

**Mark of the Beast**

**Puzzle Master Saga Book Four**

**T.J. McKenna**

Mark of the Beast

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## Dedication

The year is 2020. Between the pandemic and politics it seems like we'd all like this year to be in the rearview mirror. I would urge all who have enjoyed the first three books in the Puzzle Master Saga to look at it differently. This was a year in which many people decided to make changes in their lives. Some found their way to the Lord, some found their way back, and others just smiled - knowing all along that He was in control. I dedicate this book in general to them all.

I also dedicate it more specifically to our three children. Some of the characters in this book might bear a physical resemblance to our kids, but virtually all of the characters are inspired by them in one way or another. If you find that the characters make you laugh, fill you with pride, or just plain frustrate the heck out of you ... that's our kids!

## **Acknowledgements**

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## Prologue

Colorado Springs, Colorado 2208 A.D.

*When I was four years old, I visited an old military base with my parents and all of my relatives. There was a camera crew that followed Daddy everywhere he went, which was strange because he wasn't anyone special. He was Daddy. The entire base was inside a mountain, which I thought was cool, even though Daddy's face told me that he didn't want to be there.*

*First, we all visited an old room, empty the exception of an old clock and a screen, and everyone got really quiet - especially Daddy. I didn't understand why everyone cared about it; so I decided to watch them and see if I could figure it out. I've always liked figuring things out, especially the things that grown-ups care about.*

*Next we all went into a big room with a stage in it. Daddy came in through a door at the back of the stage, followed by the camera crew. He walked slowly, like his feet were feeling heavy, but he made it to the front of the stage, where two wooden posts were bolted to the floor.*

*The posts weren't any more interesting than the room with the clock, but everyone got really quiet again while Daddy touched the posts, which seemed to make him both happy and sad at the same time. When they put the light behind him, I realized that this must be the place that was pictured in my puzzle of Daddy. He wouldn't talk about it, but Mom had told me that this place was where Daddy had once solved a big puzzle. That made me even more confused. Why would solving a puzzle make Daddy sad?*

"What are you remembering, Cephas?" Mommy asked Daddy. "Pain? Fear?"

"Both; but they're not the strongest memories. The strongest memory is still love. Jesus did what He did out of His endless love. He loaned some to me, to help me through what He asked me to do."

*I was standing in the front row and, as I looked back at all of the grown-ups, I decided that maybe I didn't want to understand grown-up puzzles, if they were going to make everyone sad. Then I realized that my baby brother Austin was fussing and Mommy wasn't holding my hand anymore. I didn't like seeing Daddy sad, so I thought I should go cheer him up. Maybe I could remind Daddy that puzzles are supposed to be fun.*

I ran onto the stage.

"Daddy? Is this where you solved the big puzzle?" I asked.

My question made him look even more sad; so I did my best to brighten my smile and my eyes.

"I didn't solve the puzzle, sweetheart," Daddy said, slowly. "It's a secret only the puzzle maker knows."

*I was still thinking about that, when Mommy took my hand and led me out of the big room. She wasn't mad, but she also wasn't going to let me help cheer Daddy up anymore, either.*

*After that, it seemed like Daddy was always surrounded by family and friends. I could have asked him more questions with everyone around, but I'd always thought that Daddy's answers were more interesting when it was just the two of us, so I waited.*

*In the afternoon, Austin and my little cousin Cam Jr. were put down for naps and Mom said I should have a nap too, after such a busy morning. I didn't want to nap, so we agreed that I could play quietly in my room. That's when Daddy came to see me. It turned out that he'd been waiting to talk to me alone, too. First, he gave me a big hug and kissed me on the head.*

"Of all the questions that reporters and family and friends asked me all day, your question was the best," he said.

"Really? All I asked was if that was the place where you solved the big puzzle."

"I know..." he said, "...but it wasn't the question. It was the way you asked it, and the look in your eyes. You see, the first time I was inside that mountain, there were a lot of bad men there with

me; so when I got there today, I made the mistake of thinking about them. Then, when you asked your question, I stopped thinking about the bad men, and instead I thought about all the puzzles that can be solved, and how much fun it is to solve them. You reminded me that the whole point of a puzzle is that it's meant to be solved."

"But Daddy, you said the puzzle is a secret that only the puzzle maker knows. That means God, right?" I asked.

