

Chapter 1

Officer Al Cypher and his son, Asher, are cleaning up the kitchen at Detention Suites. Asher insisted on preparing a gourmet breakfast for the seven homeless men who are being held for experiments. Al Cypher's idea of cooking for the inmates is to pour something from a box or heat something out of a can, but Asher enjoys cooking and is endeavoring to pass on a few things his mother taught him.

He constructed two quiches using three kinds of cheese. Perhaps the dish would have appealed to certain cheese connoisseurs, but it was a bit beyond the reach of the inmates' simple tastes. One by one, the men decided they were not quiche lovers, got up from the table, left the common dining area, and went back to their suites to forage in their private refrigerators.

"Your quiche missed the mark with those guys," remarks the senior Cypher. He is leaning against the freezer door, watching his son load the dishwasher.

"The cheese combination didn't work like I thought it would."

"You can't expect vagrants to appreciate good cooking, let alone a gourmet dish."

"I could make it better. I'd like to try it again. But I'm not sure I'll be around after tomorrow morning."

"I'm not worried about that. ... How would you like to make a real gourmet meal—for two?"

The cooking episode this morning has reminded Al Cypher about the boast he made to his boss when she called him up to her office and told him to expect customers to feed and look after in the detention center. She is the object of his passion, and he dreams of her joining him for a meal. Although he represented himself as one whose cooking she would appreciate, it is Asher he would depend upon should the dream materialize.

"A gourmet meal? For who?"

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“Me and my boss.”

“I wouldn’t feel right about that, Dad. How could I use what Mom taught me, to entertain another woman?”

“That’s over, Asher. It’s been a year. You like her, don’t you?”

“Ms. Labaki? I guess. If she’s half as wonderful as you say she is. I only know what you’ve told me about her.”

“Everybody in the FSA is crazy about her. Well, not the women so much. But nobody has reason to complain about her, and that’s unheard of in a federal agency.”

“How do you know she likes you, especially?”

“Oh, it’s just a dream, son, I’ll have to admit.”

What diminished the dream for Al Cypher was the fact that Leila Labaki would never take an interest in him as long as Earl Clark remained in the picture. But now he has hope. It is no secret among the security personnel within the Federal Services Administration that Clark is soon to be apprehended by the FBI. Cypher not only knows about it, he was not surprised by the news. He ventures to reveal it to his son:

“Can you keep something under your hat?”

“What do you mean?”

“Something not everyone knows about yet. But they will after Monday. It’s a good thing this is your last game because Earl Clark is leaving town in the custody of a federal marshal.”

“I don’t believe it.”

“Keep your eyes open, son. You’ll see FSA cops following him everywhere he goes. Earl Clark is wanted by the FBI, and Leila Labaki has him under twenty-four-hour surveillance so he doesn’t skip town.”

“Then I don’t think she’s going to be well liked anymore.”

“Clark would be gone already if she hadn’t put them off. You can thank her for that. She got the FBI to wait until Monday, but she had to promise to keep him under surveillance.”

“Whatever they have against him must be a mistake.”

“Things go on behind the scenes. If you oppose the government, there’s risk of getting caught.”

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"I'm sure whatever Mr. Clark was against needed to be stopped. What was it?"

"It's the reason these men are in here, for one thing."

"Are you going to tell me why they're here, now?"

"It's for a good cause, son, but Clark and others see only the short term, not the long-range benefits. The police rounded these guys up yesterday, so they can be taken to a Reorganization lab for experiments. Think of it this way: One day the world will be a better place, and your homeless friends here will have made their contribution. The Reorganization will clean up every city and neighborhood in the country. Crime will be a thing of the past. There'll be no more bombings, no gang wars, no drunk drivers."

"Yeah, I know, but we don't need it here. You said that yourself. And to pick up these homeless guys and send them off when they haven't done anything really stinks. I wish Mr. Clark could stop it. Maybe he still can, and it won't have to come here."

"All I'm saying is, it's dangerous business when you oppose the government. Unfortunately, Clark got caught."

"Who turned him in?"

"... It's hard to say. Everyone has an enemy somewhere."

"Not him. He's always doing things for people. Everybody loves him."

"Especially the women."

"So why haven't he and Ms. Labaki gotten together if they're both such wonderful people?"

