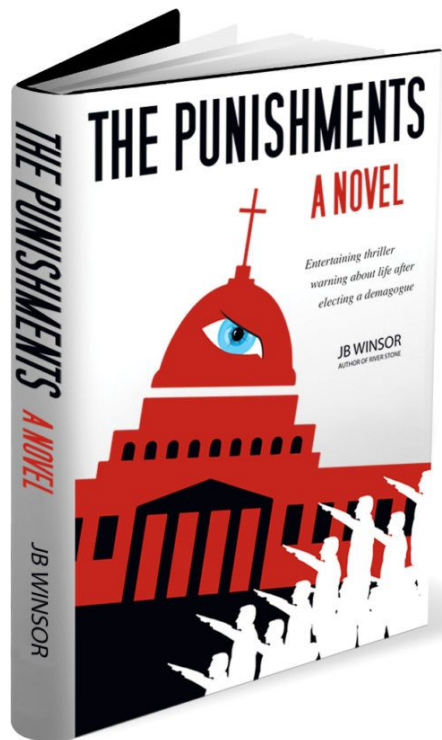


# THE PUNISHMENTS

By

JB Winsor

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# THE PUNISHMENTS<sup>©</sup>

by

JB Winsor

“Men never do evil so completely and so cheerfully as when they do it from religious conviction.”

*Blaise Pascal*

17<sup>th</sup>-century French mathematician and philosopher

“ . . . an authoritarian state church . . . a fascist ideology . . . could replace the liberal polity of the Enlightenment.”

Karen Armstrong  
*The Battle for God*



# The Punishments©

## CHAPTER 1

### **Washington**

#### *Senator William Thatcher*

Ten days before the kidnapping, Thatcher dropped the unemployment crisis report on his desk in the Hart Senate Office Building. He leaned back in his chair, irritated by the rich tones of the electronic bell strike fourteen o'clock.

The bell had been installed high in the Capitol's Dome after the last election. On Sundays the bell ordered four hundred forty-eight selectmen to church services in the chamber of the House of Representatives. There was historic precedent – the chamber had been used for worship during the Jefferson and Madison presidencies. Back then, of course, the services were nondiscriminatory and voluntary.

Now the Director of Virtue conducted Sunday prayers, resplendent in his red robes, standing below the stainless steel neo-cross clinging to the wall behind the Speaker's rostrum.



Now the bell called Thatcher to Virtue's unveiling ceremony.

Thatcher checked his neo-cross lapel pin and touched his wall-hung wooden crucifix for good luck as he walked past. He had made the cross when he had been a kid. He strode past his staff in the office and walked into the hallway. He joined a group of senators waiting for the elevators. He nodded a greeting at Senator Dupré, who had voted with Thatcher against giving the Department of Virtue the power to enforce Biblical Law. Their action had formed the type of warrior respect created during Afghan war firefights. They had lost the vote – Virtue now had enforcement power. Dupré slipped into an elevator and the door closed. Thatcher rode the next elevator down to the subway platform where other senators waited silently for a ride to the Capitol. Virtue's opto-screens plastered the walls:

FREEDOM

SECURITY

FOOD

He boarded the train and sat next to his mentor, Alan Long, the senior senator from his home state of Montana. They remained silent during the trip. There was a chance their conversation would be recorded. They got off at the station under the Capitol Building, walked through long corridors, hurried past more opto-screens, rode up an elevator, and emerged into bright September sunshine at the top of the Capitol's west stairs over-looking the National Mall. Thatcher squinted in the bright

September sunshine. When his eyes adjusted, he stopped, awed by the sight.

A solid mass of men jammed the Mall between the Lincoln Memorial, Washington Monument and Capitol Building. The hum of voices sounded like a swarm of angry hornets.

“How many would you guess?” Long asked.

“Virtue estimated a million men,” Thatcher said.

“Always a million. Doesn’t look half that to me. What do you think?”

“I believe whatever Virtue tells me.”

“Stop being cynical, Thatcher.”

Thatcher and Senator Long queued up in one of twenty dignitary-only seating lines. They shuffled forward like a line of ants toward a security checkpoint.

Senator Long pointed to the Capitol Dome draped by a thin opaque material. “So what’s Virtue hidden under that shroud?”

“I’ve got an idea.”

“Gonna tell me?” Senator Long said.

“Nope.”

In 1863 former slaves hoisted the 15,000-pound, 19-foot-tall Statue of Freedom to the top of the Capitol Dome. Last week, in secrecy of night, Virtue removed Freedom.

Thatcher looked at an armed security guard, wearing body armor, helmet and black plastic face shield. Robot or human? Hard to tell the

difference, unless you could see the eyes. He decided it was human.

Perhaps that was wishful thinking.

The guard motioned Thatcher into a circular glass booth. The door hissed shut. He spotted the ceiling vent tubes that could spray poison.

Trapped. He wiped his damp hands against his trousers.

Others had died inside the booths when the facial identification system identified them as terrorists. Rumors said some innocents died when the system failed. The technology wasn't perfect. Virtue proclaimed the gas caused immediate death. Humane. Instant justice. Thatcher's breathing quickened as he inserted his National ID card into a wall slot. He placed his hand on a graphite pad. He looked into a facecam and held his breath. He shouldn't have voted against Virtue's Supreme Biblical Law and Moral Court legislation.

The scanning process would have been faster if he had an ID chip, the size of a grain of rice, implanted under his skin. The embedding technology, called "CertiChip," had been used for the past ten years for personnel in high-security facilities. Implantations would be mandatory for all citizens by the end of the year. Virtue promoted CertiChips as an anti-terrorism security program.