"Yes, sweetheart. I was talking about God."

"Daddy ... you're the best puzzle solver in the whole world, ever. Why did God create a puzzle that even you can't solve?"

Daddy smiled.

"Jocie, you reminded me today that God created puzzles we can't solve so that we'll always have something greater than ourselves to keep reaching for ... because if we're always reaching for puzzles, we'll always be reaching for Him. Besides, maybe I'm not the best puzzle solver ever. Maybe there's someone else who will be even better ... once she's a little older."

He gently touched his pointer finger to the end of my nose, which made me giggle.

"Do you think Daddy, that we could solve some puzzles together someday?"

Daddy smiled again.

"I know we will, sweetheart. I know we will."

\*\*\*\*\*

*One of the friends who stayed the whole day was Mom and Dad's old friend, Albert. Albert knew how to make his own fireworks and had brought some with him, saying that we'd light them off after dinner to celebrate the anniversary of Daddy being inside the mountain. It had been dark for an hour, and I was looking for him, to ask him to start the show. I heard his voice in Daddy's office; so I waited outside and listened.*

"Cephas, there's something I need to tell you," Mr. Albert said.

"I've been waiting for over five years to hear this secret, Albert."

"Five years? Are you saying you've known since ..."

"... since the day Bethany House was destroyed," Daddy replied.

"Wow. Do you also know that Martha is ..."

"... planning a surprise party for my birthday? Don't change the subject. I assume you're telling me now because of the memo?"

"Yes. I should have told you on the day Austin was christened. When you said his full name ..."

"Austin? What does Austin have to do with it?" Daddy asked.

"His initials are on it, Cephas. See for yourself."

I heard the sound of something made of metal being set down on Daddy's desk, and then they were silent for a long time.

"Will you do me a favor, Albert? Take it to Ogallala and ask Cindi to hide it. Then give this message to Cameron for me: 'Buried Treasure.'"





## Chapter One

Colorado Springs, Colorado 2223 A.D.

*Start with the eyes.*

I've been playing the "mirror game" my entire life. I don't even remember how or why it started, but every day I look at myself in the mirror to remind myself that we are made in God's image.

Icy blue eyes like grandma, but with extra sparkles - just like Mom's.

*Designed by God, so I can see the wonder of His creation.*

Slender hands and fingers.

*Used to do the Lord's work.*

Thin, pink lips.

*To speak the truth.*

Bouncy red ponytail.

*Just to make one man smile.*

Thinking of him makes me lose my place. I miss him. I place my com in my ear and do what has typically become the last part of the daily ritual.

"Computer, search all worldwide networks and locate Cephas Paulson."

"You're so smart ... find him yourself," the com replies.

"Austin," I sigh under my breath.

My kid brother has reprogrammed my com again. However he did it, the code is so deeply embedded that it pops up randomly no matter how many times I attempt to purge it. I attempt yet another purge, and continue with my morning routine while I wait.

First on is the make-up. Using it, I put a large purple blotch on the right side of my face and another on my right hand. Next up are the "living scars," which I created by genetically recombining plant cell walls with a bacteria engineered to produce a sticky polymer. They stick to my skin nicely, but the oozing polymer is pretty gross. Austin says that having scars that ooze and grow over the course of a day makes them more realistic.

When I'm done, I look over my handiwork. Nobody would question whether I'm truly one of "The Marked." Before I was born, a man named Henry tried to kill me, and everyone like me, by releasing a deadly toxin into the water and the air. To make sure only his enemies died, he also made a "vaccine" containing some extra DNA that spelled out his great-grandfather's name.

Henry thought it was a great joke, but that extra DNA turned out to be a true "mark of the beast." Within a few years, everyone who had taken the vaccine was showing signs of its effect. Some died from scars on their internal organs; many will have their lives shortened by decades; all have permanent bruises and scars that never quite heal, like the ones I've replicated.

My parents received a different vaccine long before I was born, a vaccine created by the Christian group "Four." The Four vaccine didn't contain the extra bit of DNA. That makes me one of "The Washed." It also makes me a target every time I go onto the street.

