

*And I looked, and behold a pale horse;
and his name that sat on him was Death,
and Hell followed with him.*

—Revelations 6:8

IMPLEMENTATION DAY

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 22nd

World Population

7,176,323,921

Change Over Previous Day

+ 280,229

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BLUEBIRD, YANOK ISLAND
11:03 AM CENTRAL STANDARD TIME

DANIEL ASH LOCKED eyes with Olivia Silva, his gun held out in front of him.

For a moment it was as if time itself had frozen solid.

Then the corner of her lip curled up in the slightest of smiles.

Oh, God. No!

Even as he thought this, he squeezed the trigger, but her finger was already plunging toward the ENTER key.

**RIDGECREST, CALIFORNIA
8:25 AM PACIFIC STANDARD TIME**

MARTINA GABLE'S PLAN had been to sleep as late as possible. She'd arrived home the previous evening, after spending the first few days of her winter break getting in some extra workouts at Cal State University Northridge's athletic facility. Like most freshmen, she had wanted to come home right away, but she knew if she put in a little more time at the gym, it would go a long way toward scoring points with Coach Poole and the other members of the softball team's staff. As good as she had been at the game in high school, she was just one of a hundred or so equally talented players at the university vying for a spot on the squad.

It had been a good move. Only two other freshman girls and one sophomore had hung around, and the coaches seemed both annoyed that more hadn't stayed and pleased that Martina and the other three were there.

Instead of trying to one-up the other girls, Martina had gotten them to work together, helping each other like teammates would. It wasn't any kind of strategy on her part; she was just good at that kind of thing. But it was clear from the comments she received from the coaches before she left that her leadership skills had not gone unnoticed.

Finally, once the staff had left for the break, she drove the two and a half hours back to her hometown.

Sleeping in her own bed for the first time in months, she was sure she wouldn't open her eyes until noon, but by eight o'clock she was wide awake. With a groan, she pushed the covers back, swung her legs off the bed, and pulled on the running clothes she'd laid out the night before.

Five minutes later, she was out the door, and heading east toward town. When she'd left for college that August, it had been blazing hot. That was to be expected, of course. Ridgecrest was located at the northern edge of the Mojave Desert, so blazing hot in summer was the norm.

Winter was a different thing altogether. Most days wouldn't rise above fifty degrees and many were considerably colder. On this particular morning, three days before Christmas, the temperature was hovering just above freezing. If it had been cloudy, there would have been a good chance for some snow, but the sky, as it was most days, was clear.

As soon as she reached that blissful state she always felt when she ran, the cold became a distant memory and her mind turned to other things, like the gifts she still had to buy for her parents and a couple of her high school friends she was getting together with that evening. And, of course, Ben.

On she went, past the track homes, the churches, then down through the old business district on Balsam Street. Would it be tacky to get her dad a gift card to Home Depot or someplace like that? Probably, but it would be so much easier, and he'd undoubtedly be happier in the end.

You can't do that, she told herself. *Just talk to Mom. She'll know what he wants.*

A car horn honked, the driver waving and smiling as the vehicle passed by. It was Mrs. Henson, one of the secretaries at Burroughs High School.

Martina waved back, then returned to her thoughts of Christmas and her parents and her almost boyfriend. There had been several days that previous spring when she was sure she'd never see another summer, let alone Christmas, but she'd been one of the lucky ones who'd survived after contracting the Sage Flu during the outbreak. That was a nightmare she never wanted to live through again, yet if it hadn't been for the quarantine, she and Ben would have never met.

The truth was, though she didn't know it, she could never live through a hell like that again. At least not in the way she did before. Her exposure to the virus had given her immunity. So if the Sage Flu bared its fangs again, she would not fall victim.

Of course, the same couldn't be said about nearly everyone else she knew.