Even though the embedded chip allowed satellite tracking of every movement, there had been no public outcry. People gave up freedom to feel safe from terrorists. Soon everyone would be tracked, movements and motivations analyzed, their future predicted for potential intervention.

Thatcher felt a rivulet of sweat course down from his armpit. He waited as computers compared his face and DNA to the card's data and the dignitary database. His ID popped up. Rumors said the poison was released the moment an identified terrorist pulled his card from the machine. He prayed there had not been a deadly mistake. He held his breath and jerked out the card. The front barrier hissed open. He exhaled. He stepped out and waited for Senator Long. Nearby, a line of twenty Force members stood at frozen attention, awaiting orders. Obviously robots.

Startled by noise from the security booth on his left, he watched Senator Dupré claw at the door and bang on the glass as mist poured from ceiling vents. His eyes bulged, face contorted with grotesque fear and pain. He coughed, spraying droplets of blood against the glass before collapsing out of sight.

Two robot Force members moved to the security booth, waited for vents to clear the poison, opened the door, and dragged Senator Dupré by his feet across the lawn, then behind a cloth-draped fence bearing Virtue's slogan, '*Security*'. Struggling not to show emotion, Thatcher quickly looked away. Perhaps the rumor that Virtue had an "enemies" list was true. If so, why had Virtue killed Dupré and not him? He kept his face frozen. He was watched. All were watched. Senator Long stepped out of his booth and joined him, face expressionless.

They walked past black-clad Metro Force members, armed with machine guns, scanning an open field of fire between the bleachers and the fence that separated the masses from dignitaries. Other officers, humans, watched through the scopes of .50-caliber Barrett sniper rifles, scrutinizing the crowd from various positions on the scaffolding of opto-screens first seen in football stadiums. A fence of two-inch thick Plexiglas, strong enough to stop a hand-held rocket, protected the senators' bleachers.

They found their assigned seats high on the stands facing the Capitol Building with its shroud-covered dome. Opto-screens pictured men crowding the Mall. Men. Only men. They would watch the unveiling ceremony on four-story-high screens flanking the Mall.

The screens went black. Virtue's official music, Wagner's *Meistersinger* overture, Hitler's favorite, blared out. The music echoed off the Capitol Building, merging with the refrain, mixing the two refrains into reverberating dissonant sound.

The screens snapped back to life. A Virtue cameraman panned from the Reflecting Pool to the US Capitol Building, and zoomed in on the hooded dome. Black words appeared under the image:

**Unveiling Ceremony honoring those  
who died during the September 11<sup>th</sup>  
Terrorist Attack**

## **on the World Trade Centers**

The image of the veiled dome melted into a picture of the World Trade Center's twin towers.

“Not again.” Thatcher moaned to himself. He had been in the grade school cafeteria during the attack. Hearing shouts, he had turned to watch other students point to the wall-mounted TV.

When the opto-screens showed the second plane crashing into the second tower, a bestial growl rose from the men in the Mall. The first structure began to implode, raining tons of steel and glass and desks and computers and water coolers and toilets and telephones and papers and bodies. Men and women ran down the street, fleeing a wall of thick gray smoke rolling over them like a lava flow. Mouths open, gasping for air, faces masks of death.

A chant, beginning somewhere in the middle of the Mall, spread through the crowd. Anger grew in vehemence and volume. The mob's sound waves hammered Thatcher's body. He smelled their rage.

**“New - York! NEW - YORK!! NEW - YORK!!!”**

The dignitaries in the bleachers picked up the chant.

Thatcher listened to the chants of the mob. He remained silent, remembering the many years of relative peace between major terrorist events against America. And then there was Chicago.

The images of the World Trade Center rubble faded into a picture of John Hancock Building. A security camera had captured grainy pictures of a wholesale food semi-trailer truck turning off Michigan Avenue onto Delaware Street. Hijacked four hours earlier, it had been loaded with explosives. Committing suicide, its driver detonated a blast four times as powerful as the one that destroyed the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City. The blast destroyed the Hancock building's north superstructure. The 100 story skyscraper tipped at a precarious twenty-degree angle, trapping tourists in 360° Chicago, the building's observatory on the 94<sup>th</sup> floor, 1,030 feet above the sidewalk. Fires trapped residents.

Image quality improved after TV crews from WMAQ-TV, located a few blocks away, began filming the disaster. Flames engulfed buildings across the street from the Hancock Building, including the Westin Hotel. South, across Chestnut Street, Water Tower Place, Chicago's upscale shopping mall, received fatal collateral damage. Somewhere over 6,000 people died.

Unlike the World Trade Center buildings, the Hancock Building stood for eight days, giving ample time for close-ups of trapped residents suffocating, burning to death, one by one, floor by floor by floor.

**“Chi - ca - go! CHI - CA-GO!! CHI - CA - GO!!!”**

The chanting began slowly, over and over. The sound of feet stamping on pavement increased, the combined force hammering Thatcher with a body shaking rhythm.

Thatcher felt disoriented. He tried to tune out the mob’s chants by recalling other problems that had shaken America: the imperceptible rise of robotics throwing millions out of work, the financial meltdown, and the anger and frustration created by the disappearance of the middle class. Baby Boomers died off, forcing the sale of their real estate and equities, depressing the economy even further.

