

Beijing, China  
January 29<sup>th</sup>

He was about to be executed.

*It could have been worse, he thought as he was strapped to the gurney.  
They could have opted for the firing squad.*

He lay on the table, arms outstretched, strapped down so he would be unable to move, to escape. The irony was not lost on him that the position was very much like Christ being nailed to the cross.

*I'm ready. I've been ready ever since the day she died.  
Now we can be together.*

His eyes scanned the spectators--witnesses--just beyond the glass partition. Some of the faces were familiar, some not. There was so much he wanted to say, but there was not enough time. Instead, when the warden offered him a microphone, he said in a strong, clear voice, "I'm sorry."

He looked up at the plastic bags hanging just above his head. The drugs that would end his life in a matter of minutes. It was said this was the most humane form of execution, but he found himself wondering if it would be painful. Would he simply go to sleep, or would there be agony?

*Let it be over quickly, he silently prayed.*

He glanced at the faces beyond the glass again and saw that he had arrived. The man whose face was a mirror image of his own.

*I told you not to come.  
Can you ever forgive me?  
There's nothing to forgive.*

He felt the needle being inserted into his forearm. There was a stinging sensation, followed by a strange sense of euphoria.

After that came the darkness....

London  
June 22<sup>nd</sup>  
two years earlier

The massive complex that once stood at the site was now a mountain of rubble. The initial explosion, said to have occurred on the main building's lowest level, had set off a series of explosions that had killed everyone inside and destroyed everything contained there.

A man and a woman toured the remnants of the facility. The man was of an advanced age, wizened and balding, wearing an expensive black suit and a hat. The woman was young and vibrant, a redhead also dressed in black. "I trust you will not disappoint me, Cassandra," he said.

She regarded him with a feline smile. "Have I ever?" she wanted to know. He stopped walking. "No, you have not," he conceded. "But then, you have not been given such a position of responsibility before."

"It's a shame that Nicholas didn't measure up to your expectations," Cassandra said then.

He smiled. "Nicholas served his purpose," he said. "It was time for him to go."

"I don't understand."

"You will. In time."

"Do you believe he's still alive?" she asked then.

"Andrew?" Adrian's laugh was hollow. "I'm sure of it. I underestimated him once--a mistake I will not make again."

"Our people haven't located him," Cassandra pointed out.

"But he lives," Adrian said, poking the toe of one of his custom-made shoes at the ashes. "He was last seen in Cairo. No doubt on his way to his wife and the boy."

"In the States?"

"Most certainly," Adrian answered with a nod.

"Do we have anyone there?"

Adrian shook his head. "He'll be expecting that. No, we'll wait," he said. "Then, when he no longer sees a threat, only then will we make our move."

St. Louis, Missouri  
June 23<sup>rd</sup>

*"Connor...Connor...."*

Connor Mackenzie woke with a start. He sat up and looked around, certain he'd heard someone calling his name. He looked over at his wife. Lynne stirred a little but didn't wake.

Connor smiled. He'd wondered how much of an adjustment it would be for them to be together again after being apart for the past two years. He needn't have worried. Last night, they'd made love as if they hadn't even spent a night apart. It was as if the horror of the past two years had been erased.

*If only it could be,* he thought sadly.

If only he could forget all of the things that had been done to him in his two years in captivity. There were no physical scars, but the emotional scars would remain with him until death.

*"Connor...Connor...."*

He took a deep breath. Someone had indeed called his name. *Why now? Why not when I wanted you to come, wanted you to tell me where to find Lynne and my son?*

*"You must take your family and leave now. Take them back to the sanctuary. You will be safe there."*

*I can't leave. The authorities will be looking for me. I have to testify.* Not wanting to wake Lynne, he got out of bed and went over near the window. It was

early. The sun was rising on the horizon. In the distance, he could hear dogs barking. A boy on a bicycle delivered newspapers, flinging them toward the subscribers' doorsteps but never even slowing down. A couple in shorts and tank tops ran together in a perfect rhythm along the peaceful street.

*"You will be allowed to go. You will stay at the sanctuary until I call you to serve."*

*Call me to serve?*

*"You are the prophet, my child. You have a responsibility."*

*Not now. Not so soon after I've come back to them.*

*"You are first the prophet."*

*You ask too much of me.*

*"Only that for which you were born."*

*I need time.*

*"There is no time. This is a war, Connor. A supernatural war. Time is of the essence."*

*"Connor?"*

He turned. Lynne raised her head off the pillow. "Are you all right?" she asked.

