

Eutopia

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Chapter One

History had evaded Alastair Cannon's fancies in school, an obstacle which remanifested itself in his daughter Agatha. Each new name he read in her textbook prolonged their study session another ten minutes.

"It's okay if you don't know the answer," Agatha said. She'd rested her head on one hand, her palm pressing into her pink cheeks for too long. Her free hand tapped on her tablet undo, redo; undo, redo.

"I'll figure it out," Alastair said.

"Ms. Daho says it's okay to not know the answer."

"Ms. Daho is a very smart teacher."

"I know." Agatha undid and redid her answers.

"Can I have my book, please?"

"I've almost found it."

"Alastair," Cordelia called from the living room.

"Alastair, come in here."

"I'm still helping Agatha."

"You need to come in here."

Alastair placed the book in front of Agatha. "I'll be back in a minute." Alastair found Cordelia standing in the living room staring at the television, but Alastair didn't notice her first. From the hallway when the lights

were off in the rest of the apartment, Alastair could see out the living room window at sunset. Central Park reached up in front the skyline, which cut into the darkening sky. At this time of night, the taller buildings on the east side burned orange against purple space, streaked with flaming clouds. There was something divine in a sky like this. Partway down the buildings, the earth eclipsed a hard shadow. Flickering orange windows gave way to nothing. Soon, everything would blend into the night.

“Alastair.”

“Yes.”

Cordelia turned the volume up on the television. “Authorities have not released the names of the two women recovered in the suspect’s basement. They are still reaching out to families, and the victims were taken to the University of Utah Medical Center for treatment.”

“Utah,” Alastair said.

“Mm-hmm. Millcreek.”

Like a flag hanging by its last thread finally dropping in a heap, Alastair felt something fall in his chest. “Millcreek,” he repeated. “Shit. Do you think it was someone we knew?”

“I don’t know,” Cordelia said.

“There’s been a lot of turnover in Salt Lake since we moved. Silicon Slopes is booming.”

“I know.”

“What network is this on?”

“MSNBC. But it’s on all the others, too.”

“Do you think it was someone we knew?”

Alastair repeated.

“I don’t know.” Cordelia sat down. “This might not be what you want to hear, but I’m not surprised this happened.”

Alastair held out his hand for the remote and muted the television. He sat across from Cordelia. “I know.”

“Are you surprised? Al? It happened in Millcreek.”

“I know. I can’t say whether or not I’m surprised.” Alastair juggled two flavors in his mouth. “I know the rhetoric in Utah. I remember it all being a little veiled back in the day, back when I was bishop. I can’t say I’m not surprised. That’s all I can land on.”

“Okay. I’m not surprised.”

“I know. I’m shocked. I think that’s the difference. I’m not surprised; I’m shocked.”

Cordelia waited. Alastair felt conviction like acid boiling into his throat. He’d learned over the last few years how to deal with the burn without retching it onto Cordelia. She sat now the way she would when Alastair would get home from church every week, at least how she used to sit when she first left the church. In that moment he realized she’d always known how he’d censored himself. He let the acid spill. “I should call some of our old friends.”

“Okay,” Cordelia said. “What are you going to say?”

“I don’t know. But I feel like I could help the community.”

Cordelia sucked in through her nose. “Alastair—”

“For the ward. For the community.”

“They’re not your responsibility anymore.”

“They’re not my jurisdiction. I still have tacit authority.”

“As the old bishop?”

“As a friend. You know I know Millcreek better than most. It’s not a small community, but it is a small ward.” Cordelia watched the news pass silently. Alastair still held the remote. “Not small in number, I know that. I mean they’re a tight-knit community. They’ve got to be struggling right now. Obviously, this is going to take a toll on everyone. It happened practically in their backyards.”

“Maybe they need it. To take a long look at themselves.”

“You don’t think I’ll help them see that?” Alastair tucked that away in his head. She would hear that as accusatory. His voice should match his intentions, intentions he had yet to parse out. “I can help. Even if I have to force them to see themselves as they are. All of them.”

Cordelia got up and held out her hand for the remote. Alastair gave it up, and Cordelia turned the news off. Tossing the remote aside, she locked in on Alastair. “You can’t save this church.”

