

Hand of God

Chapter 1

Joshua Carpenter woke in the middle of the night in his bedroom in Chula Vista, California. He rolled over and his dog, Chachis, adjusted her position to press against his back. He petted her gently and wondered about his future. Josh always viewed the future as the continuation of the present, but now something was changing and he did not know what would happen tomorrow, other than the world would soon be unrecognizable. A mysterious dread rose in his stomach, and he felt terrified for a moment, but then pushed that feeling aside and fell sleep again in minutes. Suddenly, he was immersed in his favorite type of dream. He was flying up from the ground into the bright blue sky. His tether to Earth was broken and he felt truly free. There were a few sparse clouds in the sky, and gentle green hills and weathered low mountains stretched to the horizon. At that moment, he was free from doubt and lost all concern for his life and the future.

He sailed through that beautiful sky for several minutes, at peace and calm with his life and the world around him. After a time, he noticed that he was losing altitude. The line of mountains was now behind him and he was headed back to the ground. Instead of lush jungle and open land, he could see small plots of farm land and clusters of humble homes approaching. Joshua tried to slow down, but his speed seemed to be increasing and he began to panic. He looked from side to side and found he was inside a group of surface to surface missiles. He had become a missile himself, headed toward a target below. Joshua struggled to awaken, but could not, still streaking toward a small farm house only a few hundred yards away. He trembled and shook his body, trying to wake up, but was now just a few feet from the house. Time seemed to slow to almost a stop as his missile penetrated the thatch roof. The farmer sat at a small table with his wife and two children, eating bowls of rice and laughing about something. They could not have seen the missile in the thousandth of a second it took to pass through the roof. It slammed into the floor and exploded, blasting the house into shards of burning lumber and furniture. The small family was instantly incinerated and blown to pieces.

The shock woke Joshua up, but he was not in his bed anymore. He was sitting on a boulder in a vast desert. Low, rock-strewn mountains circled the broad rocky plain, punctuated by a few clumps of Joshua trees and cacti. It was very hot and he could feel sweat running down his chest. "Hello, Josh, it's good to see you again," a voice said close to his right ear.

He looked to his right to see a man sitting next to him on the boulder. "Do I know you?"

He was a young man with brown hair in a ponytail down his back. Joshua thought it was odd that he wore a pin-striped business suit in the desert. "It's been a long time, Josh. I know you don't remember me, but we are about to start a new adventure together. I only hope we up to the task."

"I don't understand."

The other man sighed and smiled, looking toward the horizon. "Everything happens for a reason, Josh. It is true that the missile killed that family, and that is a tragedy. But the reality is going to be much darker than that."

"But what am I supposed to do?"

A strange voice said, "You are going to save the world, son."

Joshua noticed another man standing right in front of him. He wore a business suit as well. His gray hair was short and he wore a neatly trimmed beard. "Who are you?"

"You can call me Manny, and that is my son, Chris. First, I want you to know this is just a dream. It doesn't have to come to this."

"Honestly, I have no idea what either of you are talking about."

Manny laughed and replied, "Well, since this is your dream, you get to decide what it means."

"This is making me crazy. Why don't one of you just tell me what this dream is all about?" Both men only smiled and began to fade away. In a few seconds, Josh was sitting alone on the boulder. In the distance, he could see a single figure walking toward him. As the stranger approached, he could see it was a woman with long blonde hair. When she was a hundred feet away, she began to smile at him. Moments later, she stood ten feet away. She was exquisitely beautiful, with a flawless complexion and startlingly blue eyes. "And who are you?"

"Hi, Josh. My name is Connie. My father said you were confused."

"Your father?"

"Emmanuel Judah. You probably know him as Manny."

"He was just here."

"Josh, I know that. What is it that you wanted to know?"

"This crazy dream just keeps going. What are you trying to tell me?"

Connie walked up to him and kissed his forehead and then each cheek. "Josh, I love you more than anyone you will ever know and I only wish you could remember all of the lives we've shared together. You and I are soulmates, destined to be together forever."

"So this dream is about you and me? What about that family I killed? How is all of this supposed to happen?"

Connie kissed his lips, cupping his head in her hands and gazing into his eyes. After a few moments, she replied, "It's complicated, you know. Tomorrow, you won't remember any of this; after all, it's just a dream. Those farmers outside of Chittagong are dead. It wasn't your fault or mine, it's just reality. If you meet me in the future, maybe we can be together or maybe not. My darling, you get to choose. That is the gift that my father has given you and every other living person. For all of our sakes, please choose well."

