

The Tenth Plague

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Prologue

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Near Ishpeming, Michigan

On the morning from his worst nightmares, twenty-two-year-old Rutherford Wills woke early, the frigid world outside his window still dark, and slipped noiselessly out of bed to avoid waking Bruna, his wife of only two months. He hated to leave her side, her warm body close to his, but he was a married man now with obligations to fulfill and bills to pay.

God granted no clues that this day would be different from any other.

Wills reported for the day shift at the Barnes-Hecker Mine and entered the crowded electric elevator or “cage” for the ride down the 1,060-foot shaft to the second level. It was 7:20 a.m. on a Wednesday.

As Wills descended into the earth, he wondered what life on the surface would be like today. Now that Halloween was past, the weather had turned cold. Were early snow predictions true? Would he later rise to a world of white?

At eight hundred feet, the elevator jerked to a halt, and Wills followed a dozen trammers, stemmers, timbermen, and pumpmen into the second of three levels. His hardhat’s carbide lamp chased away subterranean shadows, and the ever-present aroma of damp earth filled his nostrils. In the distance echoed the staccato blows of pneumatic drills, the hiss of compressed air, and the rumble of explosives.

He followed the pebbly corridor toward the electric haulage locomotive that pulled cars loaded with iron ore down the three-thousand-foot tunnel to the main shaft. There they were emptied through chutes into a “skip” or cable car that raised the ore to the surface.

Wills took his seat at what everyone referred to as the “motor” and glanced at Jack Hanna, his twenty-three-year-old brakeman. “Ready?”

“As ready as I’ll ever be.” The work garb, baggy on Hanna’s skinny body, was stained ore-red.

“What’s it been now—four weeks?”

“Nope. Three.”

“Well, for only bein’ on the job three weeks, I’d say you’re catchin’ on pretty fast.”

Hanna ducked his head with a shy grin and glanced away.

Wills started the engine, and the motor jerked forward. Electric lights strung along the tunnel’s ceiling at regular intervals illuminated their way like glimmers of hope in an otherwise dismal world. No one had any idea their hope was about to run out.

Wills checked his watch as a light swept past. 11:20 a.m. He yelled to Hanna over the locomotive's roar. "How about one more trip before we break for lunch?"

Hanna nodded, his face grimy from the ever-present dust permeating every crack and crevice of the place. Soon their fifty coworkers would ride the elevator to the surface for lunch. Perhaps if they hustled, they could beat the noon rush.

From somewhere deep in the tunnel above them, the muffled blast of explosives rumbled. Wills assumed his fellow miners were blasting one last time before lunch. When they returned later, the next load of ore would be ready and waiting for them.

Wills engaged the motor, and the locomotive lurched forward. During each interval between the lights, shadows swung over them like drapes of perpetual night.

A minute later, Hanna raised his hand and braked hard. The locomotive lurched to a halt. Hanna clambered off and dashed to the closest car, which was almost overflowing with large, reddish chunks of iron ore.

Wills dismounted and strode toward his friend, wondering what could be so important that it would interrupt their trip. "What's wrong, Jack?"

Hanna searched the pieces of ore. "I noticed something strange when they loaded the cars. I thought I saw—"

A sudden gust of air swept through the tunnel and blasted them like the rush of wind in the wake of a storm. The two men exchanged puzzled glances. The look in Hanna's brown eyes was unmistakable.

What was that?

Seconds later, another blast of air—this one stronger than the first—knocked them to their knees on the damp, rocky floor and extinguished the carbide lamps on their helmets. Thankfully the ceiling lights still glowed.

Wills scrambled to his feet and groped for the tunnel wall, heart drumming in his chest. "Come on! Let's get out of here!"

Distant thunder rumbled. It drew closer and increased in intensity until it was suddenly upon them. The tunnel bucked under their feet.

Wills gasped and huddled against the craggy wall with Hanna, dread clawing like a live thing in his belly. He recalled the recent muffle of explosives. Had the first level caved in?

The underground thunder faded in the distance, the tunnel still intact. A sudden change in air pressure plugged Wills' ears, and he swallowed hard to clear them. Then something from his worst nightmares came true.

The ceiling lights flickered, brightened, then died. A total eclipse swallowed them whole.

"Rutherford!" Hanna's panicked voice sliced the darkness. "W—what's happening? Where are you?"

Wills gripped his friend's arm. He tried to sound brave, though his legs were trembling. "I'm right in front of you."