When the long-term effects of the mark of the beast vaccine first became apparent, washed Christians proudly displayed their new status. They could walk down the street without wearing a hat and could go sleeveless because their skin was free of unhealed bruises. Unfortunately, they didn't always treat "The Marked" in the way Christ taught us to treat everyone - with love.

Then came the babies. It was no surprise that both The Marked and The Washed passed those genes on to their children. What no one foresaw was that washed genes are dominant. My children will be "washed," whether their father is marked or not; but like any recessive gene, it could show up

in later generations, if I were to marry a marked man. For that reason alone, most of The Washed started to date and marry only those who are also washed.

Scientists worked for years on gene therapies to reverse the mark of the beast, but failed. That's when Christian men and women started donating eggs and semen. I was young, but I remember how wonderful it seemed at first. The spirit of giving a gift of life was all around, with donation centers springing up in every city. Then came the realization that demand exceeded supply by many millions of times. Bidding wars erupted among the rich, as they clambered to obtain 'washed' samples. Rape and kidnapping followed. People would do anything to have a washed child. We were no longer people. We were a commodity.

*And so we hide.*

My com indicates that it has reset; so I repeat my previous question.

"Cephas Paulson is not visible on any worldwide networks," it responds.

"How about Martha Paulson?"

"Martha Paulson is also not visible."

"Cindi Stone? James Stone? Geoff Stone?"

I list them and a half dozen others.

"None of the listed individuals are visible," the computer says.

"Cephas Paulson - where are you?" I yell.

My brother Austin walks into the room and puts his arm around my shoulder. At just sixteen, he's nearly a foot taller than me. I put my head onto his shoulder and he puts his head down on top of mine.

"It's time to face it, Jocie. We're on our own," he says.

*But I still need you, Daddy...*

\*\*\*\*\*

I knew something was wrong before Austin and I even left on our trip to visit Aunt Cindi and Uncle Cameron in Nebraska. As always, it was Mom's behavior that tipped me off, and it wasn't any one thing. It was more like a hundred little things that didn't go together just right. It wasn't a single thing she did; her routine was as normal as ever. It was her voice, and the way she watched me and Austin. It made me feel like we were going away forever, rather than just a week. Then Dad started inviting me with him, everywhere he went. He knew what I was seeing, because he could see it too, and he didn't want me observing Mom's behavior and putting pieces together. Like so many other times, I decided to just enjoy spending the time with him, trusting that whatever was happening, it was playing out according to some plan.

The night Austin and I returned from Nebraska, it was clear that something was wrong when neither Mom nor Dad were at the tube station waiting for us. Austin's hand was halfway to placing a com into his ear to contact them, when I grabbed it and told him not to do anything that could be traced.

We walked home and snuck up on the house through the neighbor's bushes. The front door was wide open, but there were no signs that anyone was home. After an hour, a Corps team showed up, but they seemed as mystified as we were. We heard them report that the house had been ransacked and that there were signs of a struggle inside.

After that, we came here, to an abandoned house where Dad told us to go if we ever needed a safe place to hide. The water and electricity are on, and we found a small supply of dried food that got us through the first day until we could get something better at the local food center.

Like every day since, we leave our hiding place and walk towards the house where we grew up, waiting for an opportunity to go inside and see for ourselves how Mom and Dad could have disappeared.

As the children of Cephas and Martha Austin and I to walk down the street without Paulson, you'd think it would be impossible for being recognized. Mom and Dad had made too many public appearances to hide the fact that Mom was pregnant with us, but we were both born at home and our DNA was never added to the national database. Of course, enhancements were also out of the question.

Mom and Dad worked hard our entire lives to ensure our anonymity in the secular community, but things are different within the Christian community. Among Christians, Austin is something of a rock star and the heir apparent to the Paulson family legacy. It's a role he sometimes relishes a little too much for my taste.

Our daily walking route takes us near the campus district, and we walk past a for-profit genetic testing and donation center. The amount you get paid varies with the quality of your genes.

"Do you have any idea how much a sample from me is worth?" Austin whispers.

"Not enough to risk getting kidnapped and used as a stud horse for the rest of your life."

"Hey! Just because nobody would want your rotten eggs ..."

He shuts his mouth when someone abruptly opens a door close enough to overhear what he might say next. I'm used to this from Austin. From the time he could speak, our relatives have been telling him how special he is and how he'll one day do important things. Next to him, I'm treated like a disappointment. I can handle the second-class treatment from the rest of the family, but it's painful when it comes from Dad. There are times when I catch him looking at me and his face can only be described as a bottomless well of sadness.

