

—The—
Four Corners
———— of Winter ————



Visit Shine-A-Light Press on our website:
www.ShineALightPress.com
on X: @SALPress

Visit The Four Corners of Winter on our website:
www.TheFourCornersBooks.com
on X: @4CornersTrilogy

Visit C.S. Elston on his website:
www.cselston.com
on X: @cselston

The Shine-A-Light Press logo is a trademark of Shine-A-Light Corp.

The Four Corners of Winter
Copyright © 2024 by Christopher Scott Elston

All rights reserved. Published by Shine-A-Light Press. Shine-A-Light Press and associated logos are trademarks and/or are registered trademarks of Shine-A-Light Corp. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise without written permission of Shine-A-Light Corp. For information regarding permission, please contact the permissions department at www.shinealightcorp.com.

Publisher's Note: *The Four Corners of Winter* is a work of fiction. Where real people, events, establishments, organizations, or locales appear, they are used fictitiously. All other elements of the novel are drawn from the author's imagination and any resemblance to actual persons or events is coincidental.

Scripture quotations are taken from *The Holy Bible, New International Version*®, *NIV*®, Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc. ®. Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

Illustrations by Madison McClean

Author's Photo by Christie Bruno

ISBN: 978-1-953158-24-6

Printed in the U.S.A.

For the McClean “kids” who have grown up to be some of the best adults I know. Being your “Uncle Crispy” is one of my life’s biggest blessings.

Among them, I have to single out “Maddie Cakes” whose talents know no bounds. Her illustrations for this book series not only made it better, but I will forever cherish the fact that we were able to collaborate in this way, starting when she was so young.

All four of you add joy to my life. Thank you.

Acknowledgments

As always, I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to my original proofreaders: My parents, Doug and Judy, and my wife and editor, Andrea. They have all been supportive in numerous ways, not the least of which is having read drafts of the book before publication and offering valuable feedback.

I also want to acknowledge A. Brekke, who is the first person I know of to describe the Aurora as “curtains.”

I would like to further offer a sincere ‘thank you’ to my niece, Madison McClean, for once again providing her beautiful artwork for the interior of this book. I appreciate the hard work and feel grateful for the opportunity to share it with everyone who reads this book.

Table of Contents

Part One *Thanksgiving*

- Chapter One – *Break* 3-9
- Chapter Two – *Hungry* 11-16
- Chapter Three – *Family* 17-22
- Chapter Four – *Transition* 23-28

Part Two *Familiar*

- Chapter Five – *Kinship* 33-37
- Chapter Six – *Signs* 39-45
- Chapter Seven – *Christmas Eve* 47-52
- Chapter Eight – *Duty Calls* 53-56
- Chapter Nine – *Exit* 57-61

Part Three *Unfamiliar*

- Chapter Ten – *Cold and Lonely* 65-71
- Chapter Eleven – *Shelter* 73-80
- Chapter Twelve – *Herd and Seen* 81-87

Part Four *Searching*

- Chapter Thirteen – *Wranglers* 91-98
- Chapter Fourteen – *Seeking Unity* 99-104
- Chapter Fifteen – *Smoke* 105-111
- Chapter Sixteen – *Poof* 113-119

Part Five *Polarized*

- Chapter Seventeen – *Split* 123-131
- Chapter Eighteen – *The Longest Day; Even Longer Night* 133-140
- Chapter Nineteen – *The Door Closes* 141-147

Part Six *The Final Quest Begins*

Chapter Twenty – *White on White* 151-157

Chapter Twenty-One – *Seeing Red* 159-165

Chapter Twenty-Two – *Partaking* 167-173

Chapter Twenty-Three – *Forging Ahead...While Possible* 175-181

Part Seven *Hurdles*

Chapter Twenty-Four – *Mood Swings* 185-192

Chapter Twenty-Five – *All Who Wander* 193-199

Chapter Twenty-Six – *Partly Cloudy* 201-207

Part Eight *Ice Walkers*

Chapter Twenty-Seven – *Glass* 211-218

Chapter Twenty-Eight – *Subzero* 219-226

Chapter Twenty-Nine – *Soul Survivors* 227-234

Part Nine *From Cold to Hot*

Chapter Thirty – *Steam* 239-245

Chapter Thirty-One – *Unstable* 247-254

Chapter Thirty-Two – *Heat* 255-260

Chapter Thirty-Three – *Hell Spawn* 261-266

Chapter Thirty-Four – *Heaven Scent* 267-271

Part Ten *The Last Battle*

Chapter Thirty-Five – *Tarry* 275-281

Chapter Thirty-Six – *Legions* 283-288

Chapter Thirty-Seven – *The Word* 289-295

Chapter Thirty-Eight – *Return* 297-301

—The—
Four Corners
———— of Winter ————

by C.S. Elston



PART ONE
Thanksgiving

CHAPTER ONE

Break

“Hey, good day?” Tatum asked as her little brother, Kinsey, climbed up and into the front seat of her 1998, pink Jeep Wrangler Sahara. It had been lifted four inches higher than the factory position to accommodate the oversized tires. Kinsey closed the door before buckling his seatbelt.