"I'm fine. Just needing a bit of adjustment to this time zone, I think." He got back into bed and drew her into his arms. "Having a bit of trouble accepting that we're really together again."

"What did they do to you?" she asked, touching his face.

He shook his head. "Not something I want to remember." He kissed her. "I'd much rather think about being with you and the wee laddie."

She gave a little laugh. "You may see more of your son than you'd like."

"Impossible!" he laughed.

"Oh, yeah? Wait til he comes charging in here and wants to get into bed with us," she warned. "He's only in his own bed now because he was so exhausted he didn't wake during the night."

"You've been letting him sleep with you," Connor reminded her.

"I was always afraid to let him out of my sight," she confessed. "I'd lost you--or I thought I had. I wasn't going to lose him, too."

Connor was silent for a moment. "Let's go back to New Zealand," he said finally.

"Can we?" she asked. "I thought you had to stay in the US until the trial."

"They know I *want* to testify," he said, stroking her cheek. "I'll come when they need me."

"I'd been planning to go back before you arrived," she said. "I couldn't even imagine staying here. Not now, not with everyone gone."

He saw the pain in her eyes, even in the semi-darkness. Her entire family had been murdered at the church across the street. Her father had been the pastor of that church for almost forty years. Her parents, sisters, brothers-in-law, nieces and nephews, all slaughtered.

All of them had been killed for one purpose: to bring Connor and Lynne out of hiding.

"Daddy!"

The door burst open and their two-year-old son Daniel, nicknamed Kiwi because he'd been born in New Zealand, came rushing into the room. He climbed up onto the bed and wedged himself between his parents. Connor hugged the child tightly. Lynne looked uncomfortable. "How am I supposed to get out of bed *now*?" she asked.

"Just get up," Connor suggested.

"I'm naked," she reminded him.

He only laughed. "You Americans are such prudes," he said. "You think there's something wrong with your two-year-old seeing you naked? When I was a wee boy in Scotland, I saw my mum naked all the time. There's no shame in it."

"You just don't want me to get dressed," she said, rumpling her son's hair playfully.

"I haven't been with you for two years," he reminded her, as if she needed a reminder. "No, I don't want you to rush off to get dressed. Not yet."

"No point in staying in bed." She pointed at Kiwi. "He's not going anywhere, you know."

Connor got out of bed and scooped the child up in his arms. "You've taken good care of your mummy while I was away," he said, kissing Kiwi's cheek.

The toddler nodded with enthusiasm.

"But Daddy's back now, and Daddy and Mummy sleep in here, and you sleep in your room," he attempted to explain.

"No!"

Connor made a face and the little boy burst into laughter. "Sorry, chap, but how do you expect us to get you a wee brother or sister if you don't leave us to--"

"Connor," Lynne interrupted, "he's only two. Precocious as he is, he's not quite ready for *that* talk yet."

"I want a baby sister!" Kiwi chortled.

"I'll do my best," Connor promised, "but I'm going to need some time alone with your mum here. From now on, this room's off limits."

"Good luck with that," Lynne said, rolling her eyes.

"Let's go downstairs and give your mum a bit of privacy," he said, starting toward the door.

"You forgot something," Lynne called after him. He turned, and she threw his pajama bottoms at him.

He caught them easily with one hand and laughed. "I thought you liked my bum."

"I do," she assured him. "But people will be arriving at the church soon for vacation Bible school. Just stay away from the doors and windows, okay? I don't think the older women could handle the sight of you in all your glory. Some of them have pacemakers."

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"Look what we've created," Connor said, putting an arm around Lynne as they watched Kiwi at play. "He's amazing."

"Amazing," Lynne said with a nod. "Let's see how you feel after a few weeks with him."

Connor followed her into the kitchen. He plucked an apple from the basket

of fruit on the table and took a bite as he leaned against the counter. "If we're to give him a baby sister, I think we'll need to spend a great deal more time working on that," he suggested.

Lynne stopped what she was doing. "I don't want to have another baby, Connor," she said.

He couldn't hide his surprise. "There was a time you only wanted me for my sperm," he recalled with mild amusement.

She didn't smile. "I'm terrified every time he gets out of my sight," she said finally. "There are--people--who want him dead."

Connor shook his head. "Not dead, no."