*It's as if Dad is the only person in the world who knows a terrible secret about me.*

I've mentioned it to Mom and Austin, but neither of them can see it. I've tried to point out that sometimes, even when he's laughing, you can still see the sadness. Sometimes it's just a millimeter movement of his eyebrow that tips me off. Mom and Austin say I'm imagining it.

As we turn onto our old street, Austin takes my hand. To anyone else, we probably look like a young couple who are out for a walk. They'd probably also think that Austin is nervous about holding a girl's hand, because his fingers are moving non-stop. In fact, he's talking to me using a complex code of finger movements that we developed after Mom and Dad disappeared.

*Yes, I see the man on the right, I signal back with my fingers. He's ex-Corps. Give him a wide berth and look the other direction as we pass him.*

The members of The Corps were the first to receive the "mark of the beast" vaccine, but unlike the general population, their dose was injected, rather than given in pill form. They all have dark lines that radiate out from the injection site on their upper arms. In most cases, the lines extend across their shoulders and necks, and onto their faces. The lines will continue to grow for the rest of their lives. Skin-altering enhancements help some, but the lines can never be completely erased.

*They're not all evil, Austin replies.*

*Tell that to the scars on Dad's back, I say, and he drops the subject.*

In truth, a large percentage of The Corps converted to Christianity after what happened to Dad because they were given the new task of protecting the faithful. Daniel, one of the guards who beat and whipped Dad, even leads a large church in Iowa that we once visited when I was young. He had two of the lines across his face. I couldn't believe it when Dad hugged him. I wanted to run and never look at him or those black lines again, but I pretended to like him - for Daddy's sake.

It's the members of The Corps who left government service that have always worried Mom and Dad more. They call themselves "The Temple Guard" and claim to be a peaceful group, dedicated to informing the public about the dangers of religion. The black lines tell us everyone who served in The Corps, but they can't tell us who they serve now.

*There's another, Austin says with his fingers, as we turn the corner onto our old street. The woman smiles pleasantly as she passes us on the sidewalk. The black line from her injection only reaches up*

to just under her ear and is covered with heavy makeup, but it's easy to see when you're looking for it.

As always, there's a car with a man in it parked in front of our house. He's younger than the others, so he doesn't have the black marks, but he has scars and blotches that mark his inheritance.

*One hand, Austin says. You'd need both hands, plus a foot.*

Austin is referring to how little effort it would take for him to disable the young man in the car - and teasing me at the same time. As part of hiding us, Mom and Dad regularly sent us to "summer camp" to train with our Aunt Cindi, her husband, Cameron, and our many cousins. They live on a big property on Lake McConaughy in Nebraska that's equipped with all sorts of training facilities. After the government insisted that all Four houses be disbanded, it was the only place left to send us.

Austin gets a full combat training regimen whenever we're there, while the best I can ask for is intense physical training, including hours of running, weight lifting, and obstacle courses. Aunt Cindi says that I have the highest strength-to-weight ratio she's ever seen, but what good is muscle if I'm never trained how to fight my way out of a rape or kidnapping?

*Why don't I just take them all out while you go search the house?* Austin asks. *You know Mom or Dad must have left something inside that will help us to find them.*

*Because we're washed. Staying hidden is our best weapon.*

*Dad didn't stay hidden,* Austin replies, but I don't respond. Mom has always said that one of my jobs is to protect Austin - including from himself.

As we turn the corner at the end of the street, Austin drops my hand and we return to speaking aloud.

"We can't just walk past the house every day, waiting for something to happen," Austin says.

"We need to do something, Jocie. We need a plan."

"You're the favorite child. You come up with a plan."

"You're the one who inherited Dad's talent with puzzles. Shouldn't you have it all figured out by now?"