“Cordelia—”

“Listen to me. Listen. You cannot comprehend the inertia fifteen men and billions of dollars has. They’re not going to change their minds. They’re never going to change. They have tricked you into believing you have a voice anywhere near equal to theirs. Maybe you can make a difference here in Manhattan, but at the end of the road there’s always a Seventy or an Apostle ready to stomp out your efforts. It would be easier than snuffing out a candle. It’s even worse in Utah. You know this. We both know this. There is nothing left you can do for those people.”

Alastair waited. He’d put his hands in his lap as his wife spoke to him. It had felt like the polite thing to do, but he’d transformed back into a child in the movement. He placed his hands on the armrests, but stayed seated. “If I’d have left—left it all. The church, the priesthood, all of it. If I’d have left, do you think this wouldn’t have happened?” He motioned to the dead screen. “Answer honestly.”

Cordelia shook her head. “No. It still would have happened.”

“Then—”

“But at least you could know you didn’t do anything to help make it happen.”

“I haven’t.”

“You still pay tithing. At least on your half of the income.”

“I can still reach out to people. Maybe this will wake a few people up.”

“This shouldn’t have to be what it takes.”

“Unfortunately, it is.” Alastair made to stand, then thought better of it. He used the motion to situate himself better in the chair. He’d been sinking into the cushions like a cold embrace. Sitting up straighter woke him up enough to get a straight thought together. “Our friends—old as they are—our friends are hurting. Especially these victims and their families. I’m not going to defend the bastardized rhetoric that created this monster. That’s ridiculous. But I can help people work through it. You know I can. I’m not doing this for the church’s sake; I’m speaking on behalf of the victims and the community. They’re going to need all the help they can get if they’re going to make it through this in a way that keeps them alive and eradicates the arguments that led to this. Please, let me at least try.”

Alastair had taken Cordelia’s hand partway through his monologue. She held his limply. How long they stayed like that, frozen in place, a husband pleading for his wife’s leave, Alastair couldn’t tell. They may as well have marbled into statues, placed next to a Rodin.

Alastair hoped they'd neighbor Cupid and Psyche. At last, Cordelia's hand fell out of Alastair's, paled during the silence. "I don't like it," she said.

The two hardly said anything to each other the rest of the evening. After Agatha finished up her homework, they all passed through the nightly rituals of brushing teeth, checking in on the goods and bads of everyone's day, and tucking in. Sleep eventually lulled all three into Sunday. Alastair got himself up and out the door for church before Cordelia had Agatha ready for soccer, walking the twelve blocks to the chapel which shared its location with the temple in Manhattan. The white marble block forsook the first principle of New York real estate: build up, not out. At least, that wasn't entirely true. On top of the temple, cloaked in the same marble, a chapel had been erected. The dual-purpose edifice stretched wide, however, long enough to display in gleaming gold letters "The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints" across the side facing the busy intersection where Broadway met Columbus. Despite the extra room, this temple went without the usual "Holiness to the Lord, the House of the Lord" that donned other Mormon temples. It also doffed the phrase that accompanied every other Mormon meetinghouse: "Visitors Welcome." Comparing the two phrases, Alastair oscillated between which of the two omissions proved the more egregious sin.

Halfway through the sacrament meeting, when the first speaker was announced, Alastair realized he'd been replaying the previous night's discussion with Cordelia on loop in his head. To his regret, he'd autopiloted through partaking of the bread and water. He often liked to use the ordinance to reflect and pray, but sometimes larger matters pressed on his mind. The guilt settled in quickly, a reflex he hadn't yet analyzed or kicked. He resigned himself to wade in his musings through the remainder of the meeting.

Agatha's soccer game, the last of the season, was scheduled to start at ten in Central Park. Alastair planned to leave just after sacrament meeting, which would let him arrive only ten or fifteen minutes late. He rose from his pew at the end of the closing prayer and swam through the thickness of his thoughts to the hallway. As he stepped towards the elevator, an arm pulled him back into the air of reality.

"Bishop Cannon, could I talk to you?" Alastair turned to face Bishop Brayden Reed, the bishop of his ward. Bishop Reed smiled out of a boyish face, hair thick with product slicked to one side, and a crisp blue suit.

"I'm on my way to my daughter's soccer game," Alastair said.

"Right. She couldn't find a league that didn't play on Sunday?"

Alastair forced a grin. “How long do you need me?”

“It’ll only be a minute.”

“Okay. And Brother Cannon is fine, by the way. Or Alastair.”

