

**Puzzle Master: Missing Pieces**

**Puzzle Master Series Book Three**

**T.J. McKenna**

Puzzle Master: Missing Pieces  
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## **Dedication**

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

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

## **Acknowledgements**

Special thanks again go to the ever-patient and meticulous Diane, for all her work in copy editing. I can't believe she wanted to stick with me through two books, much less three. I like to think I'm learning, though, as Diane only had to add a thousand commas this time around!

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## Prologue

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What is it? Can I see?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I guess so."

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

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

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

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

I said nothing.

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

*You mean manipulating people.*

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

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

\*\*\*\*\*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Chapter One

*I am.*

If I thought the words “You are” were the most troubling words to hear repeated over and over inside my head, it’s only because I had not yet heard “I am” echoing through my mind.

“I am” the world’s best hope for stopping a war, *but I have no army.*

“I am” the one who can see pieces of the puzzle, *but I can’t put them together.*

“I am” Christianity’s best hope for survival, *but that hope is fading.*

“I am” the new rock on which His Church will continue to be built.

*Is it really possible that I’m part of God’s Plan? Or is this just my own ego talking?*

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

My thoughts turn to one of the sharpest of those thorns - Henry’s biotoxin - which the media is now calling “The Plague.” Every day we receive an updated world map that shows the progress of the toxin and the number of people killed. The map also shows areas where the Center for World Health is “vaccinating” as they attempt to get ahead of outbreaks. The CWH shipped its first batch of vaccine to Borneo after half of the population was already infected. The vaccine only works if taken before a person is infected, so riots broke out at the airport when the cargo planes landed. Anyone who looked sick was stoned by the crowds to keep them back. Kill teams from the Corps were assigned to protect the vaccine, and they shot hundreds more as they tried to storm the planes.

The reason is no puzzle. The Corps is keeping tight control of the vaccine to ensure it stays out of the hands of Christians who are living off the government grid. We received a report of a family that had walked four days in the jungle to reach a clinic, but were denied doses, and then were arrested for fraud because three of their five children were not on the grid. As far as we know, they weren’t even Christian; they were off-grid simply because they lived in a remote area. The last report said that the entire family was killed by the toxin.

Tight control of the vaccine also allows The Corps to control the level of fear. As the tension eased on Borneo, the plague showed up in Java and Sumatra, and the cycle started all over again. Vaccine had barely arrived in those countries, when Malaysia saw its first cases. Adding to the confusion is the fact that, in rare cases, the vaccine itself causes a high fever that mimics the plague. Several people who had received their dose were killed by mobs before it was figured out.

*Why don’t the experts see that this isn’t acting like a disease? It’s acting like a toxin that’s being selectively distributed.*

CWH scientists are being heralded as heroes for stemming the death toll, but there’s going to be a lot more death. Henry wants people to take the vaccine without question so the plague will continue to be made to look like an unstoppable wave traveling around the world. Everywhere the disease goes, the vaccine will arrive just in time. There’ll be enough death to keep everyone scared and controlled.

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

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

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

*But I will trust in Him.*

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

*Intruders inside the house.*

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

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

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

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

"Who are the hostages?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What else have you tried?" I ask.

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

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

I raise my stun gun.

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

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

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

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

"Do you have a better plan?"

"No, but the math is simple," James says. "There are ten of them, all with guns pointed at this door - or at the heads of the hostages. Your stun gun has a maximum fire rate of five shots per second; so even if you could hit all ten targets in under three seconds, they'll still have time to execute our people."

"Don't say 'our people' like you've never met them. My wife and your sister are two of the hostages," I say.

"It doesn't change the math," James says.

"Then I will. I'll double my fire rate."

I grab his stun gun from its holster and kick in the door with a gun in each hand. My first two shots hit Zip and a member of her team, who are indeed holding their guns to the heads of Martha

and Cindi. Next down is a man holding a rifle, followed by a woman who shoots and hits the door frame next to me. Number five is hit as he dives for the cover of a table, and six when he raises his gun to shoot Cindi. The next two reveal their positions when they shoot from shadowed spots in the corners. I'm already moving forward, so they miss, but I feel the electric charge race past before I disable them both. Number nine drops his gun and surrenders, and number ten follows suit.

"I knew you could shoot left-handed!" Martha says.

"You also knew I'd do anything necessary to end another training exercise and keep our date tonight."

"Zip," who was being played by Misty, gets up from the floor.

"You two do realize that these things still hurt, even on the lowest setting, right?"

"Sorry, Misty. How many times does that make this week? Seven?" I ask.

"You lose both count - and feeling - after three."

"Thanks everyone," Martha says. "Be ready to practice a new assault scenario tomorrow."

"Okay, but you get to be Zip next time," Misty says.

Martha looks at me.

"You're mad," she concludes.

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

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

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

She pauses.

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

"I suppose so."

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

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

As I begin to scan the news, the screen goes dark except for a small blinking icon in the lower corner that looks like a stick with a snake coiled around it. I select it and some sort of code downloads, then prompts me to select the stick again to complete a remote link. I know enough about technology to understand this is some sort of hacking, and that I should purge the new code before anyone can gain remote access. I complete the link anyway.

"Thank God," Amelia says, as her face comes up on the screen.

She's wearing an isolation suit, but has the hood off.

"I knew it would be you, Cephias. You're the only one there who would see the backdoor I wrote into my station for downloading medical texts and not delete it as a hack."

"You're alive!" I yell.

*Finally, some good news.*

Heads come up all over the room at my shout, followed by people crowding around the station.

"Why wouldn't I be?"

"We got the video you made of the pile of bodies. You looked like you had the plague."

“I told you I was fine. Whatever it was, it passed in no time. Look, I can only hold this link for a minute; so here’s my report. I’m in Makassar, Indonesia, but you’d think I’m on the set of a horror movie. This entire city is going to be wiped out. My hotel got converted into a hospital, so I’m volunteering as a nurse to collect more samples. I even flirted with a cult hunter who said he’d been vaccinated, and got a blood sample from him.”

“Did you find anything?”

“I’m sure they’re doing this with a genetic toxin, just like Jocie said; but it breaks down too quickly after a patient dies for those samples to be of any use. I ran the cult hunter’s vaccinated DNA through a sequencer to try to locate the artificial sequence that’s designed to counteract the toxin, but the human genome has over three billion base pairs. It’s a needle in a haystack.”

“If you’re working as a nurse, can you get access to the vaccine?”

“They didn’t bring vaccine to Makassar. They set up a perimeter to keep everyone inside; then wrote the city off as a loss. A few people tried to get out early on and were shot. Now the entire island is quarantined and they’re using drones to blow up anyone who attempts to leave by boat. From the roof of the hotel, you can see a dozen or more explode and burn at sea every night.”

“So what’s your next move?” I ask.

“The same as every other Christian. Survive.”

\*\*\*\*\*

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

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

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

“Guilty?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

She kisses me to drive the point home.

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

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

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

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

“Why? What’s on it?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Martha walks behind me and gives my shoulders a squeeze.

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

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

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

## Chapter Two

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

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

Martha pauses for a moment, reflecting on the observation.

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

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

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

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

Bill stops eating. Wendy gives him a sideways glance.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*How I wish that were true.*

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

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

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

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

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

“No. Of course not.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Martha sits up.

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

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

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

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

Martha sighs.

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

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

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

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

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

"Martha, I don't understand."

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

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

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

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

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

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