

Puzzle Master: Master of None

T.J. McKenna

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Dedication

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

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

Acknowledgements

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

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

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

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

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Prologue

Sheridan, Illinois 2192 A.D.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Mom, I was only seven then.”

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

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

“Maybe you should glue it.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Mom removed a few more things from the incubator.

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

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

“Cool! Can we?”

“Not today.”

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

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

“Define ‘good,’” I said.

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

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

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

She wiped a tear from the corner of each eye.

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

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

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

Chapter One

Capon Springs, West Virginia, 2203 A.D.

You Are.

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

You Are the leader of the True Holy War.

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

You Are the last hope for religious freedom.

You are in way over your head, Cephas Paulson.

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

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

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

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

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

She ignores the question.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Time to test the lines again.

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

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

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

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

Their response time is getting faster.

I turn back to the target.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“There are only five targets,” I say.

I shoot.

“Make that four.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

And that is the solution.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I lock eyes with each of my guards in turn.

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

"Just quit," Angry Eyebrows yells.

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

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

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

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

There's no reply.

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

There's a pause.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

They know the phrase I coined?

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

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

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

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

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

Why have you brought me here, Lord?

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

Four’ definitely isn’t the church Jesus described.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You ready to go?" Martha asks.

"Would it matter?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

Her eyes flash with anger, but she says nothing.

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

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

"Or at least a model prisoner?"

"You're not a prisoner."

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

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

Chapter Two

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

But whose blood is it?

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

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

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

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Her hand brushes the handle of her knife.

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

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

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

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

"I think we should talk," I say.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Martha, I still need to -"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Martha lets out a loud sigh.

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

She’s hated me from the beginning?

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

“Please don’t,” she says.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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