"Son, ... Kenneth Clark won't be here after Monday. That's why I'm hoping I can get Leila interested in coming to our place for dinner. Then you'll see what I mean."

"Who's Kenneth Clark?"

"That's his name. Earl is his middle name. I happen to know more about him than anyone else in this town. I worked for his father when we lived in the city."

Having completed wiping the counters, Asher tosses the sponge into the sink. "Come on, Dad. He wants me there forty minutes before the game starts."

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Asher's primary passion is baseball. He is one of Earl Clark's best hitters and a buddy of Homer Foster, the home team's star pitcher. Maybe Asher's cheese choices were compromised by his thinking about the game soon to take place, the final game of the championship playoff. Or it could be that he was trying too hard to do something special for the inmates, these freedom-loving men, most of whom he considers friends.

Like everyone else, Asher has the Rapture warning to deal with as best he can. His church recently put a twist on its interpretation, making it fall somewhat in line with the earth-cleansing theories. He and Homer have debated the issue, Homer arguing for a hoax, Asher taking the position that it could be exactly what the Rapture-dreamers say it is, in spite of his church's advice. Asher's father refuses to discuss it, maintaining that it will soon be forgotten as has every Rapture prediction before it.

The young fellow now has this troubling news about Clark's imminent arrest added to the rest, but it does not weigh on him as much as his concern for people who are ignoring the warning. For all he knows, Earl Clark and Leila Labaki are believers, but Homer, who has abandoned the faith of his parents, holds to the original Rapture-denying doctrine of his new church. It is the same church that Asher attends, but Asher has lately abandoned the Church's teaching on this and other points and now has beliefs aligning more with those that Homer grew up with at Grace Bible Church. As for his father, Asher holds little hope. The man disapproves of his son having anything to do with religion. It had never been an issue between them until the new sponsor of the baseball team, who is rather old-fashioned in her ways, ruled that it would be an all-boy Catholic team. That drew Asher into the circle of religious instruction and opened a new dimension in his life: he had never before considered that God might take an interest in him personally.

After confirming that the inmates are in their own suites and making sure all doors are locked, Al and Asher exit the Federal

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Building and drive down Hill Street to the athletic fields by the school. Al has no official leave for this, but nothing would keep him from watching the final game of the season. In view of his dual assignment as the security officer for the Federal Building and warden of its jail, he believes he is endowed with autonomy exceeding that of ordinary FSA employees. Furthermore, he is fully qualified as a law-enforcement officer with jurisdiction not limited to the environs of the building. No one would question his presence in uniform anywhere in the town any time day or night if it were not known that he had left his detention post during working hours.

And few would suspect that he had. This is the first time the suites have been occupied since the FSA moved into its ultramodern, lavishly appointed building. This town has little use for such a facility. None of the disruptive unrest that plagues the world has taken root here. Seldom is there a crime worthy of the front page of the paper. Earl Clark, whose primary job is writer and reporter for the local weekly, normally has to work hard to find something to make an attractive headline. Tuesday's issue ignored the Rapture warning (being initially suppressed, it was little more than a rumor) save in the religion column submitted by Earl's close friend Adam Murphy, pastor of Grace Bible Church.

Next week will be different. There will be plenty of material for the paper—assuming there will be an issue next week.

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Philip and Pamela Evans came to an important decision this morning. Earlier in the week they picked nine o'clock Saturday morning as the hour and day at which they would inform their unbelieving employees about the disposal of the hardware store. Their first idea was to give the business to them, but they remained open to any other plan that might come along as they waited on the Lord each day. No other plan came along.

Russell Tarr would be appointed manager. He had some executive experience and probably was not susceptible to the Rapture, having his own ideas about End-Time events, which did not admit of tomorrow's fulfillment.

The two professing believers on the staff were left in charge of the sales floor downstairs while the others gathered together in the upstairs room that Philip used for his office. When he presented the plan to them, he was surprised by the reactions he saw on their faces.

Since only three good chairs were in the room, various other objects had been pressed into service for seating. Only Lonnie, the senior member of the staff, remained standing. Philip was seated near his desk with Pamela beside him on one of the better chairs.

"It's not going to work, Phil," Lonnie said.

The others were silent, all looking at the speaker.

"I thought you might spring this on us, and it gave me the cold sweats when I contemplated the hodgepodge of obsolete and half-baked systems you use to run this place. One would have thought, since you knew you would be leaving in a week, that you would have spent your evenings in here getting things put in order instead of running all over town scaring folks."

