World:

Thank you for all you're doing. The mask and cloak are greatly appreciated. I'm sorry to have missed the last transport window. I fell asleep from exhaustion.

Cephas

P.S. My hands are cut and bleeding from digging. Some work gloves would be helpful.

To Henry, I write:

There's a second chamber, with an entrance opposite the first. That's where I'm putting the dirt. Air supply isn't good.

Cephas.

Again, there's nothing to do but keep digging. My note disappears sometime when I'm working, but since I'm now digging downwards in a steady arch following the cave ceiling, I don't see the flash. Digging downward makes the going much slower, because I now have to haul the dirt-filled

case up the incline and then into the cave. Ironically, having the handle that I smashed off the case would have made the work much easier.

I've extended the tunnel downward by about five meters, when I hear a hissing sound coming from the main chamber. When I get back, I see what looks like a scuba tank sitting in the arena, bleeding off its air supply. The chamber air already feels a little fresher. I'm about to move it out of the arena, when I see someone has written "Don't touch" on the side. There's a note on the floor, which I carefully grab and read.

From the People of the World

Dear Cephas,

Here is a gift of clean air, which we send as a symbol of the clean future that you are working so hard to provide to the world.

The note from Henry says:

Couldn't find an old regulator, so rigged this tank to have a slow leak. Tech guys had one explode, so warned you not to touch. Everyone is eating up your "People of the World" letters. It caused quite a fuss when you missed a transport window. I could get you elected President when you come back. Keep it up. We have the world right where we want it.

Henry

I want to write an explicative-filled letter back to remind them to send work gloves, but instead I start a new letter, with a bloody fingerprint on the paper.

People of the World

Thank you for the air. It reminds me that we breathe as one in this important task. My tunnel is approaching twelve meters in length, so I hope to soon be out.

Cephas

I choose not to respond to Henry.

I don't want to be President. I don't want to manipulate the world. I just want to see the sky.

After another eight hours, the second chamber is nearly full of dirt. I hope this means I'm almost free. Another air tank arrived about four hours ago, but the air supply is still getting thinner by the minute, and my thoughts are getting slower. I crawl to the end of the tunnel, but just can't bring myself to start digging again - my eyelids are so heavy. I know this is a stupid place to take a nap. There's very little air space in front of me, but I don't have the energy to crawl backwards either. I close my eyes, planning to shut them for just a minute.

"Cephas, wake up," I hear Martha's voice say.

"Martha? Where am I?"

"You must get out, Cephas. The air is almost all gone."

I smile. It's so nice to hear her voice.

The smile fades as I wake up and realize it was a dream. The air is very heavy and I feel dizzy. I've been asleep for so long, the light stick near my face has gone dim. I can feel beads of sweat forming on my face.

It would be easier to dig, if it wasn't so darned hot in here.

I reach up and touch the dirt above me. There's no way my breath alone heated it this much. The dirt is hotter than my hand. I must be close to the surface. I start hacking forward and upward with desperate strokes of the shovel, not caring about the dirt falling around my head and burying alive me where I lay. Thirty centimeters later, my shovel penetrates farther than it should, and when I pull it back, I'm flooded by warm sunlight and fresh air. I lay there for a long time, just letting the oxygen fill my body.

I can't wiggle through the small hole, so I'm forced to fill the case and take another load back to the cave. When I get there, I see there was a transport while I was asleep, and there's a pair of work gloves waiting for me. Better late than never, I suppose. Henry's note from the People of the World says:

"We raise our hands to you, Cephas."

I raise my hand to you too, Henry, but with one finger lifted.

I write a quick note, in large letters:

To the People of the World: I'm finally free!

I sit and contemplate the words I've written. For the first time in my life, I really am free. There are no cameras watching me. Nobody can monitor what I do or say. Nobody here has an agenda that involves manipulating or killing me.

I drop the case with no handle beside the arena for the scientists to find in twenty-two hundred years, and crawl out into the open air.

Is this what it feels like to roll back a stone, and walk out of your own tomb?

Chapter Twenty-Three

The area immediately surrounding my new cave entrance looks nothing like it does in my own time. Apparently a couple thousand years and a high-yield nuclear warhead will do that. I've emerged three-quarters of the way up a low bluff that's green with low shrubs and grasses that are doing their best to grow among the rocks and sand. I take just three steps before I trip and stumble in a small furrow created by a recent rain washing down the hillside.

Rain? Why didn't I study the weather patterns? Is it always green? Or does recent rain give some indication of what month it might be?

Instead of getting up, I crawl to the nearest shrub and spend an hour lying in its shade to rest and heal. My neck still hurts from the chips exploding, but I have no mirror to inspect the damage. Luckily, the first aid kit includes powerful antibiotics, so I don't need to worry about an infection.

The land and sky around me show no evidence of people living in the area, not even a distant curl of smoke to indicate a cooking fire. I have enough food for a couple of days, but my water supply is low from the effort of digging. There's a ridgeline to my north, so I decide to walk to it and see if it marks the edge of a valley with a stream in it. Within half a kilometer, I find myself wishing for a hover bus. Our daily training hikes at NASA were on nice, smooth roads, not steep, rocky angles. When I crest the ridge, I'm not disappointed. Below, I can see lines of thick green vegetation snaking their way down the mountain, indicating where I can find water.

The sun tells me that it's late morning, so I decide to make the trek into the valley. Someone did their homework, because the tech team provided us with three imitation water skins that shouldn't look out of place. The downward hike proves to be farther than I'd estimated, but I'm soon rewarded with the sound of trickling water. There isn't a good spot to fill the skins, so I follow the stream downward until I find a nice shaded pool.

As I bend over to fill the first skin, I get a look at myself in the water. I look awful. My face and hair are caked with dirt, and the bandage on my neck has bled through, so there's black blood visible. I carefully remove the bandage to get a look at the wound, and then wish I hadn't. There are two ragged tears in my skin where the chips blew out. If I were back home, they would warrant laser cauterization. It's a miracle the explosions didn't tear open the major blood vessels in my neck. I try to speak, but I can only make a raspy, cough-like sound. My vocal cords are at least bruised - if not destroyed altogether.

So much for being able to speak the ancient languages.

I finish filling the skins and add a sterilization tablet to each. I need to wait at least fifteen minutes before the water is safe to drink, so I use the time to clean myself by wading into the water - cloak and all. I only have a small amount of soap from the first aid kit, so I decide to conserve it for use in cleaning and dressing the wound on my neck. Even so, the cool water is refreshing and sufficient to remove most of the grime.

How would Jocie have handled being so dirty?

Using the reflection of the pool, I clean my neck with the sterilized water and dress it with a clean bandage. It's sort of like tying my necktie at home, so I find myself falling into my usual mirror "routine."

Are hands just a useful adaptation? Are lips and tongues evolved from random mutations? Or were they part of a grand design?

I make some of my favorite cult hunter facial expressions in the reflection. There's no telling which ones will be handy when I start to meet people. Will the people here respond to my practiced Cult Hunter "death mask" with fear, like the people of my own time? Or will I get a completely different response? Maybe even laughter?

Although I've been avoiding looking at my eyes, when I catch a glimpse of them, I'm the one who wants to laugh. The twinkle is still there and now looks ridiculous to me, staring out from behind the death mask. I try many other looks, but no matter what mask I choose to wear, I can't change that twinkle.

Maybe it's not mine to change?

When I'm finished, I look up at the ridge I need to climb to get back to my cave, and the very thought of it makes me sleepy. My cloak is still wet, so I hang it over a bush and then lie in a sunbeam near the side of the pool - and am soon fast asleep.

I wake to the sound of nearby children's voices and, farther off, the sounds of sheep. The kids are speaking in Aramaic. I crack my eyelids just enough to see that they're crouched about fifteen meters away, looking at me.

I open my eyes.

What sort of persona do I use? How would a foreigner act?

I fall back on what I know best: being The Cult Hunter.

Narrow eyes, tilt head by two degrees, be commanding.

The boys show no reaction at all, and continue with their conversation.

"Where do you think he comes from?" asks the first boy, who appears to be the older of the two. "Could he have come from Jerusalem?"

Try a subtle lip curl.

Still no reaction.

"I've never seen a cloak like that, even in Jerusalem," the second boy says.

"I bet he's from Babylon."

Try the classic Cult Hunter chin lowering. That always gets a reaction.

Nothing. None of my usual facial expressions work on them.

All this time, I thought the masks were an asset. Could it be they were a liability?

"His skin is very white," the second boy replies. "And he has no beard. I bet he's a Roman."

I can't believe I didn't think of beards. I hate shaving, so I had my facial hair permanently removed with lasers years ago. I guess that's also an enhancement, but since it leaves no chips inside you, I don't count it.

"But he has no sword. All Romans carry swords so they can kill people for fun."

Is that how all the locals think about the Romans?

The sheep sounds are getting closer, so it's likely that adults will be arriving soon. The only thing left to me is the most foreign option of all - being myself.

I clear my mind of manipulating my expressions and look straight at them, with a natural smile on my face.

"His eyes are blue. I've never seen blue eyes before."

"He must be an escaped slave. I've heard the Romans take slaves from far away with blue eyes. I bet that's why his neck was cut - because he was trying to escape."

"He's just looking at us and not speaking. I don't think he understands us."

I point at my neck and try to speak, but make the usual croaking sound.

"He sounds like a goat!"

"Can you not speak?"

I shake my head to indicate that I cannot, and then I stand. The boys' eyes go wide.

"He's a giant."

I'm just under two meters tall. That's an average height in my time, and above average here, but hardly gigantic. I smile to indicate that I'm a friendly giant, then I put on my cloak and collect my water skins.

“Was your throat cut in battle?”

“Are you an escaped slave?”

The boys continue to ask questions as the lead sheep come into view and start to drink at the far side of the pool. I don't want any trouble with the shepherd, so I start to back off to show that I'm not a threat.

The boys run through the sheep, calling: “Mother, mother.”

Now I'm curious. In the ancient writings, female shepherds are a rarity. I stand and wait, as dozens more sheep crowd the pool to drink. Soon a woman appears, flanked by the two boys, who are jabbering all of their suspicions about my origin. I just keep smiling as she eyes me, and then lifts her skirt to her knees and walks straight through the pool towards me. She's quite pretty, and has penetrating, shining eyes.

There's not a hint of the “doll eyes” that I see in my own time. She's full of life.

“Eli and Seth say you can't speak, and I see that your neck is bleeding.”

I touch my bandage and feel it's soaked through.

“Do you understand our language?”

I nod my head to indicate that I do.

“Are you a slave?”

I shake my head.

“Good. I want nothing of escaped slaves. We have a camp nearby. Come. I'll dress your wound and give you dinner.”

Not knowing local custom, I smile and bow my head.

Their “camp” is only two kilometers away, but traveling at the speed of sheep, it takes a long time to get there. I expect to find men at the camp, but there are none. There's no sort of pen for the sheep, so they start wandering around and finding places to eat or lie down. I notice there's a good view in all directions from this spot, making it impossible for anyone to approach without being seen.

If I stay for dinner, I'll never make it back to my cave before nightfall, and finding the small opening in the dark could prove impossible. The camp consists of a single cloth tent, a small fire pit, and mats where the boys sleep out on the ground. From this, I presume the nights must be warm.

The mother sets the boys to tasks in preparing dinner, and motions for me to sit so she can look at my neck. She knows I can't respond, but she talks to me anyway.

“This is an odd cloth.”

It's a bioengineered synthetic skin, infused with heat-activated, antibiotic-producing yeasts, but made to look like a loose cotton weave. How would you like to hear that translated into Aramaic?

I have plenty of it back in the med kit, so I throw it into the fire. She looks appalled.

“Who are you, that you can waste cloth so easily? Obviously you've never woven it yourself, or you would treat it as more precious.”

I just smile.

“This is an odd wound. It did not come from a knife. It's more like you were ripped open by claws or teeth. How did it happen?”

I smile again, at the thought of what she would think if I could answer her question.

“Luckily, it seems to be healing well - but I'll put a balm on it anyway.”

She goes to the tent and returns with some leaves, which she places into a small pot of water which she puts onto the fire. It looks like she's making tea, but I presume she intends to put it onto the wound, once the water boils.

“Could you speak before this happened?”

I nod my head.

“It would be nice to know your name.”

I pick up a stick and start to write it in the dirt.

“You can read and write?”

I nod.

“Then you are definitely no slave. Your hands tell me that you have never worked a field or tended flocks. Do you come from far away?”

I nod.

“You are a traveler?”

You don't know the half of it, sister.

“I do not read, nor does my brother-in-law, whose sheep I tend. They were my husband's sheep, but he's dead. I used to live in the house where my sister-in-law is now the mistress. I now spend the warm months here with the sheep.”

She sighs deeply.

“I'm sorry. I shouldn't share my misery, but it's easy to speak to one who can't talk back. Now, how shall I find out your name?”

I pick up a stone from the edge of the fire and hold it up.

“Your name is Cephas?”

I nod and smile.

“That's an odd name, but perhaps where you come from it is common. It's better than the name the boys gave to you. They call you 'goat man,' after the noise you make when you try to speak.”

I start to laugh at the name they gave me, but it's painful, and the noise I make in the process just proves the point. She and the boys laugh too.

When the laughing is over, I hold up the stone and point at myself, and then I point at her.

“You want to know my name? My name is Esther.”

We sit in silence for a long while. In my time, a long silence would make people uncomfortable, but she shows no signs that she regards this as anything but ordinary.

“Well, traveler Cephas, where are you going next?”

I use the stick to draw a picture showing the Dead Sea, a mountain and a city, then an arrow to show I'm going to the city.

“You are going to Jerusalem. My brother-in-law went to Jerusalem several months ago to sell wool. When he was there, he saw a great healer who healed a blind man. Maybe he can heal your voice.”

A great healer? Now you have my attention.

I point to the stone, and then open my hand in a gesture to ask for more information.

“You want to know the healer's name?”

I nod eagerly.

“They call him Jesus of Nazareth; but you may not find him in Jerusalem. A goatherd bringing his stock through here told my brother-in-law that this man, Jesus, was across the Jordan in Perea and may be heading back to Galilee.”

It's a long walk from here to Galilee.

The evening meal consists of some strange tasting meat, a coarse bread, and dried fruit. They seem to think it strange when I put the rare meat back over the fire to cook some more, but I want to avoid intestinal parasites, if possible. The boys chatter throughout the evening, while Esther tells me about her husband, how much she misses him, and how sad she is over her new lot in life. I find tears rolling down my cheeks as I hear her story, and wonder if Martha is now as lost to me as Esther's husband is to her.

Don't worry. You'll see Martha again.

I wake up often during the night. The hard ground is a far cry from my bed at home, but the restlessness allows me to watch the moon and stars like I did on camping trips when I was a kid.

Esther and the boys rise with the sun, and soon set about the tasks of the morning. Last night, Esther did, indeed, make a mush of the leaves she boiled, slathered it over my wound, and wrapped it with a bandage that looked like someone else's blood was only half washed out of it. Now she adds the cold mush that was left over, and wraps it up again.

The family seems to be in no hurry to go anywhere. The sheep are content to graze, and the family simply watches over them. Maybe they graze an area until the sheep have cleared it of grass, and then move the camp.

We eat a breakfast of cold bread and dried fruit. I need to get on with my journey, so I pick up a stick and repeat my drawing of a mountain and an arrow.

"Time to be on your way, traveler Cephas?"

I nod my head.

"I wish you safe travels," she says, and the boys repeat it.

I can't think of any way to respond, so I reach into a cloak pocket and bring out one gold coin and two pieces of silver. I point at my neck and bow my head to indicate that I want to thank her for her care, and give her the gold coin. Then I smile, and use my thumb to spin the silver coins to each of the boys. Their eyes go wide in astonishment. Apparently I've given them a lot of money.

Esther begins to cry and drops to her knees. The boys join her.

"God has answered me."

I approach her, and put my hand on the top of her head. She jumps as if she's come out of meditation to find a wolf standing next to her.

"Seth. Find a fine lamb and slaughter it. Cephas must have meat for his journey to Jerusalem."

I smile and shake my head 'no.' I take her hand and close it tightly around the gold coin, then I hold our hands against my heart. I hope she gets the message that this is a gift given with no expectations. I give them all one last smile, pick up my water skins, and start to walk from their camp.

"Wait," Eli says. "Take my staff. A traveler should have a staff."

He hands me a thick walking stick that has a handle wrapped in leather. I take the staff, bow my head to him, and leave the camp, with the three of them just staring after me.

I'm pleased to find that my cave has not been disturbed and the air inside is fresher, but there's a note from "The People of the World," wishing me well.

I write a note to tell "The People of the World" that I spent last night with some shepherds and managed to communicate, even though I'm mute. Then I tell them the shepherds confirmed that Jesus is nearby and I'm traveling to Jerusalem, so they should look for notes, at most once per day, starting in one week. Only the strictest of abolitionists have claimed Jesus never existed, so confirming He's here shouldn't raise too much of a fuss.

I take all of the food, the things I need from the med kit, plus five pieces of silver and two pieces of gold for my travels, and hide the rest of the coins in the cave. Once I'm outside, I move a rock over the entrance, then go a hundred meters uphill and make a stack of rocks as a marker. I'll make additional stacks as I go, to mark my way back.

With one last look over the little valley, I'm on my way to Jerusalem.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Although my feet are getting tougher and my legs stronger, I judge climbing over the Mount of Olives by walking up and down valleys is the more difficult way to travel. Instead, I walk southwest, where I hope to find the road that leads from Jericho to Bethany, and then into Jerusalem.

When I reach the road, I only know that I've found it because there are travelers going in each direction. The path through my local park back home seems wider. There are a lot of people heading towards Jericho, so I rest by the side of the road under one of the few trees in the area. By listening to their conversations as they pass, I realize many of the travelers are sick and injured.

In my time, nobody is diseased, deformed or injured, but here it seems as if everyone has some sort of ailment.

After a while, a man with a heavy pack sits next to me.

"Share your shade with a fellow traveler?"

