

The Messengers

DISCOVERED

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This book is written in thankfulness to God for all the Abigails,
Jonathans, and Malachis throughout the ages.



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Chapter One

—Thousands of Years Before—

I knew the world was changing, but then the tombs opened. And when people all of a sudden start rising from the dead and walking around, you can't exactly ignore it. But that's what's happening. All the officials are pretending nothing is going on and trying to stop anyone from saying otherwise. We all immediately started taking sides.

I don't get it. I mean, I know there is something different about Him, but I don't think any of us suspected this—I sure didn't the night I ran away. Was that really just a few days ago?

People coming back from the dead. What does this all mean?



—*Right About Now, Not Far Away*—

Tap. Tap. Tap.

He didn't have to look up; even with his forehead planted on the edge of his desk, Simon knew Ms. Stetter's glare was pointed directly at him. The warning taps of her knuckles on the desk announced her annoyance. He knew he couldn't ignore her, but he kept his expression as stoic as possible as he raised his head, his dark eyes meeting her frigid glare. In his right hand, Simon clenched a pamphlet, some token of a bygone era. He silently wished he could make the evidence disappear from his fist, but he knew he was caught.

"Mr. Clay?"

"Ms. Stetter?" He curved his response to a question just in time; too much attitude would definitely earn him more trouble than he was willing to solicit today. He was aware that he was wearing on his teacher's patience—on everyone's patience, really—and he had to choose his battles wisely. His facial muscles ached to slide into a smirk, but he had too much practice to give in. A blank expression stayed firmly in place.

"You're reading again."

No one else in the classroom dared to move—uniformed bodies remained in uniform position in the uniform room. Straight lines and right angles prevailed; even the fluorescent lights declined to dim or flicker. Gray-scale posters with bold commands flanked both

sides of the classroom. Simon knew them by heart: BE A TEAM PLAYER. STAY IN THE GAME; PLAY BY THE RULES. SUCCESS NOW=SUCCESS LATER. WORK WITH US, NOT AGAINST US.

Time and space froze as student and teacher engaged in a silent standoff. Simon allowed himself to swallow before attempting a nonchalant response. "I am. Just an old pamphlet, though. Not a book. No books here." *Search me* almost slipped from his lips, but Simon knew the danger those two words could bring.

He waited as Ms. Stetter's frown tightened. This was only her fourth year teaching, according to the diploma posted near the classroom door, but her continually dour demeanor added years to her small face. A tight blond bun clung to the nape of her neck and pulled her face in a way that accentuated her severely angled eyebrows. Finally, her eyes flicked to the clock to her left. Simon knew she wouldn't draw this out much longer. Authoritatively, she raised her skinny arm toward him, palm up, fingers pressed tightly together. *Classic power move*, Simon recognized.

He realized he had been holding his breath. He slowly exhaled through his nose, too careful to emit a sigh or groan, and twisted out of his chair. Step by echoing step, Simon walked the document in question to his teacher and placed the yellowed pages in her hand, *The Way of Our Lives* emblazoned on the front page in bold, black letters.

With a sniff and a sneer that almost appeared to Simon to be a crooked smile, Ms. Stetter spun triumphantly toward her desk and slipped the pamphlet under a neat

stack of test papers. As she turned back toward the class, a long, low tone began to pulse through the air.

With practiced precision, all twenty-eight students in the room rose, arranged their chairs under their desks, and walked out of the room in silence.

The pulsing ended just as Simon left the building and entered the gray afternoon; mist rested on his ears and nose as he began the walk home. Behind him, a massive structure loomed over his shoulders. High above the entryway, in big capital letters, PREPARATORY SCHOOL was pressed into the plaster facade that covered the original stone underneath. “Preparatory? Preparation for what?” was the common joke whispered in hallways. Simon, a second-year student in this ambiguous preparation, pulled his jacket tighter to brace himself against the afternoon chill and moved down the numerous front steps toward the street. A small gathering of his classmates huddled at the foot of the stairway, and two girls looked up as he passed by. Simon directed his attention away from the group.