The standard of living continued to fall. Society split: the minority – the highly educated scientists, technologists, business people and academics were doing well economically. The others, the vast majority, had no hope of improving themselves. Their anger drove them to elect demagogues and fundamentalists – men who promised a return to a better life, a return to prosperity and Christian values.

The rise of ISIS and other terrorist groups created more enemies, but it proved to be difficult to bomb an ideology. Terrorists popped up everywhere – it was like playing Whack-A-Mole. That conflict, Thatcher thought, would go on for a hundred years or more. They would always be fighting terrorists of one belief or another.



The images of the John Hancock Building attack faded, replaced by pictures of a five-year-old girl, body covered with festering black sores. The pandemic had been blamed on terrorists. The little girl writhed in agony as she died. The men in the Mall began another chant:

“A - mer - i -ca! A - MER- I - CA!! **A - MER - I - CA!!!**”

Overpowered by the reek of the mob’s sweat, Thatcher watched the images change to other gruesome scenes of the victims of the bioterrorist attack that killed over five hundred thousand Americans before the doctors from the Centers for Disease Control contained the scourge.

“A - mer - i -ca! A - MER- I - CA!! **A - MER - I - CA!!!**”

Next, appeared the pictures of the hacker attack that destroyed the electrical grid. Parts of the country had been thrown back into the Middle Ages. No heat, no light, no gas, no ability to transport food. Within a week there was no food in grocery stores. No one kept more than several weeks of food in their cabinets – food in the refrigerators and freezers rotted.

Pharmacies, reliant on just-in-time deliveries, ran out. There were no deliveries. Older people, dependent on medicines, died soon after swallowing their last pill. It had been a grisly triage.

Some areas of the country, primarily in the warmer climates of the South and West, managed to survive better than others.

The Mormons survived because of their family food storage policy, but millions of others died. It took five years to restore the grid. After martial law was lifted, men with strong, uncompromising, fundamental ideals had been swept into office.

“A - mer - i -ca! A - MER- I - CA!! **A - MER - I - CA!!!**”

The opto-screens faded to black. Chanting slowed until an eerie silence blanketed the Mall. A robin chirped displeasure at someone standing under its nest.

An image formed on the screens: an unblinking obsidian eye. The Eye, uncaring, human yet mechanical, was the tip of a drill bit auguring into Thatcher’s soul. Probing for impurities. He wanted to confess sins, real or imagined. Everyone had personal secrets. He did. Those dead school kids in Afghanistan. Thatcher shook his head and shivered.

The president, senators, congressmen, dignitaries and men in the Mall avoided the glower of the Eye. Heads lowered as the Director’s voice boomed, “Bow thy heads for prayer!”

Senator Long elbowed him. He lowered his head, but still watched the screen. The close-up of the Eye receded, revealing the face of Reverend John, the Director of the Department of Virtue. He began talking,

“Today we commemorate the anniversary of the cowardly terrorist attack on the World Trade Center.

“Today we celebrate our return to the wisdom of our Founding Fathers to create a Christian Nation.

“Today we affirm the imminence of the Rapture and Second Coming.

“The Lord hath spoken unto me. *‘It is time!’*

“It is time to raise our heads to be blessed by God. It is time to celebrate His wisdom to replace the temporal with the spiritual.

“LET THE UNVEILING CEREMONY BEGIN!”

The Director’s image faded from the screens. Virtue’s cameramen panned toward the Lincoln Memorial at the west end of the Mall. Five black helicopters rose like specters behind the Memorial. They hovered in a tight diamond formation. Dipping low, they swooped over the long reflecting pool. Their rotors’ wash roiled the water into whitecaps before they rose vertically to hover over the five-hundred-fifty-five-foot-high Washington Monument. Plunging down, they skimmed the World War II Memorial, and then charged toward the nation’s Capitol Building, buzzing the spectators on the Mall. Thumping rotors smothered their cheers.

The helicopters roared overhead. Thatcher covered his ears and shut his eyes from swirling dust. When he looked again, they hovered over

the Capitol Building's veiled dome. A cable snaked out of the belly of each helicopter toward the dome's cover, lowering a scarlet-shirted Virtue agent balancing on a steel hook. Each man wore a safety harness attached to a winch inside the craft.

Each man guided his hook through a metal ring that protruded from the bottom of the dome's white veil. Once the hook had been attached, the men were pulled into the safety of the fuselage. Now connected to the shroud, the helicopters hovered stationary over the Capitol Dome.

Reverend John began a blessing for the unveiling, beginning as always with the fact that the National Council of Churches and the Congress of the United States had voted to adopt the fundamental tenets of the Old and New Testaments as Biblical Law for the nation during the War on Terrorism, yet still abide by the Constitution to respect the rights of all religions.

Rotor blades thumped louder. The helicopters inched upward and outward, lifting the corners of the cover to expose more of the dome. They gained altitude faster, removing the shroud like a strip-teaser raising her white gown. Male voices roared approval.

From the top of the Capitol Dome, a giant silver neo-cross rose toward Heaven. The neo-cross was fifteen feet higher than the cupola: a spiritual symbol taller than its temporal base. Its pointed base was a

dagger about to thrust into the Capital Building. The supporting feet of the neo-cross that imprisoned the Dome were like the talons of a hawk.

Dignitaries jumped to their feet. Thatcher cheered along with the mob, stomping his feet against the metal bleacher. The rhythmic noise washed over him like waves, smothering reason. Chest quivering, he chanted with the rest. Men clapped him on the back. The bleachers shook. The sound rose to a climax of frenzy. He glanced at Senator Long. Their eyes met. He quickly looked away, embarrassed that he'd been swept up by the mob's emotions.