I point at my neck and make my usual goat-like sound.

"Mute, huh? You must be going to Jericho to ask Jesus of Nazareth for healing."

I notice his right hand is little more than a club, as if the bones were all broken and not set properly for healing. It probably limits the sorts of jobs he can perform. I'd planned to go to Jerusalem, but with this many people heading towards Jericho, I decide to join the crowd and seek Jesus there.

Joining the crowd is easy because there are so many traveling in that direction. Many try to speak to me, so I remove my neck bandage so all can easily see why I can't respond. The skin is healing well, but I'm no closer to being able to speak than before. Some people give me bronze coins when they see I'm mute.

Ailments are common, but so is mercy.

By the time we reach Jericho, there are hundreds of people crowding the streets - certainly many more than the town is able to house. People in the crowd pass along the information that the healer is at the river, so I continue in that direction. When the crowd slows, I realize we've reached the river and the crowd is spreading along the banks to hear Jesus speak.

I leave the crowd and scramble down the bank, which is high and steep at this point. When I look up river I can see a man in a boat, just off the shore, in a spot where the bank is more gently sloped. He's using the bank as a natural amphitheater so more in the crowd can hear Him.

I work my way towards Him, along the shore, but the crowd is continuing to spill along the banks, so I can't get very close. I wish I had those cameras about now, but no matter what happens, just being here is a historian's dream. I can see Him well enough to tell He looks pretty much like everyone else. He's about one and a half meters tall, with dark hair, a neat beard, and an olive complexion.

He's telling the story of the farmer scattering seed. I know I'm a man from the future and shouldn't be so taken by Him, but His oratory skills are mesmerizing. I listen to Him tell many stories, and watch the reaction of the people. They're just as mesmerized as I am.

The crowds on the bank are so thick there's no way for Jesus to pass through them, so I play a hunch and move back downstream, then look for a place to cross the river. The water is fairly slow and shallow on this side of the river, but as I cross, the water gets deeper and faster with each step. At first, I use the staff that Eli gave me as an extra support by wedging it between rocks, but when the water is up to my waist it seems that I'm facing a greater and greater risk of being impaled on my own staff, as the current tries to sweep my feet out from under me.

With one misstep, the current takes me away. I manage to avoid being impaled and hold onto the staff, until it's also dislodged, giving me no choice but to swim for it. Unfortunately, swimming

wasn't part of my NASA training, and my muscles quickly start to cramp up in the cold water. I try once to back float as a way to rest, but my pack drags me down too far and the choppy current sends water up my nose, causing me to flail and sputter. I cling to the walking staff, despite the fact that it's slowing me down.

As I'm pulled downstream by the current, I'm also happy to note I'm being swept closer and closer to the opposite shore. My happiness ends when I see the telltale white patches that indicate I'm being swept into rocks. I turn my feet downstream and lift them as high as I can manage.

When I reach the first section of rapids, I try to grab a big rock as I pass, but the current sweeps me off of it and all I get for my trouble is scratched and bruised hands. The water is becoming shallower, so I try several more times, but I just can't get my feet under me long enough to stand. Each time I try, I get painfully bounced along the bottom.

I still have the staff, but I know if I try to wedge it downstream, the force of the water will impale me upon it. I see two large rocks sticking out of the water close together, so I swim and position myself to be swept between them. Just before I pass through, I hold the stick out horizontally and it catches as it spans the gap, then the water presses me against the stick. The water is shallow, so I'm able to get my feet under me. I work my way to shore, where I collapse.

Eli was right. A traveler needs a staff. This thing just saved my life.

Luckily, the late afternoon sun is warm and my cloak starts to dry quickly or hypothermia would be a real possibility.

After a rest, I walk back upstream and see that my hunch was correct, Jesus and seven of His apostles are in the boat and heading for this side of the river. I see a sandy landing spot where they could put their boat ashore, so I hide in the bushes nearby. The historian in me desperately wants to speak with Jesus, but even if I wasn't mute, I'd force myself to simply observe. Anything I do or say could potentially change history. Instead, I conceal myself in the leaves, about twenty meters away.

The boat lands and the eight of them sit in the soft grass near the river to rest a while, and eat bread. They've been sitting quietly, when one of the apostles asks Jesus: "Why do you always tell stories when you talk to the people?"

He gives the apostle a patient smile - like a parent teaching their child - and begins to speak.

"You have been permitted to understand the secrets of the Kingdom of Heaven, but others have not. To those who are open to my teaching, more understanding will be given, and they will have an abundance of knowledge. But to those who are not listening, even what they have will be taken away from them. That is why I tell these stories, because people see what I do, but they don't really hear, and they don't understand. This fulfills the prophecy of Isaiah, which says:

'You will hear my words,
But you will not understand;
You will see what I do,
But you will not perceive its meaning.
For the hearts of these people are hardened,
And their ears cannot hear,
And they have closed their eyes-
So their eyes cannot see,
And their ears cannot hear,
And their hearts cannot understand,
And they cannot turn to me and let me heal them.'

As He finishes the quote from Isaiah, He stands up and faces the seated apostles. They don't perceive it, but in doing so, He's turned His face so that He's looking directly into the bushes where

I'm concealed. More than that, He's clearly looking at me and speaking to me personally, as He starts to teach again.

"But blessed are your eyes, because they see; and your ears, because they hear. I assure you, many prophets and godly people have longed to see and hear what you have seen and heard, but they could not," Jesus says directly to me.

I realize I've been holding my breath so as not to miss a word, and I force myself to breathe.

Jesus Christ just spoke to me. I came here to prove Him a fraud, but here I am, hoping I'm wrong.

I think about life in 2202. We have every earthly thing of which our human minds can conceive and build; and yet we wander, lost and broken, from one pleasure to another.

I listen to Jesus teach the apostles until its late afternoon. He doesn't look my way again until He and one apostle are the last on shore and the others are in the boat.

"Come, Cephas," He says, again looking at me. I try to stand, but I'm rooted to the spot, when the last apostle on shore says: "I'm coming," and walks towards Jesus. Jesus smiles at me, then He and the apostle push the boat off the sand and jump into it.

Once they're gone, I feel as though I've been released from a paralysis that was holding me in place. For the entire hour, I sat without having the slightest cramp or pain, but now I'm sore all over from having sat so long without moving.

Jesus using my name makes sense. He renamed Simon "Peter." In Greek the name Peter is Petrus, but in Aramaic, the name Peter is "Cephas."

So was Jesus talking to Simon? Or did Jesus just ask me to follow Him?

I spend the night curled up right there in the leaves. The next morning, I find a man with a boat who's willing to ferry me back across the river for one of the bronze coins I was given yesterday. It's much more comfortable than swimming in the cold water and walking around wet for hours.

When I get back to the road that leads from Jericho to Jerusalem, I find it already jammed with a crowd following Jesus. Since my legs are long, I quickly make my way to the front of the crowd, but when I've almost caught up with Jesus, He stops. There are two blind men beside the road shouting to Jesus and asking Him for mercy. The crowd tells them to be quiet, but they only shout louder.

"What do you want me to do for you?" Jesus asks.

"Lord, we want to see!"

While everyone else is waiting to see what happens next, I notice two men making their way along the edge of the crowd, looking at me. They have numerous scars on their faces and hands, but otherwise appear to be healthy and strong. Each is wearing clothing that appears Egyptian in origin, but they don't look Egyptian. One of them is a few centimeters taller than me and looks more like a Roman in his complexion. The other one is much smaller and has the complexion of everyone else around me. If he were to change his clothes, his face would be lost in the crowd to anyone else, but to me, he'd still look like a puzzle piece that's been jammed into the wrong spot.

It dawns on me that they may be criminals who have joined the crowd to pickpocket people, and that as a mute, I'd make an easy target to rob. Before I can try to make an escape, there's a great shout of joy and the crowd surges forward to see what has happened. The two men who had claimed to be blind are now walking around, claiming Jesus has restored their sight. The two men in Egyptian garb who were watching me are lost in the moving crowd, and I take the opportunity to disappear. I make my way close to Jesus again, hoping being near the center of attention will keep me safe.

Many times along the walk we stop, as Jesus heals the sick and lame. We're nearing Bethany, when I see the man with the crippled hand I met yesterday. He's trying to get close to Jesus to ask

for healing, but his large pack is preventing him. I make motions to indicate I'll carry his pack so he can get through, and he hands his burden over to me with a smile.

It's not long before the crowd stops again. Jesus heals a man with some sort of skin disease, and then turns to the man with the crippled hand. I can't see what's happening, but I hear Jesus say: "Go. Your faith has made you well," followed by the man saying: "Heal my friend, the mute. Make him speak!"

He points at me, and before I know it, the crowd is pushing me forward.

This is NOT a good way to keep a low profile.

The man with the healed hand says to me: "Your faith will make you well." I look at his hand. What was a gnarled club is now a normal looking hand.

Do you have faith enough to be healed, Cephas?

In just the last few hours, I've witnessed the blind given sight, and the maimed and diseased made whole, but does that mean I now have faith? My entire life has been spent in pursuing and punishing the faithful. Am I ready to turn my back on 'Man's Garden of Eden'? What will I say when I return to my own time?

Jesus smiles at me and says nothing. I look downward, afraid to meet His gaze. If He heals me, then everything I've known my entire life has been wrong. I don't know what I'm more afraid of: that I'll be healed because I've nurtured a forbidden faith that will get me killed when I return home; or that I won't be healed because I'm a faithless person standing in the presence of God made man.

The doctors in my time can fix my vocal cords in seconds when I get back. I don't need to make this choice for the sake of my voice. The choice is much larger than that. I glance upwards, but still don't meet His eyes with mine. There's no outward mask I can wear that this man cannot see through. He knows me. He knows every thought that's passing through my head.

I'm just not ready to choose. And He knows that too.

I turn my back and walk away. In just three steps, I'm hit by the enormity of what I've done. I've turned my back on God. My entire generation, my entire world has turned its back on Him, but I just did it in a very personal - and literal - way.

There's a tree not far away, so I sit under it while the crowd moves on with Jesus towards Jerusalem. The man with the healed hand comes to retrieve his pack.

"Why do you cry, my friend?"

I reach up and touch my cheek. I didn't realize I was crying.

"Were you scared of being healed?"

I nod.

"Were you afraid that your faith isn't strong enough to give you your voice back? After you saw my hand was healed, you still did not believe? Your faith truly is weak then, isn't it? Imagine all those who have not seen what you have seen and yet believe anyway. They are the ones who truly have faith. I hope you can find your faith, my friend."

He rejoins the crowd following Jesus and disappears.

Not long ago, Martha said in class that when I have something to say, nobody can shut me up. As I sit against the tree, I think perhaps I've been made mute because shutting me up was the only way He could get me to listen to Him.

Chapter Twenty-Five

I sit under the tree until the crowds have all passed by, and then continue sitting for hours - even after the sun has set. The proof of Christ's deity was right in front of me, and I turned my back because I was afraid of how it would change my comfortable life. I think about my challenge to Thomas when I said that a lack of belief is still a belief system. What a hypocrite I am. When my own belief system was challenged, I turned tail and ran.

But then, what is my belief system? My parents made no mention of the subject at all, and I was raised from the age of eight by my atheist aunt to believe there is no God. On the day their co-workers held a life celebration to honor my dead parents, my aunt refused to let me go and said: "If your parents have proven anything, it's that this is all there is, so make the best of it." For most people, "making the best of it" is to center their lives around physical pleasures by cramming in as much sex and drugs as possible.

I think about Martha's essay. Her conclusion was that, even with all of our wonderful technology, man still has a basic need that we can't fulfill by ourselves. It's such a fundamental part of our being that perhaps we sometimes forget it's there. It drives us to seek answers to the questions philosophers have asked for centuries: Who are we? Why are we here? Where are we going?

I'm stunned by the depths of my hypocrisy. I sought out a position in life where I could be privileged to read every ancient religious text imaginable. I pondered their meanings for countless hours and never understood them at all. Worse, I used the information to persecute those who had true faith because I couldn't see that all of my efforts were a vain attempt to fill my own emptiness.

"Vanity," I try to croak the word from the book of Ecclesiastes. Hover cars, fusion reactors, time machines - all of those things are just part of the vanity of mankind.

So what do I do now? Can I really be an atheist one minute and a Christian the next? Is it possible to believe in God, when a minute ago I believed in nothing?

I examine that thought. Is it really true that I believed in nothing? Even before I read the Bible, I was always searching for the meaning in things. Could it be that I've been using puzzles in a search for faith? I've wanted a puzzle that I couldn't solve by myself. Is God the puzzle that I've wanted to find all along?

Right now, I can't help but feel that the people who try to fill their lives with sex and drugs are better off than I am. They don't know how empty they truly are, while I'm sitting here staring into the abyss of my emptiness, no longer fooling myself into believing I can fill it up myself.

"Father?" I croak.

I don't know how to pray, but I decide to try - even if I can't say the words aloud.

Well, God, here I am. I'm alone and mute and finally listening. Could it be You've been trying to speak to me my entire life - and I just wouldn't shut up long enough to hear You? Or maybe You're the one who's been listening, and waiting for me to reach out to You? If You're there - and You're listening - then I guess I should say...

My mind goes blank. I have no idea what to say. Should I beg for forgiveness for my years as The Cult Hunter? Should I acknowledge my sins? I clear my mind and say the first thing that pops into my head.

"Thank you," I whisper.

Thank you for this life, even if it included doing evil things. Thank You for my love of puzzles. Thank You for bringing Martha and Jocie and Thomas and even Henry into my life. So, that's all I want to say. Let me know if there's anything You want to say to me.

I continue to sit - I don't know for how long - and watch the moon rise. I don't worry about the Egyptian men returning, or others coming to rob me. Somehow, under this tree, I feel safe - as if I'm being watched over. At some point, I drift off and begin to dream.

I'm in an ancient blacksmith's shop that has a long row of lit forges where men and women are working, hammering pieces of metal. The people pay no attention to me, but as I walk along, I notice their clothing is from many different time periods. The last few people even have combs in their ears, which strikes me as funny because I've never seen anyone in my time do such difficult manual labor. One forge is lit, but there's nobody working at it. There are many pieces of metal waiting to be worked, and I get the sense I need to select one. I run my hands over the pieces, seeking one that's strong, but not brittle. When I see the perfect piece, I pick it up and stick it into the fire.

"Cephas?"

I hear someone say in my dream. I want it to be Martha, but it's not Martha's voice I'm hearing. Someone touches my shoulder. I open my eyes to see Esther. I'm still against the tree outside Bethany. I slept through the night and it's now late morning.

"Did you sleep here last night?"

I nod.

"Come with me into Jerusalem. Everyone says Jesus of Nazareth is there. They say He's healing the sick and the lame."

I nod and get to my feet. I turn to pick up Eli's staff where I leaned it against the tree, but it's gone. I check the pockets inside my cloak and find that everything is still in place. If I was so sound asleep that someone could approach me and take the staff, why didn't they rob me at the same time?

"Are you ready to seek Jesus?"

I nod.

I'm ready. But what's more, I think I might actually believe.

There are still branches on the road that people cut and spread before Him when Jesus entered the city riding on a colt yesterday. I regret that I missed it.

I buy some bread and meat for myself and Esther. She wants to go to the market where she plans to buy sheep with the money I gave to her and start her own flock, but I point to the temple. It's Monday, and Jesus should be there. She shows me the home of a cousin, where I can sleep in a hayloft, and we part ways.

It's still early in the day and I wonder if Jesus is already in the temple. My wondering ends when I hear a great commotion inside, including the crashing of tables being overturned and money hitting the floor. I smile as I hear Him accuse the merchants of turning His Father's temple into a den of thieves.

The commotion lasts for quite a while, as the merchants clear their wares and leave, and is then followed by a great tide of people entering the temple to hear Jesus teach. If I'm supposed to pay some sort of offering, or be cleansed in some way before entering the temple, I don't see it. The people are flooding in at too great a rate to listen to the instructions of the priests and teachers of religious law anyway.

Many sick and lame people have been brought to the temple, and Jesus is healing them. I join the crowd as it pushes forward. The disciples are trying to maintain some sort of order, but it isn't going well. I come face to face with my namesake, Simon Peter, and smile at him.

"Have you found your faith, brother?" he asks me.

I smile and nod.

If I do this, my old life will be gone when I return to my time. I'll have nothing of it left. But what will I have lost in giving up that life?

I'm getting closer to Jesus by the minute, when out of the corner of my eye, I see the two rough men in Egyptian clothes who were watching me yesterday on the road from Jericho. They have zeroed in on me once again. I start to suspect that Esther or her boys told someone in her family that I have money. They're working their way closer to me as I get closer to Jesus.

When I get to the front, Jesus is turned away from me as He heals a blind woman. I want to reach out and touch Him. Like the woman who had faith she would be healed if only she could touch the hem of His garment, I feel like I would be healed as well.

Jesus turns to face me, as if He heard my thoughts and is ready to respond. I'm sure my eyes go wide with surprise, and Jesus smiles. This time I look him straight in the eyes. I want Him to see the good that's in me and ignore all the evil, but that's not what I find at all. His eyes perfectly reflect all the best, and all the worst, of me for me to see. Jesus is my perfect mirror, the mirror I've been looking for my entire life. He is the mirror that allows me to look into my own eyes, and understand.

I know now why my life never made sense to me. I know what was missing.

"Your voice is just one of many gifts you've been given."

Jesus' attention isn't focused solely on me as He says it. He's looking up into the crowd of people and smiling -as if He's hearing a joke that He can't let me in on.

"Now, return to your people and use your gifts."

He touches my neck and I feel a slight vibration in my throat.

"I'll use my gifts for you, Lord," I say in English, without even a hint of a scratch in my voice.

Jesus looks at the two men who have been following me, shakes His head, then looks back to me.

"Go now, in peace. Your faith has made you well."

I leave the crowd. The two men in Egyptian robes follow me, so I stop to confront them and make them understand that I'm no longer mute. When they reach me, their eyes scan over me, but they walk past - like they can no longer recognize me. I feel like I'm under Jesus' protection now.

