

VANISHED

ALSO BY DR. DAVID JEREMIAH

NONFICTION

The Great Disappearance

The World of the End

After the Rapture

Where Do We Go from Here?

God Has Not Forgotten You

*Forward: Discover God's Presence and Purpose in Your
Tomorrow*

Shelter in God

Everything You Need

The Book of Signs

*A Life Beyond Amazing: 9 Decisions That Will
Transform Your Life Today*

When Your World Falls Apart

Overcoming Loneliness

The Prophecy Answer Book

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One Minute a Day: Instant Inspiration for the Busy Life

*What in the World Is Going On? 10 Prophetic Clues You
Cannot Afford to Ignore*

Life-Changing Moments with God

Signs of Life

The Things That Matter

VANISHED

A NOVEL

DR. DAVID JEREMIAH

WITH SAM O'NEAL



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

Vanished

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PART 1



CHAPTER 1

JUNE 13, PRESENT DAY
HERAKLION, CRETE

It's gotta be here somewhere."

John Haggerty shifted his perch atop a small, cramped desk in the middle of a small, cramped office at the edge of the small, cramped city of Heraklion on the island of Crete. He dug his left hand blindly through an open drawer at the front of the desk. His right hand wiped another drop of sweat off his forehead. "You see anything?"

Leaning against the opposite corner of the room, a tall Black man wearing US Army fatigues shook his head. "What are you going to say when she finally gets here and finds you rooting around in her desk?"

"If she comes in, I'll muster all my available charm to apologize profusely," said Haggerty. "Then I'll ask her very politely to please turn on the air-conditioning because it's way too— Hold on . . ." He had slipped his hand into a second drawer, and he pulled it out to reveal a white rectangular remote control. "Bingo."

The other man smiled, then shook his head again. "I doubt it works."

Haggerty said nothing. He pointed the remote at a larger white

rectangle bolted to the wall above the desk—an independent HVAC unit. The European kind, designed for a single room. He pushed a button. When the unit emitted a soft beep and rattled to life, Haggerty looked over at his friend and tilted his head slightly to the left. He raised one eyebrow. *Told you.*

The other man shook his head a third time. Still smiling. *No chance.*

Haggerty reached up and placed his hand in front of the small plastic flap now oscillating up and down at the base of the AC unit. The stream of air flowing out from the machine was warm—warmer than room temperature.

Frowning, he pressed a different button several times. *Beep. Beep. Beep. Beep.*

He kept his hand in the still-warm flow of air as he looked back toward his friend. He raised his eyebrow another quarter of an inch, then shrugged. *Maybe it'll kick in?*

The tall man in the corner pointed his chin at the remote, then toward the second drawer at the front of the desk, which was still open. *May as well put it back. Not happening.*

After another thirty seconds of waiting, Haggerty lowered his hand. He tossed the remote to the top of the desk in a rare gesture of defeat.

No gloating came from Caleb Johnson, wordless or otherwise. He stood still and quiet for several moments. A tower in uniform. A living plumb line. With his slender legs, frame, and neck and large bald head, he looked a bit like an upside-down exclamation point. When he did speak, his voice was deep and resonant and clear. It was a professor's voice. Or a preacher's voice.

He pointed to the manila folder squashed under Haggerty's leg. "You've got about twenty different items on those pieces of paper, and each one would make today her worst day ever." He glanced

at the empty chair behind the desk. “She’s going to fight the whole thing. And she could make things difficult.”

Haggerty snorted. “It’s difficult no matter what she does.”

“You know what I mean, Haggs.”

Haggerty nodded.

“You’re sure it’s necessary.”

Not a question, but Haggerty nodded again in answer. “I’m sure it’s necessary.”

They heard voices coming down the hall through the open office door. A man and a woman, both speaking Greek.

Elena Kazantis, the secretary-general of the Decentralized Administration of Crete, was a dynamo. She stomped her way into the room, hands swinging wildly in mid-conversation, her voice low and nasal—and continued forward for several more stomps until she was confronted by the sight of a strange man balanced on the corner of her desk. She had a sharp face with large, liquid eyes and a shock of black hair that tumbled over her shoulders and down the back of her blue and white dress.

Her colleague was a little taller, a little thinner, and much less observant. He almost bumped into her shoulder when she stopped short and was only able to avoid a collision by one-foot-hopping himself to the side and resting a hand on the nearest wall.

“What is this?” The secretary-general’s eyes flashed at the intrusion. “Who are you?”