Later, walking back up the Capitol's west stairs, thinking about Senator Dupré, Thatcher asked Senator Long, "Think we made a mistake backing the lawsuit against the formation of Virtue's Supreme Moral Court?"

Long shook his head, "The road to Hell is paved with good intentions."

Thatcher walked into his office. His chief aide, Richard Bowman rushed to greet him. "Virtue agents installed a neo-cross in your office. I tried to stop them, but they showed me their orders: a neo-cross in every office. They took your wooden cross."

He stared at the five-foot-tall neo-cross on the far wall. He wanted to rip it down, but that would be a criminal act of aggression against Virtue. Constructed of highly polished stainless steel, the arms radiated from a flat-mirrored middle. His reflection from the beveled centerline of

the upper arm split his face: his right side normal, his left drawn into anguished scream. He looked like a man trapped in Hell.

Thatcher sucked in a ragged breath. There were rumors of a camera embedded behind the mirror in the center of the neo-cross. He forced a grave nod at the cross – for Virtue’s sake.

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## **CHAPTER 2**

### **Washington, DC**

#### *Felix*

Felix limped along a deserted forest trail in the Rock Creek Parkway. A distant church bell chimed fifteen o'clock.

She wore a Redskins ball cap covered by a hood, a ragged overcoat and a backpack with a soiled blanket strapped on top. A bottle of vodka nestled in the left coat pocket. It was a good disguise, but still she searched for signs of danger. She listened to the hum of distant traffic. Her fingers caressed the comfort of the .45 caliber derringer in her coat pocket.

Crows flew into a tree and cawed.

She inhaled scents: the stink of her filthy cloths, decaying leaves, the sharp fragrance of cedar trees reminding her of the hillsides of Morocco, and then a sudden pungent odor of feces. She glanced down in time to avoid a pile of dog shit.

Her forefinger traced the five-inch double-barreled derringer. Her father had given it to her years ago in Marrakesh - "A gift for you, Princess - the only defense you'll ever need."

The gun had looked small in his massive palm, like a toy, harmless.

She knew about his charming 'gifts'.

"I don't want it. I won't kill anyone."

"Simply for defense. Just in case. You are beautiful and you now know how men are. You'll feel better having it."

She didn't know how men were, but she knew him.

"I'll never use it."

"That's up to you, but I'd feel terrible if someone hurt you."

Because losing her would cost him money.

"Then teach me how to shoot."

"Abdul will teach you."

"Are you afraid?"

He laughed. "I know better than to be nearby if you had a loaded gun."

A gust of wind swayed tree branches. The sun cast darting shadows, making her edgy, pumping adrenaline. She loved the rush, this heightened awareness.

Still . . .

He'd forced her into a double life of innocence and evil. She'd used the derringer seven times. Seven kills. Clean kills. They hadn't suffered. She saw herself as an angel of mercy. Stamped out evil. She'd killed because she had to. Killed without joy. Killed without hatred.

Never had the chance to kill him. Wanted to. Given the opportunity, killing him would help cleanse the world of evil. Perhaps purify her soul as



well. Or had evil genes passed to her through his sperm? Was she infected?  
Was Sara?

She had to think of something else. She hobbled along the trail trying to ignore the pain she was causing herself by dragging her foot. It had been a last-minute idea: a damaged limb to go along with the disguise of a damaged life. But it did no good, her willful attempts at oblivion. This mission didn't involve one life, or two. This was about a 'clean' nuclear weapon. The radiation wouldn't be as bad, as if anyone would care if the bomb were 'clean' or 'dirty'. This was about hundreds of thousands of lives. Anonymous lives. Innocent lives. All to save another innocent. A single innocent. Her daughter. How could she balance one life against all those others? It was a simple question that wasn't at all simple. It was a small question that loomed large as the Atlas Mountains of her far-away Morocco.

A homeless man – a real one - sprawled under a tree, arms and legs stiff, eyes staring at the sky. He looked dead. It might be a trap. If so, she'd rather know sooner than later. She picked her way through fallen branches and leaves until she stood over him.

“Hello?”

Nothing.

“Are you asleep?”

She bent into the stench of death. Covering her nose, she used the first two fingers of her right hand to close his eyes. Even the homeless deserved dignity in death.

They died by the thousands these days, on streets, in alleys, and in parks. Sometimes city crews picked them up, sometimes not. Millions of homeless, careers eliminated by robots and artificial intelligence, roamed the country. The old government, frozen by partisanship, had been unable or unwilling to find a solution. *The bastards!*

She patted the dead man's pockets and discovered a wad of cash - hundred dollar bills. *Strange.* The government discouraged the use of money - it wanted the ability to track all purchases through smart-cards. *How could he have all this money?* She didn't want to think about that. Pocketing the cash, she returned to the trail.

Wary of an ambush, Felix studied islands of overgrown brush. She had chosen this path toward the dead drop because an earlier reconnaissance had revealed no Eyes watching.

The government had installed millions of surveillance cameras to elevate civility: if people knew they were being watched, their behavior would improve. Advanced facial recognition cameras would force them to behave as God commanded. That was the idea, anyway.

Felix hoped her heavy dark makeup; cotton stuffed between her teeth and lips, up her nostrils, and in her cheeks would fool the cameras.

Vertical snake-like slits in bright blue contact lenses would help distort her eyes. Still, she didn't dare look at the sky. There might be drones.