I spend the entire morning listening to Jesus teach in the temple and watching Him heal people. I hear many of the parables that I know from the Bible, but also hear others that are new to me.

As noon approaches, a man who I recognize as one of the Pharisees starts to organize the others to break up the crowd. They don't dare challenge Jesus, or even the apostles, directly, but I hear them start whisperings all through the crowd. They say Jesus can cast out demons because He is one; they say Jesus can't be the Messiah because he's from Nazareth; they say it's all just tricks. One of them spots me on the edge of the crowd as I watch and listen.

"What are you doing in here, gentile?"

"I came to be healed, I stayed to worship," I say in Aramaic.

He swears at me in Greek, so I respond in Greek, which sets him back a step.

"I read and write too -including Hebrew."

"Out of my temple, gentile."

"Is there no room in your temple for me? He seems to have room in His heart for everyone"

I nod towards Jesus, and the Pharisee motions to the temple guards.

"It's okay. I was just leaving."

I take a few steps, and then turn back to face him.

"I speak a lot of languages, but there's a language I didn't try. Perhaps it's the language men like you understand better than all others."

I flip a silver coin into the air, which he catches. He looks furious, but slips it into his pocket just the same.

I get outside before the temple guards can shake me down for the coins I have left, and start to walk around the temple area. I expect to find everyone talking about Jesus and the miracles He's

performing, but instead the people are scattering. I see a man whose deformed legs were healed by Jesus as he walks away, so I catch up to him.

“Your legs look strong and sound. Shouldn’t you be dancing and praising God?”

He says nothing.

“I was mute, and Jesus healed my voice. I want to sing.”

“Quiet, fool, or I’ll make you mute again myself.”

“Quiet? Why should I be quiet when I have a voice again?”

“The Pharisees listen everywhere, and they’re not happy,” he says, and strides away from me.

Chapter Twenty-Six

For the next three days, I find Jesus and listen to Him teach wherever I'm able to follow and spend each night in the hay at the house of Esther's relative. Esther left the city with her new sheep before I could tell her that I've been healed.

Sometimes Jesus teaches in the Temple, and sometimes I find Him teaching to crowds in the street. I hear many more of the parables found in the Bible, including those that are meant to warn the Pharisees. All the while, I stand on the edge of the crowd and hear the whispers as the Pharisees continue to spread rumors and deceit. The more direct Jesus gets in His admonishment of their ways, the louder their whispers grow.

On Thursday, Jesus is teaching on the grounds outside the Temple, when the Pharisee who was happy to keep my silver again spots me on the edge of the crowd.

"You, there. Stand where you are."

There are Temple guards behind him and I've spotted others trying to blend in with the crowd, so it would be foolish to run.

"You've claimed that you were mute and that you were healed by that man," he says and indicates Jesus.

Jesus stops speaking, but says nothing to defend me. He just stands there and watches curiously.

Jesus told me to use my talents.

"That's correct."

I speak in Greek just to aggravate the Pharisee.

"I have a witness who says that you spoke to him before this fake miracle occurred. Admit your guilt in this deceit and you will find mercy."

"Who is this witness?" I switch back to Aramaic so more members of the crowd can understand me.

The Pharisee waves his hand and I see a man being brought through. It's the man with the deformed legs who warned me to be quiet on the day he and I were both healed.

"This man is mistaken. I didn't speak to him until after Jesus restored my voice."

"He says you were both paid by the followers of this false prophet to act like a mute and a cripple, and to make it appear that you were healed."

When the healed man is before me, I can see he's been beaten. He just stares at the ground without saying anything.

"Does the man who bears witness against me not speak for himself?"

"He admitted his guilt and has received his punishment. The liar's tongue has been cut out."

The Pharisee smiles at me.

"How convenient for you," I say.

Jesus smiles, but people in the crowd are giving each other sideways glances and look fearful for me.

"Admit your guilt now, for all to hear."

The Pharisee yells in order to draw more attention from the crowd.

"Admit your guilt, and you will find mercy."

"You're afraid of Jesus, so you take your wrath out on me, and even break your own laws by bearing false witness."

The Pharisee barely controls his rage at my challenge. I hear someone in the crowd murmur that I must be insane.

He's just another little tin dictator, using the Word of God to take power over men.

“Bring him,” the Pharisee says to the guards.

“Arrest me if you will,” I reply loudly in Latin, “but be warned that I’m a citizen of Rome, and therefore under the protection of Caesar.”

His eyes go wide. I’d like to pierce him with my old Cult Hunter “death mask,” but instead instinct tells me to soften my face to a calm confidence.

“If I’m to be arrested, then bring in Roman soldiers to do it - and explain your charges to them.”

The Pharisee glares at me, while he weighs his options.

“This is not the man we seek.”

He turns to the man whose tongue has been cut out.

“You bore false witness against a Roman citizen, and will be punished.”

The Pharisee withdraws and I decide to leave before he can change his mind.

Tonight Jesus will be betrayed, and tomorrow He’ll be tried and crucified. Throngs of people will be there to witness the spectacle, and emotions will run high for everyone, including the Pharisees. There’ll be times when I’ll be safest blending in with the Jews, and times when I’ll be better off claiming to be a Roman citizen. Some Roman clothes would be useful.

The market doesn’t have clothing, but there are still some vendors selling food and wine, as the people prepare their Passover meals. The silver buys me a sizeable amount of bread, meat and wine, with change to spare. I take my purchases and head straight for the section of the city where most of the Roman soldiers are garrisoned.

“Hail, soldiers of Rome,” I say in Latin as I approach a group. “I’m a Roman citizen bearing gifts for Caesar’s finest.”

They don’t even touch their sword handles in warning as I approach. Few of the locals speak Latin fluently and, even if they did, they wouldn’t dare approach the soldiers in this way. The soldier who appears to be in charge steps towards me.

“Gifts? Why do you bring gifts?”

“I was robbed and beaten by Samaritans as I traveled here, and I was saved by some of our brave men who were on a patrol. The men who saved me are not here; however, I can thank them by thanking you for keeping all Romans safe in this horrid land.”

He looks at my cloak, and then me, taking particular interest in my blue eyes.

“You’re a citizen of Rome?”

“Yes. The Samaritans took the fine toga and cloak I bought in Naples before I began this cursed journey. It was so much nicer than the coarse weaves they make here. Their cloth isn’t fit to put on a Roman’s horse.”

The Romans all laugh.

You’re in.

“I have wine, meat, and bread. Perhaps we could share a meal and I could spend an evening where I can feel safe in this land?”

“What’s your name?” the leader asks.

“I’m called Petrus. I was named by my grandmother. She was a blue-eyed slave girl from Gaul, taken by my grandfather to be his wife.”

It’ll be centuries before anyone figures out that blue eyes are a recessive trait and I should, therefore, have brown eyes.

“I am Flavius. Come, Petrus. Our watch is over. We’d be happy to share your wine.”

Two hours later, we’ve gone through all of the wine that I bought, plus much more. I’ve had very little, compared to the soldiers, who could easily out drink anyone from my time. I’ve spent the

last two hours telling them how great it is to be in the company of Rome's finest soldiers; and they've told me over and over how much they hate Jerusalem and want to go home.

"I, too, long for Rome," I say, when they seem to be impaired enough. "How I wish I had a fine Roman toga and tunic instead of this rag. Then at least I'd look and feel like a Roman again."

"There's a merchant here to see Pilate," Flavius says. "He brings things from Rome, so perhaps he has clothes to sell."

Flavius and two others take me through the dark streets. As we pass, the few people who are left outside scurry into dark corners and whisper things about Romans they don't dare say out loud.

"That's the house where Pilate lives."

Flavius points to a large stone structure with many columns.

"The merchant is probably in that house over there, setting up his wares for Pilate to inspect tomorrow."

We go to the house and Flavius bangs on the door. A Hebrew servant answers and Flavius brushes past him like he's the family pet rather than a person.

"What's the merchant's name and city?" I ask the servant in Aramaic.

"He's Marcus Varius of Venice."

"Where's the merchant?" we can hear Flavius bellow from the next room.

"Why are you here?" a man in expensive looking clothes asks as he emerges. "These wares are for Pilate first. Others can buy according to rank when Pilate is done."

"We found this Roman citizen beaten and robbed, and left to wear Samarian rags."

Flavius is either confusing or embellishing the facts.

"I don't care who he is - or what his story may be. Pilate is always first."

"I can't believe my luck," I say as I enter the room. "It's Marcus Varius, here all the way from Venice to save me in my despair."

I bow low.

"Do I know you?"

"We've not met; but I of course know you by your reputation - and by the splendor of these wares."

"You do not recognize this man? He is Petrus, grandson to the king of the Gaul's, who now serves as Caesar's magistrate there," Flavius says.

Flavius may be drunk, but he catches onto a scam quickly.

"My dear Marcus, I've been robbed and beaten. That's why I must humbly present myself in this state. Just being in your presence in these rags is a stain upon my honor. I would not presume to usurp Pilate's privilege in seeing your wares first. I ask only if you have a toga and tunic not fit for Pilate's eyes that I may buy so I can look like a proper Roman in this land. Surely your reputation for generosity will allow this?"

"This fine Roman has nowhere else to turn," Flavius adds.

"I have some old things that might suit you."

Marcus relents with a sigh, then leads me out of the house to a wagon filled with all sorts of things. He does indeed have some clothes that will work perfectly. They're distinctly Roman, but not showy.

"This is all the money I have."

I hold out my remaining bronze coins.

"It's not nearly enough to repay your kindness, but I'll send word of this night to my grandfather. If you are ever in Gaul, he'll buy your finest things at the price you set because he'll know you're an honest man."

"Keep the Hebrew money and be gone."

"Yes, and I'll keep this old cloak as well. Perhaps I can find a horse that it suits."

Flavius and the other soldiers laugh.

On our way out the door, I give the bronze coins to the servant. The soldiers and I laugh all the way back to the garrison house.

When I wake up the next morning I'm feeling hung over, but the Romans are bright and alert, as if they were drinking water instead of wine all night. I hadn't noticed when we came in, but there are several prostitutes in the room.

I guess some parts of the future are identical to the past.

"Get up, Petrus."

Flavius addresses me like I'm one of his soldiers.

"Thank you for letting me sleep here last night, Flavius. It was nice to be among friends."

"Thank you for the fine wine and food - but now you must leave. There was an arrest last night that has caused a stir among the Jews. We have been called as an extra guard at Pilate's house."

The group falls out and joins several other groups, so I follow them through the streets until I see Pilate's house. It's still early in the morning, but a crowd has already formed outside. I take off my cloak, so I'll look like a Roman, and stand near Flavius and the other soldiers.

When Pilate comes out of the house the crowd quiets, but there are still murmurs. I can see Pharisees working the crowd. Many of the people in the crowd are saying that if Jesus were the true Messiah, He would destroy the Romans for them. Pilate says a few words, and then reminds the crowd of the "generous Roman tradition" of releasing one prisoner during the Passover celebration.

I slept through Jesus being scourged.

"Which one do you want me to release to you, Barabbas, or Jesus who is called the Messiah?"

Pilate asks, then sits to hear the response of the crowd. As he sits, a messenger comes out of the house and speaks into his ear. Pilate gets a curious look on his face, but simply nods.

The Pharisees are moving through the crowd now. I can hear them saying: "Ask for Barabbas" and "Crucify the other." I can see one of Christ's apostles on the edge of the crowd saying nothing, frozen with fear of what would happen should he speak out. I wish I was mute again. If I was mute, I wouldn't have to bear the shame of standing silent while an innocent man is murdered.

"Which of these two do you want me to release to you?" Pilate asks again.

With the Pharisees leading, the crowd shouts "Barabbas."

"But if I release Barabbas, what should I do with Jesus who is called the Messiah?"

"Crucify Him!"

"Why? What crime has He committed?"

Pilate gets no explanation. The crowd just yells louder and louder for Jesus to be crucified, so Pilate goes back into the house.

They have no idea why they're calling for a crucifixion. They're becoming a mob.

Five years ago, in my time frame, there was a street riot in Los Angeles. Every single person in that crowd was well fed and lacked for nothing, and yet they broke windows, started fires, and attacked people. When asked, most had no idea why they did it. They just felt a need to fill a void in their lives with some senseless violence, and temporarily lost their common sense.

I'm struck by how much those who participated in that riot have in common with the mob that's formed before me in this time frame. Both represent a people who are lost and wandering, looking for some sort of meaning in their lives. By and large the people in this time have no material possessions, while those in my time have more than even the richest kings of this time. Yet both are marked by an internal emptiness that they have no way of filling by themselves.

Pilate returns.

"I'm going to bring him out to you now, but understand that I clearly find Him not guilty."

Jesus is ushered out of the house by Roman soldiers. He's wearing a purple robe, and there's a crown of long, sharp thorns pressed into His head. There's blood running down His face, and it's clear He's already been whipped to the point that the skin is hanging in tatters on his back. At times, the flail wrapped around to His front as well, leaving red welts and cuts that I can see where He's not covered by the robe. His whole body is trembling, and His eyes look glassy from the pain.

"Here is the man!" Pilate says.

The priests and the Temple guards start the chant again: "Crucify! Crucify!" and the crowd goes back to its frenzied state.

I can see the frustration on Pilate's face. He wants an explanation of why Christ should be crucified, but he's getting nowhere. Many of the Roman soldiers now have their hands on their sword handles, ready to draw their weapons at the first sign the crowd is going to turn on them next. Pilate speaks to a messenger, and a few moments later a bowl of water is brought out.

Just then, on a balcony above the crowd, a woman dressed in a Roman toga dumps a bucket of dirty bath water that douses several Jews at the back of the crowd. At first I thought she poured it carelessly, but when I look up at her, I see she has a smirk of contempt on her face. She looks like a child who teases a pet -just because they can. Under their breath, the Jews curse all Romans for the indignity.

Pilate washes his hands for the crowd to see.

"I'm innocent of the blood of this man. The responsibility is yours."

When the handwashing is done, the Hebrew servant who brought the bowl dumps the water with the same look of contempt as the Roman with the bucket.

Pilate then announces he'll release Barabbas, and Jesus will be turned over to the Roman soldiers to be crucified. The crowd yells all the louder. They look like a crowd at a sporting event whose team has just won a great victory.

I'm the only one here who knows that this is the beginning, rather than the end.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

As the crowd and the soldiers disperse, I slip my Hebrew cloak back on. This is not a good time to look like a Roman. I remember the maps showing the path Jesus will walk to His crucifixion, but by the time I work my way through the crowds, Jesus has already begun His journey. I can see a crowd following Him, yelling all sorts of insults.

I think I can use a shortcut to get ahead of the crowd, but as I turn, I see another crowd has formed behind me, although it's taking a very different course. At the head of the crowd is a rough-looking man in tattered clothes. I can hear those lining the streets yelling: "Barabbas."

He has an insufferable look on his face, as he receives the adoration of the crowd. It's galling to watch him strut through the streets like a peacock.

"Barabbas, you don't deserve to live."

He looks my way.

"What did you say to me?"

"That man, Jesus, who carries a cross, He is innocent and you are a murderer. You are the one who deserves to die - not Him."

Barabbas gives me an ugly smile.

"We all deserve to die," Barabbas sneers, then laughs.

"Not Him. He doesn't deserve it. He's blameless."

"Then I guess He's dying in my place today, so that I might live. I'll have to thank Him later."

Barabbas laughs again, and the crowd laughs with him.

My jaw drops. I've studied Christianity my entire life and even if he doesn't understand what he's saying, a murderous criminal is standing before me, teaching me what I failed to grasp.

"You're right, Barabbas. We do all deserve to die. But He's not dying for you. He's dying today so that we all might live."

I disappear through the crowd, looking for a shortcut back to Christ.

When I reach Jesus, he has fallen. The heavy cross beam is on top of Him and the Roman guards are whipping Him and yelling at Him to get up. I can see the skin on His back has already been whipped to tatters and He's lost a lot of blood. I can't imagine how He finds the strength, but He makes it to his knees and then can rise no further. A guard picks a man named Simon from the crowd and tells him to help carry the cross.

The procession begins again, with the two condemned thieves leading the way. Although one of the thieves has a nasty cut across the back of his hand, they were not scourged. They still have the strength to carry their burdens, but Jesus staggers even as Simon helps Him, and falls again. I want to help Him up, but the Roman guards won't let anyone touch Him, though they allow - and even encourage - the crowd to hurl insults and an occasional rock at Him.

When Jesus falls the third time, there's a moment when the soldiers let Him struggle to His knees without whipping Him further. He looks at me. There's blood and sweat dripping off His face, and there are tears running down mine. I want so badly to save Him from this fate that I fall to my knees in front of Him and look into His eyes. Through all of the blood and pain, He's still my perfect mirror. As we share this brief moment together, He isn't concerned over His own fate. He sees my tears and I sense He's more worried about me than He is for Himself. His eyes tell me not to worry.

Everything is going to be okay, because everything that's happening is as how it's meant to be.

I thought I was sent here by Henry, but now I know I was called here by Christ. I was told by men that my role in coming here was to convince Christians that their beliefs were false. Instead, it

turns out that Henry and I have just been actors in God's plan. My role has always been to testify to the Deity of Christ.

I look into Christ's eyes again, and without speaking, He tells me I'm not just an actor on a stage to Him. My role is much more personal than that. Yes, I'm to testify to the world, but He didn't call me here for them. He called me here for me. Christ doesn't choose to save all the souls on earth at once. He chooses to personally save us one at a time. I cry as I realize travelling back in time was all part of my personal salvation.

As we approach the spot called Golgotha, where He and two criminals are to be crucified, I hang back because I'm not sure I can stand to watch. Witnessing the torture He's endured so far has already been more than I thought I could bear. People from my time want for nothing when it comes to the needs of the flesh. If we get even the slightest pain, it can be removed with modern technology or, more commonly, by numbing ourselves with various drugs. Sometimes I wonder if the technology and drugs have numbed us to the point of feeling nothing at all. Maybe if my world had a little more pain, we would feel a little more empathy towards others.