Haggerty remained seated on the desk. “Major General John Haggerty. United States Army. I’m afraid I’ve come with some bad news.” He pulled out the manila folder from under his leg and handed it to the woman. “Official communication from the United States government, which includes my orders.”

She opened the folder and glanced at the page, then looked back at Haggerty. “What it says? You tell me.”

“It says the island of Crete is under quarantine by order of the US Army.”

“Quarantine?”

Haggerty nodded. “It says all aspects of the quarantine will be managed by the Potential Pandemic Task Force, of which I am the commander.”

“No, no, no.” The Greek man spoke up for the first time, his voice a reedy tenor. “No pandemic on Creta.”

Haggerty ignored him, keeping his eyes on the secretary-general. “It says our task force will take control of all airports on the island, including the international airports in Chania and here in Heraklion. All outgoing flights will be grounded, and all incoming flights will be denied access. It says all ports will be closed, and that ships from the Hellenic Coast Guard already docked in Crete will be used to patrol local waters and maintain the quarantine. It says—”

“Enough.” She had a strong voice and a thick accent. Authoritative and confident. She didn’t look angry yet, but Haggerty could tell she was starting to steam. “This is for the sickness in Rethymno. The virus. Yes?”

“Yes,” said Haggerty. “But it’s moved beyond Rethymno.”

In the previous three weeks, more than a thousand people had been hospitalized in and around the city of Rethymno, which was centrally located on the island. Other cases had been identified in Chania to the west and Heraklion to the east. When cases were discovered on the nearby island of Rhodes, the Army sent Haggerty and his team to assess the situation.

Haggerty gestured toward the tall man still leaning against the corner. “This is Caleb Johnson, my executive officer.”

Caleb stepped forward. “We’re calling it SARS-CoV-12. It’s a new type of coronavirus, and it’s very serious.”

The Greek man piped up again. “Coronavirus? It is like COVID?”

Caleb and Haggerty exchanged a glance, each raising an eyebrow. Several epidemics and pandemics had cut their way through the global population during the years since COVID-19, but most people still thought of 2020 as the baseline for worldwide disease.

You never forget your first, Haggerty reminded himself.

“It’s worse than COVID,” Caleb told the man. “Much worse.”

“We’re still running tests.” Haggerty gestured to the manila folder in the woman’s hand. “But what we know is in those files. And what we know is bad.”

So far, most of the patients who had contracted this new version of SARS-CoV were relatively young. Twenties, thirties, and forties. Most developed a pronounced rattle in the chest because of overstimulated mucous glands in the lungs. After several days of worsening symptoms, most patients began coughing up blood. Then coughing up alarming amounts of blood. Then worse.

In the past five days, Haggerty’s team had linked a total of 112 deaths to SARS-CoV-12 across the island of Crete.

The secretary-general looked at the manila folder as if it were a cobra coiled around her wrist. “What you are saying, a quarantine of the island—it is impossible. We have ten thousand tourists on Creta even this day. At least ten thousand.”

Haggerty nodded. “They will not be allowed to leave for three weeks at the minimum. Probably longer. They’ll need places to stay.”

The woman sniffed, then scowled. “Tens of thousands more tourists booked for July and August. The ferries come and go between all the islands in Greece every day. The cruise ships come and go every day. This is life in Creta.”

“Not anymore. Anyone not currently on the island will be denied access. Again, for at least three weeks but probably longer.”

She shook her head, not worried about showing her disgust. “All of Greece lock down for COVID-19, and it was terrible for tourist

season. Terrible for our people who have only four months to earn their living. We lock down again for monkeypox, and many Cretans cannot afford their homes. They cannot afford enough food.” Her nostrils flared as she spoke. “When they tell us to lock down for the children’s disease . . . the . . .”

“The RSV mutation,” Haggerty said.

“Yes.” She waved a hand. “That one. Greek government said we must lock down again, but the people refused. Cretans refused. We are tired of lockdown. Then came the bird virus, and the Greek government did not lock down. The people are finished with lockdown.”

“I remember,” he told her. “That’s one of the reasons I’m here.” Which was true. Each time a new pandemic locked a vise around the world, people became more resistant to lockdowns and other draconian protective measures. Many refused to participate even in the face of jail.

The Potential Pandemic Task Force had been formed as a solution to those issues. Its job—Haggerty’s job—was to identify regional epidemics and nip them in the bud before they made the jump to global pandemics. He had been tasked with demonstrating brutal efficiency in a small space, such as Crete, because the global population as a whole was no longer willing to do what was necessary.