Another growl, this one deafening, pealed through their world. Wills pressed his hands over his ears and imagined a freight train bearing down on their heads. How long did they have before the tunnel caved in and crushed them like bugs underfoot?

“God help us!” Hanna cried.

Wills’ skin prickled in a cold sweat. Without electricity, they couldn’t escape on the locomotive. “Come on, follow me.”

Wills stumbled forward, arms outstretched like a blind man, in the direction of the main shaft. He managed to discern the right direction by the feel of the narrow-gauge track against his rubber-toed boots. He debated taking the ladder down to the third level and seeking refuge in the concrete pump house, but the voice in his gut rebelled.

Climb to the surface. Get out. Now!

He neared the main shaft opening, where an avalanche of water, mud, and rock streamed down from above. A prick of fear touched his nerves. Could they even escape through the main shaft? How long before the rising tide of water and mud filled the tunnels and then the shaft?

Wills yelled to Joseph Mankee, the second-level cage operator who’d been best man at his wedding. “Joe, are you there?”

“I’m here!” came the anxious shout.

“Come on, we gotta get out of here!”

Without electricity, the elevator wouldn’t budge. Wills reached the manhole and clambered onto the emergency ladder, peering upward. Amazingly, he saw it—a tiny light marked the four-by-four surface opening eight hundred feet above. As long as the light remained, they had a way out. But how much time did they have? He shoved the question aside and began to climb.

The thunder petered off to a relentless growl. More muck rained down from above and slid down Wills’ helmet, cascading down his arms. His gloves became slick with mud, and the ladder rungs grew slippery.

Once, he lost his grip, but he regained his hold just in time. He jerked his gloves off with his teeth and flung them to the void before pressing on. His thighs burned, and air burst from his lungs in explosive gasps.

Two hundred feet higher, still six hundred feet from the surface, he reached the first-level tunnel.

“Kirby, get out!” he shouted to the level’s cage and bell signal operator.

He had no idea if Thomas Kirby even heard him, but he pressed on, gritting his teeth against the burning in his legs. With the steady rumble came a new sound. The rush of water, mud, and debris was filling the shaft. How long before the rising tide reached him?

Something massive plummeted toward Wills out of the dark. Its blast of air buffeted him, its mass missing him by mere inches. The unseen rock slammed into the ladder

somewhere below his feet with an earsplitting crash. The impact almost tore him from the rungs.

Hanna, Mankee, and Kirby shrieked. Their cries were suddenly cut off as if they'd been crushed by the rock or overtaken by the rising flood.

Wills gasped, his body trembling. He yelled their names, but his friends didn't answer. He knew he'd share their fate if he didn't press on.

A torrential flood rose and drew ever closer. Wills recalled the muffled explosion before his race with Hanna to the ladder. Had the blast ripped open an underground lake?

A raging whirlpool swirled around his boots and hungrily licked up his legs. Icy muck rose to his waist.

Wills pressed on in a panic and worked his arms and legs like pistons. The level rose almost as quickly as he could climb.

He was panting so hard he thought his heart might explode. His thighs and calves screamed at him to stop, but he couldn't stop. There wasn't time—he had to keep moving.

He tried not to think about the pain. Tried to focus on Bruna and on the years they would share together. If only he could reach the top alive.

The flood pulled back, and the rumble of thunder faded away. Gasping, Wills smeared mud from his face and peered up the ladder. His heart galloped.

Edward Hillman and Albert Tippet, his stepbrother, peered down at him from the ladder above. *He was almost to the top!*

"What happened?" Albert called. "Is anyone else behind you?"

Wills raised a hand to shield their blinding headlamps. He could barely speak through his panting. "Hanna, Mankee, and Kirby—they might be below me." But even as he spoke the words, he doubted they were true.

Hillman shone his light into the darkness beyond Wills and shouted the miners' names. The only reply was the distant rush of water.

At 11:30 a.m., Wills climbed out of the mine opening with Albert's assistance and collapsed onto the frozen ground. Immediately his arms and legs began to spasm and cramp. He wept from pain and exhaustion.

"It's okay, Wills. You're gonna be okay." Albert rubbed Wills' twitching legs in a vain attempt to comfort him. He yelled to Hillman to get a blanket and call an ambulance.

"The o—others." Wills' teeth chattered; he was suddenly freezing. Was he going into shock? "W—w—where are the o—others?" Bruna's father, Sam Phillippi, and his other stepbrothers, Walter and Captain William Tippet—they'd gotten out ahead of him, right?