I gather my courage and move forward to watch. The brutality of crucifixion is well beyond anything I could have envisioned. Jesus is hurled backward, with His shoulders on the beam, and Roman soldiers grab each arm and hold them outward. The pain from the skin on His back rubbing against the rough wood alone should be enough to make Him cry out in pain, but he doesn't. Instead, He looks at the soldiers with His deep, kind eyes.

He's forgiving them for what they're about to do.

A third soldier feels Christ's wrists and selects the proper spot. He places a large square nail on the spot and raises his hammer to strike, but as he does so, he looks Jesus in the face, his hammer frozen in midair. At a moment when anyone else might beg the soldier to stop what he's doing, Jesus says nothing. He simply transfixes the man with His eyes. Then, with a slight nod of His head, as if He's the one giving the soldier the order to proceed rather than the other way around, He breaks the stare.

He could have chosen to end this, but He chose crucifixion. He chose to sacrifice His human life to give us everlasting life.

When the soldier's hesitation ends, the hammer comes down with a ring on the nail. Jesus just exhales audibly through the pain, but I let out a cry, as if it's me being nailed to the cross instead of Him.

It is you being nailed, Cephas. Your sins - and the sins of all mankind - are what nail Him here. You're truly a Christian now. His cross is your cross too.

The soldier nails the other wrist, this time without hesitation, and I gasp again as the hammer hits home. Behind me, I hear a woman whimper and a man consoling her in whispers. With each hit, I expect to hear the snapping of bones as the spikes penetrate, but there are none. There's just the loud ring of the hammer. Through it all, I hear the thieves begging and crying out, as their wrists are nailed.

The hammers ring out again, as each man has his left foot crossed over his right and pointed downwards so a nail can be driven through the arch of both and into the wood. This time I hold in my cry as the nail is driven, but despite the warmth of the sun, I begin to shake. Again I expect to hear bones break as the nail is driven through, and again I hear none.

The Old Testament prophecy said that not a single bone would be broken.

More soldiers come forward and lift the heavy beams, and their human cargo, into place. The entire sight is horrifying. Somehow I'd expected He would be high up in the air. Instead, His feet are just barely off the ground. I wish He was high up and farther away. Being tall enough to look Him in the face as this is done to Him makes the scene all too personal.

His death is supposed to be personal, just like His love for each of us. Here He is, even hung up on a cross, His arms are open wide to embrace us.

The crowd continues to mock Jesus as a soldier appears with a sign saying: “Jesus of Nazareth, The King of the Jews” in Hebrew, Latin, and Greek, and nails it above Jesus’ head. One of the Pharisees argues with the soldier for a minute, and then leaves. I guess he doesn’t like what’s written on the sign. The Roman soldiers move back, and I see them throwing dice to see who’ll get Jesus’ robe.

Another prophecy down.

The remaining Pharisees start the mocking again. They yell: “Save yourself” and “Come down from your cross,” then laugh and egg on the crowd to join them.

I move farther away and stay silent, while the crowd jeers. Jesus has been silent through the insults, so when He speaks, everyone goes quiet. It appears that many in the crowd come to crucifixions as a form of entertainment, and hearing the crucified beg for mercy is an expected part of the show. Instead of begging for Himself though, Jesus begs for them to receive mercy, when He shouts: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

The people look back and forth at each other in surprise, but quickly recover and return to yelling. These words are among the best known of Jesus’ life, but now that I’ve heard them personally, I start to think about them for the first time.

If those in the crowd ‘know not what they do,’ why do they need to be forgiven? Does their ignorance not make them innocent? Or is it possible that even in ignorance, they’re still guilty of this great sin?

Instead of providing relief, Jesus’ plea to God feels like a personal curse upon me. Unlike those around me, I can’t claim ignorance. I know exactly what’s happening here, and by standing and watching it happen, I feel just as guilty of crucifying Him as those who held His arms and drove the nails.

Why, God, did you send me through time to this place to witness this moment? I’m a man of 2202. I’m not like these people.

I think this to myself, but I know it isn’t true. I’m exactly like these people. No - I’m worse than these people. I live in a world full of sins of which these people can’t possibly conceive. If only I were just another sinner, I could claim the same ignorance for which Jesus just forgave the people around me, but I’m not just another sinner from 2202. I’m a believer from 2202, and I’ve done nothing to change my world. I’m sad when I see a selective pregnancy kiosk, yet I’ve done nothing but walk by. I’ve seen people having public sex, yet I’ve just looked away. So, unlike these people around me, I’m not ignorant of what’s happening before my eyes to God’s only Son.

Forgive me, Father, for I do know what I do.

Can someone who *knowingly* drives the nails through Christ’s hands and feet with his sins still receive His grace? Everything I’ve read in the Bible tells me the answer is “yes”, but I want a more direct answer, and the only man who can answer the question is right in front of me.

I make my way to the front, until I’m less than a meter from Him and speak in Latin so fewer around me will understand what I’m saying.

“Jesus. I know you’ve already forgiven these people, but you know I’m not ignorant. I know what we’ve all done here. I know my sins drove those nails through you as if I forged them and drove them myself. Will you forgive me?”

Tears are running down my face like a river.

Jesus looks at me, but says nothing - and his silence sends a chill through me. I’ve read the Bible and many other sacred writings in multiple languages. I’ve analyzed the words; I’ve researched the context; I’ve thought endlessly about what happens here, and what it means over the two thousand years of history that will begin unfolding starting on this day. Without knowing it, I’ve dedicated my

entire life to understanding the man who is dying before me. Yet I never understood anything at all until this moment, as our eyes are locked onto each other. He still doesn't speak, but He bows His head slightly and then stares over my shoulder and into the crowd.

"Thank you, Lord."

I make my way back to the far edge of the gathering.

I'm no longer ashamed of staying silent. This is happening because it's what needs to happen, and I understand that now. What if I could run to Jesus, and persuade the crowd and the soldiers to bring Him down and let Him live? Then what? What would become of humanity if Christ's sacrifice could be erased from time? He's hanging on a cross because He's choosing to hang there. He's choosing death, so I might find eternal life.

The word "choice" makes my memory flash to Martha, and I reach into my cloak pocket and take out two old rose blooms that I snuck along. Even though the petals are dried and faded, I can read the words "life" and "death." The thought of it makes me weep again.

Martha understands His choice. How I wish she was here with me.

As time wears on, the horror of crucifixion increases. If the nails were only through the wrists and not the feet, so that the body was hanging by just the arms, then crucifixion would be relatively quick. The arms and pectoral muscles would quickly tire out and breathing would become impossible. With the nails through their feet, the three men on their crosses are starting to lift themselves by pushing down on the nail. Although the pain in their feet must be unimaginable, lifting up allows them to exhale and sink back down, until the primal need to breath forces them upward again. This is why breaking the legs of the crucified ends their lives quickly, and can even be thought of as an act of mercy.

I've been watching this unfold for hours and the sun is directly overhead when I realize it's becoming dark. I look up, expecting thick clouds or even a solar eclipse, but neither is happening. The sun is simply going dark. Like an eclipse, we're not plunged into complete darkness. There's an eerie, undefined twilight that allows us to see each other and the three crosses.

We sit and stand in the darkness for hours. The crowd is silent now, so you can hear each breath of the three men as they move up and down on their crosses and gasp for air. If I could, I'd break all of their legs, just to stop that sound.

One breath closer to death, one breath closer to redeeming mankind.

I get my wish when the sound is interrupted by the clear voice of Jesus saying: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

The crowd gasps a little at the intrusion, but say little more until we hear Jesus say: "I thirst."

The crowd thinks he's physically thirsty, but I think He wants this temporary separation from God to end. I think He thirsts to be back in God's love.

A boy tries to give Him sour wine soaked into a sponge by putting it onto the end of a hyssop branch, but someone in the crowd says: "Leave Him alone. Let's see whether Elijah will come and save Him."

We wait another minute, listening to the breathing, when we hear Jesus say: "It's finished," and with a long, low breath, His body relaxes and it's apparent He's gone from us.

As His last breath expires, we start to hear - and then feel - a low rumble in the ground that develops into a great shaking. I've never seen fear in the eyes of a Roman soldier, but I see it now. As if to express what the entire contingent is thinking, the officer in charge says: "Truly this was the Son of God".

I've never been so exhausted in my life. I lie down on the spot and fall into a deep sleep.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

I'm awakened by someone shaking my shoulder. The sun is shining brightly again and there's nobody around, except a few Roman soldiers and a group of women standing at a distance. The person shaking my shoulder is a small man with a long black beard and hair, both of which are streaked with gray. He's wearing long Jewish robes.

"Will you help me?" the man asks.

"Help you with what?"

"The Romans won't help me take the body down from the cross. Will you help me?"

This is Joseph of Arimathea.

I look up at the crosses. The thieves died sometime while I was sleeping. Their legs are broken. I bet they were in so much pain they didn't even feel it happen.

Jesus has a gaping hole in His side, neatly slit between the ribs. You can see that blood poured out of the gash and ran down His side and legs. There's a distinct smell of recent death, which the crows and magpies quickly detected. They now sit and squawk as they wait for a chance to peck at the bodies.

I won't allow them that chance.

"Yes. I'll help you."

I wish that removing Jesus from the cross could be done with dignity, but it can't. The large spikes are driven deep into the wood and won't come free using just our bare hands. Luckily, they're not made with a large head like a modern nail, so we're able to draw His feet back over the nail and leave the nail in the wood. There's some tearing of flesh, but the bones don't break.

Once the feet are free, His body hangs limply from the wrists. Joseph is able to lift the body upward enough to take some of the weight off and I pull Jesus' left wrist free. Centuries from now, there'll be debate over whether Jesus really died on the cross, or if He lived and was nursed back to health. As I tug on His cold arm to free it, there's no doubt He's dead. When I pull His right wrist free, Joseph is unable to hold the weight by himself and Jesus falls to the dusty ground, face up.

I thank God for the fact His eyes are closed. Despite the dried blood and dirt, His face looks peaceful. You'd never guess the cruel and brutal way in which He died. Joseph has a cart that looks much like a wheelbarrow, which we load Jesus onto.

"I have a place for Him. It's not far."

Joseph leads while I push the cart.

The Romans prefer to have executions near public roads as a warning to all who walk past. We stay on the road as long as possible, which makes the travel easy. I notice the women I observed earlier are following us at a distance. They must want to see where Jesus is to be laid. When we reach the tomb, a man who has brought a large amount of ointment for embalming the body joins us.

"Thank you," Joseph says. "We will prepare Him."

"I'll help you."

"No. You are a Gentile. We will prepare Him according to our customs."

With no words passing between them, the men set to work cleaning Jesus and wrapping him in linen with the spices. The women are watching from a distance as the men do their work, as are some religious leaders and two Roman soldiers. Apparently everyone wants to know where Jesus is to be laid to rest.

As I turn to leave, I spot the two men in Egyptian robes that have stalked me since Jericho. They're not here to see where Jesus is laid to rest, their focus is still on me. They're going to be disappointed. I have no money left for them to rob.

Tomorrow is Saturday and marks one week since I left the cave with a note saying they should check for messages in a week. It'll be sundown in a few hours, so I decide to travel as far as Bethany, and will then head for the cave at dawn. I have no money for an inn, so I ask if I can sleep on some hay in a small barn outside Bethany. The woman of the house even brings me some stale bread just before dawn - though I notice it wasn't until after the chickens had eaten their fill of it.

I'm approaching the center of Bethany, on my way to the cave, when I hear a short yell - followed by the sound of heavy footsteps behind me. The sun is just breaking the horizon so all I can see are two shadowy figures, but there's little doubt it's the two Egyptians. I run into a narrow alley between two buildings, with them in close pursuit.

As I'm just about to emerge from the alley into an open area, I trip and end up sprawled on the ground. When I look back, I see there was a person standing on either side of the alley, waiting for me to emerge. I ran right into a trap. One of them is nearly two meters tall, which is pretty big in these times. The other is much smaller. Both are wearing Roman togas and hooded tunics which cover their faces.

As the Egyptians emerge from the alley, the first one smiles when he sees me on the ground. He likely loses at least one tooth from his smile when the big Roman hits him in the mouth with a heavy wooden staff, followed by sweeping his legs out from under him. One last hit to the temple, and the Egyptian falls to the ground, unconscious.

The smaller Roman is unarmed, but I think I'd rather face the big guy with the staff. As I watch, the small Roman boxes the second Egyptian in the ears, smashes him in the face with a knee as he doubles over, and lands a perfect kick to the groin as the man is crumpling to the ground. He rolls over and vomits his breakfast.

I wish I could fight like that.

I start to slowly crab walk away, hoping the Romans have forgotten about me and will be content to rob the Egyptians instead.

"Stop," commands the big one in Latin while pointing his staff at me.

The small one sets to work checking the possessions of the Egyptians, and comes away with two coin purses, several knives, two unknown objects wrapped in leather bundles, and a piece of paper, which is opened and read.

If they can read, they're not common thieves. Maybe I can bargain with them.

The Romans exchange a look and nod. The big one tosses me his staff, which I catch in two shaking hands.

Why is he arming me?

"Run," he says.

I run through a different alley and onto the Jericho road.

I've run for at least three kilometers, when I stop to drink some water. The staff the Roman threw to me is still in my hand. I stare at it in disbelief when I see it's the staff that Eli gave to me, and was stolen as I slept by a tree.

What's going on here?

I'm relieved to have no trouble finding the cave, and to see it hasn't been disturbed. The inside feels like a tomb again. There are no notes waiting for me in the arena, so I grab some paper and head outside to write a letter to the future. I realize I'm afraid to describe everything that's happened so far. If I tell the world that I witnessed, and then experienced, a miracle, Henry might destroy the note and leave me here in the past. I need to tell Henry what he wants to hear. I write:

To the People of the World:

I finally found Jesus on the road as he entered Jerusalem riding on a colt. I'll admit, he is not what I expected at all. It's like how

our world treats movie stars. They're calling him Lord. I watched as He taught in the street and in the Temple but He caused such a stir that I left and sought the protection of Roman soldiers. Hopefully this friendship will allow me watch the crucifixion and the tomb when the time comes. He will not rise from the dead, and I'll be there as witness. It all begins tomorrow.

The puzzle should be complete in just 4 days. Check for a message from me then.

I look back over my handiwork and hope I'm not being too obvious. Anyone who knows my love of puzzles and codes should suspect I'm leaving a hidden message, and that the number 'four' is a clue. All you have to do is look at the fourth word in each sentence and you'll find the message "Jesus is our Lord. He will rise tomorrow." On the other hand, it also says exactly what Henry wants to hear - that I'm looking for the proof that he's so certain I'll find.

Once I've placed the note in the arena, I grab some more silver and gold, and rebury the cave entrance. It's not far out of the way, so I head to where Esther and her boys were camped.

From their vantage point, they see me approaching from a long way off.

"Mother, the goat man - I mean Cephas - is coming back," Eli yells, and Esther emerges from her tent. Seth runs up the hill to greet me.

"Cephas, mother bought weaned lambs with the money you gave us. She says we'll have our own flock and move away from our uncle."

I smile and nod, like I'm still mute. I continue smiling until I'm standing before Esther, but she frowns when she sees me up close.

"You are changed, Cephas."

I reach out and take her hands between mine.

"You are right, Esther."

Seth squeals a little at the sound of my voice, but Esther continues to look at me intently.

"It is not your voice. Even when you were mute, your eyes and your hands and your smile spoke for you. It is like there is a new light shining from your face - as if a great weight has been lifted from your shoulders."

"I sense the opposite is true for you. What's troubling you, Esther?"

"To say would seem ungrateful."

"But it would be the truth, so please speak it."

"My husband's brother will come here soon to check on his sheep. He will see the lambs I bought and claim them as his own. He is a coward at heart, who hits me and my boys because he is stronger, but he would not dare stand against you. Maybe you could rest here for a day? Or maybe you could stay much longer than a day? Maybe you are tired of being a traveler and could become a shepherd? I would warm your bed."

It's tempting. There's really nothing left for me to return to in my own time.

Jesus' last command to me sticks in my mind.

"I'm sorry, Esther. I must return to my people."

"Then your kindness will be for nothing."

"Kindness never comes to nothing, Esther. You bound a stranger's wound, when you could have let him bleed. For that kindness alone, I promise that you're being watched over."

When I get back to Jerusalem, I look for food and end up buying a large supply of meat, bread, fruit, and cheese. I'm becoming accustomed to the physical exertion of the first century and my appetite is increasing to match.

I decide to walk around the city, and eventually end up on the temple grounds. The temple itself is locked up tight, with multiple guards turning people away at every entrance. I find a spot in the shade and pretend to sleep, while listening to every conversation in earshot. The talk is mostly about how all the Pharisees and Sadducees have locked themselves inside. They're not even taking offerings.

They must be upset, to stop the flow of money into their own pockets.

Two temple guards stop in front of me and have a whispered conversation.

"Have you been inside? Is it true about the shroud?"

"It's true. It's torn from top to bottom, but that's the least of your worries."

"What do you mean?"

"You have the night watch tonight. The priests asked Pilate to seal the Nazarene's tomb to prevent His followers from taking the body. Pilate refused, so they're sending a Temple guard instead. That means you."

"How do I get out of it?"

His voice is quavering, he's terrified.

"If I were you, I'd volunteer to clean the stables."

As sunset approaches, I make my way to the tomb. The guard was right, there's an energy in the air that should make the enemies of Christ nervous. I'm nervous too - but not afraid.

A very large stone has been rolled in front of the entrance and there are temple guards milling about. Some have already fallen asleep, while the rest are cooking or eating. Unlike my experience with Romans, I know I have little hope of befriending this group, so I conceal myself in some rocks about a hundred meters away and eat more bread, meat, and cheese.

Around midnight, there's a change in the contingent of guards. By their dim torchlight, I can see that most settle down to fall asleep. As the hours wear on, I can't keep my eyes open any longer.