“The United States will help as much as we can,” he said, trying to project compassion, “but hard times are coming for the people here. They will need to find a way to survive.”

Elena’s brows furrowed. Her voice rose. “No! You have no authority on Crete. You have no authority in Greece. How dare you come into this office and demand these things?”

Haggerty pointed again at the manila folder. “My orders are signed by the commander in chief of the United States Armed Forces. The president. By her authority, I am empowered to take

whatever actions I deem necessary to evaluate epidemics and other medical emergencies, both foreign and domestic, that pose a potential threat to citizens of the United States. I am also empowered to take whatever actions I deem necessary to eliminate those threats in a manner that protects the lives of United States citizens.”

“Your citizens,” said Elena Kazantis. “Typical arrogance of America.” She held up the manila folder. “These things you say”—she threw it down on the desk near Haggerty’s leg, papers spilling out like a deck of cards—“these things will not happen. Please go!”

She turned away from Haggerty and Caleb and began speaking rapidly to her colleague in Greek.

“Madame Secretary.” Haggerty’s voice was calm.

She ignored him. Her hands swung back and forth as she continued giving what seemed like commands to the other man. He had taken out his phone and responded to whatever she was saying with short phrases and quick nods.

“Madame Secretary . . .”

Nothing.

“Elena.” There was a slight elevation in Haggerty’s tone. A hint of irritation. Of command.

She whirled around to face him. “This my desk you are sitting on. Get off. Move away from my chair. Go!”

Haggerty stood. He was two inches shorter than his XO but much broader in the chest and shoulders. Between them, they made an intimidating duo in the small office. The Greek man stepped back involuntarily, but Elena stood her ground. She continued to glare up at Haggerty, nostrils flaring.

Good, he thought. He would need tough people to make it through the next several weeks. Crete would need tough people.

“You take these.” Elena swept up the folder and the papers from the top of the desk. “I say again, these things will not happen. Therefore, go!”

“These things are already happening.” Haggerty spoke quietly, but he kept his eyes locked on hers. “Troops were deployed from the US Army base in Souda early this morning. My orders were set for zero eight hundred, which means”—he looked down at his watch, which read 8:09—“both airports have been grounded for nine minutes now. Same with the seaports. Same with the coast guard.”

For the first time, Elena appeared visibly shaken. She placed a steadying hand on the desk Haggerty had just vacated. “You . . .” She took a moment to breathe. “You have done this?”

“Yes.” Haggerty felt a little shaken himself, but he tried not to show even a hint of his uncertainty. This was the first time he’d invoked his authority to essentially commandeer the local government of a sovereign nation—an authority that had never been accepted or acknowledged by any nation outside the United States. This was a watershed moment, and he felt the weight of it.

The secretary-general seemed unable to believe what she was hearing. “Soldiers in the airports,” she said, her voice low. “Soldiers in the cities?”

“Yes.”

“No authority on Creta,” she repeated, although with much less assurance. “The international community accept this?”

She seemed to be asking a genuine question, so he answered honestly. “Yes, we think they will. We’ve already spoken to the relevant NATO reps, and they understand the stakes. The secretary of state will be in Athens this afternoon to work with your prime minister. They’re probably on the phone together right now.”

Haggerty knew the U.S. would catch a lot of flak for this decision—for *his* decision. There would be official proclamations and condemnations from other governments, including some in Europe. There would be hyperbolic headlines in the press. *America*

Imposes Its Will Once Again—that kind of thing. And, of course, the United Nations would kick up a fuss, but it had been a long time since anybody had given any real credence to what the UN said or did.

In the end, Haggerty believed the quarantine would save millions of lives, not just in America but around the world. Which made his decision clear. Even so, he regarded the woman in front of him with considerable compassion and admiration. He'd do everything he could to carry the consequences of this moment, both now and in the future. But he was setting a heavy burden on her shoulders as well.

"I cannot allow this." She whispered the words at first, then spoke more firmly. "I will not allow you to do this."

"It's already done. The island is quarantined." Haggerty placed a hand on her shoulder. Lightly. The tips of his fingers barely touching the fabric of her dress. "Now I need your help."

Like most things about Crete, the helicopter flight from Heraklion back to the US base in Souda was striking. And colorful. And baked by the sun.