Bishop Reed ushered Alastair into his office. The room would have fit in perfectly at Alastair’s law firm. Fluorescent light harshed over an oak desk, ornately crafted with beehives on the tops of every leg, a Mormon symbol of hard work and productivity. Bishop Reed sighed himself into his padded office chair and motioned for Alastair to take the metal folding chair opposite him. When Bishop Reed signed into the desktop computer, Alastair recognized the tithing report open in the first window. “Bet you’re glad you don’t have to deal with those anymore,” Bishop Reed said.

“Are you extending a calling?” Alastair said.

“No, no.” Bishop Reed chuckled. He typed as he spoke. “No, you’re doing great in the Young Men’s organization. I just wanted your opinion. My wife texted me a news article during sacrament. Did you see this?” He’d pulled up an article on the kidnappings. It was from KUTV, the local Salt Lake City news station.

“Yes. Cordelia and I watched something on it last night.”

“I’m sure Cordelia had thoughts on it.”

“Both of us did.”

“Of course. Everyone has thoughts. I’m just wondering if you had any ideas how to talk to the ward about it. Bishop to bishop. That and if anyone from the press reaches out to me.”

“My thoughts weren’t exactly on PR. If you want PR help, I don’t think I’m—”

“No, no. I know that. I’m not asking you to get in front of a camera or anything. I’m not worried about that. I’m asking more for counsel. With the Times right down the street I’m sure someone here will start getting emails. I don’t like making statements to the press. I want to make sure we tackle this right. Condemn the actions while declaring the true doctrine of the church. We don’t stand behind it, but we can explain the complexities. You’re so good with words, I thought you might be able to give me pointers on how to focus on the real issues here.”

Plenty of arguments on the “real issues” dropped onto Alastair’s tongue, fighting for which would go first, not sure if he and Bishop Reed would agree on what real issues were at stake. Alastair opened his mouth to see what fell out first. “If you’re asking because I moved here from Millcreek, then I—”

“You’re from Millcreek?” Bishop Reed beamed like a child on his birthday. “Did you know Brigham Rasmussen, then?”

Alastair felt a jolt, and wondered why the room’s light bent in his vision. He had been in an office just like

this with fewer wrinkles than Bishop Reed sported. Alastair felt himself shrinking into his own memories. “How do you know Brigham?” Alastair said.

“From the article.” The bishop scrolled down and pointed to a line just below a mugshot. Brigham’s face stared at Alastair, the rigid disappointment like most mugshots Alastair had seen set into the only slightly more mature face of the boy Alastair remembered. The room reeled again. Alastair had looked into that sullen face before, the pale skin and messy blond hair. Back then, his white collar wasn’t large enough to cover the tie his father had loaned him for his priesthood interview with the bishop, good Bishop Cannon.

“Brigham,” Alastair said. His mouth couldn’t find any other words.

“I hadn’t realized,” Bishop Reed said. “I can’t believe you knew him.”

“He was a young man when I was bishop of the Millcreek 2nd Ward. He wasn’t even a priest when I moved here. He lived on Fox Point Lane. He had a younger brother. His mom worked for an essential oils call center.” Alastair wondered if he’d said any of that out loud. He took command of his voice. “I’m going back to Millcreek this week to deal with this.”

“That’s good. Take this time to help deal with the damage. Soften the blow.”

“That’s the plan.” Alastair realized he should have talked further with Cordelia before stating whether or not he would leave for Utah.

“The church is going to catch a lot of flack for this, but the people are the most important thing at stake here. You’ve always had righteous desires. I know you’ll do what’s best for your friends back home. They’ll be in good hands with you.” Bishop Reed hesitated, then continued. “You have a good opportunity to help the church, as well. I know we joke about Salt Lake being Zion here, but even jokes have their own grain of truth. And Zion needs to be guarded. We had a bad thing happen, but we can’t let the enemies of God think that it’s the church’s fault this happened.”

Alastair hadn’t looked away from Brigham’s picture. The more he studied it, the less he saw the features of youth. Maturity had grown from a seed Alastair hadn’t realized had been planted. Brigham’s profile shot seemed to be turning further away from Alastair every time he checked it. Bishop Reed moved his head closer to the desktop screen to catch Alastair’s attention, and the old bishop finally clicked his eyes away from the mugshot. Bishop Reed was smiling through closed lips, less bright than the smile he’d had on before. It held a more hopeful and pleading air. Alastair had to put a cap on his throat to keep the acid from spilling over.