I awake to a boom - like a sharp crack of thunder - that echoes off the nearby canyon walls. There's also a great white light that lasts much longer than a lightening flash, but it goes out after a few more seconds. I peer at the tomb area and see that all of the temple guards are on the ground, but they're not laying as if they fell asleep. Their weapons are scattered among them like they had all been standing at attention and then fainted. The great stone has been rolled away from the tomb.

You've slept through the greatest moment in human history.

I don't dare approach the tomb for fear the guards will wake and attack me, so I sit behind the rock and wait until I hear a commotion from the temple guards. By now, there's a small amount of light on the horizon, indicating the sun will soon rise. When I peek out again, two of the guards are kicking at the others and yelling at them to get up. One of the guards enters the tomb for a moment, but quickly reemerges. His hands gesticulate wildly as he describes what he's seen and in seconds they're all running towards the city.

I know from the Bible that three women will soon make their way to the tomb, and that I can't risk being seen, so I continue to watch from behind the rocks. As the sky continues to grow brighter, I see movement on a low rise several hundred meters from the tomb. There are three people hiding on that rise who now stand up. The largest figure heaves what looks like a dead body over his shoulder and the trio makes its way over the rise and disappears from sight.

No, it can't be.

I'm about to stand, when I catch movement out of the corner of my eye. Its three women carrying jars of ointment meant for Christ's body. I sit behind the rock again until I hear the jars break as they're dropped to the ground, followed by the sound of the women fleeing.

I make my way to the tomb entrance. I see the jars of burial ointment that have been dropped outside. I don't know if I want to enter the tomb or not. What if there's evidence that the body was

stolen? I decide that I must stay objective and observe all evidence, so I enter the tomb. The linen wrappings are lying there - but the body is gone. Given the low and narrow entrance, it would be impossible to carry a body and there are no signs in the dirt that a body has been dragged from the tomb or rolled out on a cart. I look at the linens and am tempted to take them back with me, but I decide to leave them alone.

Next, I climb to the low rise where I saw someone throw a body over his shoulder. As I reach the spot, Simon Peter and another apostle run past, so I conceal myself in the rocks. The other apostle reaches the tomb first, but doesn't go inside. Peter goes in first, followed by the other. They, too, quickly leave.

It's only when they're out of sight that I notice I've been kneeling beside a pool of blood in the dirt, and there are signs that a body laid here for a while. Could someone have sacrificed an animal way out here? Maybe I saw someone throw a sheep or a goat over his shoulder rather than a human body? That makes no sense, and even if it was an animal sacrifice, the goal would be to collect the blood rather than allow it to run onto the ground.

I still have a synthetic skin bandage in my first aid kit, so I use it to sop up some of the blood for analysis. As I place it into a sterile bag, the blood drips onto my hand and inside the case of the first aid kit. The blood is definitely fresh.

As I'm finishing, the Jewish leaders arrive with Temple guards and a few Roman soldiers. I don't hang around to hear what they say.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

I spend the next two days going to the places where the Bible says Jesus appeared after the resurrection. Despite the blood on the ground, and seeing a dead body being carried away, my heart is still hoping there's another explanation and that I'll see Him. I search for Mary Magdalene everywhere, without success. I walk up and down the road from Emmaus looking for Cleopas, but don't see him either. When I hear that some of the disciples have left for Galilee, I know I've missed seeing Jesus when He appeared in Jerusalem.

I feel guilty because doubt is starting to creep into my mind, in spite all that I've seen and experienced. How can I go back to my time without knowing for certain? I would regret it for the rest of my life. I wonder if the wrong person survived to complete the mission. Maybe Thomas, who named himself after the greatest "doubter" in history, should be here instead of me.

The disciples are on the Jericho road, so I take a side trip to the arena cave. There are two notes waiting for me. The first is the usual note from "The People of the World," which reads:

Cephas, the whole world is rejoicing that the end of primitive belief systems is at hand, and that mankind can move forward, once and for all. Come home soon!

The second note is from Henry:

The world is NOT rejoicing. The group "Four" has become active worldwide and is much larger in number than we thought. Though they're still peaceful, we're sure it's just a matter of time before things get ugly. They have taken over countless broadcasts, and we can't stop them or track them. Sometimes they put your name onto screens instead of the number 'four.' The fish heads are completely silent and appear defeated. Our experts think the Four's are seeking to replace the Christians. Your leadership is needed back here, before another Holy War erupts.

How on earth am I supposed to respond to that? My attempt at sending a hidden message must have failed. If the Christians had seen it, they would be vocal. If the pagan Four's had gotten my message, they wouldn't be so happy. If Henry had seen it, then his message would probably describe how he would treat me to a slow, painful death if I dared to return to my time.

I grab the paper and decide to write something very short so the problems in the future don't get worse on my account.

To the People of the World:

Jesus was crucified, but by the time I reached the tomb, everyone was gone. I've followed His apostles and have seen neither His dead body nor Him, risen from the dead. Although I'm eager to return to our time, I must complete my mission, so I'm following the apostles to Galilee to get final proof. Check for notes daily, starting in one week.

I don't want to write a note to Henry, but I guess I must - so I write:

Henry, I'm sorry for the additional delay, but we only get one shot at doing this completely right. It seems like I have some sway with the Four's. Keep me in the news and I'll address them directly when I get back.

I grab more money and start towards the Jericho road. It's a minimum of a four or five day walk, but it's likely the apostles and other disciples will be holding a stiff pace on their way to Galilee, since Jesus instructed them to go there. My legs have been getting stronger, but I don't think I can keep up with men and women who have walked such great distances their entire lives.

Trying to use the River Jordan isn't an option - it's not navigable. There's a shorter route to Nazareth, but travelling through Samaria is more dangerous. As I walk, I become aware of the weight of the money in my cloak pockets, which gives me an idea.

When I get to Jericho, I look around for anyone with an animal I can ride. Only the rich ride, but - technically - I'm rich here. I find a house with four donkeys and knock on the door. A solid looking man answers the door.

"I see you have four fine asses. Are any of them for sale?" I ask.

"You don't look like a farmer. Do you need an ass to ride or work?"

"To ride to Galilee and back."

"You must be a rich man, seeking an ass to ride."

"I'm not rich, but I can pay you."

"You are also not a good judge of animals. The youngest colt is too young to ride; the Jack is lame, but can still breed; the Jenny is pregnant; and the older colt isn't broken to the saddle."

"You are right. I'm not a good judge of animals," I say.

I turn to leave.

"But I do have what you need," he says.

He leads me behind the barn, where a horse is tied up.

"She was left to die at the river by Roman soldiers because she had broken her leg. I brought her back to health. She can't be used as a war horse or even to pull a plow, because the break is weak. She cannot gallop, but she can walk - and even trot - to Galilee and back."

"Do you have a saddle?"

"No. The Romans took their saddle, of course."

"Do you know where I can buy a saddle today?"

"A large saddle built for an ass might be made to fit. There's a merchant in town who might have one big enough."

I get the horse and saddle for most of my gold. I have no idea how much a horse is worth, and I haven't figured out the conversion system between gold, silver and bronze coins, so I just hope they were being honest salesmen. I'm much happier riding a horse. Riding on a donkey like Christ did as he entered Jerusalem, just seems wrong somehow.

Even riding at a horse's walk, I'm making much better time than if I were on foot. The apostles started out at least a couple of days ahead of me, so I don't catch them until I reach the tip of the Sea of Galilee.

They're all walking. There's no way they could have carried a body far without being noticed.

I've just refilled my water skins, so I trot up next to them.

"Are you thirsty?" I ask the group.

The days have been getting warmer, so I'm riding in just my Roman toga. They look up at me, then back at the ground.

"We just drank and filled our skins."

I'm not sure which apostle says it. Except for Simon Peter, I never did figure out who's who.

"Thomas, be gracious," Simon Peter says. "I know this man. He was mute and was healed by our Lord in Jerusalem."

"That's right. I was very grieved when He was crucified."

"Grieve not! Our Lord has risen, just as He and the scriptures foretold. We have seen Him in Jerusalem, and we go now to Galilee, where He says He will come to us again."

If Simon Peter is lying to me, he's very good at it.

"Then our paths go the same way. May I join you?"

"Of course."

Peter looks around, as if seeking someone else.
“Is everything okay?”
“I’m just surprised to see you traveling alone.”

For the next day, I travel with the disciples. They tell the story of Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection to every Jew they see along the road, but with me they remain quiet and explain it’s because I’m a Roman - and a gentile. It’ll be a while yet before missions to spread the good news of Christ to the gentiles will begin. We reach the Sea of Galilee and spend several days resting. Simon Peter and his brother know the area well, having grown up fishing here.

Although I seem welcome at their fire, I make a camp down the shore from where they’re staying. They kindly give me extra fish, when they catch them. One night, I hear them gathering their nets and pushing off their boat to go fishing, but I fall back asleep. Just at dawn, I hear a man’s voice ask: “Friends, have you caught any fish?” and the apostles in the boat say: “No.”

I pull on my cloak and look along the shore. There’s the dark figure of a man standing near the water and I can see a lamp on the boat, which is about ninety meters from shore.

“Throw out your net on the right hand side of the boat and you’ll get plenty of fish!” instructs the man on the shore. I hear the splash of the net, and soon after the sounds of happy men straining at a net full of fish.

“It is the Lord!” one of the men in the boat says.

There’s just enough light that I can see someone dive overboard and swim to shore. I strain my eyes in the growing light to see what’s going on - and there’s no doubt - Jesus is standing among them. I felt His cold, dead flesh at Golgotha. He was dead, and now, here He is - walking among us. I still don’t know how to explain the blood near the tomb, but now that I can see Him, it no longer matters.

It takes every bit of willpower I have to not join their fire and eat breakfast with them. I want to put my fingers on the scars on His wrists and side - but I know I can’t.

You don’t need to touch Him in order to believe.

After breakfast, Jesus and Simon Peter walk along the shore towards me. Like I did outside Jericho, I conceal myself in the bushes and wait. Jesus stops not far away and bids Simon Peter to sit with his back towards me, while Jesus faces me.

“Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?” Jesus asks Simon Peter.

“Yes, Lord. You know I love you.”

I find myself saying the words along with Simon Peter.

“Then feed my lambs.”

“Simon, son of John, do you love me?” Jesus repeats the question.

“Yes, Lord. You know I love you.”

Simon Peter and I reply a second time.

“Then take care of my sheep.”

“Simon, son of John, do you love me?” Jesus asks a third time.

Simon Peter is distressed that the question has been asked again.

“Lord, you know everything. You know I love you.”

Simon Peter’s head is bowed down.

Jesus looks up from Simon Peter and looks me straight in the eyes.

“Then feed my sheep.”

Jesus places His hand on Simon Peter’s shoulder, then bids him to stand and they walk further along the shore.

I sit there for a long time, taking in the enormity of the message I just received.

I never see Jesus leave, but it doesn't matter. I pack my few things onto the horse and say goodbye to the disciples.

"Where are you going?" asks one who I now know is named Nathanael.

"I'm leaving. There are many hungry sheep waiting for me to come home."

I make the horse trot as much as walk back to Jericho, but her leg holds up well. When I get there, I go to the man who sold her to me and ask if he knows Esther, which he does. Somehow I know that Esther and her boys won't be at the camp near my cave, so I ask him if he'll ride the horse to Esther and give it to her as a gift from Cephas. He agrees to do it, for some silver.

I walk the rest of the way in high spirits and make it to my cave, looking forward to the trip back to my own time. When I get inside, there's a note from Henry that breaks my good mood.

Cephas, we're checking for you and messages every hour. You must come back as soon as you get this. People are disappearing worldwide, and we don't know why. Our assumption is that the Fours are involved. Whatever they're planning, it's begun.

I set to work to bury the cave entrance. I don't bother using the case to transport dirt back to the mouth. I just pull the rock over the entrance and begin packing dirt until the final two meters of the tunnel are blocked off. In two thousand years, a nuclear bomb will vaporize that two meters - and then some - but until then, the cave must stay sealed off to the outside world.

I throw a note into the arena that reads: "Pull me back ten minutes after you get this note," and then set to work collecting everything from my century. There isn't much left: a few pieces of gold and silver; a handful of dead light sticks; and some scraps of paper. The note disappears with the usual bright flash, so I gather everything up into the arena and wait for transport.

In my timeframe, people know what time it is to the second because they seem to be constantly looking for what to do to entertain themselves next. Few people seem to stop and think about who they are, and where their lives are going. I've now become accustomed to not having a way - other than the sun - to mark the passage of time. Waiting in the arena for ten minutes will be no big deal to me.

This time there's plenty of room in the arena, which makes me think of Thomas and Jocie. What would they be thinking right now? I'd like to think Thomas would have become a fervent believer, having received the proof he so adamantly required. I'd like to think Jocie would be making plans to become famous as the world's first openly Christian movie star, and she would live her new faith, rather than just use it for fame.

Beside me, I still have the staff that Eli gave me and that the Roman both stole and returned to me. I shouldn't use the world's energy to transport it, but I want it as a keepsake. I run my hands over its smooth surface and notice it has markings lightly carved into it, just below the leather grip, so I snap my last light stick to see what it is.

In the dim light I read XXIX LVIII XXXI XXXI VIII XVI.

Was Eli counting the sheep? Or was the Roman who stole the staff counting something?

I don't see the flash, but I'm immediately aware I'm in transport. Like last time, transport feels like it takes years to accomplish, rather than a moment. Last time, I was able to hear Thomas' and Jocie's thoughts during transport, even though I had no physical awareness of them. Without them, this transport is the very definition of loneliness.

You're stuck between two ticks of a clock. You're in neither the present second, nor in the next one. The scientists accounted for transporting the molecules that make up your physical body. But they had no way of calculating what it takes to transport your soul.

Through the void, my brain wanders to a simple but familiar tune: the "Cult Hunter" song we sang as a kid. I try to impose the words I learned at school:

Where are you hiding, you children of the night?

Will you come out and see the sun and trade the truth for lies?
We'll find you. We'll find you. You cannot win this fight,
Stop hiding in the darkness now and we'll teach you what's right.

Somehow, those words don't feel right anymore. I focus instead on my mother. She would hum the tune when I was five, but when I was younger, she would sing it to me. The memory and her voice come rushing back:

Why are you hiding, you children of the light?
Will you come out and praise the Son now He has heard your cries?
He'll find you. He'll find you; once your heart is right.
Come hear His truth and read His Word, and seek His perfect light.

Chapter Thirty

Through blurred eyes, I become aware of bright camera lights and cheering. People are touching me, lifting me out of the arena. Someone instructs me to wave, which I do. I hear Janet's voice saying: "Professor Paulson must undergo a routine medical examination. He'll address the world in three hours."

I manage to get my feet under me, but continue to stumble, as I'm pushed through a human alley of flashing cameras.

What persona do I portray? No. I'm done with all of that.

Moments later, I'm in some sort of craft, with Janet next to me.

"Bath time for you, stinky boy. If you don't snap out of it, I'll handle the job personally."

"I think I can take care of it myself."

My senses may be slow in returning, but I haven't lost them completely.

"I'll have clothes laid out for you."

"No. Have the toga and tunic cleaned. I'd like to wear them."

"Great idea. You might even start a new fashion trend."

You'd think my first hot shower in weeks would feel better than it does. Either I've gotten used to being dirty, or washing off the dirt is helping to solidify in my brain that the journey is over.

I put on a thick bathrobe and walk out into the small changing room that's been assigned to me. There's no sign of my toga and tunic, but the wooden staff has been placed in the room.

"Hold on, everyone," a voice instructs over the intercom, just as Janet bursts into the room with my cleaned ancient clothes.

"That's good advice," she says.

Janet grabs the door handle and I grab a closet door just in time, as I go weightless.

"What's going on?" I ask.

"The only way we can have you in D.C. in three hours is to go through space. Have fun. We'll be weightless for about fifteen minutes."

I take the toga and change in the shower stall, with drops of water floating all around me. All things considered, it's easy to get dressed in zero gravity, but there's no way to keep the toga from floating up and exposing me.

"I think I'm going to like this new fashion," Janet says, with a smirk, as I float back into the room.

"Did you happen to bring some modern underwear?"

"Of course."

She hands them to me.

"You couldn't give them to me earlier?"

"Now what fun would that have been?"

Life in my own timeframe disgusts me.

I notice the room has a seat that's folded up against the wall, which includes a lap belt. I sit and belt myself - and my toga - down. Janet floats in the doorway, but says nothing.

"I thought you'd have dozens of questions for me," I say.

"I do. But Henry says he talks to you first. No exceptions."

My brain is starting to click at full speed again.

"I see my staff - but where's my backpack?"

"The decontamination team is going through it. Everyone is most interested in the bloody bandage you labeled as being collected near the tomb."

Oh no. I forgot to get rid of it. They think it's evidence proving the apostles stole the body.

Once we're back in earth's gravity, I say: "I need to stretch my legs. Can I walk around the plane, rocket, whatever this thing is?"

Whatever it is, it's no bigger on the inside than the Bureau's private tube car. When I reach the back, I see the usual room full of electronic gadgetry. The guy manning the equipment looks up at me and smiles, but says nothing. There's a small screen that lists everyone who's aboard, but I'm not on the list.

I used to come up in blue on the security screens. What's changed?

I reach up and touch the spot on my neck where the enhancements exploded.

The closest place where the space plane can land is in North Carolina, so there's a private tube car waiting to speed us to D.C. Janet and I step into the private elevator, and it starts to take us down - even though only Janet is listed on the screen.

"Oh, here's your com," she says, when she notices the screen. I put it into my ear and my name comes up in red as an authorized occupant. It also tells me that I have thousands of messages.

"Is that a special Bureau com you're wearing?" I ask.

Without warning, I reach up and pluck it from her ear. As I do, her name switches from red to blue on the screen as it deactivates.

"Yes."

She snatches it back, and when she puts it into her ear, her name switches back to red.

"I have thousands of messages. I don't want to think about it," I say.

I remove my com and watch my name disappear from the screen. Janet gives me a penetrating look. She knows I'm playing around with their tracking system.