As the helicopter flew low along the Mediterranean coast, Haggerty's gaze followed the shifting shades of cobalt and sapphire where the deep sea merged into shallows and bays and beaches. His eyes were drawn most often to the wide swaths of silvery green and mossy green and forest green that seemed to cover every meter between the shoreline and the gray, rocky mountains at the center of the island. Olive groves. Mostly olives but also citrus and star pine and many vineyards.

Something about the precision of those groves resonated with Haggerty in a profound way. He responded to the planning

involved. The dedication. Generations of Cretans had carefully cultivated each tree among the millions of trees dotting the coastlands, covering the hills, and even spreading like ranks of stationary soldiers across the chalky crags. Seen from above, the island was lovely in its vitality and its regimented order.

Once on the ground, Haggerty and Caleb ducked unconsciously away from the helicopter's whirling blades, then walked toward a group of staffers and soldiers waiting like expectant vultures for their turn to pounce. He and Caleb read papers. Checked screens. Heard reports. Answered questions. Issued orders. Then they both walked with long strides toward the hastily but efficiently expanded medical facilities now sprawling along the outskirts of the base.

"I'll be at the hospital for a bit," Haggerty said. "Quarantine center."

Caleb raised his eyebrows. "The girl?"

Haggerty nodded. He was trying to figure out how to explain his motives when his friend cut in.

"I'll get started on the paperwork." He took the folders out of Haggerty's hand. "And I'll put together some press releases. You take care of your patient."

"Thanks, Cay." Haggerty offered a grateful salute, then strode toward the on-base hospital. Once inside, he had himself washed and prepped. Sanitized and disinfected. Dressed in level A hazmat gear, which always made him feel like something out of a B movie filled with nuke-mutated monsters. As soon as he was cleared, he stepped into one of the small patient rooms near the center of the quarantine zone.

The room itself was sterile and relatively quiet. Neutral walls. No windows. Soft lights and softly whirring machines that occasionally offered a muted beep. There was a bed in the middle of the room, set close to the wall. There was a girl in the middle of

the bed. Blue gown. White sheet. She lay on her side, facing away from the door. Knees tucked up toward her chest. Arms wrapped around her knees. A ball of humanity in the middle of an antiseptic collection of tubes and plastic sheets.

Haggerty walked around the side of the bed to see her face. He knew she was nineteen, but what he could see of her exposed skin looked much older. She was desiccated, her lips pulled down in a grimace of pain.

She smiled when she recognized him. “Dr. America.”

“That’s me,” said Haggerty, though he didn’t feel like a doctor. Not anymore. It had been decades since he graduated from Uniformed Services University. Then residency, several deployments as a combat surgeon, and three years at Walter Reed. That’s when he’d transitioned over to administration. It was a better choice for the family, with more stability and better opportunities for advancement. But it hadn’t been long before he missed the simplicity of working with specific patients and healing specific wounds—of dealing with solvable problems.

Administrative traumas were often much harder to handle.

Two years ago, he’d been offered command of a new unit—a special task force focused on the wave of epidemics and pandemics sweeping across the world. The Potential Pandemic Task Force had been formed after the hybridized avian influenza (called the duck flu because the first cases were in Oregon) infected billions and killed millions. That was after a novel version of RSV infected millions of children and killed tens of thousands. Which was after COVID-19 infected billions and killed millions. There were other pandemics, but those were the biggest.

Something had to be done. Too many lives had been lost and too much money spent (with far too little results). People were afraid of a world in which wars, natural disasters, and food shortages had become increasingly common—and nobody seemed to understand

why. The United States Army still had budget resources (unlike the rest of the government) and was attempting to plug the gaps.

Haggerty had jumped at the promotion to commander because it felt like a chance to be a doctor again—to solve problems in the real world rather than keep wading through the shifting quagmire of political nonsense within the Army Medical Department. In practice, his life had become the worst of both worlds. He felt the weight of global bureaucracy pressing down on his head and the weight of billions of lives pressing down on his heart.

“Dr. America,” said the girl, her voice raspy, “I thirsty.”

He handed her a large thermos of ice water from a nearby tray table, the straw sticking out through the lid. His hazmat gloves were clunky but functional.

As she drank, he took a quick peek at her chart. Blood pressure and heart rate remained normal, but oxygen was down to 86 percent saturation, which was a big drop from yesterday. She’d started coughing up blood. Haggerty glanced over at the red stains on the front of her smock, then up at her face.

She was looking at him. Her gray eyes strained to penetrate the plastic visor, searching for his own. “My mother die?”

