

FINDING EDEN

— A NOVEL —



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PROLOGUE

Field Journal – Day 30, September 15

I think we are lost.

But that wouldn't be the first time! Not with this group of yahoos. This has to be – what - at least number ten? What an amazing trip it's been though. We just hit the one-month mark away from home, so I did some reflecting as we hiked today. Picked up this journal from a street vendor last week and thought it might be a good idea to record some thoughts, so here goes. Let's see...thirty days, three continents, and at least 120 miles of hiking.

It's just gotten better as we've moved from place to place. Europe was great. People were nice. Yeah, everybody does the "backpack through Europe" thing. But still, good way to break in the gear and get our legs under us. The Middle East was

next. One word: AMAZING! And boy, talk about edgy. Lots of Muslims. Trying to just blend in and not stick out. Not too easy for four white guys from the south. Well, I guess Alberto is Hispanic but it feels all the same when everyone is speaking in Arabic, and you're not sure what you're eating pretty much everywhere you go.

My parents think the whole thing's crazy and they are probably right. Ah well. You only live once. In and out and back in, via Turkey and then a plane to Egypt.

And now here - wherever here is. Haha. Anyway, just a couple more weeks and then back home, just in time to enroll for the spring semester. That will definitely make my folks happy. Been a nice break though.

None of it would have been possible without Jake. Or I guess I should say, Jake's money. Or I guess I should say, Jake's parent's money! Anyway, he's cool and they're cool and what a gift. The whole thing has been on the cheap, but it does take some bling to fly and rent vehicles. But now we're just walking - six days and at least 50 miles on this leg. Pickup is in three days. Jake says he's got it figured out, so for now, I'm not going to worry about it - just gonna crawl in my sleeping bag and get some shuteye.

Field Journal – Day 31, September 16

A great day today - the weather was perfect. No more than 80 degrees and not a cloud in the sky. Lots of wildlife. If I were alone I'd probably be scared, but not in a group - especially our group. I love these guys. We've truly seen the world together. And not the usual places - we've gone and are going places no one goes. At least people like us.

We are really remote now. Haven't seen anyone really since the first day of drop-off. But all is well. I know it. Jake says we are right on track and ready for pickup in just two more days. I can't believe it - two more days and we start the journey home. SO much fun today.

Ryan was cracking us all up with his singing. He just makes up these crazy songs. Makes the hiking not so bad, that's for sure. If I'm honest, my feet are sore and I'm tired of the miles. It will feel good to drive again.

We sat around tonight over dinner eating our freeze-dried packets – tonight was something like meatloaf – talking about all the food we are looking forward to eating when we get home. For me....I can't wait to throw down an entire meat lovers pie from Pizza Hut. Okay, I'm torturing myself now.

Alberto's already asleep in the tent we share. Ryan and Jake are down by the little creek next to camp looking for exotic fish. I'm just enjoying the fire and staring at the stars.

The sky is different here than at home. The stars are all in different positions, and I can see constellations and stars here that you don't see at all in Texas. I have never felt so far away from home as I do right now. And I've never felt so small before. If there is a God up there, and if he really did create all this, then he surely is a big God.

Field Journal – Day 32, September 17

Such a frustrating day. Jake insisted we were right on track, but now I'm convinced he's full of it. There is no doubt that we are still lost, and this time I think we are really lost. Jake was so sure when we started off today. But I know we have walked in circles. We've passed the same boulders, the same trees, the same water - at least three times. I know it. Jake says no way. He's sticking to his guns but I can see it on his face.

For some reason the GPS thing we brought isn't working either. That was news to me. I was trusting Jake. We all were trusting Jake. I don't even know how long it's been out. Jake says since today but I don't think I believe him. We are supposed to be at the pickup point tomorrow by the end of the day. So I'm a little freaked out about that.

Jake says that once the sun comes up, we need to be up and ready to haul out of here. He says that if we just mark the exact spot that the sun breaks the horizon, we will know for sure which way is east, then we can hike exactly opposite of that, to the west, right toward pickup, and until we hit something that matches our topo map. That sounds right. I think that's right. But man...I'm nervous. There was a lot of yelling over dinner - mostly all of us at Jake. He's gotten quiet on us. Nobody's really talking to each other right now. But I think we are all thinking the same thing. It's time to go home.

I'm sure we will be fine. Yes. We will be fine. I'm gonna keep telling myself that. The power of positive thinking, right? We will make the pickup and ride out of here. Bus it back to Cairo. Then on a plane back to the good ol' United States. This time next month we will be back, things will be calm, and

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we will all be laughing about this over some Mexican food and a round of beers at El Rey's. God, I hope I'm right. Please, Lord, let me be right. I can't believe I'm praying! I must really be desperate. Haha. That's right. Keep laughing. Keep praying. Keep positive. Time to close my eyes. Tomorrow's going to be a long day I think.

Field Journal – Day 33, September 18

I'm so tired...my watch says 12:30 a.m. It's dark - so, so dark tonight. We missed pickup. Of course we missed pickup. We have no idea where we are. We were up early, ready to head west once the sun came up, but it was cloudy. Go figure! The only cloudy day the whole time we've been out here. So we decided to follow the muddy river we've passed the last two days.

Jake's not talking much but Ryan says that the rivers on our map all seem to run pretty much east and west. Sounded like the best idea considering.

All morning we just walked, a little chitchat but not much else. Around noon we got so excited because we ran into a small village. It was the first sign of anybody since the small town where we were dropped off. It was so strange. They looked like Massai, but there are not supposed to be any Massai anywhere close to where we are. But they were also very different than the Massai I've seen. Very little clothing and only men in the village. What's that all about?