Everyone seemed to think that was funny. They all had a good laugh at Philip's expense. Pamela perceived that something was amiss, and she correctly concluded that they were in collusion and had appointed Lonnie their spokesman.

"No. ... Seriously, Phil, I was a little concerned about that, but I'm not anymore. We all came in early this morning and had a

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meeting before you got here. I don't know whether you realize it, but none of us is keen on running the store without you. In fact, we want to keep everybody together. Call it a family or whatever you want. We're going to hang together one way or another."

"I'm not sure I understand what you're getting at," said Philip.

"We're going with you. We figured if you invited the customers to go with you, in that ad you put in the paper, you wouldn't mind if we joined you too."

"Do you understand what you're saying?" Philip was understandably aghast.

"Good enough, I think. Russell explained it to us."

"It wasn't my doing!" protested Russell. "I just gave them your believe-and-be-saved line, and they all swallowed it like it was the gospel truth."

"You told us it *was* the gospel truth," said Lindsey with a knowing smile. She was sitting on a stack of doormats next to Russell.

"Well, it is. I just don't like admitting it to Phil after all these years."

"All right, I forgive you for being so stubborn," said Philip.

"Did he tell you what to expect?" Pamela asked. In her amazement and excitement, she had stood up, her long, flaming-red hair framing a face that seemed to be seeing a vision of heaven.

"Jesus!" they exclaimed in unison.

"It sounds like you all mean it," said Philip.

"When Pastor Murphy comes out in his column saying he's resigning, you take notice," said Jeremy, who was sitting in a yard chair with a broken armrest. Nods and "That's right"s indicated general agreement with the statement.

"I always knew there was more to life than we were taught in school," said Joanne, who was sitting in an inflatable camp chair. "It wasn't acceptable to associate with Christians, so I just let it go. But things started happening this week, and I knew I couldn't stay away any longer. When Russell told us the story about Jesus

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this morning, it was like, ‘where have you been all my life?’”

“Did you tell them that Jesus is a person of the Godhead, Russell?” asked Philip.

“Yes he did!” said Lonnie.

Russell said nothing in his defense. He was staring at the floor, shaking his head.

“Did he tell you the bad news too or just the good news?” asked Philip.

“I’m not sure what you mean by the bad news,” said Lonnie. “But if there’s one thing about life that’s obvious, it’s that something is terribly wrong. How could anyone be as good as a guy who cuts his neighbor’s lawn, yet as bad as when he turns around and slaps his own wife? I’ve done worse things myself.”

“It’s the stuff we all have to live with,” said Frieda, who was sitting on a box of shop towels.

“If I were God, I’d wipe everybody out and start over again!” said Carl, who was sitting on a spool of rope.

“Good thing you’re not. You’d wipe yourself out too,” observed Clarence, who was perched on a stubby stepladder.

“That’s where Jesus comes in. Only he could take the punishment for us and survive,” said Carl.

“Not just survive! He’s inherited everything!” said Lindsey.

“The best part is, he’s willing to share it with us,” said Vicki, who was sitting in a squeaky office chair.

“Not just willing: he does it because he loves us,” said Francis, who was straddling an air compressor.

“It’s not the kind of love you find anywhere else,” said Frieda.

“I guess we don’t have a better word for it. He actually yearns for us to be with him,” said Carl.

“While he’s the King and we’re guilty rebels—or used to be!” added Clarence.

“The way he conquered our death and then captured our hearts is enough to think about for a thousand years,” said Francis.

“I’ve a feeling nothing else will matter pretty soon,” said

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Lonnie.

“Russell, did you tell them all that?” asked Philip.

“No. I don’t know where they got it,” Russell replied.

“I thought you *did* tell us,” said Joanne.

“I told them the basics, that’s all. Now they’re preaching to *me* as far as I can tell.”

“I’ve seen some strange things this week, but this tops them all,” said Philip. “Now, what are we going to do about the store?”

“Let’s just leave it unlocked and go home,” suggested Carl.

“Put a sign in the window that says *Free*,” said Clarence.

“I’m afraid the place would be mobbed,” said Lonnie.

“I’d like to leave something in the account to help the bank recover the loan,” said Philip.

“We could leave it unlocked and extend the fifty-percent-off sale. Everyone knows how to check stuff out with the self-service scanners,” proposed Lindsey.