“Yes,” said Haggerty. The mother had died several days ago. The girl already knew, but she kept asking whenever he came to see her. Maybe she was trying to wake up from a nightmare.

“My sister die?”

“Yes.”

Her family was from Rethymno and had been caught up in the earliest wave of the disease. The mother owned a café downtown. The patient and her sister were two of the servers. The other three servers had caught the same illness. Two had recovered quickly, but the third died shortly after starting to cough up blood.

“Family die,” said the girl. “But yesterday you say I be okay?”

“I said you were looking strong.” He took a few seconds to pon-

der the difference between *were* and *are*. “I said I expect you to be okay—and I do.”

“Dr. America . . . you good doctor?”

“Yes,” he answered after a slight pause, offering what he hoped was a reassuring smile. “Good doctor.”

“Good. Because you are bad liar.”

Haggerty was struck by a moment of gaping surprise, then a guffaw erupted from inside his protective headwear. Then he laughed without reserve, bending over and resting one hand on his knee to regain his breath. He felt a little embarrassed to be carrying on this way in such a sterile environment, but he was also pleased. He’d forgotten how good it felt to laugh like this.

The girl watched as his laughter died down. Her face wore a triumphant grin that temporarily overshadowed her usual grimace of pain.

“Thank you, Sonia.” The sound of her name made Haggerty wince in spite of his recent mirth. It was the same name he’d given his own daughter not too many years before this one was born.

“Thank you,” he said again. “I needed that.”

She nodded tiredly. Still smiling.

He reached over to touch the top of her hand with his gloved fingers but didn’t quite make contact. The gesture carried him back across time and time zones to another set of slender fingers reaching out toward his own. Reaching for his chin. Reaching for a ball. Reaching for his keys.

“Sonia, we’re learning new things every day. We’re making progress toward treatments every day. And I’m going to do everything I can to get you back home soon.”

He realized too late that *home* would be a painful word rather than a comforting one, but she showed no reaction.

“I need you to help me by staying strong,” he said. “When you beat this thing, you’ll help us figure out how to treat other people

here on Crete and other people in different parts of Greece. You'll be a hero, like Hercules. Like Athena. You just have to hold on while we figure things out. Okay?"

She nodded as the last traces of her smile drained away. She was drifting toward sleep. "Good doctor." Her head sank a little lower into her pillow, and her eyes closed.

Haggerty stayed in the room a long time as she slept. He stood by the bed, the tips of his gloves still resting two inches from the tips of her fingers. He looked from her face to the chart still open at the bottom of the bed. Looked from her face to the machines as they whirred and beeped, whirred and beeped. Unceasing. Untiring. Looked from her face to the clock as the seconds ticked, ticked, ticked their relentless march toward afternoon.

CHAPTER 2

JUNE 14

US ARMY FACILITY, SOUDA BAY, CRETE

Jones!” Caleb held up his hand to shield his eyes against the early morning sun. “Jones! Come over here.”

Caleb was standing in the middle of the base’s airfield outside Chania, and he was doing his best to work through a thick stack of paperwork while also supervising two dozen soldiers on loading duty. Four large helicopters were lined up in the middle of the airfield—each one a CH-53E Super Stallion that could comfortably hold up to ten tons of supplies.

In this case the supplies were pallets of food, water, and other emergency items. Northern Africa was in the middle of another food crisis caused mainly by famine and super-swarms of locusts straight out of the Old Testament. Whole regions were starving and desperate for help. The president and her cabinet knew the decision to enforce a mandatory quarantine of Crete would be unpopular on the world stage, so the secretary of state had arranged for the Potential Pandemic Task Force to make a very public aid delivery to Benghazi, Libya, as a way of appeasing other NATO members and regaining a measure of goodwill. It was a peace offering on a grand scale.

Caleb hoped it would work, and he was glad the people of Benghazi would receive some much-needed help. He just wished he wasn't the one required to manage everything.

Private First Class Jones jogged over to Caleb's position in front of the lead helicopter.

"Sir?" He was young, tall, and splashed with freckles across his arms and forehead.

"Are you wearing sunscreen, Jones?"

"Yes, sir." The young man met his eyes for a moment, then looked away. "No, sir."

Caleb crossed his arms and sighed. The Cretan sun was notoriously intense, even in the early morning. Especially for twenty-two-year-old Alabama boys with freckles.

Jones hung his head in acknowledgment of Caleb's unspoken order. "Yes, sir."