I'm not sure you can even call it a village, just some mud huts with thatch and a burn of thickets surrounding it all. And where are the women and children? Every place we've gone since Cairo has had children everywhere. I think we surprised them as much as they surprised us. They were nice at first, but a little standoffish. We offered them some of our leftover packets of food. We don't have much left to trade. One man brought out a bowl of some kind of raw meat, soaked in blood with flies swarming it. Absolutely nasty! They used hand motions and their strange language to insist we eat. No one could understand anyone. It felt tense so we all tried it -

hardest thing I've ever done. Only one bite and I gagged the whole time. We all did. We weren't hungry much anyway, just desperate to get out of there.

Ryan showed them the map, trying to get them to help us, and they got very agitated. He kept pointing to the spot where our pickup point was. I don't think they understood at all. I think they thought we were trying to find something else and that made them even more angry.

Then two of the men ran to one of the huts in the back of the yard. We could hear angry shouts but we had no idea what was being said. All of a sudden the two men came running out with an old man between them. Old is an understatement. This guy was ancient. Skin so black from the sun and so wrinkled with time, wearing only a loincloth. He had no teeth and was clearly blind. When they got about twenty feet from us, he shook off the other two and walked straight toward our group. I swear he could see us, but how?!

The old man - must have been the chief - began to chant and stomp and then from the back of his loin cloth he pulled a knife made of some sort of bone material! The two others snatched the map from Ryan and began to push us out of the yard. Everything went to crazy after that. Alberto was pushing through three of them trying to get the map. Ryan went after Alberto and the old man slashed him across the side with the knife. Jake yelled and threw his pack at the old guy - I grabbed Jake and we ran. Alberto and Ryan tore away and followed. The whole group chased us for at least a hundred yards, and then just stopped and formed a line. They began to chant and jump, in a strange rhythm. Were they cursing us? It was clear we were to leave. Immediately. So we ran.

Skirting their camp, we just took off and stopped after ten minutes or so.

We found shelter under a tree to look at Ryan's wound and to regroup. It's pretty nasty looking – a wicked gash just below the left side under his rib cage. Maybe six inches long or so. Ryan put on a strong face saying it didn't hurt much, but I know it has to. After a short rest to dress Ryan's wound, we took off again. We are all pretty shook up. We just need to get out of here. We decided to hike even after sunset. But there's no map and Jake's pack had our spare food, what little we had left. We finally stopped, just because we can't go any further tonight. It smells really odd where we are. I'm writing all this down because it feels important. We need help.

Field Journal – Day 34, September 19

Morning - *Bad just got worse. We slept in more than we wanted to. Just so tired still.*

Ryan is sick. His side is killing him and none of us feel quite right. Lots of stomach cramps. I think we should never have eaten that bowl of whatever we were given yesterday. I have no appetite at all, which is okay because all we have left are some power bars and trail mix.

We've decided that our pickup team we hired will come back today since we didn't show up yesterday. They would have to, right? Then if we still don't show up, they will come looking for us. That may be our best chance. It's just before noon and we are about to get going for the day - try to find the river again and keep following it.

Evening – *We could only go a few hours today. Ryan is just too sick. He keeps apologizing to us. His cramping is worse than ours and his side looks really bad. We still have a few bandages left, so that's good.*

We found the river again but stopped late afternoon. We decided we needed to stay rested. Alberto has started cracking potty humor jokes to cheer us up - sort of goes along with all our intestinal issues. Haha! Thanks Alberto. Love you man.

It's very strange here. The longer we walked and followed the river today, the more the vegetation and scenery changed. This whole time everything has looked the same: arid climate, short brown grasses, acacia trees here and there, etc. What you'd expect. But now everything is...I don't know, greener. More lush and just...more. The area feels different too. And that smell - what is the deal with the smell? So bad and

pungent and getting stronger. I've decided I'm done panicking. It is what it is. We have each other and something will happen to get us out of here.

Field Journal – Day 35, September 20

Morning – *Something is out there. We could hear it all night long. Like we are being stalked. Alberto joked that it was a lion. Do they even have lions in this part of the country? No way it's a lion, right?*

Ryan is bad. Real bad. It was hard to wake him up this morning. His wound is infected I think.

Alberto is still cracking jokes, but it's not funny anymore. Why's he doing that?

Jake won't talk to anyone. He just sat around the fire last night and stared at the flames. I think he's blaming himself. I told the guys last night that we have to stick together. We have to. All we have is each other. This is the part in the movies where everything goes from bad to worse. But this is not a movie. We are going to be okay.

Please God, let us be okay. There I go praying again. I don't care. We need all the help we can get. I don't know if we can travel at all today with Ryan the way he is. Everyone is just laying around anyway. I'm going to walk a ways down the river and explore. See if I can see anything.

Evening – *Jake is gone. What the heck! I was gone about two hours and when I got back he was just...gone.*

I don't like where we are camped at all. When I went down the river, I noticed that there is no wildlife at all here. No birds, no insects, no ground or tree animals of any kind. And it's so quiet. How long has it been this way? I got to a point on my morning hike where I couldn't go any further because the terrain just rose up so high on the bank, and I would have had to cross over to the other side to keep going.

Before I turned to come back, I looked across the river and my eye caught the only thing I've seen alive out here. Sitting with just its upper torso and head showing above a large boulder was what looked like an eagle. But it was not like any kind of eagle I've ever seen before. Incredibly huge! And terrible looking with white, red, and gold plumage. And his eyes – he kept staring at me. Like he was warning me to stay away, to go back. I couldn't take my eyes off of him. And I didn't! I just eased away walking backwards until I was around the bend and he was out of sight. So creepy.