Everyone knows that coms are tracking devices, but enhancements are trackers too. The entire population is filled with them. Everyone except me.

I smile when I realize my thought isn't accurate.

Everyone except me and Martha...and possibly all of Four.

"Give me your com," Janet says. "I'll have someone sort the messages and restrict incoming calls. You can give me a list later of people you still want to hear from."

Henry is in the tube car waiting for me.

"Cephas! That's quite the fashion statement."

He appears to be very drunk.

"It was way, way back in my closet."

He laughs like only drunk people do.

Take advantage of his drunkenness. Tell him what he wants to hear.

"Henry, this is going to be like no debriefing you've ever received before. I just wish the price to see it all hadn't been so high."

He frowns for a moment, like he has no clue to what I'm referring.

"Oh. You're talking about losing Jocie and Thomas. Forget about it. Tonight you'll have any woman you want, and if you must have one who looks like Jocie, I'll have one built for you."

He's thrown her away. To Henry, she wasn't a soul. She was just another asset to be used up.

"Are you ready for my report?"

He orders everyone, including Janet, to clear the car and motions for me to sit. Before he can begin, I cut him off.

"Galilee was a good choice. I caught up with the disciples. I saw Christ's body."

Technically, that isn't a lie.

"I knew it. It'll finally be over."

"What about the Four movement?" I ask. "What did you mean when you said people are disappearing? Are you talking kidnappings? Murders?"

“Maybe both - maybe neither. All we know is a lot of people are no longer making traceable electronic footprints like they were. But today isn't the day to worry about the Four's. Today is a day to celebrate. A day that took generations of work to accomplish.”

He takes another long drink.

“Agreed. Today is the day for the truth to be heard,” I say.

“Truth? What is truth?”

Henry laughs, but I don't laugh with him.

According to the book of John, Pilate said those exact words to Jesus.

“Truth is whatever I choose it to be, and I can change the truth in seconds - just by ordering all of the records to be changed,” Henry says.

“Of course.” I reply. “That's why paper Bibles were such a thorn in the early abolitionist's side. Once they're printed, they can't be changed.”

“That was my great-grandfather's mission. He was determined to keep making subtle changes in the Bible. Add some things, take other things away - until you've made it into what you want, even if it takes generations.”

“Will you do me a favor, Henry? When you rewrite the story of the Travelers Initiative, will you make me taller and better looking?”

Henry laughs and drinks some more.

“You're out of luck. The media has been wall-to-wall with your face for a week, and the entire world will be watching your speech. Changing the Bible will be child's play compared to changing what you say today.”

I'm counting on it.

“That reminds me,” Henry says. “I have your speech ready. You'll want to customize it and throw in some jokes and anecdotes, but everything you need to say is in there.”

“Thanks. I'll look it over. Do you mind if I lie down for a bit? I'm pretty tired.”

Henry waves me to a room and pours himself another drink, as the tube car speeds us closer to D.C.

The speech Henry wrote for me is already up on the screen in the room. I read the first couple of paragraphs, but as I do, my eyelids begin to droop and my head starts to wobble from exhaustion. I lie on the bed and try to pray, but soon find myself in a dream.

I'm back in an ancient blacksmith's shop, but this time I'm alone. The fire is lit in the forge and the piece of metal I selected is in the fire, where I put it. I pick it up with tongs and strike it a few times with a hammer, and again judge it to be the perfect piece of metal. Then holding it with the tongs, I decide to touch the glowing end to my wrist in the spot where I saw the spikes driven into Jesus. The intense pain awakens me, and I bolt upright.

I'm staring into the surprised face of Janet. I was asleep and she had just touched me on the wrist to wake me. The spot still feels like it burns.

“It's show time,” she says.

“How long did I sleep?”

“I could only give you twenty minutes.”

“I fell asleep reading Henry's speech.”

“Don't worry. I've come to trust your instincts when it comes to handling the public. You'll be great.”

“As I remember it, my instincts usually take me in the opposite direction of where you intended me to go.”

“And it’s always worked out great. Here’s your com. I cleared out all of the messages and had them block everyone except me, Henry, and your publisher. By the way, while you were gone, you owned the three top spots on the best sellers list.”

I look at my com. It’s active, even though it isn’t in my ear. It appears to be rigged so it’ll never turn off. We get into the same old elevator that’ll take us up to a private hover bus bay. When the door opens, we step out into a corridor that’s been made up of two lines of fully armored kill teams who are holding back throngs of people that are waiting to see me. They roar with delight at the sight of me.

“These are just the people with official passes to be here. The general public is the real zoo.”

Janet has to yell for me to hear her over the crowd.

As we pass through the human corridor, the occasional arm sticks through and tries to touch me. I don’t know what to do, so I reach out and brush every hand I can reach. Each time I do, my touch is met with squeals. One woman even faints. When we reach the huge hover bus, the door snaps shut and dulls the crowd noise somewhat.

“You’re bigger than Jocie!” Janet says.

Although it wasn’t her intention, Janet’s observation is like a punch to the stomach. If I’m bigger than Jocie, it’s for all of the wrong reasons.

An even larger human corridor has been opened so the bus can pass through the crowd that’s outside the building. We travel just a few blocks, and the bus dives into a secured underground bay. Most of D.C. has tunnels underneath it, connecting one government building to another.

Janet begins briefing me.

“Your speech is on the steps of the Department of Energy building. They insisted that it be there since they provided the world’s power to get you to the past and back. The President will be introducing you, although you should probably introduce him, since you’re more recognized worldwide than he is at this point.”

As I suspected, they take me into the Department of Energy through an underground entrance from an adjacent building. I used to make a game of picking the security people out of the crowd, but here it would be faster to pick out those who are not part of the security detail. Everyone around me is armed.

When we get to the front doors, the President is already speaking. It sounds like he’s spewing a bunch of drivel that Henry wrote for him about the importance of mankind leaving behind its ancient beliefs and leaping into the future. I can see his back through the glass doors, but the audience seems to be craning their necks to look for me.

To his right, there’s a special box where all the dignitaries are seated. Although I can only see the backs of their heads, I recognize Henry Portman and several government department heads. As I scan the end of the front row of the box, I do a double take as I recognize a woman’s head that can only be my Aunt Jennifer.

Behind the crowd, on an adjacent building, is a huge banner that says: “The World Thanks You.”

Janet nudges me forward.

“The President is stoned again. He’ll ramble all day. Just go.”

I take a step towards the door and realize that the glass is a pretty good mirror. I think about my old morning routine, and look over my mouth, nose and ears.

Time for the eyes.

I look into them without fear or doubt. I see the twinkle and smile. I can’t see the evolved collection of cells waiting to collect light and transmit information. All I can see now is the twinkle - the spark of life that I didn’t put there myself.

The twinkle God put in there for me, to remind me that He’s always with me.

Chapter Thirty-One

As I step through the door, the crowd roars, drowning out the President. He stops speaking and turns to face me as well. All cameras swing to focus on me. Every eye in the world is watching as I descend the steps between two massive marble columns. Wearing a toga, I look like Caesar Augustus walking out to greet his people.

To me, these plain ancient clothes have become a symbol of my humility before Christ, but now, even that simple expression of faith has been twisted and used to meet the ends of man.

“Interesting outfit,” the President says, as I approach the podium.

“What? This old thing?”

The crowd again roars in approval, and the President retreats to a chair to my left.

The speech from Henry is on the monitor in front of me. It will go unread again. The storm that has raged inside of me for so long is calm. There’ll be no grandiose speech. I’ll speak straight from the heart with whatever words are given to me from above, knowing that Henry will order me killed for it.

I take a deep breath.

“It’s hard to know what to say to the people of the world, now that I’m back in my own time. I thank you all for the support I felt when I was back there. I felt you with me as I dug meter by meter to escape the cave. I felt you with me as I walked many kilometers in pursuit of my mission.”

I don’t know why, but I adjust my hands so my thumbs are on top of the podium and my fingers are down the sides, and start drumming my fingers lightly. I’ve stood at hundreds of podiums and never once held one like this, but it feels perfectly natural.

“This isn’t generally known, but I think I can tell you now that many months ago some papers were found in a Christian gathering place. Those papers said it would send a powerful message if I were to die.”

The crowd gasps at the thought of their newest hero being killed by cultists.

“They were correct. There are few messages more powerful than death. When I was back in time I witnessed how the religious leaders of the day chose to use death to send a message to Jesus and His followers. And they didn’t choose just any form of death. They chose the slowest, most horrifying form of death they had at their disposal - death by crucifixion.”

A message from Henry comes onto my screen saying, “What are you doing? Read the speech.” I ignore him.

“I’m here to stand as witness to say that they got their wish. I watched as spikes were pounded through His flesh. I saw the blood pour out of Him. I heard the moans of pain and the gasps for each breath. I heard His last human breath, and I helped take His body down from the cross. I pulled His cold flesh off of the nails. I saw the hole in His side and His blood spilled on the ground. Let there be no doubt: Jesus Christ died on that cross!”

The crowd roars, and out of the corner of my eye, I see Henry give a proud nod of approval.

Just then, a homemade banner is lifted at the back of the crowd. It adds a message to the banner saying: “The World Thanks You.” It adds the words: “FOR life.” I look at my four drumming fingers on the side of podium, and then back up at the message. I remember Martha’s four fingers drumming, and those of the woman who sat on the park bench. I stare at the banner for so long that the silence gets awkward and the crowd begins to turn to see what I’m staring at.

“I get it,” I think out loud.

The crowd murmurs in confusion.

“I don’t know how I could be so blind. I just realized who the group Four is.”

The crowd continues to murmur.

“They just use the number ‘four’ as a representation of an idea. What it really means isn’t the number ‘four.’ It’s the word F-O-R.”

“But what does the word ‘F-O-R’ mean?” the President asks.

I turn to him and smile.

“It means: ‘For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.’ It means that Four isn’t a pagan rival to Christianity. They are Christians. I suspect they’re the young Christians who are tired of hiding in the shadows,” I say, remembering Martha’s words.

And it means if I survive this, I’m going to continue my hunt for Martha, and tell her I love her.

I get a message on the screen from Henry, saying: “Good work. Now squash them all at once.”

The crowd gasps as a small number ‘four’ appears in the lower corner of the live feed. I nailed it, and now the whole world knows.

There are thousands of people here and I wish I had a pin to drop, because I bet I’d hear it hit. I glance at Henry and even he’s motionless, waiting to hear what I say next.

My voice softens, and slows to a measured pace.

“Today is the culmination of generations of hard work aimed at ending all religion. You all know the big events - like the Final Holy War and the Sunspot reactors - that helped doom religion, but it was actually all the little things that really made destroying religion possible. It was ending prayer in schools. It was redefining marriage, and closing businesses that refused to compromise their beliefs. Once those little things were done, tearing crosses off church steeples and memorials was a simple matter - as simple as hammering nails through one man’s wrists and feet.”

I pause.

“But just like the ancient Pharisees, we missed something. There was one cross that couldn’t be torn down, and now we’ve failed to tear it down too.”

The smile starts to disappear from Henry’s face as I raise my arms wide into a cross and hold them there, as strong and sure as wooden beams.

“Here’s the cross you’ll never tear down - the cross that lives in our hearts. I stand here as His living cross and declare The Cult Hunter is dead. I am now - and will forever be - a Christian.”

To my dismay, the crowd roars its approval.

Are these just the chaff that’ll go whichever way the wind is currently blowing? Or do some of them actually believe, and have been waiting for this day?

“It all happened as He wanted it to happen. I was there at His will, to be His witness. I was muted so I would finally listen, and then my voice was healed by Christ so I could deliver this message. I saw Christ alive in Galilee. I saw the scars on His hands and side. Christ died for your sins and rose from the dead, just as it was told in the Bible.”

My Aunt Jennifer is shaking, and her lips are mouthing “No, no, no, no,” over and over again.

I start to sing the words of the song I now know not as “The Cult Hunter” song, but as “He’ll find you:”

Why are you hiding, you children of the light?

Will you come out and praise the Son now he has heard your cries?

He’ll find you. He’ll find you, once your heart is right,

Come hear His truth and read His word, and seek His perfect light.

I lower my voice as I approach the end of the song, so I can hear how the crowd is responding. It’s barely perceptible, but it’s there. It’s like hundreds - or maybe thousands - of people in the crowd are humming along with me under their breath, just low enough so the person next to them can’t point a finger at them.

“Join me. Be the crosses that can’t be torn down.”

Hundreds of arms, scattered here and there in the crowd, start to move upward to join mine. They’re tentative at first, afraid of whom might be watching.

They look like dolls suddenly coming to life - suddenly having that spark ignited in their eyes.

When Henry finally snaps out of his trance, I expect a bullet to the head. Instead the microphone goes off and I’m swarmed by security. Out of fear, the arms in the crowd begin to drop, but mine stay wide - even as the guards use them to pick me up and carry me away.

“What am I going to do with you now?” Henry asks. “I can’t have you killed and create a martyr.”

After I was pulled from the stage, I was moved - under high security - to the nearest tube station, and have spent the last few hours in a moving tube car. Other than that, I have no idea where I am or where I’m going.

“If you have some lions handy, you could throw me to them.”

“Maybe you’re insane. Maybe I should send you for evaluation and treatment.”

A statement like that should warrant looking directly at me, but Henry refuses to meet my gaze.

“You know I’m not crazy, Henry.”

“Do I, Cephas? Why else would someone throw away their life like that? You were the greatest asset the Corps ever had in fighting cults. You had best-selling books, money, and fame. Jocie threw herself at your feet. You had everything.”

“I had nothing, Henry. Nothing whatsoever. I was like an empty shell you find on the beach: beautiful on the outside, but dead on the inside.”

“You could have saved the world!”

I’ve never seen Henry so upset. I’ve sent his atheistic world view spinning out of control.

“I did save the world,” I reply. “I testified to the truth, and the truth will set them free.”

“Free will is one of your God’s many stupid ideas. What has freedom ever gotten mankind? Freedom to hate? Freedom to kill each other, and start holy wars?”

“Freedom to choose,” I say.

“To choose what?”

“Life, of course. Don’t you remember what the Christians said? That it would send a powerful message if DRCP were to die? They weren’t talking about my physical death. They were talking about my conversion to Christianity. I’ve died to my old life in this world, and have chosen a new life.”

“You have gone crazy.”

“I’m thinking more clearly than ever before. Can’t you see the course humanity is on? We’re dying a slow death from apathy. If this is the only life we have, then we no longer have a reason to live it. The only significant scientific breakthroughs in a generation have been stronger drugs and devices for heightened sex. Without Him, we’re lost, and going nowhere.”

“I can’t accept that. We can create our own paradise. We just need to find new ways to inspire and motivate ourselves.”

“I’m here as witness to say that we can’t. He knows we’re falling apart. He knows we need Him. He’s reaching out to us, and we need His guidance.”

“If God really wanted to reach out, He would have let technology travel through time so you’d have video of it all. Why would He send proof in the form of just your word? Why, Cephas?”

“Why? You think I have the answer to the question ‘Why?’” I reply. “Christ Himself, who’s known God since the beginning of time, hung on a cross and still asked the question ‘why?’”

Henry finally looks me in the eyes, and I’m overjoyed to see that I’m reaching him. There’s still a spark in there. Then, like someone blew out a candle, his eyes go dark again. I’d like to think that

Satan himself was drawing Henry back, but that's not it. God did this, just like He hardened Pharaoh's heart against Moses. This too is part of His plan, and there's nothing I can do but trust.

Henry paces back and forth.

"No. I won't do it. I won't turn my back on generations of our work."

"Your work? Hardly. Everything in the atheist playbook is stolen from one religion or another. You even stole the Christian song I just sang, and changed the words."

"Control the songs that children sing and you'll control their thought processes into adulthood," Henry replies.

An agent enters the room.

"You may want to look at the newsfeeds, sir."

"Now what?" Henry replies and turns on a large screen.

The screen is split into many sections. I see the Great Wall of China, the pyramids, the Eiffel Tower, the Statue of Liberty, the Sunspot One reactor, the Golden Gate Bridge, and many other images representing man's great accomplishments. Standing in front of each is a single person, with their arms spread wide in the form of a cross.

"What are they doing?" Henry asks.

"They're telling you that you can't take away their crosses either. But they're also putting the mark of faith in front of the works of man. They're letting you know that God's hand was present in all of our accomplishments."

One section has words scrolling up it, probably hacked onto the broadcast by Four.

"If my word isn't enough, then how about His Word?" I ask.

The verse on the screen is from Jeremiah. I read it out loud to Henry.

"For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the Lord, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.'"

"You're done choosing man's future, Henry."

"Maybe so, Cephas. But I still control your future - and you're not going to like it."

They lock me in a room, where I see my backpack and staff are still sitting in the corner. When I search it, I find the first aid kit is there, but the blood-soaked bandage is no longer inside. They also took the small knife, so I have no weapons.

There's a screen with a newsfeed, showing people worldwide holding protests. Some are singing with their arms spread wide, and they're all asking questions, the most prominent of which is: "Where is Cephas?"

I wish I knew the answer to that question myself. I've been in a moving tube car for almost five hours now. I could have crossed the continent twice, or I could have been going in circles all this time. I have no way of knowing.

Use your gifts, and find yourself, Cephas.

I check my com, and although it's still active, my ability to contact anyone is blocked and - of course - my top secret clearance has been revoked. However, my com can still interface with the main public computer.

"Connect to the Department of Transportation," I instruct the com, and I find I still have basic public access.

"Display a map showing all tube cars in North America that are currently in motion."

The map is so covered with dots along the tube lines that it looks like blood moving through a body. You can't distinguish one car from another.

"Now, eliminate all the cars that are shorter than twenty meters in length."

The number of dots is reduced to just a few thousand. These are the large V.I.P. cars, like the one I'm on.

“Have any of these cars been in continuous motion for the last four hours?”

Down to just six cars. I’m on one of them.

“Have any of these cars been assigned security priority?”

“You do not have proper clearance for that information,” the pleasant voice says.