MONTANA
9:35 AM MOUNTAIN STANDARD TIME

LIZZIE DEXEL WAS not a typical recluse. She had lived, if not quite thrived, for many years right in the middle of Denver, Colorado. It hadn't been easy, and she had been

prone to the occasional panic attack, but she had made it work. She'd even had a couple friends. Well, one work friend, anyway. When she left for the day from the accounting office where she was employed, she would go straight home, make some dinner, and watch Animal Planet until it was time to go to sleep. She had no pets. She liked cats, but was allergic, and dogs took too much work. So she contented herself with watching them on TV.

When her brother Owen died, things had changed. He'd been even worse with crowds than Lizzie. The one time he had visited her in Denver, he had barely left her apartment, and when he did, his eyes watched every face he passed. He was much happier in his isolated home in Montana, where he was able to feed his paranoid belief of a coming war.

That's where his body had been found. He'd been chopping wood behind his house and had apparently suffered a heart attack. If Lizzie hadn't become worried because he wasn't answering her calls, it could have been months before anyone found him. As it was, his body lay on the ground for nearly two weeks before the sheriff drove out and checked, giving the bugs and the animals plenty of time to take what they wanted. Needless to say, it was a closed casket funeral.

Being the only one Owen kept in contact with, Liz had inherited his house. At first she thought she'd sell it, but after spending a week there going through his things, she found she liked the solitude. She thought if she did a little redecorating, and lost the survivalist theme, his place would actually be nice.

Back in Denver, she had worked out a deal with her firm to work remotely from Montana.

It didn't take much to convince her bosses that it was a good idea. She did great work, but was a bit of an oddball in their view, kind of a loner who had a paranoid streak in her. She, of course, would have said the description fit her brother, not her, but she never really had been good at seeing the truth about herself.

At the end of summer, she moved permanently to Montana, and settled into her new life. The only times she saw anyone in the months that followed were on the two occasions she'd gone to town for supplies. No one ever visited her house, and she believed no one ever would.

It was probably for the best that she didn't realize how soon that belief would be shattered.

OUTSIDE MUMBAI, INDIA
9:12 PM INDIAN STANDARD TIME

THE ROAD SANJAY and Kusum had been traveling on was really no more than two rutted tire tracks running through a stretch of wilderness outside their home city of Mumbai.

Sanjay had been forced to drop their speed to a crawl, so that the front tire wouldn't get caught in a hole and fling them both to the ground. Kusum's arms were tight around his waist, but he knew she was only trying to hold on, not showing him any kind of affection.

Despite his protests, she'd been right when she accused him of kidnapping her. But what choice did he have? When he'd found his cousin Ayush dying in a makeshift hospital room, then learned the truth about the "miracle malaria spray" they had both been hired to help douse the city with, he'd had no other option. The spray had nothing to do with saving lives. In fact, quite the opposite. They and others hired by Pishon Chem would be covering Mumbai with the same deadly virus from which Ayush had been dying. Sanjay had stolen some vaccine, talked Kusum into joining him for lunch, then kept driving the motorcycle he'd rented until they were well out of the city.

He'd done it to save her. He *had* to save her. She was all he ever thought about, all he cared about—especially now that Ayush was surely dead. If that meant kidnapping her, then so be it.

When he'd stabbed the needle into her arm, and injected her with the life-saving vaccine, she had all but flown into a rage, thinking he had drugged her. He'd tried to explain what he had seen and learned, but naturally she didn't believe him.

"I promise if I'm wrong, I will take you back and turn myself over to the police," he told her. Finally, she had reluctantly agreed to stay with him.

As they came around a turn, Sanjay immediately jammed on the brakes. The back of the bike fishtailed right, then left, before stopping at an angle to the road.

Kusum immediately released his waist. "What's wrong?"

"There." He nodded at the road ahead.

A pool of water, perhaps twenty meters across, covered the road. He didn't think it was very deep, but knew it would be better to cross it in daylight to be safe.

"We'll stay here."

She looked around. "Stay where?"

"Here."

"In the jungle?"

"It's not that much of a jungle. We'll be fine."

"Are you crazy?"

"It's just for one night."

"I'm not sleeping here."

"Fine. You can stay awake."