Ryan is sleeping and Alberto keeps telling knock-knock jokes.

"Knock, knock."

"Who's there?"

"Jake."

"Jake, who?"

"Jake the SNNAAKKKEEE! SNAKE! SNAKE! SNAKE!"

He just keeps saying this over and over again, pointing at the river and laughing out of control every time he says "snake." I think he's lost his mind. I hope Jake just went to explore like me. Come back, Jake. Wherever you are, come back!

Field Journal – Day 36, September 21

Morning – *Jake never came back last night. Jake, where are you? Ryan won't wake up either. He's burning up with a fever. Alberto. Oh man. Alberto is bad. I can hear him in his tent just mumbling and laughing. Every once in a while I hear the word "snake." God, I don't know what to do! I'm not sick anymore and now I'm getting hungry.*

I'm gonna go soak some dirty clothes in the river and try to cool Ryan off. I feel completely alone. Except for that thing that keeps walking around our camp at night. What is that?

There is seriously nothing alive around here. Not even mosquitos, I've realized. It's crazy. But then there's this thing. And the eagle from yesterday. Is it the same thing? Can an eagle stalk? At one point I stepped out of my tent to go pee, and about 20 yards away I saw a pair of red eyes just staring at me! Red eyes? What kind of animal has red eyes? Yes, I feel totally alone right now and totally freaked out.

Evening – *I don't want to go to sleep. It's late, past midnight. Watch says 1:00 a.m. About an hour ago I was drifting off and I heard this awful scream. It sounded like someone was dying. Seriously. It was so horrible. And it went on for over a minute. I ran from my tent - it was coming from the river. Then all of a sudden it stopped. I yelled for Jake over and over again. Please Jake - I hope you heard me brother! And then this light. Right across from us on the other side of the river. Maybe 200 yards away, like a rod or shaft of fire, not very big, but distinct and bright. Then the smell. The same sickening smell that won't go away. It became overwhelming. I bent over, wanting to throw up.*

When I looked up from doubling over it was just...gone. Am I hallucinating? Losing it, like Alberto?

Ryan is bad. I think he might die. Oh God, please no! Alberto never came out of his tent today. He's just whispering "snake, snake, snake, sssnnnaakkkeee..." over and over again. When I try to talk to him, to get him to eat something, he just says it louder until I leave. He's not dangerous, I hope. Is he? Oh man. Nope, I'm definitely not sleeping tonight.

Field Journal – Day 37, September 22

Morning – Ryan died last night.

Despite my best attempts to stay awake, I fell asleep. I woke up and he was standing over me, wide-eyed. He was just staring at me...and then he pointed. Off into the distance. He looked right at me and said as clear as can be, "Go." I was shocked, horrified! I jumped up and grabbed him by the shoulders as he collapsed in my arms. But his fever was gone. I thought he had turned the corner. I couldn't believe it! I laid him back in his tent and then went back to my post by the fire. I tried so hard to stay awake, but fell asleep again.

When I got up this morning to check on him, he was just gone. No pulse No breath.

I'm so sorry Ryan. So, so sorry. Please forgive me! I tried not to leave you alone.

I went and told Alberto and he just laughed...

"Knock, knock."

"Who's there?"

"Ryan."

"Ryan who?"

"Ryan the...LION!...LION! LION! LION!!!!"

More laughing and totally freaking me out. What am I going to do?! I guess I should bury Ryan. Or should I not and just wait to be rescued? I can't leave him here. What would I tell his parents? Surely there's a search party looking for us by now. It's been four days. I'm so tired. So hungry. I'm going to go check out the river where I heard the screaming last night....

Evening – So. Much. Blood! Oh my gosh, I went down to the

river's edge and what a mess of blood and gore. Nothing recognizable at all. I don't know if it's human or animal. I've never seen anything like it.

Oh Jake! Jake. Jake. Jake. He's not coming back, is he? That has to be him. Or what's left of him. I'll never be able to get the stench out of my mind. The smell of death. And that other odor just won't go away! What is it? What is any of this? What did that to him? Did that red-eyed whatever it is take him? I am so scared. So, so scared. I've got to hold it together. I don't want to sleep and I don't want to be awake either. This place is hell. I want out. Please, God, send someone to find me.

Field Journal – Day 38, September 23

Morning – *I have to leave. I have to leave. I have to leave. NOW. I can't believe what I just saw! Oh man, Alberto! And Ryan, what happened to Ryan?!! Dear God...I am running....*

Evening – *Okay, I'm going to try to write all this down. I'm not sure I can trust everything happening to me. I'm so exhausted and so hungry. My food is totally gone. I left everything behind. I ran with only my pack and personal items. Oh man, Alberto.*

I woke up this morning and I couldn't hear Alberto in his tent, so I went to check on him. Empty. First time in days he'd come out. I looked all around for him, calling his name.

I didn't want to go back to the river. Oh, the awful river! But that's all I could think of. And there he was...on the other side! He'd swum across to the other side and he was just standing there with no clothes on...totally naked. His back to me - like he was looking at something.

"Alberto!" I called to him. He turned around and had the biggest smile on his face. His famous Alberto smile. And then he threw back his head and yelled, "SNAKE!!" Before he finished – it happened so fast. I didn't even see where it came from. Yes...IT! Oh, it was a like a flash of white and red and gold and I thought I saw fur and also that horrible beak. The eagle! But no! It wasn't! I don't know what it was, but it took him. It just took Alberto. It picked him up and crushed him and then he was gone. I don't even know where. Up. Away. Back. I can't say. It's like I didn't see what I saw. But I saw it. And I don't even know what I saw. Tears in my eyes, I just

*yelled and cried and called and then...I ran. I ran to camp -
and Ryan. Oh, poor Ryan. His body, gone.*

Just gone!