§

A tone jarred Ted Dixon from his dreams. He waved his hand at the alarm clock and it silenced. He climbed out of bed and pulled open the drapes. Vehicles were flying past his twentieth floor apartment window. Looking down, he could see the normal gridlock of surface-bound vehicles edging toward the skyscrapers filling the center of San Diego. He pulled the drapes closed and went into the bathroom to prepare for his day. He stripped quickly and stepped into the shower. As the hot water poured over his head, he tuned the media wall in the stall by tapping the images of buttons. A local newscaster looked back at him and began to detail the overnight news. "This just in from our Beijing office. Tensions continue to soar between the Asian Republic and the Eastern Caliphate. Both sides are committed to resolving their differences diplomatically." Ted moved away from the stream of water and rubbed shaving balm over his face, neck, and chest. "In a surprise move, President Carmichael has ceded Panama to the Union of American Socialist Republics. Her remarks note that this will be the last land grant

to that regime until there is substantial progress on their human rights record." Ted stepped back into the water, washing off the balm and revealing his freshly whiskerless skin. "The weather outlook for the San Diego area is for warm weather and sunny skies. The high should be in the upper twenties." Ted tapped the image and it turned off. He tapped another spot causing the water to stop and the air driers to activate. After thirty seconds, the air flow stopped and he was sprayed with cologne and sunscreen.

After dressing, he walked into the main room and saw Stella standing at the stove in the open kitchen area. The smell of sausage and toast filled the air. "Good morning, Stella," he said as he approached her from behind and wrapped his arms around her waist.

"Good morning, Ted. I trust you slept well." She was wearing a long pink robe and flip-flops. Her long hair was pulled back into a ponytail that caressed the nape of her neck. "Please sit down. Your breakfast is ready."

He kissed her on the neck and went to sit. He felt his phone vibrate, so he pulled it from his pocket and set it on the table. "Hi, Mom," he said.

A holographic image of his mother now sat on the opposite side of the table smiling at him. "How's my baby boy today, Teddy?"

"I'm okay. I just got out of bed, you know."

Stella walked up next to him and set down his plate and mug of coffee. "Good morning, Mrs. Dixon."

"What are you still doing with that thing, Teddy?"

"Mother, please. We've been through this a hundred times. Stella is good to me, and I don't have the time or patience to go looking for a wife now. My job is my life and Stella takes care of me. The fact that she's a robot doesn't matter to me, and it shouldn't matter to you either."

"You're killing your father and me," his mother complained.

"Wait just a minute! You've both had your share of companions."

"But that's different! Having a little robotic love now and then is normal. Living full time with a robot is not natural."

"Stella, please don't take offense at what my mother is saying."

Stella smiled and said, "Don't worry, Ted. I am not programmed to take offense from people. Louise is just trying to help you, and I understand her concerns."

"Thank you, Stella."

"You're welcome, Louise. It's all part of my job. Ted, I'm going to my recharge station now. Do you need anything else first?" He shook his head and the robot walked out of the room.

"Why did you call, Mom?" he asked.

"Your father is going in for an upgrade next week. His heart and lung implants are at the end of their expected life cycle and he's getting the latest versions. You know how these things make me feel."

"Yes Mom, I know. Please don't worry. Just let me know the day and I'll help you take him to the hospital and stay with you."

"Good, I know Bill will appreciate that. Take care and I love you."

"I love you too, Mom." The image disappeared. He rushed through his breakfast and walked over to Stella's charging station in the spare bedroom. She stood there silently with her eyes closed as though she was sleeping. He wondered if Stella was dreaming, but quickly realized she was just a machine. He smiled and caressed her cheek. Yes, she was a machine, but somehow, she was more than that to him. Then he took the first elevator down to the ground floor and stepped out into the sunshine. Vehicles moving through the sky over his head cast

shadows that appeared and disappeared quickly. He walked over to a taxi stand and took his place at the back of the line. Within a few minutes, he reached the front of the line, pressed a contact on the stand and said, "Local."

A driverless taxi rolled toward him and its passenger door opened. He climbed inside as a green light illuminated his face. "Where to, Mr. Dixon?" the car asked. Rather than a front and back seat, the interior looked like a small seating area, with two large seats facing each other.

"Lower California Tribune Main Office, please." The door closed and the vehicle pulled into traffic.