*Like I said, Daddy ... I need you...*

## Chapter Two

*My parents' house was very old compared to the houses around it, with real hardwood floors instead of carbon fiber and actual staircases instead of hover lifts. We all had rooms on the second floor, with mine being the smallest. I never thought that was fair, since I'm older than Austin, but that's the way it was. My room was also the coldest, which must be why someone had cut a hole in the floor to allow heat to rise up from the first floor. It was covered by an ancient metal grate, with metal louvers that I could rotate using a lever to block the heat from rising into my room in the summer.*

*The best part was that my room was over Dad's office, and if the louvers were open, we could talk to each other. When I was very young, he'd sometimes sing lullabies to me through the grate at bedtime. It wasn't until I was about six-years-old that it occurred to me that I could also use the opening to eavesdrop. The metal grates would squeak if I opened them quickly; so the only way to eavesdrop without Daddy hearing me was to open the louvers over a full two minutes of constant pressure. By the time I was ten, I could open the louvers without making the slightest sound.*

*Uncle Cameron was visiting all by himself, which was unusual, but he and Aunt Cindi had four kids now, so I suppose travelling had become more difficult. Uncle Cameron had a very clear "mad voice," and I was surprised to hear him using it when speaking with Mom and Dad.*

"You ordered 'Buried Treasure' for a reason, Cephas?" Uncle Cameron said. "You've seen the reports. You know how many Washed children have been kidnapped this year. What makes you think it can't be one of your kids next?"

"I ordered 'Buried Treasure' to get the intelligence gathering operations up and running, not to make our children into an army. Let them have a normal childhood."

"Martha? Would you talk to him?"

"Cephas ..." Mom said, "... you've made it clear to everyone that we're at war again. Children have been growing up during wars for millennia. They'll be fine."

"Four was officially disbanded," Daddy said. "I signed the treaty. As adults, we can make the decision to break the law, but they can't."

"Nobody is saying they'll be operatives," Cameron replied. "They just need to be able to defend themselves."

Daddy was silent for a while; then sighing, said: "Train Austin."

I wanted to yell about how unfair it was, and I think I may have let out a tiny squeak of surprise and anger; but it wasn't worth revealing my eavesdropping spot, so I stayed silent.

"They should both be on a full training schedule," Uncle Cameron replied.

"I agree," Mom said. "Girls her age are being kidnapped."

"She can do it, Cephas," Uncle Cameron added. "She's as tough as Martha, and she's a fast learner. She could be great."

"Give her extra conditioning - especially running - but no combat training."

"Why are you being so stubborn about this, Cephas?" Mom asked.

"Do you remember how I learned to fight?" Dad replied.

"You pretty much figured it out on your own."

"Then let her figure out fighting on her own, just like I did."

*My first "summer camp" with Uncle Cameron came just a few weeks later. While Austin was learning combat with my cousins, I was sent for kilometers' worth of running in the woods. The thing is, they had no idea just how fast I could complete the course; so I spent hours in the trees that week, watching everyone else train, then practicing the moves I'd seen.*

\*\*\*\*\*

Austin and I finish our walk and return to the abandoned house. The house has a high fence and the backyard is surrounded by ancient cottonwood trees that grow along Monument Creek, so it lends itself well to the next part of our daily routine: Austin giving me combat training. Since there's little chance we'll be seen as we spar, we remove the living scars and leave them in the sunshine to grow and ooze without us.

This is Austin's favorite part of the day - beating me. Copying and practicing the moves I saw helps, but it didn't really prepare me for actual fighting. Even so, I've learned that my hands and feet are a little faster than his, but it's going to take more than that to overcome the fact that he's bigger, stronger, and more aggressive. He also talks more.

"Joice, hold your hands higher! Turn more sideways! Kick with your left foot more!"

His constant talking usually throws me off, rather than help, and his advice works well for him, but not for me.

We don't have a scoring computer like Uncle Cameron, but at the end of each session, Austin always announces the informal score he's kept in his head.

"I'd score that as eighty-six to twelve," he says, but I'm not listening. I'm thinking about Mom and Dad.

"There's no way Dad was taken by surprise and ambushed at the house," I say. "He spent hours every day gathering information and putting together the pieces of what's happening in the world."

"Could they have faked the ransacking of the house as a cover?" Austin asks.

"It makes the most sense," I say. "Even if they were attacked, I've seen Mom and Dad fighting side-by-side. It would take a small army."

"When did you see Mom and Dad fight together? You've never been interested in combat. You'd always go off running instead."

