

"I'm sure. Maybe it doesn't exist after all," Alexander speculated.

Isaac's eyes grew instantly cold. Despite all they knew, Alexander's faith was still weak. Everything Samuel had said about The Prophecy and tonight's mission had been true. The file must exist – if not on the server, then somewhere. "Let's go," Isaac ordered.

CHAPTER 2

"Wake up with the Dunham and Miller show and remember to tune it in, turn it up and keep it on Sports Radio 1310..." Professor Michael Riley awoke and silenced the alarm clock with a reflexive slap. He knew the time but rolled over to look at the clock anyway. Confirming the ungodly hour, he let out a deep sigh and stared up at the ceiling.

In the dim light of the early morning hours, he could barely make out the cabin's thick beams overhead. He closed his eyes and lay there for a moment to feel the soft breeze of the ceiling fan on his face. Then, with a deep breath and a heave, Riley sat up and extracted himself from the firm grip of the mattress.

The hardwood floor was cool on his feet as he made his way into the master bath of his small, two-bedroom lake house. He had bought the house in the emotional haze of his wife's sudden death and, at the time, he had no intention of keeping the place. He just needed to get away from the crush of life in Washington, D.C. and be alone with his grief.

Now, five years later, Riley still used the cabin to get away from things and, occasionally, to get some work done. Yesterday, he had given his last lecture of the spring semester to a room full of eager students at SMU School of Law. Exams were only two weeks away and Riley hadn't written a single question. So he'd packed his bag and made his way out to the cabin, hoping the

isolation would focus his efforts. But first, he had to wake up.

Riley's eyes shot open as the cold water clung to his three-day growth and dripped from his face. He glanced in the mirror and was not surprised to see the mass of tousled dark hair, which he attempted to tame with another splash of water and a quick comb with his fingers. He patted his face dry and changed into his running gear.

The wooden screen door clapped to a close as Riley stepped off the back porch. He lifted the garage door to reveal the tailgate of his 1981 Chevrolet long-bed truck. The original blue and white paint was now spotted with what Riley described as a "tasteful patina." But to most people, it was just rust.

Riley ran his hand along the top of the bed as he passed by and opened the driver's door. He threw his hat and cell phone onto the blue vinyl seat and slid inside. Turning the key, which he always left in the ignition, the engine sputtered to life and Riley headed out towards Highway 205.

The highway cut through the surrounding farmland, which was planted with perfect rows of sorghum and corn. A mile down the road, Riley approached a bridge that spanned a broad irrigation canal. He pulled across the highway into the shoulder of the oncoming lane. Making a hard left, he turned off the pavement and onto a dirt road that ran down a short embankment before leveling off in a cornfield. Riley looped around and parked under the bridge by the canal. He grabbed his hat

and tucked his cell phone under the driver's seat as he waited for the dust to settle. Then he opened the door and slid out into the early morning air.

Riley had learned the hard way that, once you turn forty, stretching before a run was no longer optional. He walked around to the back of the truck and looked out over the canal during his pre-run warm-up. With a final stretch of his calves, he eased into his morning run. He followed the dirt road, which ran about two miles along the bank of the canal and ended in a copse of native trees. The road itself, Riley guessed, was formed by years of farm trucks bouncing over the rough terrain until it was relatively tamed.

Riley had loved this stretch of farmland since the day he found it. In all the years he'd been coming here, he had never seen anyone along the road or tending to the crops. The isolation had always given him comfort and allowed his mind to roam freely.

On this morning, his thoughts wandered to the unpredictable chain of events that had taken him from his high-pressured life as a big firm lawyer in Washington, D.C. to the relative calm of a constitutional law professor in Dallas. His thoughts mixed with the rhythmic sound of his shoes contacting the grass and dirt. Then, *BANG!* The sound was startling and stopped Riley in his tracks. *BANG!* There it was again! *What was that? Sounds like a car door,* Riley thought.

Having never seen anyone down there before, he was unnerved by the thought of company. Through the morning breeze, he could make out voices, but couldn't

tell what they were saying. Fearing it may be a farmer who might not like trespassers, Riley ducked into the cornfield.

Under cover of the tall plants, he stopped and listened. The rustle of the corn stalks in the wind made it difficult to hear, but he was certain there was an argument underway in the trees. His curiosity getting the better of him, Riley wove his way to the edge of the field, where the corn stopped and the trees began. From there, he heard the voices more clearly but a large pile of brush inside the tree line prevented him from seeing anything. They didn't sound like farmers.

Riley darted from the field and landed behind the brush pile with a thud. "What was that?" a voice asked. Riley's heart stopped.

"I didn't hear anything," said a second voice after a beat. "Give me a hand over here. We're almost done."

"Alright, alright," said the first.

Riley waited for the men to get back to their task before he edged over to look around the side of the brush. From there, he saw the corner of a black Suburban with the back doors open. Beneath the doors, he could see two sets of legs jostling as the men struggled to maneuver something in the cargo space. Then, one of the men began to back out.

"Come on, dammit! Get the other side," said the second man.

"I got it," reassured the first.

One of the men stepped slowly backwards, allowing the other time to get a better grip on the seemingly

bulky object. As they cleared the back of the door, Riley strained to see what they were carrying. With a sudden collapse, one of the men turned and fell as the object slipped off the rear bumper and landed on the ground with a dull thump.