“How do I find the right car?”

You’re talking too much again. Try listening.

I close my eyes and listen. It’s just the usual monotone, there are no cues whatsoever.

I open my eyes. Of course! There are none of the usual tone changes indicating cars getting close and sharing the slipstream.

“Show just the cars that have maintained a minimum distance of one hundred meters from all other cars for the last three hours.”

Five dots disappear. The remaining dot is outside Ottawa, Canada, heading west. If I’m correct, in under an hour I’ll be at the NASA base in Michigan, where I trained for the Travelers Initiative.

Stop the car.

“Computer, what’s the emergency procedure if a tube car depressurizes while in transit?”

“In the event of depressurization, all cars on the line will automatically stop while a diagnostic is completed. If the pressure can’t be restored, then all cars will proceed at a safe rate until the depressurized car reaches the next available station.”

“Are there emergency exits from the tube that passengers can use to escape if the car can no longer move?”

“No. Passengers in a nonfunctioning car must remain in the car until service robots pull the car to the next available station.”

“Trying to leave us so soon?” Henry asks as he enters the room. “Don’t bother trying to depressurize the car. You could hit these windows all day and they wouldn’t break. Even if you could open a door, you’d be killed in the process.”

“I thought that was your plan anyway.”

“Not quite yet. There’s still the matter of your final press conference. Though, in your case, perhaps it should be called a final confession. First a panel of medical experts will announce that time travel causes a temporary psychosis. Then you’ll recant everything as a delusion, and say that you witnessed the apostles stealing Christ’s dead body. You’ll also offer the bloody bandage as proof.”

“Christians will see right through it as coerced. They won’t believe a word.”

“It’s no longer your job to convince the fish heads. Your job is to convince the vast number of people who no longer know what to believe. Your stunt has them all teetering on the edge, and I need you to get them back to their regularly scheduled, pointless little lives.”

I thought Henry’s religion centered on faith in man. He’ll even betray his own faith to hang onto power.

“I’ve seen the truth Henry. What are you going to do when I refuse? Threaten to kill me?”

“Why would I bother? I can see you’re so far gone your own life doesn’t mean enough to you anymore. It’ll take something far more precious in order to persuade you.”

He uses his com to change the screen to a private live feed featuring Martha tied to a chair.

“I’ll offer you her life.”

Please, Lord. No.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Martha's staring at the floor. Her face is bruised and her hands and feet are both in shackles.

"Martha? Are you okay?"

She makes no move to raise her head or acknowledge me. I turn to Henry.

"What have you done to her?"

"We needed information that she didn't want to give to us. You, of all people, should understand that torture is often required to get what you need. Some people are never quite the same afterwards."

I want to choke him, but my focus on Martha allows me to maintain control over my emotions.

I don't know what information Henry got, but if he still thinks I tortured Christians, then she didn't tell him the truth about how I broke the final code.

"She'd rather die than have me make this deal."

I watch Martha intently. She doesn't look up, but her right thumb moves behind her four fingers. Anyone else would see a random twitch, but she knew I'd pick it up.

I look at the woman sitting in the chair.

Who is she, really? Is she the thoughtful and gentle student from my class? Or is she just another actor, playing her part to use me in her agenda? My mind can't sort out the puzzle pieces, but I know what my heart wants to believe.

I turn back to Henry.

"I don't even know who this woman is. I haven't seen her since she ran out of my house when I figured out she's from Four. As far as I'm concerned, the time we spent together was all an act."

I gauge both Henry's response and Martha's.

Martha finally raises her head, and her eyes flicker to the camera for just a moment. Even through the camera, I can see that dazzling sparkle.

They haven't broken her. She's gaming them. But what's the game?

"Nice try, Cephas, but she told us all about how you two believe you're in love. We know you figured out she was from Four months before that day, and that you blurting it out was all part of your plan. Given how much persuasion it took to get the information out of her, I'm quite sure it's true. I must complement you, Cephas. Pretending to hunt for her using the Corps' computers was very convincing."

"Together. We're meant to be together, Cephas," Martha says and begins to sob.

I hope I'm correct about the message she just sent.

"If you can still understand what I'm saying Martha, please forgive me."

"You have a deal, Henry. I'll read your speech - in exchange for her life."

Martha sobs all the louder.

"Here are my terms. You get Martha onto this car so I can be sure she's alive. We do the speech in a large public forum, and when it's over, she walks into the crowd and disappears."

"How do I know you won't recant later?"

"This deal is for her life, not mine. You'll have me in prison to trot out anytime you need the lie repeated, or you just kill me and the truth dies with me. How do I know you'll leave her in peace for the rest of her life?"

"With you out of the way, what little is left of her will no longer be a threat."

"So we have a deal?" I ask.

"Yes. And as it turns out, you'll be seeing her in just a few minutes. We're holding her right here in Michigan, at the NASA base where you trained."

So I was right about which car I'm on.

Martha raises her head and gives the camera a vacant look, but the sparkle in her eyes tells me that things are going exactly as she wants.

When they bring Martha into the car, I can see the torture was much more severe than could be seen on the video feed. Her face and neck are bruised, and it looks like she's been burned on her arms. Her knuckles are bruised too, but they look like she was the one doing the hitting at the time. She stares at the floor as she shuffles along in her shackles, pushed and prodded by armed security. I've never seen someone who looked so thoroughly broken and defeated.

She's even better at manipulating her appearance than I am.

There's a screen showing the names of all the passengers in the car and when she enters, the name "unknown female #1" comes onto the security screen in blue. Henry notices it too.

"Calling her 'unknown female' is too much dignity. Change it to read 'Leper #1'."

"Are the shackles really necessary?" I ask. "She looks like she can barely stand."

The eyes of the guard standing behind Martha go wide when Henry instructs him to remove the cuffs. He takes two steps back and draws a stun gun before using his com to unlock the cuffs electronically. Martha barely moves. She just continues to stare at the floor and rubs the red marks on her wrists where the cuffs had been.

"We'll be in D.C. in two hours. Enjoy your time together," Henry says, and then has us locked in a room that has cameras in every corner. Martha continues to stare at the floor. I'm afraid a hug will be too painful for her, so I hold her loosely - but she doesn't raise her arms to hug me back.

"You'd really die for me?" she asks

Her voice sounds tired and distant.

"I said that I choose you."

"It's still a bad choice."

I move in closer and whisper in her ear, with my lips buried in her hair so the lip-reading cameras get nothing.

"Looking and sounding broken won't work on me, Martha. I can still see the fire in those eyes. Please tell me you got yourself captured as part of an escape plan, because I can't read Henry's speech. I'll die before I deny Christ."

Her arms come up and hold me tightly, despite a whimper of pain.

"I knew it. I knew they couldn't ruin you. The Four leadership said it was just another Cult Hunter trick to flush us out, but I knew. I just knew."

"So what's the escape plan?"

She goes slightly limp in my arms.

"I'm still working on that. I'm afraid this might be a one way trip for both of us."

I embrace her and hide my lips in her hair again.

"Trust the Lord."

I start to feel up her back.

"I'm pretty sure the Lord didn't tell you to run your hand up my shirt. Besides, there's a spot between my shoulder blades where they must have burned me or something. It really hurts."

"They didn't burn you. They put a tracking chip in you. The only thing that makes sense is that all enhancements must emit a radio frequency that's tagged to the person. Pretty much the entire population is tagged because of enhancements. That's why they could never figure out who was part of Four. None of you have enhancements. It's also why you'd never remove your com in class. If you had, your desk would have deactivated."

"Very good; but what makes you think there's a chip in me?"

"The security screens in this car put your name in blue when they're just detecting a chip, but your name is in red when you wear a com because the signal is stronger."

“Have I mentioned that I love your powers of observation?”

She winces in pain when I reach the correct spot on her back.

“Here it is - right between the shoulder blades where you can’t reach it yourself and would never notice it once it heals. It’s about the size of a grain of rice.”

“Will they know if you remove it?”

“I doubt it. I bet it stays active as a way to find and identify dead bodies.”

“Then get it out of me.”

“I’ll need to squeeze it out through the incision. It’s going to hurt like crazy and you’ll bleed when it breaks through the skin. They’ll see me doing it.”

She thinks for a moment.

“We need to do something for the camera that’s just a normal part of life for them. They won’t see what you’re doing if they think we’re just having sex.”

I pull away and look her in the eyes.

“Excuse me?”

She pulls me back to her.

“I said ‘think we’re having sex’ - not actually do it. But we’ll need to put on a convincing show.”

She grabs my face and kisses me.

I should be bursting with joy over being kissed by Martha again, but I’m not. I can feel that it’s just a show for the cameras. I’m ashamed to admit to myself that it feels like I’m kissing Jocie.

To my surprise, she starts to undress me, and I do the same. Her job is easy - togas pretty much fall off anyway. When we’re down to just underwear, we get under the covers. I may not know how Martha truly feels about me, but there’s no way I’m going to allow the Corps to get either of our naked bodies on a video they can show to the world. Martha removes her underwear and throws it on the floor for the camera. I want to follow suit, but instead I just pretend so there’ll still be some clothing between us.

We’re lying on our sides facing each other, and just having her warmth against me is heavenly. Like the atheist I was raised to be, her body makes me lose all focus on removing the chip.

Guard your thoughts, Cephas Paulson!

The voice in my head doesn’t even sound like my own, and it snaps me back to the task.

I can’t bring myself to kiss her on the lips again. Instead I start planting kisses on her neck and work my hand to where the chip is implanted. It’s in deep, and when I squeeze the skin, her body tenses from the pain and I release the pressure.

“Just do it, Cephas. I can handle it.”

“This is a bad angle. You’re going to have to get on top.”

The incision is only a few hours old, but even so I can feel I’m working the chip through partially healed skin. The pain must be incredible.

“Some noise might make you feel better - and add to the show.”

She lets out a deep moan.

“Since you’re on top, I think you should be moving up and down in a rhythm by this point. The movement will disguise what I’m really doing with my hands.”

“You *think* I should move up and down? Don’t you know? Everyone says that you’re-”

“Another time, Martha. Just keep moving.”

It seems to take forever, but when I have it almost free, I whisper, “Get ready to scream.”

I give it a massive squeeze and the chip breaks through the top layer of skin with a slight pop. Right on cue, Martha lets out a yell and I follow suit a moment later.

“Now, collapse on top of me,” I say.

“You think you were that good?”

“According to Cult Hunter legend, I’m that good - and more - but I also have to keep pressure on the spot to minimize the bleeding.”

We’re still lying there, when the door flies open.

“Now that you’re done, don’t bother putting the toga back on,” a Corps guy snaps. “Put this suit on instead.”

“Who says we’re done?”

He shuts the door and we both laugh awkwardly.

I pretend to put my underwear on under the covers, then retrieve Martha’s clothes. We’ll just have to hope the wound doesn’t bleed enough to ooze through her shirt. When she’s standing, I kiss her on the cheek and slip the chip into her hand. I see her place it into her pocket.

Even after lying next to her naked, I still don’t know if she loves me, or if it’s all just a show.

I ask the guard to take me to Henry. I leave Martha in the cabin, and as I enter the main room, I can see Martha is still listed on the board in blue as “Leper #1.”

“You should thank me,” Henry says as I enter.

“For what?”

“Apparently when we destroyed her mind, we left her sex drive intact. Given that it took two full kill teams to subdue her, she must be quite remarkable in bed. If I had that sort of spirit and raw power in just half of the Corps, I’d have wiped out the fish heads years ago.”

I say nothing.

“A week ago I wouldn’t have survived trying to bed her. Now I’ve seen what she can do, maybe I’ll take a turn.”

I start to move towards him with my fists ready, but one of the security guards raises his gun in warning.

“Give it a chance, Cephas. You may like her better this way.”

I continue to move towards him, but just then the car lurches a little and throws me off balance. The low hum of the moving air changes to a whistle, as the car rapidly decelerates, followed by a loud clunk as the car comes to a complete stop.

“What on earth is going on?” Henry yells in the direction of the control room.

A moment later, a tech guy comes into the room.

“The system says a cargo car in front of us has depressurized. The whole line is shut down, sir.”

“Depressurized? That hasn’t happened in decades. It isn’t possible.”

Henry looks at me, as he remembers what I was doing on the computer.

“This is no coincidence. You did this somehow.”

“If you ask me, this looks like an act of God,” I reply.

“Where’s the Leper? Get her in here so I can keep an eye on her.”

I watch as the guard resets his pistol to maximum stun.

“Where are we?” Henry asks.

“We’d just passed Winchester, Virginia,” the tech guy says.

“So we’re almost in D.C. Get this car moving again.”

“I can’t, sir. The automated shutdown protocol has been activated. All cars in the tube are stopped until the broken car is pulled to the closest station. They’ll pull us back first, and reroute us while they clear the tube and check for any debris.”

“Override the shutdown protocol,” Henry says. “We’ll push the dead car in front of us to D.C., if need be.”

“But there could be survivors.”

“If there are survivors, then they’re a bunch of fish heads. We’ll just arrange for them to meet Jesus sooner than they expected.”

Martha shuffles into the room with her head down and her hands in the air. She's followed by a guard with a drawn stunner.

"I'm being good now," Martha says in her damaged-goods voice.

Henry had some sort of stun weapon hidden on his lap, and he now points it nervously at Martha.

It took two kill teams to subdue her? She must be one heck of a fighter.

There are four armed security guards on the car - five if you include Henry - plus the tech guy. I wonder if Martha can take out all six of them. The guards must be thinking the same thing, because all weapons are drawn and pointed at Martha. I start to pace to temporarily block their view of her, but she continues to stare at the floor rather than making a move.

"I'm ready to override the controls," the tech guy says a moment later. "We can operate the system manually, but I wouldn't recommend pushing the car in front of us at high speed. If it starts losing pieces, the debris will shred us. We can also go backwards to the last junction, but we'll end up pushing back the maintenance drone that's coming to tow us."

Henry continues to stare at Martha, waiting for her to attack.

"You have to make a decision, sir. Forward manually, through the debris, or back to the station?"

Henry finally looks at the tech guy.

"Lost, lost, lost. When you hesitate, you're lost," Martha says, and Henry returns his focus to her.

She's trying to buy time. Why?

She shifts her gaze towards the front of the car, then puts a mindless smile on her face. She appears to be waiting for something to happen. Henry notices.

"They're coming from in front of us," he says.

We feel a bump from the maintenance drone hooking onto us and we begin to move backwards.

"Let the drone pull us so they'll think the car is dead, and get as many agents as you can into the Winchester station. If there are more like her in front of us, let's go around."

Martha's chin hits her chest - but I can see her smile.

Chapter Thirty-Three

The ride back to Winchester is slow and bumpy by tube standards, but still only takes twenty minutes. Henry sends guards to the front and the back.

Only three guns left in the room.

“There’s a bypass junction on this side of the station, so we shouldn’t need to stop once the maintenance drone releases us,” the tech guy says.

“Good. We need to get moving again,” Henry replies. “As soon as we’re clear, send two full teams down the tube on the drone. Tell them to kill anything that moves.”

We feel the maintenance car release us, but we don’t start moving. The tech guy comes back into the room.

“We’re not in position like I requested. They pulled us all the way back to the public station.”

There’s a knock on the rear airlock and we hear someone say: “We need to inspect the front of the car for debris damage. Please release the inside manual lock.”

“Nobody in or out,” Henry replies.

The guard relays the message.

“I can’t inspect the front from here. I have to come through and do it via the forward lock. I can’t release this car for travel until it’s been inspected.”

“Stupid bureaucrats - and their procedures.”

Henry doesn’t see the irony in his statement, but accents to the request when the security system confirms the identity of the man outside.

Martha and I are both standing, when a young man comes through the cabin with a com in each ear, registering on the board as being the Winchester station manager. He’s wearing an official jacket and pants that appear to be two sizes too big for him, as well as a hat and some sort of computerized glasses that make it hard to see his face. I tap Martha’s elbow and drop my eyes to the man’s shoes. Stuck to the bottom, like it had inadvertently stuck there when he stepped on it, is a single white rose petal. I see the corner of Martha’s mouth curl ever so slightly in satisfaction.

“Thirsty. Drink?” Martha asks like a little kid.

Henry nods his head, and Martha works her way to the coffee service area, under the watchful eyes - and guns - of two security men.

“Tea, Cephas?”

She starts humming what only I recognize as the ancient tune “Amazing Grace.”

“I’d love a cup. Mint, if they have it.”

I watch, as she takes down saucers. She has at least six, but nobody else seems to notice that she has many more than she needs.

When the station manager reaches the front of the car, we hear the airlock open with a clunk, followed by a voice saying: “Hey,” and a much louder thud.

“If she moves, shoot her,” Henry orders one of the security guys, then sends the other to see what just happened. Martha doesn’t even turn around, she just keeps humming and fussing with the coffee service.

“Tea, Cephas.”

She turns to hand it to me. As she does, she shifts her eyes towards Henry, then turns back to her work. When I sit, instead of sitting directly across from Henry, I sit so his view of Martha is blocked.

What happens next is a blur. The security guard who Henry sent to investigate the noise says: “What the -” followed by the sound of a stun gun. As he staggers backwards into the room, Martha spins and throws saucers like throwing stars at the remaining guard.

We drink from the cup God chooses for us, but I guess we can do as we please with the saucers.

The first two are clean misses, but the third hits him in the forehead and the fourth in the throat. Henry has no clear shot on Martha because I'm in the way, so he stands to shoot over my head. As he does, I throw the hot tea into his face, then grab for his gun. The guard that Martha hit gets off one shot, which hits the coffee service and makes most of the china cups explode, before Martha is across the room and disarms him.

I have Henry in a wristlock across the table to keep him from shooting Martha, but because he's much heavier, I'm losing the battle. Just before Henry is able to turn the gun on me, the guy in the stationmaster coat lands a flying foot on Henry's face. A second later, two men dressed as maintenance workers enter from both the front and back - but there's nobody left for them to fight.

The tech guy enters the room with his hands on the top of his head. He was either too scared - or too smart - to fight.