"Others?" Albert shook his head, his eyes heavy with shock and despair. "There haven't been any others. Only you."

Wills' brain cramped as his muscles had. No, it wasn't possible. Out of fifty-two miners, he was the sole survivor?

He rolled painfully to his side, his spent legs like dead things, and stared at the mine opening and prayed for others to come out. Surely there was still time for some of them to escape. But then he remembered the freezing muck lapping at his waist. The rising tide had filled the tunnels and had nowhere else to go except up the main shaft.

As the minutes ticked by, so grew the truth he didn't want to accept. For the rest of his life until his death at age sixty-nine, he relived their deaths in his dreams. Night after night, all fifty-one died somewhere in the heart of the earth, their last cries drowned out by icy muck rising above their heads, their mouths upturned like fish nibbling bugs at the surface of a pond. Dying alone in the merciless, cold tomb of the earth.

Nobody should ever die like that.

Later, ten bodies were pulled from the debris, including those of Hanna, Mankee, and Kirby. Months later, further recovery efforts to find more bodies and reclaim the mine were abandoned. A concrete slab was poured to seal off the main shaft, and everyone—including Wills—left in pursuit of other work.

But Wills never forgot that day. Over the years, he often puzzled over his last moments with Hanna before their desperate escape. What exactly had Hanna seen in the ore car?

Wills didn't know, but it hardly mattered now. The mine had been sealed closed. No one would ever explore those tunnels again.

A discovery of significance? No one would ever know.

Chapter 1

Present Day

Even before the child was in her arms, Gillian Thayer knew with certain dread that someone would try to take him away from her. She tried to shrug off the irrational fear, tried not to think about the children who'd been taken away from her, victims of her inadequate body. She tried to focus on the fact that this was supposed to be a happy occasion—that her elusive dream of having a son was finally coming true.

The judge said she loved adoption cases because they made the courtroom a happy place, at least for a while. A rare event indeed. She was a kind, matronly type, if not full figured. Certainly not the type you'd expect to wear the title of "judge" and wield a gavel. But when she spoke, her official facial expression matched the inflection in her voice, underlining in Gillian's mind that this was serious business.

"Once this adoption is final," Judge Alisyn Newton said from her bench at the front of the small courtroom in Seattle, "there's no turning back. Do you understand?"

No turning back.

Her eyes seemed to bore into Gillian, who met her gaze with a strength beyond her own. From her place in the third row on the left side, Gillian felt herself nodding while microscope eyes bore into her soul as if seeking her fear and identifying it for what it was. Insecurity. Weakness. Doubt that she would ever be a mother good or deserving enough.

"This child will be yours as if you'd given him birth."

Gillian rejected nagging voices of self-doubt that whispered at the edges of her consciousness. *Are you really ready to do this—to be a mother again? What are you thinking at forty-four? He doesn't even belong to you. What if he has genetic problems you don't even know about?*

Judge Newton turned to Paige and asked her to verify whether the Thayers were fit to be parents. The willowy, fresh-faced social worker—who didn't even look old enough to be passing such judgment—rose to her feet and agreed in a childlike voice that this was indeed true.

Gillian took a deep breath and let it out slowly, measuring her exhalations, trying to relax. *It's okay. Everything's going to be okay.* What other roadblocks could possibly stand in their way after the countless interviews, the never-ending bills, the reams of paperwork, and the maddening months of waiting?

She flexed the fingers of her free hand. She hadn't done any calligraphy in weeks, and her fingers ached to script something as a way to combat her stress. If set loose, she knew what they would say. They'd echo Thoreau's sentiments that "nothing is so much to be feared as fear."

By any standards, the open adoption had moved forward without a hitch, its speed and lack of hurdles a surprise to everyone. Janna, a seventeen-year-old, had become pregnant out of wedlock, and her parents had encouraged her to give the baby away. Out of dozens of applicants, she'd chosen the Thayers to be her son's parents.

Gillian broke her perspiring hand away from her tall husband's and blotted it against her skirt, embarrassed by her nerves. Marc glanced down at her, a smile on his lips, and reached for her hand as if he didn't care. They were beyond cooties, after all.

How can he be so calm? They were about to bring a baby boy home with them—a living, breathing son to call their own. Was she the only one experiencing butterflies right now?