*He doesn't know.*

"Austin, I didn't go off running. I was sent off to run. Dad decided years ago to train only you, but I'd sneak back and watch from the trees as everyone else trained."

He lets that information sink in for a moment.

"You may have seen a lot from the trees, but you missed the biggest family match ever," he says. "Dad and Uncle Cameron had *the* rematch!"

Years ago, Uncle Cameron was the only person in all of Four who ever fought Dad to a draw in hand-to-hand combat. Mom says she could beat them both, but they both claim that they let her win. They talked for years about having a rematch, but Mom forbade it.

"How did they talk Mom into that?"

"She doesn't know. They did it four months ago, when you and Mom were visiting Great Aunt Kimberley."

"What happened? Did they let you watch the match?" I ask. "How could Dad even stand a chance? Uncle Cameron is huge!"

"Actually, it was Uncle Cameron who didn't stand a chance! Dad went ahead on points in hand-to-hand and never looked back."

"How could Dad beat that kind of power?" I ask.

"It was weird. It was like Dad knew every move before it happened, and was ready. Sometimes he even used Uncle Cameron's power against him. What I remember most though was Dad's face. He had the same look on his face that he gets when he's solving a puzzle. You get it too, you know."

"I do not ... do I?"

"Yeah, it's kind of like this," he says, and makes a face that looks like he's been hit in the head with a stun gun.

I smack him on the arm, which is as good as ringing a bell, signaling that the next sparring session has begun.

*Austin is much more powerful than I am ... I wonder...*

I don't attempt any counter attacks. I just watch him carefully and block.

*Combination attacks almost always start with his right hand.*

He gets a curious look on his face when I block.

*His eyes are tricky, but his head tilts just a centimeter in the direction he's going next.*

I can see him getting frustrated.

"Hold your left hand higher, Jocie," he says.

*No way. You use that against me. I wonder what other advice he's given that doesn't work for me.*

I drop my left hand even lower, and instead of turning sideways like he does, I square my body up towards him.

"You're making yourself a bigger target," he says

*But I'm a tiny person. I'm always a small target and this feels much more natural.*

Once I'm squared, I stop favoring my right arm and leg.

*Now I'm balanced.*

He's getting ready for a major assault on this new style I'm developing, when I hold my hands up to signal for him to stop.

"There's someone inside the house," I say.

"There can't be," Austin replies. "All the silent door and window alarms are tied to our coms."

"I saw a shadow move in the kitchen."

"Should we bug out?"

"No," I reply, "but let's get the scars back on. We can pretend to be just a couple of marked kids hanging out in an abandoned house."

Once the scars are in place again, we creep into the house. Austin is correct that the security system is functioning, and we both get a signal in our coms when we open the door. Austin motions for me to check the rooms on the left, while he goes into the kitchen on the right. The first room is empty, with the curtains drawn, but through the door I can see that the second room is lit with a bright sunbeam. I approach the doorway, but don't enter.

The house hasn't had automatic cleaning robots for years, and in the sunbeam I can see sparkles of dust. Dad loved dusty sunbeams, and when I was little, I enjoyed sitting on his lap and watching them with him. As I watch this one, I can see that the movement of sparkles isn't random. Someone moved silently through this room, but they couldn't prevent the dust from taking on a lazy spiral as it settles back to the floor.

"Austin," I whisper over my shoulder.

I hear the hand move to grab the door frame before I see it, and somehow know that a foot is about to fly around the corner; so I lunge to the left and land a kick on the person's side as they come through the door. If it hurt him, he shows no signs of it. He's just a couple of inches taller than I am, but has a larger frame. Still, he'll be no match for Austin, who I can hear rushing back this way.

My attacker is wearing a black leather coat and a hat. If the coat is restricting his movement, he shows no signs of it, as he attempts a karate move that Aunt Cindi likes to use, which I block. My counter-attack is blocked just as easily.

*He's not from The Corps. Whoever he is, he fights like a Christian.*

He switches to a martial art form I've never seen before. The first punch lands hard on my stomach and the first kick on my thigh, but I somehow see that the next kick will be to my head and deflect it; then land a kick that glances off his hip. He is thrown off balance, and when I move to the right, I can see that Austin is standing in the doorway, watching.

"I could use a little help," I say.

"From him?" my attacker says, and I realize that I'm not fighting a man. It's a girl.