Like Alberto.

Like Jake. They're all gone, except for me.

Field Journal – Day 39, September 24

I had to come back to the river. Oh, I didn't want to, but I can't just roam around out here going in circles. The river is my only path, my only way to freedom...hopefully. I didn't go back to camp though. I'm sitting right now, downriver as far as I can go on this side. Same place I was a few days ago...where I saw that...thing. That thing that got Alberto. Oh, Alberto....

I'm going to keep my fire going all night and rest. I'm so hungry. So utterly exhausted. I've got to find some food. Tomorrow, I'm going to swim across. I have to. It's the only way. I'm going to swim and then I am going to run. Downstream. And keep running. Away from here and away from that thing.

I don't know what's going to happen to me. If anyone finds this journal please get it to my mom and dad. Mom, I love you so much. I can't get your pretty face out of my mind. Please forgive me for not being a better son. Dad, you were right. I never should have done this stupid trip. I pushed it too far. I love you Dad.

Field Journal – Day 40, September 25

I did it. I made it across. And I ran until I collapsed. No sign at all of the eagle-creature-thing. Thank you, God. I have no idea how far I've gone.

It's even greener and more lush here. Like I've entered a jungle almost. Still no sign of animals of any kind. But the smell is gone. The air is so much sweeter! I went as far as I could go before the sun went down. I laid down thinking this was it. I can't go any further.

Then I looked back across the river and began to cry! There is a grove of trees, maybe just 75 yards on the other side. There's what looks like fruit hanging from them! My heart leapt. I had forgotten what hope felt like.

I'm going to sleep now and tomorrow muster my strength to swim back across. I think this is a good sign. I might make it out of here after all. See you soon, Mom and Dad. Too tired to write any more. Going to sleep now....

Field Journal – Day 41, September 26

OH GOD!

PLEASE!

NO!!!

CHAPTER ONE

Phineas T. Crook bolted up in bed.

Alarm blaring.

6:00 a.m.

Another “dream,” if that is what you can call it. More like a premonition covered in dread. One of those dreams that you can just barely get your mind around as you wake up. The images and details slipping away like sand running through your fingers.

It had been, what, a month or even longer since the last one? It was so easy to lose track as the days turned into weeks.

Until another one hit.

The images, the horror, the feeling of wrongness and hopelessness.

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Then...wide-awake, shirt soaked with sweat. And always, always the details just falling away, no matter how hard he tried to concentrate and hold on. Just to find some meaning in it all.

Sometimes the dreams or visions or whatever they were would come in waves. Happening every night for three, four, or five days - like torture. Then they would just...be gone. Sometimes they invaded once a week and other times once or twice a month. But always the same - dread without meaning.

No matter. It was time to get up because the students would be waiting at 8:00 a.m. sharp for another Monday morning lecture on biblical hermeneutics.

Phineas T. Crook, that would be *Dr.* Phineas T. Crook, was the esteemed associate professor of preaching and pastoral ministry at Oklahoma Baptist University. Esteemed may be too proud of a word, especially in light of his ongoing reputation. But he did hold the Sam and Martha Goodman Chair for said position.

Dr. Crook resided alone in the little home he had purchased three years ago on Broadway Avenue in Shawnee, Oklahoma, just minutes from the campus known as Bison Hill. He liked the little mid-century house very much, but he hated the loneliness of it all. Hopefully, prayerfully, it wouldn't always be this way.

Ring...Ring...Ring...!!

Jolted from his thoughts, Crook rushed to his charging station, grabbing his cell and quickly unplugging it.

"Hello?" he answered, still shaking off the aftermath of his dream.

"Phin! You awake?" That's how everyone who knew Phineas Crook well referred to him – *Phin*.

"Oh...good morning, Max. Yes, I'm awake. What's up? A little early to be calling, isn't it?" Phin asked, eyes rolling as he sighed to himself.

Dr. Max Allred was the assistant dean of the Hobbs College at

OBU, and Phin's best friend. He'd been the one to recommend Phin for appointment to the faculty at OBU, the one to insist to Phin that this was something he simply must do after his decision to resign as the senior pastor of Covenant Baptist Church in Oklahoma City. Those were dark days for his good friend, and Max felt it his duty to help his old college roommate reinvent himself. He also knew the tremendous potential that Phin held intellectually and spiritually. Phineas Crook would be a gift to the university they both loved and attended together as students so many years ago.

"Look Phin, sorry to call so early, but the dean has asked to meet with you and me together this morning before your classes begin. He wants to do it at seven-thirty," Max explained.

"What's this about, Max? Please don't tell me the school's bent out of shape again because of my *personal* interests."

"Look, I don't know. I can't really talk about it with you over the phone right now. I've just been asked to call and make sure you show up. Don't worry, I'll be in the meeting too." A pause. Then Max continued, "Look, Phin. Everybody likes you. The students *love* you. That goes a long way and you know it. Just relax and I'll see you in forty-five minutes," Max hung up.

Forty-five minutes? It was already 6:45! Phin had completely lost track of time. Lost in thought. Paralyzed is more like it.

Dang! he thought, *I hope this isn't the beginning of something bad.* As he said this to himself, he was thinking about the "dreams" and not the meeting.