§

An hour later, Ted Dixon sat at his station in the sea of cubicles at the downtown Tribune office. His computer was scanning news reports from around the globe and he was looking for a story to delve into to provide more than blurbs and photos and give context to his readers. The upper left screen relayed bulletins about new diplomatic pressures between the Eastern Caliphate and the Asian Republic. That region was not his beat and he knew his editor would never allow him to travel to exotic locations for the local news site. International news always dominated the news feeds. After the last war in Asia, tensions were high as the risk of terrorism was again spreading its tentacles around the planet. "Dixon, get in here!" John Stanton exclaimed from his office door. Ted sighed and pulled the sound cable connector from its receptacle behind his left ear and walked across the open office. His coworkers stared at him as he passed. During the current recession, too many of them had been called and found themselves laid off.

Ted walked into the office and closed the door. "What's up, Chief? Should I pack my stuff?"

"No one is getting laid off, Ted," John replied. "I have a human interest story for you to check into."

"Human interest?" he groaned.

"Ted, you know that everyone gets the news pumped into their brains. Following global conflict doesn't sell our site. That shit is available on demand. We need to connect people to others and reach them in new ways to keep this place open."

Ted sighed and sat down across the desk. "What do you have, Chief?"

"A local couple has raised an unenhanced child, who just graduated from San Diego State."

"An APE, here in town? That's hard to believe, but how is that news? Most of the people on Earth are APEs."

"That term is not acceptable in this office, Ted."

"Okay, the kid is a NEM, is that better?"

John smirked at the young man. "Apparently, this baby's parents are both highly enhanced, which makes it intriguing to find out why they chose not to enhance or modify this child," John continued. "That's what I want you to find out. Write a good story, pulling on the heart strings if you can. So far, we're the only ones who know about this."

"Or care."

"Just do your job, okay?" He handed a piece of paper to Ted. "The contact information is here. Call the parents and try to get an interview, the sooner the better. If the LA Times gets their hands on this and beats us, you might find yourself out of a job."

"No problem, Chief. I'll call them right now."

The door opened and Sandi Adams entered. "Hot story, Chief." She touched her tablet to the television in a corner of the room and the image changed to the Rose Garden of the White House where President Alexis Carmichael stood behind a podium in front of a group of reporters.

"Thank you all for coming on such short notice," she began. "We have been advised that several divisions of the Army of the Asian Republic have crossed the eastern border of the Eastern Caliphate. According to President Han, this is in retaliation for recent terrorist activity in the Chinese and Vietnamese regions of the Republic. President Han told me that there was no plan to use nuclears at this time. I have put all of our forces in that region on high alert and have asked our local regional leaders to be on the lookout for increasing terrorist acts on our own homeland. Thank you for your time."

Sandi turned off the television. "Pretty hot stuff, right?"

"Okay, Sandi, I want you and Rick to find some locals with family in those regions and interview them for their perspective on this. Find out which of their family members are in danger or if any are assigned to our forces nearby. Good job."

"I can help, Chief," Ted noted.

"Ted, you already have a job to do, and I think you should start already," John growled.

§

Ted got his appointment with the Carpenter family at 1:00 p.m. at their home in the Chula Vista neighborhood of the megalopolis. While he was waiting, he researched the facts regarding NEMs in the American Republic. Not Enhanced or Modified humans were still a large minority in the country, although the number was shrinking each year. As technology improved, parents could find fewer and fewer reasons not to enhance their children or themselves. Enhancing DNA and modifying the body with robotic parts began nobly as a way to stop disease and eliminate handicaps. Ultimately, the devices began to exceed normal human capabilities and people wanted those advantages for their families. Ted knew his parents had applied every DNA enhancement to him. His family had a history of poor vision and so his eyes were replaced with bionic ones shortly after he was born. He had asked his parents to give him new robotic bones and muscles so he could excel at sports, but they had refused. By the time he was able to make those decisions for himself, the rules for the professional sports had changed, disallowing mechanical strength enhancements. According to his research, several states in the American Republic still prohibited physical modifications except to correct disabilities. The rules were the most lax in the European Union, which stretched from the Iberian Peninsula through the former Russian Republic to the Pacific, although much of Central Asia was now part of the Eastern Caliphate.

The flying cab settled down in front of the Carpenter home at 12:55 p.m. The neighborhood looked much like the one where Ted had grown up. Single family homes were rare in major cities, and the homes here were likely more than one hundred years old. He walked up the path to the front door and waved his hand to signal his arrival. Nothing happened. He waved again and still there was no acknowledgement response. Finally, something to his right caught his eye and he looked to see a small button with a sign above it reading "push me." A doorbell? Ted had seen those in old movies, but never in real life. He pressed it and tones began to play inside. After a few seconds, the door opened and a large man stood before him. He was at least six feet five inches tall with a shaved head and broad smile. "You must be Ted Dixon. I'm Joe

Carpenter. You can call me Joe. Please come in." The man led him into the living room and offered him a seat. A few seconds later, a woman entered and shook his hand. She said her name was Mary Margaret, but everyone called her Maggie. Then she retreated to the kitchen to bring coffee and cookies.