"Let's go," the stationmaster says, and heads for the airlock.

"Wait," I say, and use my com to see through the cameras positioned around the station. People are coming and going like normal.

"Most of the cult hunters jumped onto a drone and headed down the line," the stationmaster insists. "This is our chance."

I stay focused on the cameras, the misplaced puzzle pieces jumping out one at a time, until I've counted over three dozen cult hunters who are trying to blend in with the crowd. One in particular keeps speaking into his com, asking for the time.

They're expecting us to leave.

"Close the airlocks," I say.

As soon as the doors are closed, the car moves into position to take us down a branch line.

"The order had already been entered. We're on our way to D.C. again," I say.

Martha turns to the tech guy. "You said you can override the system and drive this car manually?"

He nods.

"The junction should take us down a branch line towards the Strasburg station. Stop the car there."

We lock the stunned security guys in a room, but use the shackles meant for Martha to secure Henry to a chair, while the tech guy takes control of the car. The young man who posed as the Winchester stationmaster removes the oversized coat, hat, pants, and glasses.

"You got my message," Martha says.

As she gives him a long embrace, I feel a twinge of jealousy.

"How did you know that decompressing a car would get us back to Winchester for a rescue?" she asks him.

"We thought it was your idea. We were monitoring Cephas' com, like you said, and it just started showing us how to find this car and how to stop the line."

Martha turns and smiles at me.

"You just never cease to amaze do you, Professor?"

"So says the tea party ninja."

The young man walks over to me.

"I'm William, Martha's cousin. Is it true that Jesus touched you and healed you? Is it true that you touched His dead body, and saw Him risen? Can you really recite the entire Bible from memory?"

"It's a pleasure to meet you, William. I've read the Bible many times, but I can't recite it by heart. I was healed by Jesus, I did help take Him down from the cross and I did see Him risen."

William falls to his knees in front of me, and Henry starts to laugh.

“Don’t get used to it, Cephas. I give this newfound adoration a week, before the Christians remember how much of their blood is on your hands. You’ll never be one of them. And you’ll be begging for my protection.”

His words don’t bother me, but Martha’s eyes shift down and to the right. She must believe there’s some truth in what Henry is saying.

“We’ll be in Strasburg in one minute,” we hear over the intercom.

“We’ll get off here and send this car across the country,” Martha says. “We can take another car, and disappear for a while.”

“I’ll track you wherever you go,” Henry says.

“Really?” I say.

I drop my com to the floor and step on it. My name disappears from the passenger list on the screen. Martha takes the chip that was in her back, drops it to the floor, and crushes it. “Leper #1” disappears from the screen.

“You said it in your note, Henry. Millions are disappearing worldwide, and you don’t know why. Nobody’s disappeared, they’re just waking up and taking out the chips that you use to track them.”

“People won’t choose to live without their enhancements. It’s who they are now.”

Enhancements are who we are? I wonder...

Without warning, I shoot Henry with his own stunner, and he slumps over.

“I’m glad you shut him up, but you didn’t need to stun him. We’re leaving a man on the car to be sure that it’s far away before Henry gets control back,” Martha says.

“That’s not why I did it,” I say. “William, you impersonated the stationmaster by taking his coms, right?”

“Yes. So?”

“So you used their reliance on technology against them. Henry is pretty well enhanced, especially around the face. Let’s get a small chip out of him.”

William finds one behind Henry’s left ear, where the skin is thin. He removes it then stops the bleeding with a laser cauterizer. We walk into the Strasburg station, and the elevator monitor lists both the name of the Winchester stationmaster in red and Henry’s name in blue.

“Now take out the coms,” I say.

When they deactivate, only Henry’s name remains on the screen.

“They’ll figure it out quickly, but for now, we have a way to impersonate anyone who donates a chip,” I say. “So, now that William’s been promoted from stationmaster to Director of the F.B.I., which tube shall we take - and where shall we go?” I ask.

“I just said that to throw Henry off. We’re walking from here,” Martha replies.

“Walking? To where?”

“A safe place, up in those mountains. It’s fifteen or sixteen kilometers as the crow flies, but walking will leave no electronic trace.”

“William. Throw those coms in a random tube car. When they’re found, it’ll look like we left by tube,” I say, and he runs off to do it.

“You’re a crafty one,” Martha says, and walks over and kisses me on the cheek.

The cheek?

Walking through mountains makes me feel like I’m back walking with the disciples, so I tell Martha and William the story of my adventure, from beginning to end. Martha prefers to stay quiet and take it all in, but William asks many questions. His thirst to know more about Jesus and the apostles reminds me of a young child who is curious and excited about the world. He’s especially

thrilled when I tell him about the times that Jesus spoke directly to me, when - to everyone else around Him - it seemed like He was speaking to Simon Peter.

“He planned for you to be there,” William says. “He knew all along that you would be there to carry the message forward to this time. Wouldn’t it be funny if there was someone behind you too? Someone from even farther in the future who’s carrying the message to that time?”

Pay attention to this question, Cephas.

I turn to Martha.

“Do you have people in Israel? Can you get messages to them?”

“Of course - but why?”

“Henry still has a time machine. He may try to send someone else back to change my trip and get a result that suits him better.”

“I don’t see how. Sending someone back after you were there won’t change anything, and he can’t send someone back to the same cave who arrives before you did. If he does, then you would have seen evidence of it.”

“And as far as anyone knows, there isn’t another cave in the area that’s been untouched from before the time of Jesus,” William adds.

“He doesn’t need to send someone to Jerusalem, or even very far back. All he needs to do is send someone to kill me before I testify.”

“Wouldn’t he still need a different place to set everything up?” William asks. “The cave they used for your trip is still pretty high profile.”

“It could be done in an empty warehouse here in the U.S.,” I respond. “They could go back a few days and shoot me from a rooftop, as I walk down the steps to the podium. Then they’d claim the shooter was a Christian who was sent to stop me from testifying that I saw the apostles steal the body.”

“Is your mind always a step or two ahead?” William asks.

“More like ten,” Martha replies.

We reach the top of an open ridge and sit down for a rest.

“We’re pretty close now,” Martha says. “It’s just down in that valley.”

“You’ve been here before, then?”

“Yes, many times - although this is the first time I’ve walked all the way. There’s no hover line into the area, so usually an old-fashioned electric bus takes you the last few kilometers.”

“An electric bus? It would have to be a hundred years old.”

“Things change slowly for people who’re trying to live without being seen by the government.”

“But the young Christians who set up the group Four are good with technology,” I say. “You’re running circles around the Corps’ best tech guys.”

“Young people with Christ in their lives are ambitious and motivated. While the rest of our generation has been numbing its brains with sex and drugs, we’ve put the time to good use. For generations now, the country has been run by numbed people who saw no point in trying to exceed the work of their grandfathers. That’s what happens when people have nothing greater than themselves to live for.”

“The first time I looked into your eyes, I said that you want to do more than exist, you want to live. So, with all of our needs met by technology, what’s left for a Christian to do?”

Martha smiles her brilliant smile.

“I don’t know, but I’m sure He will lead us there. There’s always the stars. Maybe He wants to lead us out there.”

I can’t help but smile at her.

“Henry wanted proof that Jesus is a fraud, and when I could offer only my word that Jesus is real, he said it wasn’t good enough. Sometimes I wonder if the lack of “proof” of His existence is one of His greatest gifts to us.”

“What do you mean?” William asks.

“Even the most faithful people throughout history had their doubts. We’re imperfect beings, and we don’t have perfect faith.”

“Are you saying that doubt makes faith stronger?” William asks. “That doesn’t make any sense.”

“I think what I’m saying is that exploring our doubts is a natural way of searching for Him. Maybe the point of faith in this life is the journey, rather than the destination.”

William looks confused, so I continue.

“Let me put it another way. If we knew with absolute certainty that there is a heaven, wouldn’t it make sense to just end our lives here and get there faster? More to the point, if you knew for certain that you were going to heaven, why would you bother to work hard to better your life here?”

“That’s the current state of mankind, just flipped on its head,” Martha says. “People are so convinced that we’ve created “Man’s Garden of Eden” that they waste their lives away without bothering to search for anything other than new pleasures.”

“So proof in either direction results in man stagnating?” William asks.

“The very essence of faith is that you don’t need proof,” I say.

I see something through the trees. We’ve been walking through a thick stand of mixed hardwoods, with a few pines scattered here and there, and were just descending into a swampy spot near a stream, when out of nowhere pops a small, stone, octagon building.

Martha asks William to give us a moment alone, then turns to face me.

“I loved my time as your student. I loved lying in the grass, and watching sunsets, and holding your hand, but-”

“But, it’s over,” I say.

“Yeah. It’s over. I’ve been promoted to a leadership position, and-”

“So is this goodbye?”

“It’s goodbye to that life, for both of us.”

“As I remember it, goodbye kisses don’t count.”

I take a step forward, with my arms out to hold her, but she backs away.

“I learned a lot more from being your student than the material you taught in class. You showed me that, even when surrounded by temptation, it’s still up to each of us to make our own choices. Then you proved you meant it by resisting everything the world used to try to ruin you. I just hope...”

I wait awkwardly for her to finish her sentence. She finally raises her head and meets my eyes.

“I just hope it isn’t the Christian world that ends up ruining you instead.”

As we walk past the little octagon house, I see a collection of white buildings with green trim. They’re all hundreds of years old, and show the signs of being updated over time. In some places, you can see original wood clapboard siding. In others, there are one hundred-year-old synthetics that must have been put up when cutting trees was outlawed, and there are even places where modern carbon fiber siding has been used. The mix of materials gives me the instant impression of a place that’s trying to hold onto tradition, but is losing the battle - one board at a time.

Martha leads me to a stone drinking fountain, where the water is bubbling up without any sort of activation switch. She takes a long drink.

“There’s no water like this anywhere else on earth,” Martha says. “It’s naturally purified as it bubbles up through the rocks, so we get to drink it in the form that it was made by God, untouched

by man. This place is called 'Capon Springs.' It's an ancient Native American word that means 'medicine waters.'"

Since we did the walk without water, I also take a long drink. She's right, the water is clear and delicious. It makes me wonder just how much processing is done to city water supplies.

"Medicine waters?" I ask.

"Hundreds of years ago, right up through the late 1800's - before the onset of even crude pharmaceuticals - people believed that certain waters had medicinal properties, and would flock to springs like this one to cure whatever ailed them. Resorts and bathhouses sprang up to give people a place to stay while they rested and healed. Of course, once early painkillers and antibiotics like aspirin and penicillin were invented, those resorts lost their business."

The buildings of the resort are interspersed among enormous trees. As we pass one, I see a small green plaque. I know it must be ancient because it's made out of plastic, a material that was abandoned over one hundred years ago. It states that this maple tree was planted by some guy named Lyons in the year 2010, almost two hundred years ago. Its trunk must be three meters around. When Mr. Lyons planted this, it was probably as big as my thumb. Could he have ever imagined what his tiny sapling would become? If you had told him his tree would live through a nuclear and biological war, would he have believed it? If you had told him that during the life of his tree that Christianity would be all but wiped out, would he have said it's impossible? Or in the year 2010, was he already seeing the incremental changes aimed at removing it?

As we walk along a central greenway, I start seeing that we're far from alone. There's a large swimming pool, where people are playing and relaxing. Nobody is wearing a com or using a computer. Most are engaged in real face-to-face conversations where they see and hear each other, just as I dreamed my students would see and hear me in the classroom.

A group of children run past, and I realize that I don't remember the last time I saw children simply playing together, without using electronics in some way.

"Is this a Christian hiding place?" I ask Martha.

"No. Everyone is welcome here. This is simply a place you can go when you want to enjoy a simpler life for a few days."

A place where you can think.

The buildings have porches where people are sitting and talking, but conversations stop as we walk past. I overhear things like: "Is that who I think it is?" and "No way."

As we approach the largest building, many people are following us, including William. Someone on the porch spots us and yells into the building: "Hey, Brill! You'd better get out here."

An old gentleman walks onto the porch. I recognize him as the bartender in San Francisco.

"Hello, Brill," Martha says. "I hope you don't mind. I brought a friend to visit."

"I figured you'd turn up here eventually. Welcome to Capon Springs, West Virginia, Dr. Paulson."

"It's nice to put a name with the face. You left abruptly when we spoke in San Francisco."

"That wasn't me. That was my twin brother, Austin. He's always taking off for somewhere, and poking into things where his nose doesn't belong."

"Actually, we had a very interesting conversation."

"I suppose he promised this place could be your headquarters or something. Isn't that just all I need?"

"Headquarters? Headquarters for what?"

"For the war of course," William says from behind me.

I turn to look at him.

"The war?"

"You're the history professor. You know the True Holy War has never ended."

I get it immediately. The True Holy War is the name for the unspoken war that has been waged since the late 1900's by the atheists and their allies against believers of all creeds. The Christians, the Muslims, the Jews, Buddhists, and Hindus to name a few - everyone who believed in any sort of god whatsoever was a target. They went after the institutions of all religions by targeting marriage. They sought to weaken all religions through the Equalization and changing laws, including the U.S. Constitution. They even started a nuclear and biological war, then did their best to buy off religion by fulfilling man's needs with technology. The True Holy War is the two hundred-year-old war of believers against non-believers and now a few million Christians worldwide are the only ones left to carry on the fight, in a world ruled by apathy and a love for self-gratification.

"So if this place is going to be headquarters, who's the leader of the Christians in the war?" I ask.

Martha and William look at each other, and then at Brill. Brill shakes his head and chuckles under his breath. Many people in the crowd raise their arms to make themselves human crosses.

"You are," Martha replies.

Dear Reader:

Please allow me to reiterate the last line of this book, which explains who is most needed in the very real fight we face today for the survival of religious freedom...

You Are.

Connect with the Author

I hope you enjoyed *Puzzle Master* as much as I enjoyed writing it. If you liked it, I hope you'll take a moment to post a review at your favorite eBook site and to tell others about it on social media.

Before we get to the Epilogue, and a sneak peek at the next book - *Puzzle Master: Master of None* - I have a personal request. In Chapter 31, we see that one reaction to Cephas' testimony is people standing in various places throughout the world, with their arms held wide to show that the cross that lives in their hearts can never be torn down. To help spread the word - and help me give away as many free eBooks as possible - please put yourself in that picture.

I've seen fads with people taking pictures of themselves lying in odd places (planking); pictures of morning lattes; people imitating the poses of favorite sports stars and celebrities; and of course, a never-ending parade of selfies. Most of the time, it's done as meaningless fun - and I respect that. This once though, let's put a little meaning into the fun.

Stand and show your "cross" anywhere and everywhere that you feel the presence of God in your heart; then share the picture with your friends - along with a link to the free download of *Puzzle Master* and maybe a word or two saying that you enjoyed the book. For the younger crowd: I know you love Snapchat, so you can find me @PuzzleMasterBk. If you'd like a more permanent record, you can post your "cross" picture on my Facebook or Instagram pages, both of which are @PuzzleMasterBook.

If I've achieved the goal of touching you with my words, here is an email address where you can tell me about it personally: puzzlemasterbook@gmail.com. For those who prefer the personal touch of a handwritten letter, you can reach me via my publisher at:

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Thanks for your patience and your posts. Now, on to the Epilogue and a portion of Chapter 1 of *Puzzle Master: Master of None*.

Epilogue

Four weeks later

Nearly ten thousand kilometers away, large drilling drones work grinding through a mix of sand and solid rock. As the cutting heads on one drone get dull, another automatically swings into position, while the first reports to the maintenance area, where more robots will automatically sharpen or replace the cutting edges.

Behind the drills, smaller drones carry away the excavated material, while others move roof supports into place. The going is slowest when the rigs hit pockets of sand that cave in around them; but working day and night, nothing holds them back for long. After digging for over five kilometers, tonight the drones are finally standing still and silent. Tonight needs the human touch.

“Where do we stand?” the shift supervisor asks the lead technician.

“We broke through an hour ago. It took us a while to pull the rigs out of the way, so the first team is just about to enter the chamber now. Here’s the live feed.”

He taps a screen, which displays a jumpy video taken from a shoulder camera on the team leader.

The screen shows the agents moving through some sort of ancient burial chamber that’s filled with various artifacts. The find would be an archeologist’s dream, but the team steps on and kicks the antiquities, like junk that has accumulated in an attic.

“Nothing.” the supervisor says. “I don’t get it. Our source said it would be here.”

“Hold on,” the team leader replies over his com. “It looks like we have a set of stairs leading down. I’m going to check out what’s below.”

Without thinking about the age of the wooden steps, the leader takes just one step before the entire staircase disintegrates from thousands of years of dry rot, sending him tumbling with a crash. When the camera stops moving, there’s nothing to be seen but dust reflecting back in the beam of the camera’s light.

“Team leader? Are you okay?” the technician asks, but there’s no response - not even a moan. “He’s not moving. Should I send a medical drone to assist?”

“Do whatever you want,” the supervisor replies. “Look!”

Through the settling dust, the tilted camera shows a clear image of what looks like a large metal birdcage.

“Send a message directly to Henry Portman in D.C. Tell him ‘we’re on.’”

Sneak Peek at Puzzle Master Trilogy Book Two: *Master of None*

Chapter One

Capon Springs, West Virginia, 2203 A.D.

You Are.

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

You Are the leader of the True Holy War.

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

You Are the last hope for religious freedom.

You are in way over your head, Cephas Paulson.

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

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

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

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

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

She ignores the question.

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

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

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

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

"I have to go. Enjoy the training."

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

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

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

Time to test the lines again.

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

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

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

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

Their response time is getting faster.

I turn back to the target.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“There are only five targets,” I say.

I shoot.

“Make that four.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I'm amazed *you* got six."

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

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

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

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

And that is the solution.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I lock eyes with each of my guards in turn.

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

"Just quit," Angry Eyebrows yells.

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

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

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

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

Another Author's note:

You didn't really expect life to suddenly be easy for Cephas did you? It's one thing to declare yourself a Christian... but it's quite another to live it...