Dr. Phineas T. Crook, took a quick shower, threw down a bowl of Cheerios and an orange, and grabbed his Harris Tweed jacket along with his leather satchel as he ran out the door.



Oklahoma Baptist University is a small liberal arts university of

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roughly two thousand students. Located just forty minutes east of Oklahoma City on Interstate 40, the school was founded in 1910 by the Baptist churches of Oklahoma, and has maintained a strong reputation for producing ministers and missionaries. But it's also known for its excellence in business education, nursing, science, and a host of other disciplines. A hallmark of an OBU education is the close link between faculty and students. At a school like OBU, the faculty also live under certain *expectations* - that they will not wander too far from the doctrinal tenants of the Baptist faith, and that their public reputations will not serve to tarnish the good image of the university. Not just anyone can be an OBU professor.

The student experience at OBU is tied hand and glove to strong and real relationships with those same faculty. Everyone knows that college is a time to learn and grow and explore new ideas. Sometimes those ideas are not necessarily a part of one's upbringing, especially in a state like Oklahoma and the surrounding states of the Midwest and Southwest where OBU draws from primarily for its student body. Individual faculty quickly form individual reputations among the OBU community. Students are continually drawn to those professors that have a penchant for the eccentric, the unusual, or the perceived "out of bounds." It's all a part of the coming-of-age cliché: to know and understand oneself.

On this cold February Monday morning, Phin whipped into his faculty parking spot located just behind Montgomery Hall, home of the Hobbs College of Theology and Ministry. It was 7:28 a.m. as he stepped out of his car, the bitter wind that comes "sweeping down the plains" slapping him in the face. *Why does it always seem to blow harder on campus?* Phin thought as he sprinted through the back door and up the stairs, bypassing the elevator. He didn't like to be late, ever.

The dean's office was located on the second floor. The best office in the building overlooked the majestic Oval of the campus,

dotted with other class buildings, dormitories, and administrative offices. The central point of the Oval was the beautiful Oval Fountain itself, either frozen over or simply turned off this time of year.

Like most professors' offices, the dean's office sported an impressive library with one notable difference - it was enormous in size. Floor to ceiling, wall-to-wall bookshelves filled with a lifetime of collected works, special and rare editions, classics, and an assortment of various artifacts of academia. To step into the dean's office for the first time would truly set one aback. Phin had been in the office so many times now that its aura no longer affected him. It was still early as he arrived so not many were around yet - not even Carol, the dean's assistant.

Taking a deep breath and calming himself, Phin moved on through the open doorway. *Why was he so nervous anyway?*

"Ah, Phin, come on in! We just got here ourselves and were chatting," greeted Dean Reynolds, rising from his leather desk chair. Max Allred rose from where he was seated as well. *Of course...Max is already here*, Phin bristled.

With a round of customary, good morning handshakes, Phin and Max settled into guest chairs spaced evenly apart on the opposite side of the dean's desk.

"Okay," Phin thought. "Here we go."

CHAPTER TWO

Dr. Clayton Reynolds had served as the dean of the Hobbs College for seventeen years. He was forty-seven years old, having come into the position at a remarkably young age. Handpicked, he'd been plucked from one of the Southern Baptist seminaries by the search committee. "A prodigy in theology and philosophy" was the label he carried into the position. Reynolds was also good with people. All put together, it made for a rare combination. Because of his tenure, Reynolds was now firmly entrenched as a major gear in the university machine.

It is always a challenge to keep a school like OBU firmly planted in its historical and theological roots, while also staying relevant in an ever-changing world. Prior to Dr. Reynolds' assumption as the dean of

the Hobbs College, the school had, some would say, *drifted*. Reynolds had fought the hard fight to right the course and set a new direction; one that made the administration and the trustees immensely relieved and happy. Dean Reynolds knew what he wanted, not tolerating anything or anyone that gummed up the works.

On top of all that, Clayton Reynolds was a sharp-looking and impressive man. Standing just at six foot three inches, he was well-built and muscular, the exact opposite of the two other men in the room. He looked older than his years, with his hair being on the saltier side of a salt and pepper mix. The man commanded respect.

“Phin, thanks for coming in early,” the dean was all business this morning. “I’ll get right to the point because I know you’ve got a class to teach. I’ve asked Dr. Allred to join us because I know you two are close, and because I think we need to make sure we are all on the same page when we leave here.”

Dr. Allred. *Okay, we definitely aren’t here to shoot the breeze*, Phin thought. This was a formal job evaluation. No doubt about it.

He was actually glad Max was in the room. Yes, they were good friends and had been since attending OBU together. Phin and Max saw eye-to-eye on many things, although they both took very different paths after graduating. Max taking the more formal route in academia, Phin going off in search of himself and God as a missionary on the African continent.

Phin would always be grateful for Max’s presence in his life. They were both now in their mid-thirties, and as the two friends joined Reynolds in his office on this very cold Monday morning, it struck Phin: this trio of men shared a deep love for OBU. Yes, they had that one thing in common, but they were each vastly different from one another in so many other ways.

After losing touch through the twists and turns of the post-college years, Max and Phin had reconnected while Phin was still overseas. He

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would later return to the United States with his doctorate under one arm and a wife under the other. Those were the best of years. After what most would label an adventurous life abroad, Phin was ready for something a little quieter by way of pace of life. He and Autumn were madly in love and ready to start a family. No more adventure. No more crazy. Those days were over. Just a quiet life as a pastor, taking care of people. Preaching the Word of God. Raising kids in the suburbs of Oklahoma City, taking them to Thunder basketball games. He could see it all in his mind's eye. Then it all had come to an end....