"No. Worse." Lynne took a deep breath. "I won't bring another child into the world to be hunted like some prize animal. I can't."

"What happened to your faith?" Connor asked. "What happened to accepting God's will, trusting him to protect our children?"

"I lost it when my family was massacred," she said coldly. "I lost it when my team was killed because they couldn't reveal our whereabouts. I lost it when we had to run for our lives. I lost it when I thought my husband, my baby's father, was dead. Take your pick."

Connor bit into the apple again. "You do realize that we had unprotected sex last night," he reminded her. "You might already be pregnant again."

Lynne avoided his eyes. "We need to talk about that."

"Don't even suggest abstaining until we get birth control," he warned. "I've been abstaining for the past two years."

"I'll have a tubal ligation," she said.

He shook his head. "No," he said with finality.

She stared at him. "No?"

"Too final. You may change your mind. I may change your mind."

"Connor," she started, "I'm already forty-three. You're thirty-nine. Our childbearing years are nearing an end."

"You're married to a geneticist," he reminded her. "There are ways--"

"No," she cut him off emphatically. "We had Kiwi naturally, and that's the only way I'll ever do it." Then: "Would you consider adoption?"

"Of course."

"Then let's adopt. We can certainly afford to have several children that way. And the cartel won't be interested in them because they won't have your DNA."

"Are you sorry we had Kiwi?" he asked then.

"Of course not!"

"Would you have still had him if you'd known the truth about me then?"

She didn't have an answer for him.

Los Angeles  
July 10<sup>th</sup>

Alex Stewart shifted uncomfortably in the seat of the crowded Greyhound bus as it approached the city from the east on the San Bernardino Freeway. In the darkness, most of his fellow passengers slept. Sleep for Alex, however, had never come easily. A woman seated in the back of the bus with a crying baby was having the same problem. He smiled to himself, a weary little smile. The kid was proof of perpetual motion: he never stopped crying. Alex was surprised any sound could come out of that throat after all this time.

He sat up and attempted to refold his jacket into a more comfortable pillow. *What's the use?* he asked himself. In another fifteen minutes, the bus would be stopping, and he'd be looking for someplace else to call home, however temporarily.

*Home. I don't even know the meaning of the word.*

He looked up at the lights. Lights illuminating the freeway, lights in buildings. He tried to imagine what the people inside those buildings were doing. Office buildings, with workaholics burning the midnight oil, trying to get rich. Hotels, filled with weary travelers, families on vacation, cheating spouses having trysts. No matter who they were or what they were doing, those people had somebody with them, or somebody to go home to.

Alex had no one. *Not anymore.*

He looked down at the folded newspaper in his lap. The headline read: SCIENTIST SOUGHT TO TESTIFY IN GEN TECH CASE. The caption under the photograph read *Dr. Andrew Stewart*, but the face was his own. They were twins, even though they had been born to different mothers in different countries, ten years apart.

The bus left the freeway and headed into the city itself. Los Angeles suited Alex's needs perfectly. It was the perfect place to lose oneself. He wanted to drop off the face of the earth. What better place to do it than this city of dreams? *The City of Angels*. He found it amusing. If this place were indeed populated by angels, if angels existed, if Heaven existed, he would certainly be banned. He'd never be permitted to set foot on holy ground. *I'm a walking, talking sacrilege*, he thought miserably. *Man's slap in the face to God.*

By the time the bus pulled into the station in downtown L.A., the crying baby in the back had finally drifted off to sleep. His mother's peace would be short-lived. The moment she moved, rising from her seat to disembark, the howling began all over again. Alex hoisted his backpack onto one shoulder and slipped into the line in the aisle. As he stepped off the bus, he was assaulted by a variety of sights and sounds. Los Angeles was truly a melting pot, populated by people representing a wide range of cultures and speaking a multitude of languages. He made his way through the crowd and entered the large, cavernous station. There were faded fiberglass chairs in lines in the center, some taken, most empty. A row of vending machines lined one wall. There was a snack bar that was now closed, and small TV sets that operated on quarters. Homeless people slept on the floor at the far end, their worldly belongings stuffed into tattered backpacks, duffels and totes.

Alex lowered his own backpack from his shoulder and looked at it for a moment. *I'm one of them*, he thought, drawing in a deep breath before moving

forward. *Might as well join the crowd.*

He found a spot in a corner and lay down, drawing his body into a fetal position. He rested his head on his backpack and found it surprisingly easy to drift off to sleep. Had he become so accustomed to this life that it no longer bothered him?