“Awesome,” he quickly responded. “At lunch, Adam burped so loud it startled Chelsea Longhorn, who was at the table in front of us, and when she jumped, she spilled the milk she was drinking down her shirt, in her lap, and some of it even came out of her nose. It was hilarious!”

“Probably not for Chelsea,” Tatum responded sincerely but with a small chuckle as she put her Jeep into gear and pulled out of her space in the high school’s student parking lot. “How embarrassing.”

“Yeah,” Kinsey agreed, “but still hilarious. Even Chelsea was

laughing about it.”

“That’s good. Still, poor thing. So, you ready for Joe Flows?”

“Definitely. I’ve been ready for my Bullinger since about 11:30 this morning.”

“It’s like forty-two degrees outside. Why can’t you order something hot like a normal human being?”

“I like the Bullinger, regardless of the temperature. Besides, we’re going to be sitting inside where it’s warm. What difference does the outdoor temperature make?”

“Okay,” Tatum conceded as she stopped her Jeep at a crosswalk before turning left, “that’s a pretty decent point. What’s in those things, anyway?”

“Mostly Red Bull, but I think there’s also some lime juice and ginger beer.”

“I do like ginger beer, but I’ll take my extra hot almond latte and sit by the fireplace so I can get cozy.”

“And you think I’m crazy?” Kinsey asked, looking over at his sister with a grin forming on his face.

“I know you’re crazy,” she teased back.

The pink Jeep meandered through Snohomish, Washington until finally coming to a stop and parking on the south side of Second Street in front of a barbecue restaurant, just two doors down from Joe Flows. Tatum and Kinsey climbed out, walked to the coffee shop where Tatum worked on Saturdays and, true to

The Four Corners of Winter

their word, ordered a medium almond latte and a large Bullinger. She sat by the fireplace, warming herself with her back to the flames, and Kinsey sat directly across from her with only a small table between them. They enjoyed their drinks and talked more about their separate days at school.

It was a routine that had started shortly after Tatum got her driver's license more than a year earlier. Kinsey had expressed disappointment that their walks were going to come to an end before she even had her learner's permit. But this new tradition that replaced the walks had so far satisfied that concern and would continue to do so, at least until the end of the current school year.

"Are you still thinking Biola for college?" Kinsey asked with a hint of sadness in his voice.

"Depends on scholarships," Tatum responded thoughtfully. "That school's crazy expensive."

"Mom and Dad want you there as bad as you do. They'll find a way to make it work even if they're keeping it to themselves so you'll push harder for the scholarship money. Trust me, you'll be just fine."

"It would be nice to get some California sun. Spend some time in Uncle Ray's old stomping grounds. Check out some of the places he's made legendary, like that donut place."

"Sidecar."

“Exactly. He’s made me want to try that so bad.”

“Me, too.”

They shared a smile, but Tatum could tell what was really on Kinsey’s mind. “It’ll be weird at first, but you’ll be driving yourself soon after I’m gone. Then you can come here with your friends. Start a new tradition.”

“I don’t know. I’ll find something else to do with them. I think I’d rather save this for us. We can do this whenever you come home on breaks.”

They shared another smile before Tatum decided to change the subject. “Are you excited about your first year of high school track?”

“Yeah,” Kinsey quickly responded. “I don’t expect to make varsity or anything, but hopefully training with the older kids will help get me ready by next year or at least the year after that.”

“I think you’ll do better than you realize.”

“I guess we’ll find out in a few months.”

“I guess we will.”

“So,” Kinsey started with a bit of a thoughtful pause, “if you go to Biola next year, you’ll be like a thousand miles away.”

“True,” Tatum responded with equal thoughtfulness, “but it’s less than a three-hour plane ride.”

“Right, but how often do you think you’ll make that plane ride?”

The Four Corners of Winter

“Well, it’s not like I can come home on normal weekends, but I’ll be back three or four times a year for at least a week or so with things like spring break. Christmas is longer, and summer is, well, a lot like our summers now. Plus, you can always come visit me down there, too. Biola is inland, but we can still go to the beach, maybe even learn to surf. And, who knows, if we time it with Uncle Ray visiting his family, maybe he can show us around Long Beach.”

“Sidecar,” they said in unison.

“Jinx,” Kinsey quickly added. “You owe me a Bullinger.”

“I already bought you a Bullinger.”

“You owe me another one.”

“Nope. All paid up.”

“Fine,” Kinsey yielded with a smile. “That does sound fun. Cali, I mean,” he added while letting his smile grow.

“It does, doesn’t it? What do you say we finish our drinks in the car. I’m sure Mom’s scrambling to get ready for Thanksgiving dinner tomorrow. We should probably get home and help.”

“Let’s do it.”