Two crows sitting on a tree branch took flight, cawing raucously. Footsteps sprinted from behind. She jerked the bottle from her pocket and raised it toward her lips. Stumbling as if drunk, knees bent to receive an impact, she turned to face her attacker. She brought up the derringer.

A young woman wearing a tight black top, black Spandex shorts, and florescent red running shoes skidded to a halt, flinging her arms across her chest, mouth agape. A jogger.

Felix slipped the gun back into her pocket and offered the vodka bottle. The cotton balls in her cheeks slurred her words. "Want a little drink, honey?"

The runner looked like she'd seen a rattlesnake.

"You're stupid to run out here alone."

"What . . .?"

"Stupid, I said." Felix hooked her thumbs under the backpack straps.

"I run here every day." She glanced at her watch and began jogging in place.

"You're asking for trouble."

"Uh-huh." The jogger stared, repulsed. She sidestepped around Felix, avoiding eye contact, and sprinted away. Felix inhaled a scent of healthy sweat and perfume, a combination that hinted at the gardenias in

the entrance to her father's Marrakesh compound. She exhaled, slipped the bottle into her pocket, and watched the woman glance back, and then slow from a sprint to a jog.

The jogger's ponytail, lit by a sunbeam, swung in an undulating rhythm. Why didn't it bounce up and down? That side-to-side motion—a blond ponytail reflecting sunlight— was a lovely sight. On the other hand, the fool was asking for trouble, seeking an endorphin high on a deserted trail. Despite the homeless hordes, the plagues of despair and exposure, many were arrogant about safety, unaware of evil.

Felix knew evil. She watched the woman's round hips pump, tight and firm, under the stretch shorts, her smooth body a contrast against the gnarled oaks and maples. Felix envied and resented her indifference.

An arm lashed out from behind a tree trunk hooking the jogger's neck. Her head snapped back. Her feet kept pumping, red sneakers swinging off the ground like a pendulum. For an instant, her body froze horizontally. Then she crashed to the ground, a confused mass of arms, legs, and blond hair.

*Warned the fool.* Felix slipped behind a tree. The woman's moans sparked terrible memories - her father's eyes, his searing weight forcing breath from her lungs.

Felix shook her head to concentrate. The white face of a huge man peered up and down the trail. He bent over the woman, and dragged her

by the feet into thick brush. *A trap?* Felix scanned the canopy overhead, wondering if drone watchers had picked up the attack.

The woman screamed.

Felix waited for a mini-missile strike. No retribution came tearing from the sky. Nothing.

This was none of her business. She had to get past them to reach the dead drop. She shuffled up the trail, trying to ignore the thrashing and moaning. The jogger's black running shorts were cast aside. The man's left forearm pinned the woman's throat, choking off her moans. He unbuckled his belt, pulled down his pants, his ass white against dark shadows.

A crow cawed.

The man forced the woman's legs apart. The woman screamed a ragged sharp yelp.

Still no drone strike. Perhaps the trail was not being scanned. Perhaps the ethical decision-making algorithm on the drone's computer had slowed uselessly in its attempt to identify the victim, analyze her worth—single? mother? education? job importance? Perhaps the computer had given up and referred the question to a human at Virtue.

*Can't let this happen.* Felix pulled the derringer from her pocket, thumbed back the hammer. The man would not rape the jogger. He would not rape any woman again. Ever. The derringer's hollow-point bullet would expand inside his skull and literally blow his brains out.

Later, Felix wondered what, at that precise moment, made her dive and flatten on the trail. A change in air pressure? A faint swoosh? She covered her head with her arms, opened her mouth wide to relieve explosive pressure. She pressed her cheek hard into the earth an instant before the tearing of leaves, the breaking of branches, the blast of skin and bone and guts.

Ears ringing, Felix staggered up, listening for footsteps. The forest was silent, smelled of charred flesh and stomach gas. She had no choice but to hobble through the clearing toward the dead drop, glancing at bits of clothing, skin, and hair, ropes of pink intestines impaled on bushes. The mini-missile had shredded the bodies. Virtue punished guilty and innocent alike.

*Told her. She wouldn't listen.*

Twenty minutes later, nearing the edge of the park, Felix walked through a homeless camp. She'd seen places like this all over the world. The sights and smells had been unbearable at first. Now? Just another camp. New for America, though.

Tarps covered cardboard refrigerator boxes and weathered plywood to form shelters. Men and women sat on lawn chairs and wooden stumps. They stood in small groups, staring through vacant eyes, watching their lethargic children. Judging by their clothes they had been middle class. *A long, hard fall. There but for the grace of god . . .*

Felix approached a woman who sat with her arm around a girl that reminded her of Sara.

“How old is your daughter?” Felix asked.

“Eleven and hungry” the woman said in a listless voice without looking up.

*At least Sara was well fed. On the other hand . . .*

“What happened?” Felix asked.

“Job taken by the robots and immigrates, like all the rest.” She turned her head and coughed into her fist.

“Your husband . . .?”

“Who the hell are you? Why is it any of your business?”

“Another widow,” Felix lied.

“He thought the life insurance would see us through. Good plan, but the money didn’t last.”

The daughter seemed not to have heard. Perhaps the girl was beyond caring.

“I’m sorry.” Felix moved close to the woman, glanced around to be certain others were not watching, and slipped her the wad of cash.

The woman looked at the money and quickly hid it in her pocket. Her eyes teared. “Why?”

“I have a daughter.”

The woman stared at her face. Her defeated eyes widened.

“Virtue agents around?” Felix asked.