Riley's breath caught in his lungs as he tried to comprehend what he was seeing. Lying on the ground, in a crumpled and lifeless pile, was a man's body. His elongated face and pointed nose were framed by long gray hair. His unblinking eyes were staring directly at Riley, who recoiled back behind the brush pile.

"Dammit, Alexander!" boomed a voice. "You said you had it!"

"Sorry. He slipped!" responded Alexander.

"Well pick him up. We've gotta get this done."

Riley tried to calm himself. *Think!* He demanded as he looked around. The presence of the two men and a dead body made the distance to the cornfield seem impossibly far. He quickly decided the safest thing to do was to stay put until they left. He closed his eyes and focused on slowing his breathing, which had been accelerating on its own accord. His hands were shaking from an enormous surge of adrenaline. *You've got to calm down and you've got to see who these people are*, he convinced himself. Slowly turning back, he peered around the brush.

The men had recovered the body and were setting it down near a freshly dug hole. "Okay. Let's strip him down."

"C'mon, Isaac. We don't have to do this," said Alexander.

"Yes," Isaac said with a cold stare, "we do." Alexander saw there was no turning back.

Isaac looked down and studied the old man's face. Despite being thrown on the ground and dragged through the dirt to this deserted place, the man appeared perfectly at peace. Isaac found comfort in the man's expression, as if he was silently approving all that had happened.

Lifting his gaze, Isaac watched as Alexander sat down and untied the man's shoelace with a slow pull. With Alexander at work, Isaac knelt at the man's shoulders and began wrestling his arms from the suit coat. One by one, they threw each article of clothing into the crude grave until the old man lay in the dirt completely naked.

Alexander stood and backed away from the body, wanting little part in what he knew was about to happen. Isaac looked up. "What're you doing? Get over here and start at his feet," Isaac gestured with his head. "I'll start up here."

A mixture of fear and disgust gripped Alexander. He wanted no more of this. He wanted to leave the old man lying naked in the dirt and run, but Isaac's icy stare held him in place. Having little choice, Alexander knelt beside the body and reached for the lifeless foot.

Isaac grabbed the man's right arm and set to work. Starting at the fingers, he began methodically probing the man's skin. As if giving him a massage, Isaac worked his hands down the arm with slow, circular movements.

Reaching the base of the arm, he continued into the man's armpit, across the chest, and down the other arm. With a determined look, Isaac shuffled around to the side of the torso. He glanced down at Alexander, who was working the top of the man's left thigh with a slow, pressing motion. "Anything?" Isaac asked.

"No," Alexander responded tersely, without looking up.

Frustrated, Isaac resumed his examination. With the same circular motion, he probed across the man's stomach and down the left side of his pelvis. Moving to the right side of the pelvis, he felt a hard knot just beneath the skin. "Hold on a second," he said as he gently pressed around the knotted area. Alexander stopped his search and looked hopefully at the spot on the old man's hip.

Marking the knot with his left hand, Isaac pulled a hunting knife from his belt. He placed the silver blade to the edge of the knot and pressed the tip into the man's skin. Carefully, Isaac cut a small, U-shaped flap around the knot. The severed skin appeared translucent in the morning light.

Looking inside, Isaac's eyes shone with satisfaction. He set the knife on the man's stomach and, with the flap held open, delicately pushed his forefinger inside until it made contact with a hard object. Probing deeper, he reached behind the object and pulled it from beneath the skin.

Alexander struggled to see what it was until Isaac lifted the object up over his head to examine it in the

morning sunlight. It was a black rubber capsule about three-quarters of an inch long. As the capsule turned in Isaac's hand, he was astonished at the extreme measures the old man had taken to hide this tiny object from the world.

"Okay," Isaac said, "let's get him in the hole."

Alexander grabbed the corpse by the ankles and began dragging it to the edge of the grave. Isaac circled around the grave and retrieved a shovel. By the time he returned, the body was lined up beside the hole. Alexander glanced over at Isaac, who had sunk the shovel blade into the dirt pile. "Well, go on," Isaac instructed.

Kneeling down beside the old man, Alexander rolled the body into the grave. He watched as the old man spilled over the edge and fell to his final resting place. The image of the naked man's twisted mass burned into his memory.

With Alexander leaning over the grave, Isaac grabbed the shovel with both hands. Suddenly, he lifted the shovel and swung it over his head in a long arc. The blade glinted in the rising sun as it sped through the air. Isaac let out a guttural scream as he brought the shovel down hard until it connected with the back of Alexander's head with a sickening crunch. Instantly, Alexander's body went limp. Isaac cocked the shovel, prepared to strike again. But as he began his swing, Alexander slumped forward and fell into the hole, where he landed motionless atop the naked and butchered man.

Riley recoiled and waited motionless behind the brush. He could hear the scraping sounds of the shovel as it made contact with the dirt over and over again. After what felt like an eternity, the scraping finally stopped. Moments later, he heard rustling sounds as Isaac dragged branches over to better conceal the grave. A car door slammed and the Suburban's engine roared to life.

Quickly, Riley scrambled back to the edge of the brush. As the rear tires began to spin in the loose soil, Riley just caught the first three letters of the license plate, GLH, before the Suburban disappeared in a cloud of dust.