He hadn't been asleep long when the shrill whistle issued by a policeman roused him from his rest. He sat up as a group of people rushed into the terminal and started rounding up the homeless. He thought they were cops at first. He scrambled to his feet.

"Come with me."

He turned. Behind him was a young woman who looked to be in her late twenties, dressed in an Old Navy T-shirt and faded jeans with warm brown eyes and long reddish brown hair that hung in messy curls about her shoulders. "You sure don't look like a cop," he told her, confident that, unless she was armed, he could easily get away from her.

"I'm not," she said, looking mildly insulted. "I'm from the Guardian Angel shelter. You need a place to stay?"

He regarded her with amusement. "Do I look that bad?"

"You're sleeping on the floor in a bus station," she reminded him. "It's a no-brainer."

He scratched his head. "Yeah, I see your point."

She pulled herself to her full five feet two inches. "Well?"

"Well what?" he asked.

"Does a warm bed and hot food appeal to you or not?" She looked around. The people she'd come with were already leading several others out of the terminal. "We only have limited facilities."

He nodded. "You talked me into it."

She gestured toward the door on the opposite side of the building from which he had entered. "Our van's outside."

"My mother always taught me never to get into a car with strangers," he said then. "I don't even know your name."

She shot him an impatient look. "I'm Robyn," she said. "Robyn Cantwell. And you?"

"Alex Stewart."

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"More soup?" Robyn asked.

Alex nodded, unable to speak with his mouth full. Until she put the bowl in front of him, he hadn't realized how hungry he was--or how long it had been since he'd last eaten. He was sure his table manners were deplorable, but she didn't seem to notice--or to care. She sat across the table from him, watching him intently. "So where are you from, Alex Stewart?" she asked finally.

"Nowhere," he answered, his attention remaining on his food.

"You have a family."

"Did I say that?"

"You said your mother taught you never to get into cars with strangers," she recalled. "I have a photographic memory." She tapped her temple for

emphasis.

He grinned. "I was being sarcastic," he confessed.

"So there's no family back home?" she pursued.

"No family, no home." He went back to his soup.

She didn't give up. "Everybody comes from *somewhere*, Alex Stewart."

"I come from a test tube," he deadpanned.

She laughed. A beautiful, open laugh. He liked the sound. It had been a long time since he'd laughed--or heard anyone else laugh like that. It was funny how something so simple, so often taken for granted, could become so precious when one was deprived of it.

"More sarcasm?" she wanted to know.

"What do you think?"

"I think you're not like most of the people I see come through here," she answered honestly, offering him some crackers.

"Yeah? How so?"

She considered her answer before giving it. "Most of them are out on the streets because they can't take care of themselves. Mentally ill, handicapped in other ways. Can't work, can't pay the bills. Society's cruel, so they end up out on the streets."

"And I'm not mentally ill? How do you know?" he asked.

She smiled. "It's not that hard to tell."

He finished his soup. He would have liked another bowl, but was reluctant to ask for it. Instead, he pushed it away to let her know he was finished. "Do tell," he urged.

She took the bowl and put it on a cart, then sat down with him again. "If I had to venture a guess, I'd say you're above average in the brains department. Which makes me wonder how you ended up here," she said.

He hesitated. "Family problems."

"So you do have a family."

"Yeah, I guess you could call what I had a family."

Her expression softened. "That bad?"

"That bad." He changed the subject then, unwilling to say anything more. "You said something about a soft bed. I'm really beat...."

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When he spotted her dishing out breakfast the next morning, he asked, "Do you live here, too?"

She laughed. "Sometimes it feels that way," she admitted, "but no. I live in the Valley. I'm filling in for a friend this morning." She heaped eggs and bacon onto a plate for him. He took it, nodding in appreciation. He moved along in the line, figuring he'd probably seen the last of her. He took a seat at one end of one of the long, cafeteria-style tables that filled the lunchroom and ate alone, lost in his own thoughts.

"Need a job, Alex Stewart?"

He looked up. Robyn stood there, smiling down at him. Her smile was as warm and inviting as her laugh. "Am I now your pet cause?" he asked, regretting those words as soon as they were out of his mouth. She'd been concerned about

him, and he sounded as if he resented it--which couldn't have been further from the truth.