He gunned the engine, circled the bike around to the way they'd come, then turned into the wilderness and drove them back amongst the trees and bushes until he found a wide spot that would work for their camp. Killing the engine, he flipped down the kickstand, but Kusum didn't move.

"Please," he said. "Get off."

"I will not."

"Well, I'm getting off, and when I do, you'll fall."

She huffed in frustration then climbed off the seat, making sure her foot kicked him as she did. Once he was off the bike, he stretched, and retrieved the bag he'd strapped to the handlebars that contained the food they picked up earlier.

He sat down in the small clearing and opened the bag. "Have something to eat."

"I am not hungry," she said.

"You need to eat. It's important."

"I told you, I am not hungry."

"All right."

He pulled out the container of *vada pav*, quickly ate two pieces, then took the bag with the remainder back to the motorcycle and hung it over the handlebars so insects would be less likely to find it.

"When you get hungry, it's here."

He stretched out on the undergrowth and glanced at Kusum. "If you're not going to

eat, you should at least try to sleep.”

“I told you, I am not sleeping here.”

“Kusum, please. I am not your enemy. What I have done is only because I care about you.”

She glared at him, her eyes full of fire. “If you cared about me, you would have taken me home already.”

In a few days, you will see how much I care, he thought, but he said nothing, hoping he was wrong.

Hours later, he stirred, his eyes opening for just a moment. Kusum was on the ground a foot away from him. Tentatively he reached out and put a hand on her shoulder. At first she tried to pull away, but then she stopped. A moment later, she scooted back against him, and he could feel her body shake as she cried.

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THE RANCH, MONTANA 10:10 AM MOUNTAIN STANDARD TIME

THE RANCH WAS on fire.

The dormitory, by far the smaller of the two buildings of the Resistance's headquarters, was already well on its way to total destruction. Even if a hundred firefighters had been on site, there would have been nothing they could do.

The Lodge was a different story. Though it too was being consumed by flames, there would have still been the possibility of saving some of the structure, given its massive size. But the nearest fire crew was over seventy miles away, and they had received no emergency call.

Nor would they.

Just before ten a.m., three helicopters and several ground vehicles had been spotted rushing toward the Ranch. There was no question who had sent them, or what their purpose was. They were a Project Eden attack squad, coming to eliminate everyone there.

"Full cover," Matt Hamilton, the head of the Resistance, had ordered.

Giant impenetrable doors had been sealed, locking everyone into the large underground bunker deep below the Lodge, and the self-destruction of the two surface buildings was triggered. The burned wreckage would block the two main entrances into the Bunker, and, Matt hoped, keep the killers above from finding a way in.

"Don't worry," Rachel Hamilton said. "Jon will keep him safe." She was Matt's sister and closest advisor, so it wasn't surprising she knew exactly what he was thinking.

"I know," he said, though he wasn't as sure as she was.

"He'll get Brandon out."

This time Matt simply nodded.

Though most of the people who had been at the Ranch when the helicopters were spotted were safe in the underground facility, Jon Hayes and Brandon Ash had been caught outside, unable to get back before Matt was forced to seal up the Bunker. While

Jon had received the training all Resistance members were given, Brandon was just a kid. To make matters worse, Matt himself had promised the boy's father he'd watch over him.

He just hoped Jon and Brandon had done what he ordered, and were already in the woods, trying to get as far from the Ranch as possible.

"Intruders on ground," someone announced.

Matt looked at the monitors displaying feeds from cameras hidden around the compound. He zeroed in on a view of the open space near the Lodge, where one of the helicopters had just set down and a half dozen heavily armed men in fatigues, helmets, and body armor were jumping out. As they rushed toward the burning building, the second helicopter landed and more men joined the others.

"Dear God," someone said.

Matt could sense fear filling the room.

"Hold it together," he ordered. "They can't get in. You all know that."

There were a few nods, and a couple of grunts of agreement, but the anxiety level remained high.