But Marc's confident blue eyes seemed to repeat what he'd told her the night before when she'd been unable to sleep, certain that something was going to go wrong.

We've prayed about this adoption and given the matter to God. It's time, Gill. Time to take the step. Sure, it's scary, but God knows, and He's here with us all the way. Remember, God will never lead us where His grace cannot keep us. Relax. Rest in Him.

Judge Alisyn Newton declared, "Today, May 13, Marc and Gillian Thayer are declared the parents of their son, Chase Henry, by the power vested in me by the state of Washington."

Marc turned to Gillian with a broad smile and pulled her into an embrace. Gillian peered over his shoulder at the ceiling that rippled through her tears. A prayer of gratitude breathed through her lips. They'd finally come to the end of the grueling, exhausting process. She'd always wanted to give Marc a son so he could pass on the basketball tradition. Now God had given them the son they'd always wanted.

She should have felt relieved, and she did to a point. But later, when Janna, the birth mother, said good-bye to the infant so the social worker could transfer the baby to her arms, uneasiness gnawed away inside her—doubts she didn't want to admit, not even to Marc.

Though this baby boy was legally theirs, the dread was back, the conviction that someone, sometime, somewhere would try to take this baby away from her.

She shook her head, steeling herself against her fear.

Over my dead body.

Chapter 2

Long before the first rays of the sun flickered over the ridge, Cyrus woke from dreams of revenge on the massive complex he inhabited alone on the outskirts of San Antonio. He lit ten candles in a circle around him and sat, legs crossed, on the cool hardwood floor of the bedroom. He feared fire more than anything else, but candles were a contained sort of fear that ushered him into a deeper spiritual dimension. Sometimes a little fear was a good thing.

And the number ten. Ah yes. Of all numbers, ten was his favorite.

As he did every day when important decisions needed to be made, he untied the leather band and opened the camel-skin pouch, casting the Urim and Thummim across the floor. He intoned a sanctifying prayer before murmuring the question in his mind.

Should I visit my son today?

During Old Testament times, high priests had used the Urim and Thummim to discern God's will. He used them now for a similar purpose. Like dice, the two small, polished stones—one side white, one side black—tumbled, spun, and settled, shiny and glistening in the flicker of candlelight.

Deciphering their message was simple enough. Black meant no, but white meant yes. If both sides were black, his answer was a definitive no. If both were white, his answer was an unequivocal yes. But if one was black and one was white, his direction was unclear, and he must pray, wait, and hope for a clear answer at another time.

This morning's reply offered no ambiguity.

He reverently collected the stones and returned them to the pouch, thanking the spirits for another clear manifestation of their will. For some time he'd been preparing for what he knew he must do, but waiting had taken longer than expected, leaving his patience frayed. Now, at last, the time for action was drawing near. In fact, he was practically at the door. Exhilaration rushed through his body. His scalp tightened.

He listened to the glass, drywall, and wood of the complex creak in the mournful howl of the desert wind. He detected no trace of a presence other than his own. Not even Linus, his sable ferret who slept up to fourteen hours a day, stirred in his multi-level cage.

Cyrus peered out the large bay windows and scanned the far reaches of his 150 acres of barbwired private property. He wondered if somebody was out there, watching him with high-powered binoculars.

Some might call him paranoid, but he didn't consider himself so. Just realistic. If only they'd experienced what he had. His mind ambled down long-dusty corridors of recall, and for an instant he slipped into another world. He remembered

Nights of trying to sleep with his friends, who were trapped with him in a three-story structure slapped together out of salvaged lumber, thin sheetrock, and cheap siding. Outside wailed a cacophony of hellish sounds as a means of psychological warfare: bagpipes, howling

coyotes, buzzing dental drills, crying babies, strangling rabbits. Then Nancy Sinatra's infernal song "These Boots Were Made for Walking" froze his blood with two prophetic lines he would never forget:

And you keep thinking that you'll never get burnt (Ha!)

Well, I've just found me a brand new box of matches (Yeah!)

He jerked out of the mental snapshot, gasping, and wished he could forget. But the memories invaded his days and haunted his dreams, sometimes waking him in the dead of night, drenched in sweat. Sometimes they kept him up to the wee hours, and all he could do was quote verses from various sacred scriptures to chase the memories away and give him a solid footing of sanity to stand on.

He reminded himself of the fifth seal—that many saints would be massacred in the last days. That he must be willing to die as well for the cause. But not yet. No, not yet.

Others needed to die first.

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