She attacks again, using yet another martial art form. Again, her first attack is successful and I compensate, making her follow-up strikes useless.

“I’d have him on the floor by now,” she says. “Why didn’t you use everything you’ve got against him when you were in the backyard?”

She turns her back on me and faces Austin; then in two steps, launches herself into the air in some sort of flying kick.

*He should spin to the right.*

Austin spins to the left, which avoids the kick but allows her to land a loud slap across his face. She could have hit him with a fist. She backs away, staring at her hand.

“Cool! Can I have some of this?” she asks.

When she slapped Austin, one of his artificial scars was transferred to her hand. I get my first good look at her face and see that she has bruises made with makeup.

Austin’s face is red, both from the slap and because he’s mad. He crouches into an attack pose, but I put myself between the two of them.

“Break it in half. They double in size every few days anyway,” I say. “If you ever grow too much, rubbing alcohol will kill the extra.”

“It’s alive? Even cooler!” she says.

“We’re friends now?” Austin asks.

“She’s obviously washed, Austin.”

“We can keep going - if you want...,” she says, as she sticks half of the living scar to her face and throws the other half back to Austin. “...though I am disappointed. I expected a little more from the great Austin Paulson.”

“I’ll show you more, right now,” Austin says, and tries to push me out of the way. I give him my best ‘big sister’ look, and he backs off.

“Who are you?” I ask.

“I’m Zera.”

“Why did you say it like I should know who you are?”

“How could you not? Your mom and dad are my Godparents!”



## Chapter Three

*When I was about twelve years old, Dad and I were rock climbing, when he asked me an unexpected question. Maybe I could even call it an unwelcome question, because rock climbing was always my special time with Dad and I just wanted to enjoy being outdoors with him.*

“Jocie? What does it mean to you to be a Christian?” he asked.

I’d never really thought about it before. I had always been a Christian. It was just who I was.

“It means that Jesus died for my sins,” I said.

I stretched for a hand hold that was nearly out of my reach, and ended up hanging by one hand for a moment, until I found places for my feet. There were much easier holds available, but I knew that such a simple answer to Dad’s question wouldn’t end the discussion; so I might as well try to delay him by climbing hard, and give myself more time to think.

“That’s what it means for all of us,” he said. “What does it mean to YOU?”

This time I didn’t reply right away. I knew he wouldn’t mind waiting, so long as I was thinking about the answer.

“It’s both happy and sad,” I said. “The happy part is obvious. I have a Savior who loves me.”

I paused, as I switched my hand holds.

“What’s the sad part?”

“That’s pretty obvious too. I feel hated. There are men and women out there with black lines on their faces, who would gladly snatch me and sell me just because of my genes.”

“Is being a Christian genetic now?” he asked.

“You know what I mean, Dad.”

We each hauled ourselves over the last bit and sat on the very top of the rock formation.

“That was a great climb,” Dad said. “You really stretched your abilities, but are you sure you took the right route to get here?”

“There is no right way to get here. You choose a path and it takes you to the top.”

Dad smiled, and it became clear that there was a lesson in his questions.

“I’m so glad to hear you say that,” he said. “I’ll tell you why while we eat, but first, let’s pray.”

It was something Dad and I did at the top of every climb. We’d sit on the rock, look out over creation, and say thanks. For Dad, giving thanks always began with the same three words, spoken directly to Jesus: “My dear friend.”

Dad handed me an apple.

“Today is the anniversary of the death of a man who chose a very difficult path on earth,” he said. “Even now, most people refer to him as ‘Michael the Assassin’, but that’s not how I remember him. I remember the gentle man who loved his neighbor as he did himself - so much so that he sacrificed himself to save the life of another. The woman he saved was named ‘Zip’ and she then nearly sacrificed herself while saving a whole town. They had very different routes to faith, neither of which is better or worse than mine or yours. I’m just happy that we’ve all arrived at the same place.”

A large drop of rain hits the top of my head; then another hits my shoulder. Sudden afternoon rains are a common occurrence for Colorado summers, but are not good news for rock climbers. We’ll have to descend quickly.

By the time we’ve reached the bottom and are packing our gear, we’re in a steady shower.

“I hate rain,” I say.

“Really?” Dad asked. “I’ve always enjoyed it.”

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