After batting similar ideas around for several minutes, someone found a sign board, and they made a sign for the window.

Gone-on-to-glory sale
50% off everything
Open 24 hours every day
until sold out
Self service
Honor system

Then they all went home, promising to see each other in heaven.

Except Russell.

Russell had written up a bill of sale and handed it to Philip.

“Just in case I don’t make it—would you make over the store to me, effective Monday morning?”

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Leila Labaki had been spending her morning hours reading and praying. She had discovered some of the purest gold in the world and was reading it over and over, underlining her favorite words and phrases.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ!

He has blessed us!—in Christ—with every blessing in the heavenly places.

He chose us in love before the foundation of the world.

He predestined us to become holy and blameless before him.

His plan, which is pure, glorious grace, is to adopt us in the Beloved Son.

In Jesus Christ—through his blood—he redeemed us from the deadly grip of sin.

He lavished upon us the riches of his grace, including the forgiveness of our sins, in all wisdom and insight,

Even making known to us the mystery of his will—

His purpose in Christ for the fullness of time—

To unite all things in him; things in heaven and things on earth.

When you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him,

You were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit,

Who is the guarantee of your inheritance until you come into possession of it—

To the everlasting praise of his glory.

In spite of the glorious message, which she sincerely took to heart, the nagging pain returned soon after she closed the book: it continued to grieve her that Earl Clark did not seem to be happy about the prospect of her being baptized—or of her being there at all. Perhaps he felt that things had gotten out of hand. It was *his* beach being used for the baptism and, as originally scheduled, only for Evelyn Newton. She could understand his attitude if he planned to be absent: boycotting the baptism would be in character; it would merely mean he did not care for religious ceremony. But judging from what he said last night, it seemed he planned to be there.

The thought of him possibly preferring Evelyn's presence to hers was troubling even as she firmly held to the explanation that

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came to her last night. She told herself again that probably she had misinterpreted his evident disappointment. It was reasonable that he would be unhappy about her becoming committed to something that might take her away from him. It had little to do with Evelyn.

Either way, it amounted to the same thing: it had turned out that she was not what he wanted.

But she also considered the other side: He must give in or lose his freedom next week. The Translation was his only realistic hope. Why was he disregarding it? The danger that Earl faced distressed her greatly. She did not want him to suffer.

Seeking an additional dose of relief, she opened her Bible again—randomly. (It was all new to her.)

The Song of Songs. What is this about?

Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth! ... Take me with you. Let us run.

Behold, he comes leaping upon the mountains, skipping over the hills. ... There he stands, looking through the window. ... My beloved speaks:

Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away with me, for the winter is past, and the rain is over and gone. Flowers are opening upon the earth, and the time of the singing of birds has come. ... Catch the foxes, the little foxes that spoil the vines, for the vineyards now are in bloom.

My beloved is mine, and I am his. ... On my bed at night I dreamed and sought him whom my soul loves. I sought him and did not find him. I will rise now and go about the city, in the streets and in the squares; I will seek him whom my soul loves.

Come with me from Lebanon, my bride, from the dens of lions. ... You have captivated my heart, my sister, my bride. How beautiful is your love! ...

I sleep, but my heart is awake. My beloved is knocking!

Open to me, my sister, my love, my dove, my perfect one. ...

He puts his hand on the latch, and my heart thrills. I rise to open the door, ... but he has turned and gone.

I sought him but could not find him. ... I charge you, O daughters of Jerusalem, if you find my beloved, tell him I am sick with love.

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Someday I'll ask him what it means.

Although the meaning was obscure, it was a comfort that the Holy Spirit knew what she was going through. Beyond that, it seemed to be about her in some exciting way. She turned to the last verse to see how the story ended.

Make haste, my beloved. Be like a swift deer or a young stag
coming down from the mountains of spices.

Leila had her phone at hand in order to follow the surveillance reports. She knew when Earl left his house; she knew he had stopped at the Burns-house rebuilding project. Again the phone vibrated, and she checked the message. Earl had left the Burns house and gone directly to the baseball field. But she waited and did not leave immediately. She was timing her arrival to be slightly before the game was to start. She did not want to risk being a distraction that he might resent when he was busy with his team.

So much will depend on these last few hours. There will be no making amends tomorrow for mistakes made today.