On the screen, the attack squad circled the Lodge, while a smaller detachment raced over to the dormitory. When it was clear no one could be alive in the burning buildings, they regrouped, then split again, and headed in teams of three into the woods.

It's okay, Matt thought. Jon and Brandon are far away. They won't be seen.

"Matt?" Christina Kim called out from the communication terminal she was manning.

"In a minute," Matt said.

"No. Now."

He turned. "What is it?"

Her eyes never left the monitor in front of her as she motioned for him to hurry over. She said into her microphone, "Your signal's weak, but you're getting through."

Matt walked quickly to her desk. "Who is it?"

"Pax," she said as she handed him a second headset.

Matt donned it and pressed the earpiece tight to his head. Pax was his right-hand man, and was currently above the Arctic Circle in search of Bluebird, Project Eden's control center. "It's Matt. Are you there?"

“Good to hear your voice, Matt,” Pax said.

There was a lot of interference.

Matt put his hand over his mic and said, “Can you do anything about the signal?”

Christina shook her head. “I’ll keep trying, but that’s the best I’ve been able to do so far.”

He took his hand off the mic. “Any luck?”

“Bust here,” Pax said. “The science facility on Amund Ringnes Island is legit.”

The assumption had been that Bluebird was posing as a scientific research outpost on one of the far north islands. The Resistance had narrowed it down to the most likely ones, and sent the team—headed by Brandon’s father, Daniel Ash—to see if they could pinpoint its exact location, and do whatever they could to stop Project Eden from initiating its plan. The team had then divided in half so they could check the final two possibilities at the same time. Pax led one group to Amund Ringnes Island, while Ash led the other to Yanok Island.

So if Bluebird wasn’t on Amund Ringnes...

“I haven’t been able to reach Captain Ash,” Pax said. “Has he reported in to you?”

Though Matt knew the answer, he glanced at Christina. She shook her head. “No,” he said. “We haven’t heard from him since before they left for Yanok.”

“I was afraid of that. I’ve also been unable to reach Gagnon to arrange pickup.” Gagnon was flying the seaplane that shuttled the men to the islands. “I guess it doesn’t matter at the moment. Even if I did reach him, I doubt he’d be able to get here for a day or two.”

“Did something happen?”

“A storm happened. It seems to be a pretty big one. We’ve taken shelter in an unmanned research outpost, and won’t be going anywhere until it calms down a bit.”

“I understand.”

There was a pause. “Matt, Bluebird’s got to be on Yanok. I’m sure Ash has already figured that out, so I’m surprised you haven’t heard from him.”

“Could be caught in the storm, too.”

“Could be, but he wouldn’t let that stop him until he knew for sure. We’re running out of time. Implementation Day could be tomorrow, for all we know.”

Implementation Day, when Project Eden would activate the release of the Sage Flu virus on the world.

Matt glanced over at the others watching the assault team search the area around the Lodge. “Actually, Pax, I’m pretty sure it’s not going to be tomorrow.”

“KEEP MOVING!” HAYES yelled.

Brandon jerked back around. He hadn’t even realized he’d slowed down, but he hadn’t been able to help glancing over his shoulder to search for the helicopters thumping in the distance. He couldn’t spot them, though, with the thick forest cover barely allowing him a glimpse of the sky. He picked up his pace, and soon caught up to the man who was trying to save his life.

“The emergency stash is only about five minutes from the top of the ridge,” Hayes said. “We can rest when we get there.”

“I’m fine,” Brandon told him, not wanting to show any weakness.

Hayes gave him a smile. “Glad to hear it.”

When they reached the top, the trees parted enough for them to see two columns of smoke rising into the air from back toward the Ranch. Brandon knew that at the bottom of the larger column would be what was left of the Lodge, and below it, underground, the Bunker where his sister Josie and the others were hiding. He hoped she was all right, and that the security measures Mr. Hamilton had taken would be enough to protect her and everyone else.

A part of him wanted to rush back, and do what he could to help them. What that would be, he had no idea, but running away just seemed wrong.