Caleb pointed to the helicopter in front of him. "I'm riding this bird today, and I do not want to be crushed by any loose cargo. When you get back, hand-check every hook, strap, and pallet. Everything secure. Understood?"

"Yes, sir." Jones offered a salute, then slunk off in search of sunscreen.

Caleb turned back toward the helicopter and glared at it for a moment. As a former officer in the Transportation Corps, he had traveled to many places in the world using many different vehicles—and he enjoyed almost all of them. He liked cars, trucks, trains, airplanes, cargo planes, and boats. He even liked the new electric scooters that had started springing up on bases.

He did not like helicopters. Maybe it was the lack of wings, but Caleb wasn't thrilled at the idea of being squeezed in with tons of supplies and then choppity-choppity-choppered several hundred feet above the open ocean with just a few whirling sticks keeping him in the air.

Not thrilled a bit.

Sighing, he walked over to the cockpit and knocked loudly on a metal panel. “How are things coming along, Ms. Peterson?”

A young woman poked her head through the open window. “Fine, sir. I’m almost through with the preflight. Everything is green.”

“Very good.” Caleb started to walk away but stopped when she called after him.

“Sergeant Major? Some of the other pilots said you know a lot about spiritual things. Bible things, I mean. And since you’ll be on the flight, too, I was thinking . . .” She scrunched her face together in an effort to find the right words. “I mean, I was wondering . . .”

Caleb thought he understood. “Would it be okay with you if I prayed over this flight, soldier?”

She relaxed. “Yes, sir. Please, sir. There’ve been reports of anti-air on the Libyan side, and I like all the help I can get.”

I wish I hadn’t heard that. “Anti-air” meant missiles or other artillery designed to destroy aircraft in flight, and four big, fat choppers would be especially juicy targets for any bad guys looking to make a statement. *Oh, Lord, You know this is why I hate helicopters.*

Caleb closed his eyes and raised a hand toward the cockpit. “Heavenly Father, You said in Your Word that they who wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run and not be weary; and they shall walk and not faint. Bless our mission with those wings. Renew the strength of our pilots. And bring us home safe. In Jesus’ name, amen.”

When Caleb opened his eyes, he was surprised to see Haggerty standing close by. For such a big man, he’d always been able to move quietly when he wanted to.

“Got a minute, Sergeant Major?”

He didn't have a minute. Not really. But there was very little Caleb wouldn't do to accommodate this man who was both his commander and his oldest friend.

As they walked toward the perimeter of the airfield, Caleb studied his boss. The man was huge by any measure, with a broad chest and wide shoulders. His most noticeable feature was a dime-sized chunk of flesh missing from his right ear. The rest of his face was a collection of planes—as if a sculptor had started with a cinder block but forgotten to round out the flesh. He had a flat forehead, dark brown eyes, and a thick, well-trimmed hedge of a mustache atop thin lips and a strong, square jaw. The cleft in the middle of his chin was deep enough to hold a pencil.

It wasn't a handsome face, but it was one Caleb had known and appreciated for close to forty years.

When did those wrinkles get so deep? He was looking at Haggerty's eyes and at the sides of his mouth. And since when is there gray in your mustache, Hags? Was it there in Spain? Was it there last month?

"You're gonna see something new today, Cay." As always, Haggerty dropped the formality when they were away from other soldiers. "When you get to the delivery site, watch for the rich man's army in black uniforms. They'll be handling security in addition to unloading the choppers and managing distribution, so you can't miss 'em."

Caleb grunted. A rich man's army was a private military organization. Such groups had been part of the world stage for decades, from Blackwater to the infamous Wagner Group and many others. But the recent increase in pandemics, famines, and other natural disasters had produced high levels of chaos and unrest around the globe, which in turn created a palpable need for private security on a mega-scale. Billionaires and multinational corporations had invested huge amounts of money in acquiring, equipping, and merging private armies in recent years—many of them quite large—and found them to be hugely profitable.

“Why will that be new?”

“Because these guys don’t use any electronics.”

“What?” Caleb stopped walking and tilted his head to the side.

Haggerty nodded, a grin on his face. “You heard me. There’s no electronic equipment for the entire private army. No comms. No computers. No drones. No battery-powered scopes—no batteries for anything.”

Caleb was flabbergasted. He’d never heard of such a thing—had a hard time even imagining it. “What about the vehicles? They’ve all got computers running things now.”

“Not these guys. Everything from the trucks to the choppers are basically big versions of gas-powered lawn mowers. No onboard equipment or circuit boards or anything like that.”