“Not now. But they come and tell us faith will get us through tough times. Can’t eat faith.”

Felix limped away, nodding. Her hip hurt from her dragging foot.

“Wait,” the woman called out.

She turned back. “What?”

The woman pointed with her chin to Felix’s leg. “What happened?”

“Car accident,” she lied, again.

“Good luck,” the woman said.

Felix emerged from the park, stepped onto a cracked sidewalk and studied the cars, the pedestrians, and the homeless, looking for anything out of place. She spotted the dead drop across the street - a bench at a bus stop. She squatted, pretending to pick at her nails.

A piece of chewing gum had been pressed on a lamppost on the other side of the park: her signal that the information was taped to the bottom of the bench. Hundreds and thousands of innocent lives and she was working with the enemy to end them. She chuckled grimly: look on the bright side, she told herself. At least she wasn’t sleeping with them.

It was ironic, survival in a high-tech world meant adopting the old way, low-tech ways. She shuffled past the bench and joined a group of three homeless men huddled by a windowless building. Were they the trap?

She nodded to them. “Got anything?”

“Go fuck yourself, chipmunk face,” said a man stinking of booze.



They resumed their opaque conversation. She watched their eyes, listening to them argue about which church gave the best meals - ruling them out as Virtue agents attempting to identify her. She moved to study the drop zone. Leaning against the building, hands deep in pockets, she watched from under the visor of her cap as respectable people strolled past, giving the homeless nervous glances and wide berth.

Nothing spooked her, though she noted an Eye atop a pole on the corner. The Eye program – “If you have nothing to hide, you have nothing to fear!” – had been in place so long that most people either forgot they were being watched or no longer cared.

She shuffled on, into an alley where a red-bearded homeless man, wrapped in a blanket, sat in a doorway. Scanning the area to make certain no Eye watched, she moved into the doorway to avoid drone detection. She showed the man the vodka bottle. He grinned. She told him what she wanted. He nodded and stood up, dropping his blanket. He stumbled down the alley toward the bus stop, rounded the corner of the building, and disappeared.

She limped across the broken pavement toward another doorway, but turned away at the smell: a dead woman claimed it.

She moved back across the alley, burrowed inside a deep door recess, and waited. Her fingers wrapped around the derringer as she focused on the end of the alley away from the bus stop, ignoring a blowing piece of paper and the flutter of pigeon wings close overhead.

She took deep breaths to calm her breathing. Waited. Finally, the red-bearded man stumbled back into the alley looking for her. He swore and spat, perplexed, then plopped down in his doorway and covered himself with the blanket. When she was certain he had not been followed, she strode across the alley, gave him the bottle of vodka in exchange for the envelope, and returned to her doorway.

Crouching, she tore open the envelope, pulled out a three-by-five card, and memorized the numbers for a Swiss bank account.

The number that would save Sara.

She pulled out a lighter, lit the card, dropped it on the concrete, and watched the paper curl on itself in flames. She ground the black flakes of ash under her shoe, shuffled out of the alley, and turned left.

Three blocks later, after doubling back twice looking for tails, she paused under a low-hanging roof, removed her contact lenses, and spat out the cotton balls. She discarded her homeless clothes in a dumpster, smoothed the dress she had worn under the overcoat, and walked away without a limp.

She would return to the boutique shop where she'd seen the off-the-shoulder long red dress. He would be at the French Embassy reception. She was eager to meet him again after all these years.

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## **CHAPTER 3**

### **Five miles southeast of Washington**

#### **Reverend John**

The Reverend John Thomas waited for them on the sunlit flagstone patio of his colonial-style house. He wore grey flannel pants and a double-breasted blue blazer. His fingers played with the brass buttons, which strained against the buttonholes. He resolved, once again, to lose weight. But good Lord, he loved eating. It was one of the few pleasures he still enjoyed, a respite from his growing responsibilities as lifetime director of The Department of Virtue.

He absorbed the peaceful surroundings of his estate: a forested five acres full of wildlife: rabbits, raccoons, quail, deer, and turkeys. A light breeze carried an acrid scent of urine. Deer droppings, small piles of black pellets, marred his perfect lawn. His property was simply overrun with whitetails. They were destroying his flowers and shrubs.

He loved watching the deer, but he loved his flowers more. There was only one solution, yet he hated the thought of killing any innocent creature.

When he'd been a child, his daddy shot deer for their table. Venison steaks, venison chops, venison hamburger - even venison tongue. Only meat they could afford, scraping out life on a patch of South Carolina dirt next to the national forest. Put on their best rags for church every Sunday. Learned that God gave authority to the man as head of the household, women and children subordinate. God gave man dominion over the earth. The Good Book was the inerrant Truth - the answer for any question man could conceive. Biblical Laws trumped man-made laws. Learned to ignore man-made laws that violated Biblical principles. Learned his obligation was to make Christianity dominate throughout the world.

The church congregation had jumped to their feet and cheered at the announcement that he'd won a scholarship to major in Christian Leadership Management and Communications at Liberty University in Lynchburg, Virginia.

Four years later, walking across campus on a crisp fall day under a canopy of bright leaves, he spotted Linda, books held across her chest, hiding God's finest creations, laughing with his friend Ted Wilson. Linda's breathtaking smile forced him to strong-arm Wilson for an introduction. Three years later, with God's help and blessing, they were married in the chapel of his first rural ministry.

Linda had wanted children. Couldn't. A doctor of their congregation had tested them. Infertile. Wasn't his fault. She wanted to adopt. He refused to accept a child created in sin.