As they started down the other side of the ridge, he said, “Do you think they can get into the Bunker?”

“No,” Hayes said, and started walking again.

Brandon grabbed his arm. “You can’t know for sure.”

The man turned toward him. “Matt knows what he’s doing. The people from the helicopters won’t be able to get to them. You and I, we need to concentrate on our own survival right now. Playing guessing games about what’s going on back there isn’t going to help us. Okay?”

Brandon frowned, but said, “Okay.”

A few minutes later, Hayes stopped.

“Is this it?” Brandon asked, looking around. There was nothing there but more trees.

Hayes approached a broken branch sticking out of the ground. No, not a branch, Brandon realized—an old rusted stake.

Hayes aligned himself with it, then marched off a couple dozen paces to the west. The place where he stopped was just a small open space, maybe ten feet in diameter at most, and looked pretty much like everywhere else.

“Give me a hand,” Hayes said. He dropped to his knees and began pushing away the ground cover.

Brandon joined him. He almost asked what they were looking for, but as soon as he started moving the dirt and dead vegetation, he saw a flat metal surface. It took them less than a minute to completely clear it.

“Come over to this side,” Hayes said.

Brandon repositioned himself, and together they put their hands underneath the four-foot-square plate and lifted. The metal was heavy, but they were able to get it up and to the side. In the space beneath was what looked like a sewer lid, only it had no holes in the top, and instead of being metal, it was plastic. Embedded in the surface were two handles about six inches apart.

Hayes put a hand in each, and turned the whole thing like the lid of a jar. It took two complete rotations before it came free. Underneath was a round shaft stuffed with items in airtight packages.

Hayes set the lid to the side, then began pulling the packages out and handing them to Brandon. By the time they finished emptying the cylinder, the area around the hole was littered with bags. Hayes started going through them one by one, separating them into two groups.

When he finished, he pointed at the bags to his right and said, “Those go back in. Can you take care of that?”

“Of course,” Brandon said.

While he put the unwanted bags back in the storage cylinder, Hayes opened the others. The first contained a standard hiking backpack, while in the second was a smaller

bag, not too dissimilar from the book backpack Brandon had used for school. Hayes began filling each with contents removed from the other bags—food, bottles of water, clothing, two sleeping bags, and a few things Brandon couldn't identify.

“Shall I put the top back on?” Brandon asked when he was finished.

Hayes shook his head. “We need to put all the empty bags in first.”

Brandon collected the bags and stuffed them down the hole.

Once that was done, Hayes said, “You'll take the small pack.”

The bag looked full, and had one of the sleeping bags strapped to the bottom.

“Don't worry, I didn't make it too heavy.”

“I'm not worried,” Brandon said.

“All right. One more check around to make sure we haven't forgotten anything, then—”

A low, rhythmic noise echoed softly down the hill. Both Hayes and Brandon cocked their heads.

“One of the helicopters,” Brandon said.

Hayes looked around, his gaze settling on the half-full storage cylinder.

“Get in!”

“What?”

“Get in! Now. We don't have time to talk about it.”

“You said they might have a thermal scanner. Won't they be able to see us?”

“Not through the lid and the ground.”

Brandon looked at the hole, then at Hayes. “But...we both can't fit.”

“I'll get rid of them, and come back for you.”

“No!”

“If you don't get in, you'll get us both killed.”

The whirling of the helicopter rotors was growing louder.

“Now!” Hayes shouted.

Brandon jerked back in surprise, then climbed into the hole.

“Here,” Hayes said, shoving the small backpack in with him. “I'm going to leave the screw top off, and just pull the plate over.”

“But...but...”

“It’s going to be all right,” Hayes said, grabbing the metal plate and tipping it back over.

As it was closing down on him, Brandon said, “How long will I have to—”

“It’s going to be fine.”

The plate fell the rest of the way to the ground, plunging Brandon into darkness. He could hear scrapes on the other side as Hayes covered the plate with the loose ground they’d scraped off. For several seconds all was quiet.

Then the helicopter roared overhead.