Max and Phin sat quietly, Max stoically even, as Dean Reynolds continued, "Phin, your tenure with us the last three years has been a good one. There's no doubt you are one of the most popular professors on campus."

There was a "but" coming. Phin could feel it. Why hadn't Max said anything yet? That was just like him to sit there, overshadowed - overpowered really - by the persona of the dean. *Come on Max, help me out here, buddy*, Phin pleaded within.

Max Allred was very average when compared to... well, just about anyone. He was average height. Average build. Brown hair. Not dark or light, just...average. Even his personality was average. Not too high and excited, and not too low and dull. Just right in the middle. It made him the perfect person to serve under a man like Reynolds as the assistant dean. The dean would never feel threatened, and Max would never challenge. Hiring Max was brilliant on Reynolds' part because, as a graduate of OBU, Max understood many of the finer points of how the university lived and operated, which made him invaluable to a man like Reynolds, who would always be an outsider.

"But, Phin..." and there it was - the *but*. "I want you to seriously consider whether or not you still truly fit at a university like OBU."

"Why would I do that, *Clayton*?" Phin quickly shot back. Almost too quickly. If the dean was going to call him by his first name, he

could do the same, couldn't he? Just a slight move on his part to bow up. Phin was definitely not like Max when it came to jockeying with the dean.

"Why in the world would you even ask me that? I love it here. I love what I do. I love working with the students. You just said yourself that I am one of the most popular professors on campus. Help me understand."

So this is how it's going to be, Reynolds surmised. Okay then, here we go. "Phin, I think you know what I'm talking about."

"Of course I know what you're talking about, *Clayton*. Why are we beating around the bush with all this popularity crap?" Phin shot back. He had no patience for playing political games. He did love his job, and he knew the administration would be hard-pressed to release him. Phin wanted to seize on this to his advantage.

Reynolds bristled as Phin continued, "Please, let's just cut to it - I want you to say it straight out. Say what the problem is...what we all know it to be. Say it with Max sitting here just staring at us. Go ahead, I'm all ears."

The room fell silent. Max sat wide-eyed, the dean composing himself to continue. Even Phin was surprised at how strong he had come on. "Very well. Look Phin, you *are* a good teacher...great even. But it's about your interactions with students and those outside the university when you are *not* in the classroom. Your personal interest...obsession actually, is staining your reputation."

"What you really mean is that it's staining the reputation of the university," Phin inserted.

"Phin, it's the same thing. The faculty, the students, the administration, it's all the university. You can't separate one from the other," Reynolds countered. "When students attend one of your dorm floor lectures, or when you draw any kind of crowd on your personal lecture circuit, people don't just see you, they see Oklahoma Baptist

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University. It's all one and the same and you know it."

Phin did know it but he didn't like it. In a very real way, being a sitting chair at OBU gave him the clout to travel and lecture and propose his ideas and interpretations no matter how unorthodox they might be. That was really what this was all about. That's why Dr. Phineas Crook was sitting in Dean Clayton Reynolds' office on a Monday morning, just before a class, seemingly being asked to resign. Orthodoxy.

Phin sat silent for a moment, contemplating how to continue. "Okay, you are right. I understand, Dean. So let me ask because I want to be clear," Phin had cooled a bit. "Are you asking me to resign my position on the faculty at OBU?" Phin tensed again waiting for a reply.

"No...I don't think we are there yet, Phin. But I want you to understand. There's pressure. Real pressure coming from outside this office. Certain trustees don't like what they are hearing. It's all second, third hand - whatever. But they don't like it."

Reynolds went on, "When the trustees aren't happy, they put pressure on the president. When the president feels pressure, he pushes on the provost. When the provost feels pressure, he pushes on me. And when I feel pressure, I push - "

"On me," Phin cut him off.

"Yes, you've got it," Reynolds agreed. "Phin, you know that I advocate for my faculty."

"Yes! He sure does, Phin. He's in your corner." Welcome to the party, Max. *Nice time to speak up*, Phin was thinking, perturbed at his friend. *Why are you even here?*

It was true. Dean Reynolds did have a reputation for hiring faculty he liked and respected, then standing by those men and women through thick and thin. If they were even having this conversation it was because, Phin knew, he was feeling the heat from above.

“Yes, I do and I appreciate it, Dean,” Phin replied, ignoring Max. “I do know that and I appreciate it. My intention is to never put the university or you or anyone,” eyeing Max with a smirk, “into a bad position on my account. You say that I’m obsessed. I don’t know, maybe I am. I like to think that I’m passionate. Am I driven by that passion? Yes, absolutely. You both know,” Phin’s voice rising, his excitement beginning to permeate the room, “that what I am doing, *on my own time*, that what is compelling me and pushing me forward in all of this is not academic. No sir...for me, this is *real*. For me this is *everything!*”

Phin finished much stronger, much louder than he had intended. He couldn’t help himself. The room was once again silent. This time the tension between the men had drained. Clayton Reynolds sat staring. Max just looked down. The silenced dragged out.

Until finally...Dean Reynolds’ slowly and thoughtfully broke the silence, “Phin...do you really, honestly, in your heart of hearts, with the full engagement of logic and reason believe that the Garden of Eden still exists and can be found?”

It was Phin’s turn to be stunned.

This was the first time that Dr. Clayton Reynolds had ever asked this question in a way that Phin actually believed that he wanted to know an answer.

No mocking.

No derision.

No placating.

No humoring.

Something had shifted in the room. Something had changed. Phin could feel it. Max could feel it. The books on the shelves could even feel it.

“Yes sir, I do,” came the answer from Dr. Phineas T. Crook.