As usual, he kept his head as bowed as possible, but he peered out from under the straight dark hair that fell across his forehead. Most boys his age combed their hair to the right side of their foreheads in the style approved by the school (and other government institutions). Simon’s longer cut raised a few eyebrows from time to time, but it was just short enough to pass for the norm. As a bonus,

his hair served as a sort of screen to hide behind, one that afforded him the chance to look around and take in as much as possible without being noticed much himself. It was a world of watchers, and Simon wanted to see what he could without being seen in return. *So much for that today.* He thought back to the forbidden pamphlet. In case any eyes were on him now, he bowed his head a little lower, adjusting his full backpack at the same time.

Most of the buildings he passed on his way home were rigid and nondescript, varying only in neutral shades of plaster and sizes of windows. Each structure hinted to Simon that there was a story behind the government-regulated exteriors. Who had lived within these walls years ago? Were some of these structural skeletons former factories that bustled with life and energy at one time? What was life like for the generations back then? While walking past a particularly dingy street-level pane, Simon slowed his pace and watched his reflection through the dust. There was a flaw in the window about midway. The warped glass distorted his face slightly, causing his mirrored mouth to curl in satisfaction and his dark eyes to stare out, wide and oblong. His lips began to mimic the reflection, but the image just shifted more, finally into a face beyond his recognition.

Tick tock. Tick tock. He was nearing a street corner, and therefore one of the clocks. He was surprised to see that the allowed fifteen-minute after-school commute was already a third of the way over. *Have I been crawling?!* He should be at least three blocks farther by now. Simon picked up his pace. There was no reason,

the government had decided, that students should take more than a quarter hour to walk from school to home. Any more time implied inefficiency or mischief. Simon turned and quickened his steps toward his destination. No time to explore today.

This trip was routine, but Simon rarely passed up an opportunity to discover something new. Once released from the oppressive walls of school, he would lift his head and peer up and around, looking for hints of the old days he hadn't detected before. He didn't quite know when the "old days" had passed, but he had heard enough mumbles and whispers over the years to know that life was much different not so long ago. Sometimes, his eye would catch a simple crack in a plastered wall, a little design peeking through a crevice or a slight splash of color that hadn't been completely hidden in the renovations of the current regime. He collected these images in his memory as proof that eras come and go, that anything can change at any time—maybe even now.

But at the moment, he was losing time as each street crossing brought a new tick-tock of warning.

Tick tock.

You're in trouble again, Simon.

Tick tock.

And what did you find?

Tick tock.

It was an old government pamphlet anyway—something they'd probably want you to read. Just propaganda. Probably. Its yellowed corner had been poking out of a forgotten cabinet right inside the custodial closet,

catching Simon's eye as he passed the open door of the small storage room before school began that morning. *And you just had to take it.* His internal argument wasn't getting him anywhere.

Tick tock. Tick tock.

Simon reached his block on Merchant Street with two and a half minutes to spare. He allowed himself a victory jog toward the apartment building marked 2350, but he stopped short when he noticed a shadowed figure waiting on the steps to the front entrance.

The panic was wasted. Ben Pharen, his classmate and neighbor, leaned near the doorway, his face trained toward the nearest clock just twenty feet away. Simon relaxed his shoulders and drew closer, but Ben's freckles seemed to disappear under his reddening cheeks, perspiration beading on his nose.

Ben's light brown hair, styled in the standard part worn by nearly all male students and trimmed neatly around his ears, became mussed as he nervously scratched his head. This visit was unusual. Aside from occasional chats in the hallway or during lunch breaks, there was little interaction between these two lately. They had been childhood friends, but some invisible force had been gradually pulling them apart since eighth grade. Simon more or less assumed that this was just part of growing up, but he wasn't quite convinced. Looking at Ben now, Simon briefly considered what it was that kept the two of them from acting like the buddies they once were.

"What was that?" Ben asked.

“What? You know I can’t let a week go by without a little fun.” Simon’s own hair—rebellious as the head beneath—fell back as he lifted his chin.

“No. Really. What was the pamphlet? It looked different from the others.”

Simon shrugged, a little surprised that Ben took notice of previous times he had been caught with contraband information. “I didn’t have a chance to get a good look. The Darkness came for it too soon.”

The quip fell flat as Ben’s chuckle was more of a nervous snort. “Really. You can’t say stuff like that.”

“Whatever” was all Simon cared to reply. He nodded toward the clock, “Look.” Ben’s eyes widened before he rushed across the street to his own building. Both teenagers opened their doors as the tone started pulsing again.