One day several years' later, he walked through several inches of fresh snow on the sidewalk next to the creek behind his church, thinking about a subject for Sunday's sermon. Something made him stop, turn and look back at his tracks, fading shadows blemishing the purity of the snow. His footprints, like life, were ephemeral.

At that moment, he was swept, unprepared, into a state of searing, otherworldly awareness. He experienced a cataclysmic personal event, a mystical occurrence. He heard the Voice of God.

"It is time to do more for the Glory of God!"

Yes! Yes of course. But what could he do? He remembered being hungry and poor. A sea of humanity flooded the planet. He would help the world's most desperate children. His chosen few would crawl to high ground to take leadership positions throughout our culture and spread the Word.

When he realized he'd actually heard the Voice of God ordering him to create a Save-a-Child Foundation, he fell to his knees, ignoring the cold snow wetting his trousers. He prayed for forgiveness at his hubris at believing his thoughts had ever been directed by anything other than the Word of the Lord.

God listened to his humility and gave him a national TV audience who flooded the Foundation with donations - millions upon millions of dollars. More money than he used saving kids. He began feeling guilty about hoarding tens of millions, hundreds of millions.

The Voice spoke again: use that extra money to help returning veterans who helped make the country safe by fighting terrorists in far off, God-forsaken places. He would provide jobs and give vets a sense of purpose by bringing the nation back to its Christian roots. He started the *Vets for a Christian Nation Foundation*.

Fundamentalists had been successful in using the Tea Party to change the grass roots political landscape of counties, states and Congress. The Voice told him it was time to use his *VCNF* manpower and money to promote candidates for national offices. He used his core group of vets to get out the vote for favored Christian fundamentalist candidates for the Senate and Congress, to intimidate and threaten political opposition. No one knew how to threaten like battle-hardened vets. As a result, his foundation's money quietly influenced elections on the state and national level.

After America's long economic malaise caused by globalization, the cost/price depressive power of the Internet, and job-killing rise of Artificial Intelligence and robotics, the Voice ordered him to back a wealthy New Mexico businessman to run for President.

Lopez-Chin was a demagogue, like several other unfortunate examples in America's political history. He gained power and popularity by arousing the emotions, anger and prejudices of the people.

He was a narcissist with no center, no principles, and no political knowledge. He had no skills other than self-aggrandizement and an uncanny ability to articulate the fears and fading hopes of economically disenfranchised voters who had lost faith in the future of America, who had watched the ties of their communities and families dissolve, watched their culture lose its meaning and hope. And they watched their jobs taken by others. By immigrants.

Reverend John knew how to manipulate the man's ego and had gone all-in to support Lopez-Chin's campaign. He poured hundreds of millions of dollars and focused his vet's organization toward the campaign.

The demagogue and fundamentalists swept into power by a landslide.

After winning the election, he called in his debt from President Lopez-Chin, and all the other congressmen and senators he had helped into office, to create the Department of Virtue. Virtue's mission was to protect the homeland through a smaller but much more efficient FBI, CIA and NSA, to replace the hated IRS with a simple flat-tax system, and to spread the Judeo-Christian belief system throughout the world: to spread Christian values. He had been named lifetime director of Virtue.

Nearly a year later, he'd had a crisis of faith after the Voice told him it was time to trigger the Rapture - just prior to the Second Coming of Jesus Christ, both dead and living believers would be caught up into the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, followed by a seven-year period of suffering in which the Antichrist would conquer the world and persecute those who refused to worship him. At the end of this period of tribulation, Christ would return to defeat the Antichrist and establish the age of peace.

Reverend John had not believed in the Rapture. His eschatology had been based on end-times theology, postmillennialism, believing Christ would come again only after the majority of the global population was converted to Christianity as a result of evangelization.

That issue of the Rapture, the method and timing of the second coming, had been disputed for as long as he could remember. In fact, the argument originated in the eighteenth century by a Puritan preacher by the name of Cotton Mather. The argument had been caused by different interpretations of the Bible. Man-made interpretations.

After agonizing about what to do, Reverend John decided to pick and choose what he needed from both beliefs in order to obey God. After all, it was His Voice that ordered him to trigger the Rapture.

That's why he'd ordered the nuke from a shadowy character named Felix. What were a hundred thousand lives, compared with hundreds of millions who would be saved?



Now, standing on the patio of his mansion, feeling truly blessed, he watched a gentle breeze rustle oak leaves. The Voice whispered to him. He fought an impulse to fall to his knees.

There had been a time early on when he wasn't certain he listened to the voice of God. Perhaps the words had been his own thoughts. There had been so many competing voices, but the Voice revealed the truth and led to success. He now obeyed the Voice with certainty, resolve and humility.

Powerful words coursed through his mind. He listened carefully and nodded. The Voice faded with the breeze, leaving him feeling hollow and lonely, but that's how He worked. God had chosen him to demonstrate the power of Biblical Law to the world before triggering the Rapture. When His plan succeeded, Reverend John would be filled with power and glory for eternity. Still, he felt ambivalent about going up at the Rapture - he so enjoyed his earthly work for the Lord. But how could he disobey God Himself?

Filled with the Spirit, he watched two cameramen from his studio arrive, set up cameras, and attend to last minute details. After making certain his blazer collar lay smooth and flat, he smiled and waved. The cameramen waved back with obvious fondness and respect. Everyone loved and admired him. He had been blessed.