CHAPTER THREE

Staff sergeant Billy Warren readied his military issued M27 IAR, affixed with an ACOG Squad Day Optic. A weapon designed for only one purpose - to kill.

This was a solo mission. No backup, no support. He would go in and not come back out.

Looking to his left and to his right, and again to his left, he popped up from the depression he'd been lying in and sprinted toward the first out building at the edge of the small town. His heart was racing, blood pumping, palms moist.

This was real. As real as it gets.

Sergeant Warren was career military. He joined the Marines right out of high school, making his parents proud. He had served in

multiple theaters of conflict across both Iraq and Afghanistan, mostly covert and in conjunction with “friendly” nationals in both countries. Since the official end of the war, the media and Washington played up the role of the United States military as “special advisors” on the ground.

Sergeant Warren laughed every time he heard the term.

“Special advisors, my foot!” he’d say to his men. “This is my special advisor!” hollering as he held up his automatic assault rifle. “And it has two bits of advice for anyone on the other end of it: run or die!” his men whooping it up as he lowered the weapon, big giant grin on his clean-shaven face. Billy Warren was a serious fighting machine, trained by the Marines with two objectives: protect and kill.

The scourge of the Middle East and Northern Africa known as ISIS had been the dominating focus of his time on the ground. Yes, Sergeant Warren had multiple confirmed “kills” to his name, and he’d been wounded more than once in return, his body bearing the scars of his sacrifice for his nation.

Now he was ready to sacrifice again.

Warren had three targets that were his primary objectives. His secondary objective included killing any other bad guys that got in his way.

This mission, like so many before it, was off the books, and no one would ever know it happened. The only sign being, hopefully, a byline from Syria on page four of the *New York Times* or the *Washington Post* announcing the death of “high ranking leaders” within ISIS.

Pulling up his HUD (Heads Up Display), Warren took one more quick look at the digital images of the three “targets.”

Muhammad al Shanees, Alexander Jabar, and a woman, Miriam Akbar. All three were bad actors, responsible for kidnappings, beheadings, and at least six suicide bombings in Europe.

The recent bombing attempt on the subway system in New York

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City was traced back to this trio as well. Only by the grace of God did U.S. intelligence services intercept the would-be bomber. The documents taped to the explosives in his backpack were the break the government needed, and the reason that Sergeant Billy Warren was sent to this little desert hamlet in southeastern Syria known as Ghouta.

Parachuting in about a mile outside of town, Warren had made his way under the cover of darkness to the edge of town and waited. He was now fully engaged, and having memorized the layout of the village, was ready to execute the mission.

Ready, *GO!*

Rounding off the corner, Warren sprinted down the quiet street between a canyon of open-windowed buildings. Some two stories tall, others three and even four stories. Classic Middle Eastern architecture, the buildings shown with the battle scars of the years of civil war within Syria.

The territory that Ghouta lay in was now firmly under ISIS control, this little unassuming village becoming one of the many headquarters of operations for the multi-headed monster.

Tonight, I'm going to cut this head off! thought Warren as he moved in stealth mode to his first checkpoint, ducking behind a pile of tires about two hundred yards inside the interior from where he started. He was doing good. Not out of breath yet, heart rate calming. All business, just like he had been trained.

Waiting only ninety seconds to assess the new vantage point, Warren made a quick check of the rooftops and the side street he had just moved through.

No sign of detection. Excellent.

Steeling himself, he eased slowly from behind his tire barrier and verified that his next pathway was open. This one was behind a series of buildings just off a main street.

Not an ideal path.

Satellite imaging showed this to be the most direct route, certainly better than the main street that ran parallel. But back alleys are unpredictable and this one was extremely narrow, maybe four feet wide at most, so if there were any surprises, there wouldn't be much room to maneuver.

Ab well, this is urban warfare, Warren knew - hazardous at every turn...and deadly.

Warren shot his body to the corner of the alley and immediately entered, moving low and quiet. He relied on his night vision to step over and avoid trip hazards: trash, broken toys, and anything else that lay in his way. About halfway through he heard a sound and saw movement just up ahead and to his left. Pinning himself against the stone wall, Warren's reflexes kicked into action. He launched himself toward the movement.

Better to be on the offense and own the element of surprise, the sergeant knew.

He found himself pinning a helpless and homeless old man to ground, his hand over his mouth to keep him from crying out. The city was likely dotted throughout with many more just like this one, run out of their homes either because they had been destroyed in the fighting or because ISIS had commandeered the property for nefarious uses.

There was that moment of realization: *This is not a hostile. He's a victim.*

Without another thought, Sergeant Warren sunk his knife deep into the chest of the old man, squeezing him tight, holding him firm as the life faded from his eyes.

There was no other way, the mission could not be compromised. Collateral damage. That is what they call it in military terminology. Warren could not risk a cry of warning or fright from the old man. The mission was too critical. He knew this was a possibility, even a

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likelihood, and had come to terms with it before even saying yes to the mission.

Sorry old man, Warren thought, as he eased off of the now lifeless body and resumed his movement through the ally.

Arriving at the exit, Warren found himself at a “T” that dumped into a larger street. Checking both directions, he once again made his move, this time turning left and moving quickly, hugging the side of the building. It was deathly quiet now, and dark. The only sound, that of a barking dog in the distance.

For the next twenty minutes, Sergeant Warren weaved his way with precision through the maze of pockmarked buildings and burnt-out cars.

At last he arrived at his destination - a small compound of buildings behind a chain-link fence topped with razor wire.