“Why?” Caleb felt professionally offended. “For what possible reason?”

Haggerty shrugged. “I’m hoping you can tell me when you get back. See if you can connect with the officer in charge and get some answers.”

I’ll definitely do that. Caleb looked over at his friend, who was fidgeting with the sleeves of his uniform. He seemed a little out of sorts. Or nervous. Or something. “Is that what you wanted to talk about, Hagg?”

The smile vanished from Haggerty’s face. “No, there’s something else.” He rubbed a hand across the back of his neck. “You and the pilots and the other volunteers—they’ve all been medically cleared in regards to the Dirty Dozen, right?” That was the nickname many on the team had given the new virus because of the twelve in SARS-CoV-12. “No possibility of infection?”

“That’s correct. We’ve done full workups and checks against all known markers. Blood tests confirm we’ve never had the virus in our system.”

“Then how about a little company?” Haggerty tried to renew

the grin, but his face revealed a curious mixture of apprehension and anticipation. “What would you say if I went through the same protocols and joined you?”

Caleb frowned. *I would say it’s a terrible idea to leave an island you just forced into quarantine. And you should know that.* Actually, from the pained expression on Haggerty’s face, it seemed like he did know that. So why was he trying to make this happen? Caleb let the silence stretch for several seconds while he looked around to make sure nobody else was in hearing range.

“Is this about the girl, Haggs?”

Sonia had died early that morning. Acute overproduction of the mucous glands in the lungs and severe hemorrhaging from the capillaries within the lungs, according to the report—which Haggerty himself had signed. She’d drowned without regaining consciousness.

Haggerty was fiddling with his sleeves again but said nothing.

“Did you get any sleep last night, Haggs?”

“No.”

“Did you try?”

“No.”

“And all this is because of the girl? Because she died?”

“No.” There was a pause. “Yes. She didn’t just die, Cay. I failed her.”

This again. Lord, help me. Caleb knew Haggerty would be affected by the young woman’s death, but he’d hoped it wouldn’t be this bad. He hadn’t guessed the commander would deal with it by trying to do something stupid.

“Remind me, Haggs, how long have you been a doctor now?”

“Thirty years, give or take.”

“And how many patients have you lost?”

“Thousands.”

“So help me understand the connection to this one patient.”

Caleb intentionally avoided the word *obsession*. “I know she had your daughter’s name and they’re about the same age. I can see why you’d feel responsible because of what happened with Ry—”

“No.” Haggerty spoke sharply, raising a finger. “Don’t.” His face was a mask of stern intensity, but Caleb could see the wounded animal underneath.

Okay. Now we’re getting warmer. Caleb decided to take a different approach.

“Look, Hags. For the first time in United States history, we just forced another country to accept a medical quarantine within its borders. An ally. *You* just did that to one of our European allies, and the world is watching. Do you really think this is an acceptable time for you to go out joyriding? Do you think that’s appropriate?”

“I’m part of the team, Cay. I’d be on an official mission. That’s all.”

Caleb shook his head. “You’re not part of the team. You’re the commander, and you just made the decision to quarantine a whole lot of people.”

Haggerty nodded. “I know. I just . . . The pressure keeps building. I think I could handle it if I could get away for a day. Or even a few hours.”

It was the same old story. John Haggerty was so talented and so dedicated that he could solve almost any problem and right almost any wrong. Almost. But in those rare moments when he failed, Haggerty had a tendency to run away—to find an escape hatch rather than resolve the issue.

Caleb wanted to say, “You can’t run away from this one, Hags.” He wanted to say, “Leaving this island won’t make you feel any better.” Instead, he asked the only question that mattered in that moment.

“What are your orders, Commander?”

Haggerty met Caleb’s eyes. His gaze was steady. “Same as before,

Sergeant. Take a bunch of food to a bunch of hungry people and do some good on behalf of the US Army. Then get back here safe.”

“Yes, sir.” Caleb snapped off a salute.

“Also,” added Haggerty, “don’t break any of my choppers.”

“Ha!” Caleb turned to resume his inspection, but he was called back for the second time that morning.

“One more thing, Cay. There’s something I’ve wanted to ask you for a little while, but it’s about Tess. Do you mind?”

That got Caleb’s attention. Haggerty rarely talked about family these days—especially when he was on duty in any official capacity.

“No, I don’t mind. What’s up?”

“How long has it been since she passed? Two years?”

Caleb glanced down at his watch. “Two years, two months, and thirteen days.”

“And how long were you married before . . . before it happened?”