Reverend Ted Wilson, his old college friend and now director of Save-A-Child orphanage, stood on the far side of the gate talking to Linda.

Their heads were close together. She laughed, face alive, flirtatious. Smiling like that first time he had spotted her on campus. Nothing unusual. Linda and Reverend Ted had been childhood friends. Reverend John was happy they had a chance to visit. He pulled a comb from his breast pocket, stroked his long white hair, pocketed the comb, and nodded to the assistant, who opened the gate.

A flood of smiling orphans rushed in, young girls and boys wearing black shorts and crisp white shirts, a mix of Blacks, Whites, Hispanics and Asians. They ran toward him across the lawn, arms outstretched to touch their savior.

The waist-length black hair of a budding girl reflected sunrays as she raced toward him. The boy running next to her was an Asian-black mix, with smooth skin, almond eyes and brilliant teeth framed by sensuous full lips. Both would have been forced into sexual slavery and would have died early. His foundation's scouts chose the children for their beauty and native intelligence, plucking more than five hundred from the millions of orphans in the world's worst slums. It wasn't quantity, but quality they selected. Besides, millions of dollars annually diverted to the Vets foundation were a better investment in the Lord's work.

The children surrounded him, fingering the fabric of his pants, the hem of his blazer. Sweat and unidentifiable child smells pricked his nostrils. Jostled by little bodies, fingers explored his pockets. He didn't

mind. The children were street smart. They had learned to steal to survive. Years ago, he learned to carry nothing during such public relations events.

He considered these kids, and those that had come before, his children. God had decided that his wife Linda would be fruitless. And He had been all-wise, because Reverend John would have been a terrible father. He did not know how Linda felt – they avoided the subject. Being fatherless did not bother him - this greeting session and his annual inspection of the orphanage fulfilled his parental needs. God had bigger plans for him - much bigger. He felt the pacemaker implanted under his collarbone. *Just grant me the time to complete your plans, merciful God.*

He forced his lips into an avuncular smile and patted heads for the cameras. He imagined lice crawling from their hair onto his hands, creeping up his arms, swarming across his neck into his thick white hair, scabbling across his scalp, seeking nesting sites.

Reverend Ted lined up the children on the patio. Reverend John helped straighten up the line. He hated uneven lines. He told the children to tuck in their shirts and smooth them down so they did not look messy. Kids could look untidy without trying. Turning his best angle to the cameras, he addressed them.

“God and I welcome you to your new life here in the United States of America, a Christian nation. By the grace of Jesus Christ, you have been selected for salvation and redemption. Many children just like you have been selected for our teaching orphanage. They have learned how to live a

life of Christian values. Many have gone on to accomplish great things. All had an opportunity to live a better life. Study hard and obey Reverend Ted, for he is now your father. I will come to visit you and hear about your progress. Good luck and God bless!”

Reverend Ted waved his arms for the children to cheer. After the kids quieted, he said, ”Stand tall to receive a cross from Reverend John - a symbol of your new life.”

As he pinned a silver neo-cross on each child’s shirt, he imagined lice burrowing into his skin, sucking his blood, propagating. He used all his will power to keep smiling, not scratch his head and run screaming for a shower.

After the last pinning, Reverend Ted twirled his forefinger in the air, ordering the cameramen to capture more footage of the happy gathering.

Reverend John sighed and looked up for deliverance. He spied Pearl watching from the window of her attic bedroom, her face framed by a white curtain. He remembered when Pearl had run across the lawn to him for the first time. There had been something about her that drew him besides her beauty. Perhaps he witnessed a conflict between shyness and boldness. Now, three years later, her youthful body raced toward puberty, and he was fighting a different type of attraction.

Perhaps now she wished she were back in the slums, free. But how could she possibly understand? The young simply do not have enough

experience to understand. How could she appreciate her fortune to have been chosen as his servant? Someday she would look back at her time with him with fondness and longing.

He waved at her. The white curtain swung back into place.

At last, Reverend Ted gathered up the children, herded them out the gate, toward the bus for the drive back to Manhattan. Linda stood next to Reverend Ted, talking, as the kids climbed the bus stairs. Cameramen gathered their equipment. Reverend John rushed into the house and, rounding the corner from the hall to the stairs, practically bumped into Pearl.

“Wait five minutes, then come to the master bathroom and take a bag of used garments to the incinerator.”

Pearl nodded. He hated the way she stared at the floor, avoiding his eyes.

He hurried to the bathroom, stripped off his clothes, stuffed them into a large plastic garbage sack, tied off the neck, folded it back upon itself, and tied it again so that nothing could crawl out. He stepped into a scalding shower and lathered himself with an astringent anti-bacterial, anti-parasitic soap. He stepped out and stowed the soap container in the medicine chest, carefully aligning it with other plastic jars and bottles, then stepped back under the shower.

As hot water streamed over his head, he tried to ignore images of Pearl’s pubescent figure. He rinsed thoroughly, concentrating on the bitter

smell of the soap, then rubbed a lavender scented shampoo all over his body. His fingertips slipped through the delicious foam, slid down his belly toward a growing erection. He loved the feeling, a minor miracle, even if it was Satan's miracle.

The bathroom door opened, and Pearl slipped in. Fully erect, he turned toward her. Through the foggy shower glass, he saw her eyes widen, and glance away. Cheeks blushing, she picked up the plastic sack and rushed out.

Satan controlled him fully now, providing lurid images, forcing his hand to stroke faster and faster. He shuddered and groaned, leaning against the shower, moaning in ecstasy and disgust at his weakness.

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