Laughing to himself at the pathetic excuse for security, Warren made quick work of clipping his way through the fence. He chose as his breach point an area where, on the other side of the fence, was some garbage and concrete blocks stacked as much as three feet high, a perfect place to reassess and prepare for the assault.

Now, it was show time, thought Warren, smiling to himself. *It's about to get fun!*

CHAPTER FOUR

Warren checked his weapon one last time taking in the situation.

About thirty yards ahead standing at the corner of the main building were two guards, both with what looked like Russian-made SKS rifles slung over their shoulders.

Figures the Russians would be involved, Warren mused, *either directly or indirectly*. Their intelligence had been correct again. If the intel was *still* correct, then on the second floor of that same building all tucked nice and neat into bed would be al Shanees, Jabar, and Akbar.

Both guards were lazily smoking, basically looking bored and uninterested, not paying attention to anything.

No doubt they drew the short stick for the midnight shift, Warren thought, smiling once again to himself. He liked to find the humor in dangerous

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situations, keep the atmosphere light. *Can't give into fear*, he knew. He also knew that these two would not be the only ones lurking about. There was likely one to three more stationed at the other buildings or just walking the perimeter.

Sergeant Warren's plan was simple: a head-on, fast assault. He'd belly crawl as far as he could, get as close as he could. When he knew he could go no further without detection, he'd lay on the ground and put two rounds through the forehead of each guard.

Then he'd storm the building and run the stairs to the second floor. Infrared imaging showed only three rooms on that level. He should be able to check all in less than thirty seconds, identify the targets, and eliminate them.

By that time it would be obvious to everyone else sleeping in the other buildings what was happening. They would converge on his position. But at that point it wouldn't matter anymore.

Crawling ever so slowly, Warren slithered his way toward the corner of the building from his hiding place. He could feel his heart rate climbing. Taking slow deliberate breaths, he worked to calm himself, all the while continuing to move - to creep - closer and closer to the unsuspecting soldiers.

He was maybe thirty feet away now. Easing his rifle into position ever so quietly, he sighted the first guard, all the while preparing to train his sights on the second as soon as he pulled the trigger.

If either one were to glance to their left and down they would surely see him laying there. It didn't matter though, he was close enough now that he could improvise.

A nice clean head shot, Billy, he said to himself. *A nice clean...*holding his breath, Warren wrapped his index finger around the trigger...*shot.*

A massive thud slammed into Sergeant Warren's back, intense pressure but no pain. Simultaneously, he heard the crack of a shot being fired... but not from him!

What the...?! Warren's mind raced. The roof!

He had missed the guard on the roof. Probably out of sight on the other side of the building.

The guard had likely made his way to the edge and glanced down. Even covered in camo, he had seen the shape of a man laying in the grass and dirt, training his weapon on his two unsuspecting friends.

Warren had been a sitting duck!

Then crazy happened. Warren jumped up as the other two guards looked his way and scrambled to pull their rifles off of their backs.

Billy was slammed again by another round, this one in the right shoulder.

He was already throwing his own M27 up to the same shoulder, firing a quick blast of three shots. He saw the guard on the roof disappear behind the ledge in a red mist.

One down.

Turning his weapon on the other two guards - one sprinting toward him yelling something about Allah in Arabic - Warren fired and took him out cleanly with a single shot to the face.

The man fell hard, and Warren ran over the top of him as he fired into the chest of the other guard.

Two down.

Three down.

Under normal circumstances, the shot to the back and the shoulder would have been the end of the mission and the end of Billy Warren.

But these were not ordinary circumstances. Warren was laughing to himself again as he burst through the front door, immediately bounding up the small flight of stairs just to his right.

Gotta find the humor, keep it light, stomp down the fear, Warren was saying to himself, also aware that maybe he was having too much fun with this one.

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At the top of the stairs was a small hallway - two doors on each side and one directly in front.

There's no way anybody's asleep anymore, he knew. But it didn't matter now.

Which door? A one in three chance.

Warren charged straight ahead, busting the door down and off its hinges.

He recognized them immediately.

Muhammad al Shanees was standing on his bed in the corner, still in his nightclothes. Arms and hands out in front of him, he was obviously pleading for his life.

Alexander Jabar was kneeling over the side of his bed, frantically trying to wrap his hand around something underneath, looking up wide-eyed with fear.

Pop, Pop!

And then another *Pop, Pop!*

No thinking, no hesitation. There had already been enough of both.

Only execution. Literally.

But wait! What about Miriam Akbar? Of course! There's no way she would be sleeping in the same room as the men. Not in a Muslim culture.

Rookie mistake.

Fatal mistake.

Sergeant Billy Warren knew it before he heard the shuffle behind him. There was no time to turn around as the metal bar came down on his arm...hard.

CRACK! He heard the snap as his weapon went flying.

Then another blow, this one across the back of the head, sending him to the ground.

He began to twitch, his body not working properly. He was lying on his side, helpless. As he stared across the room into the eyes of the

two dead primary targets, a pair of boots slowly came into his view.

Primary target number three.

Miram Akbar kicked him over onto his back, sitting down heavily on his chest, a look of evil in her eyes. She had a devilish grin on her face as she...observed him. Like she was studying a dissection in biology class.

Sergeant Warren just smiled back.

Then he began to chuckle - out loud.

Gotta find the humor, keep it light, stomp down the fear.

Akbar began to chuckle too, a fiendish laugh originating from the pit of hell itself.

And then...lifting a long, brutal knife from behind her back, Miram Akbar slowly and deliberately drove the knife through the forehead of Billy Warren, all the way to the back of his skull.

*Gotta find the humor...no fear...*these were Warren's last thoughts as, painlessly, everything went red and then black.