"Maybe you are," she said with a slight nod. She didn't wait to be invited to join him. "So, about that job."

"What job?"

"At the animal shelter. There's an opening. It doesn't pay much, but it's a start," she told him. "Do you like animals?"

"I don't know," he answered truthfully. "The closest thing I've ever had to a pet was a lab rat, and you can guess how he ended up."

She frowned. "I'm sorry."

Alex grinned. "Not as sorry as he was."

Robyn was silent for a moment. "Think you'd want to give it a shot?" she asked finally.

"Why not?" he said. How hard could it be for them to replace him when the time came for him to move on?

July 30<sup>th</sup>

"So what is it you plan to do with the rest of your life?" Alex asked over lunch at Der Weinerschnitzel one day. He was celebrating his first paycheck from the animal shelter job by taking Robyn out for a meal that, for once, was not served at the homeless shelter.

She licked chili from her fingers. "Actually, I could be happy there at the shelter on a long-term basis," she insisted, "but since you asked, I'm going to be a teacher."

"Yeah?" he took a drink from his Olympic-sized soda cup. "A teacher of what?"

"Art," she said. "I plan to work with mentally disturbed kids. Art is wonderful therapy."

"I can testify to that," he said, popping a French fry into his mouth. "Art's gotten me through many a rough spot in my life."

She straightened up, intrigued. "You're an artist?"

He nodded. "Amateur, but I'd like to think I'm good enough to go pro." He didn't tell her he'd studied at the Sorbonne in Paris.

"I'd love to see some of your work sometime," she said honestly.

"Be careful what you wish for," he said, unzipping his backpack.

"You have it with you?"

He grinned. "I live in a homeless shelter. Where would I leave it?" He pulled out a large sketchbook and passed it across the table to her. She turned the pages slowly, carefully. She was amazed. "This is incredible," she told him. "You've never tried to sell any of your work?"

He shook his head. "I've done it mostly for myself," he said. "It's been a long time since I've shown it to anyone."

"Why?"

He shrugged. "It was a sore subject back home," he confided. "My father didn't want me to become an artist. He had other plans for me--wanted me to join the family business."

"What family business?"

"Doesn't matter," he answered evasively. "Not anymore."

Robyn wondered what he was running away from.

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"I don't get you two at all."

"You're not alone," Alex said. "Nobody does."

Alex sat at a table in a small bar in Santa Monica with Elroy Moss, who he'd met at the homeless shelter. Elroy, like Robyn, had been a volunteer there. Most people were surprised to find that Elroy, with his multicolored Mohawk haircut, tattoos and body piercings, was an environmental activist who had graduated summa cum laude from Stanford and held dual masters degrees. Elroy, Alex had quickly discovered, was a straight-shooter who always said exactly what was on his mind.

"Robyn's a great girl. The best," he was saying now. "She's obviously crazy about you--but you'd have to be brain dead to not already know that. And I can tell you care about her, too--so why aren't you doing anything about it?"

"Do anything about it?" Alex asked, not sure he'd understood correctly.

"Asking her out would be a good start."

"As a matter of fact, we're taking a drive up the coast this weekend," Alex said in his own defense.

"That's not a date," Elroy said. "That was her idea, and you agreed to go along."

Alex didn't respond. He didn't know what to say. Searching for a way to change the subject without arousing further suspicion, he noticed a man at the bar, well-dressed, smoking a pipe. The man was eyeing them with pure contempt.

"What's his problem?" Alex wondered aloud.

Elroy chuckled. "His problem is me," he said. "He equates the hair, the tattoos, and everything else I am on the surface with degeneracy. I have these things, therefore, I am trash. I just ignore him and wait for him to go away."

Alex knew what it was like to be looked at that way. He experienced that kind of contempt every time he looked in the mirror.

Elroy glanced at his watch. "I have to run," he said. "See you when you get back."

"Sure."

As Elroy departed, Alex looked back at the man at the bar. He was making a comment to the bartender. On impulse, Alex got up and walked over to the bar.

"Man, you really blew it," he told the man, who didn't respond but continued to stare at Alex with open disdain. "You didn't recognize the man I was with, did you?"

"Should I have?"

"You should--he's the high priest of the most bloodthirsty satanic cult on the West Coast," Alex said with a genuinely somber expression on his face.

“He’s looking for a sacrifice for their next full moon ritual. I think you just helped him make up his mind.”