Caleb smiled. An easy calculation. “Thirty years.”

“That’s right.” Haggerty lifted one corner of his mouth. “You went to Fiji. You came back with those crazy war clubs.”

Caleb recalled the moment he’d surprised her with the tickets. “*I want to give you a week in paradise because you’ve already given me thirty years.*” He did not voice that memory to Haggerty.

“I know it hit you hard when she . . . when it happened. I know you were torn up. The whole thing was terrible. I know that.” Haggerty rubbed his eyes with his palms, then squared his shoulders and looked up. “But how are you doing so well, Cay?” He pointed a hand at his friend and moved it up and down. Indicating, Caleb assumed, his physical and emotional self. His life. “She’s gone and you’re still here. How are you handling it so well?”

Am I handling it well? Am I doing okay?

His mind wandered again back to those days. To that season and those memories. Less than two months after they returned from

Fiji, the duck flu swept across North America, then swept across the globe, then fizzled into memory.

Tess fizzled with it.

Caleb had been there for every moment. Each appointment. Each conversation with the doctors—and there were many doctors. Each evening as the lights dimmed and the hospital equipment *beep beeped* its regular rhythm. Each time a nurse banged through the door to check on things during the night. Each time they woke her up in the morning to point at a row of facial expressions and ask, “What’s your pain level?”

The last few moments were precious. And painful. She’d been in and out of consciousness for several hours, but she swam back to the surface for a final conversation, her eyes moist and her lips cracked but smiling. Her hands felt insubstantial when pressed between his own.

“Going home, Cay,” she’d told him, still smiling. “Going home today.”

“In my Father’s house are many mansions,” he answered. He was weeping but also smiling. Neither of them could stop smiling in that long, strange, somehow familiar moment. “If it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you.”

“Yes, Lord,” she said. “Yes, Lord.” There was a long pause, and then her eyes widened. She was focusing not on him but something behind him. Something beyond him. A renewed strength energized her hand as she squeezed him. “Oh, Cay. Oh, Cay. Going home.”

And she did. Her eyes met his as she stepped through whatever door had opened in front of her. Briefly they saw each other one last time—then her eyes were empty. His eyes were too filled with tears to see much of anything.

Is all that in the past? Caleb wondered. Is it something I went through, or is it something I’m going through still?

He didn't know. But he saw Haggerty watching him. Waiting patiently in the midst of memory.

"You know how I'm handling it," Caleb told him. "You know what gets me through."

Haggerty grunted. He raised his hand to touch the missing chunk from his ear. "'They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength,' and so on and so forth. Right?"

"Right."

Haggerty shook his head. "But what is it that . . . ? How can . . . ?" He moved his head up and down. Frustrated. Trying to find a way to say what he wanted to say. "I'm talking about something practical. Something real."

Caleb put his hand on his friend's shoulder. "Faith is practical. It is real. For both the dead and the living."

Haggerty's face clouded. "What does that mean?"

Caleb didn't answer right away. *It's been a while since the two of us have gone down this road*, he thought. *Can you handle what I want to say? What you need to hear?*

"Death has taken people from both of us, Hags. That's a tragedy. But you've also been separated from people who are still alive. I can't help thinking that must be just as hard to carry."

Haggerty was quiet, but he stayed still. He didn't crack a joke or pretend he had some urgent duty to carry out. So Caleb kept pushing.

"How long since the divorce?" They both already knew the answer, but Caleb wanted his friend to say it out loud.

"A long time. Sixteen years." Haggerty glanced back toward the helicopters, and Caleb was certain the conversation was over. He fully expected his friend to turn on his heel and stride back toward the gathered soldiers, barking orders the whole way.

But he was wrong.

"It's not just that I lost Sonya and Marianna, Cay. It's that I'm

still losing them. I've been losing them in slow motion. It doesn't stop."

Caleb put a hand on his shoulder. "So why not try something different? Why not do everything you can to get them back?"

They looked at each other for several seconds, the moment heavy with questions and memories and questions about memories. Then one of the Super Stallions fired its engines and roared to life. Then another. And another.

"Time to go." Just like that, John was gone. Commander Haggerty was back, large and in charge.

Caleb took his hand off his friend's shoulder. "Time to go." As they walked back toward the choppers, he once again considered the questions Haggerty had asked of him—once again peeked behind the curtain of memories as sharp and penetrating as knives.

Am I really doing well? Could that be true? He smiled and shook his head. *What a wonder that would be.*