"So, Mr. Dixon, Josh isn't here just yet, but we can chat a while before he arrives, if that's okay?"

"Of course, and please call me Ted. You have a lovely home."

"Thank you, Ted," Maggie said as she returned with a tray and set it on the coffee table.

"Please help yourself to coffee, if you like."

Ted pulled a small tablet from his pocket, pressed a button and set it on the table. "If you don't mind, I'll be recording this for later."

"No problem, Ted. Just tell us what you want to know."

Ted sat back and considered the couple across the table. He could tell from their eyes that they were modified like him. "Okay, let's just cut to the chase. I understand that your son is a NEM. That is very unusual in this country and especially in San Diego. Why did you choose not to modify him?"

"Are you a believer, Ted?" Maggie asked.

"What?"

"Do you believe in God?" Joe asked.

"I don't understand what that has to do with anything," Ted noted.

"We both had visions during the pregnancy telling us not to enhance or modify our son," Joe said. "And believe me, we were not true believers before that, but since we had the exact same experience, we decided to follow it."

"Now we both are true believers, Ted," Maggie interjected. "When you meet Josh, you'll understand."

The front door opened and a thin, young man entered. His hair was black and cut short. He walked over and kissed his mother and father on the cheek and offered his hand to Ted. "Hi, I'm Josh Carpenter."

Ted stood and shook his hand, saying, "I'm Ted Dixon from the Lower California Tribune. You can call me Ted." He turned to the parents and said, "Now, I'm confused. Your son appears to have modified eyes."

"I'm wearing contacts, Ted. Most people are uncomfortable around NEMs like me, so I wear these to avoid any uncomfortable situations. I'll go take them out and be right back."

"What kind of situations is he talking about?"

"Ted, you know how things are nowadays. Most of the people in the world are NEMs, but not in this country. Everyone thinks they are inferior humans, even though that is how we are all created before the modifications were invented. I spent a few years in the Army and I've been in countries where modifications are illegal. Believe me; modified people like me are not appreciated in those places. Here, it's the exact opposite. People like Josh are looked down upon."

"I appreciate what you're saying, Mr. Carpenter, but I don't think that NEMs are treated badly in North America."

"Ted, you just can call us Joe, Maggie, and Josh. There's no need for formality in our house," Maggie said.

Josh reentered the room and sat next to Ted on the couch. His eyes were sky blue and clearly natural. "What about the term APE?"

"That's a great point, son. Why did someone come up with an acronym comparing normal human beings to gorillas or orangutans?"

"I think it was an old term when enhancement and modification began. Doesn't it stand for Absent Personal Enhancement?" Ted asked.

"It doesn't matter what it stood for," Joe argued. "It was created specifically to demean natural human beings, nothing else. That's why Josh wears the contacts. The last thing we want is a bunch of hoodlums to beat him for being normal."

"Josh, how old are you?"

"I'm twenty-two."

"You have the right to get enhanced or modified now. You're an adult. Why don't you?"

"I like myself just the way I am, Ted. If my eyesight worsens, I'll upgrade my contacts. If someday I need augmentation to survive, I probably will do it, but not for now."

"Do you think you're on a mission for God?" Ted asked.

"We didn't say that, Ted," Joe said. "We only said we had a vision."

"That's okay, Dad. Yes, Ted, I am on a mission for God."

"Wow! That's quite a revelation, Josh."

"I don't think you understand, Ted," Josh replied, placing his hand on the other man's shoulder. "We're all on missions for God. We each have our life given to us so we can do the things we were meant to do."

"And what were you meant to do, Josh?"

"I don't really know, yet. I just graduated from college. I expect life will lead me where it wants me to go."

"So, you're just hanging out, waiting for God to tell you what to do?" Ted queried.

Josh laughed and replied, "Not exactly that, Ted. I think I've already taken the first step on my path by talking to you."

"I don't understand what you mean."

"It's pretty simple, Ted. All my life, I've lived in blessed obscurity. Now, you're going to write a story about me, telling your readers about my status and my world view. That will open a door that I will walk through to begin my journey."