The short drive involved a lot less conversation. As soon as Tatum started the engine, they turned the radio on instead. She had developed a taste for country music because of her dad, Grant. But it was a little more “current” than his and wasn’t limited just to country. In fact, on that last stretch, it was Lauren

Daigle that was singing them home. Kinsey was fine with it, too. Although he had his own favorite artists like TobyMac, Skillet, and NEEDTOBREATHE, he also looked up to his big sister and thought that anything she liked simply had to be cool.

Just after the pink Jeep, with its black hardtop and black tire cover on the back spare that had the iconic Jeep headlights and grill in perfectly matching pink, came to a stop in its usual spot on the far-left side of the Snyder's driveway, Kinsey and Tatum both hopped out. They quickly reached back inside for their school bags, shut their doors nearly simultaneously, walked to the front door, and stepped inside.

The siblings were immediately approached by their mom, Jill, who excitedly told them to remove their shoes and take everything to their room. They did as they were instructed, and when they were walking back down the stairs to the entryway, she next advised them not to enter the living room because she had already vacuumed it and didn't want to have to do it twice.

"Mom," Kinsey started with a little confusion as they stopped at the bottom of the stairs on the same rug where they had been standing only a minute earlier, "nobody's going to be here for twenty-four hours."

"Yes," Jill agreed but not without qualification, "and there's a lot to do in those twenty-four hours, which means I don't have time to do things twice. And don't think I'm not about to put you

The Four Corners of Winter

two to work.”

“We know,” Tatum stated a bit defensively, “that’s why we’re home a little earlier than normal.”

“Good,” Jill said with a smile before turning and hustling off, expecting them to fall in line, “I need you both in the kitchen.”

“Are we supposed to follow her?” Kinsey quietly asked.

“I think so,” Tatum stated as if there was a hint of uncertainty even though there really wasn’t any at all.

“I vote we go the other direction. I have a feeling I’m going to need another Bullinger.”

“I think I’ll join you this time but make mine a double.”

CHAPTER TWO

Hungry

Jill and Tatum were up until after midnight baking three pies: apple, pumpkin, and pecan. Grant and Kinsey, on the other hand, had both fallen asleep watching the University of Washington men's basketball team beat South Dakota State. Or at least they hoped that's how it had ended up. The Huskies had a twelve-point lead when Grant conked out, and by the time Kinsey joined his dad in slumberland, the lead had increased to eighteen. The boys didn't wake up until the girls came in and gave them a shake. They had considered banging some pots and pans together to startle them, but truth was, they were too tired to take the loud noise themselves. Everyone stumbled up the stairs and performed an abbreviated version of their bedtime routine. Kinsey didn't even get through half of the eleventh chapter of the book of Hebrews before he was done for the night.

He woke up with his reading light still on at 7:24 a.m. His

tummy growled. *Thanksgiving*, he instantly thought as the corners of his mouth turned up and his eyes began adjusting to the light. Springing out of bed with an enthusiasm that caused him to temporarily forget his morning Bible reading routine, Kinsey swung his door open, and the wonderful smells filled his nostrils. There were still leftover scents from making the pie the night before, and he knew they would soon be mixed with the turkey which would be placed in the oven to start baking in a couple of hours. Kinsey looked back in the room at his clock and felt his tummy growl again. His mom never let anyone eat anything on Thanksgiving until company arrived about an hour before dinner was served. The meal was scheduled for just over seven hours from then, and he didn't know how he was going to make it that long without devouring something.

Used to Kinsey's annual complaining, Jill tried to keep him busy with chores. Putting him in charge of mashed potatoes seemed like particularly cruel and unusual punishment for a crime he didn't even commit. The football games on the TV were a welcome distraction, but they were professional teams, and Kinsey preferred college. He had inherited that trait from his dad. The Huskies wouldn't play until the next day. It was the Apple Cup, the game when they played their biggest rivals, the Cougars, every year. That would be a fun one to watch, but it was something else he had to wait for. Between the Apple Cup the

The Four Corners of Winter

next day and the delicious dinner an ample number of hours away, that dawn to dark's life-education theme was clearly patience, and Kinsey was feeling like a slow learner.

Tatum had an easier time when it came to the patience aspect of that particular day. For one thing, she rarely woke up hungry, and today was no exception. In fact, Tatum typically didn't eat much at breakfast time unless it was a sweet treat like a cranberry-orange scone or pancakes. So, the time she had to spend anxiously waiting for dinner would be significantly shorter. The Apple Cup, on the other hand, was something she was really looking forward to. That event would stretch her patience elasticity more than anything else she was anticipating.

Jill was too busy to concern herself with anything but having the house clean and decorated, as well as, arguably most important, the dinner done on time shortly after their guests arrived. Neither hunger nor football were anywhere near her thoughts. Of course, it didn't hurt that she allowed herself to taste-test things as she cooked.

Grant was the one who had the day the most figured out. College football was never on Thanksgiving, so he had accepted that a while back. It had taken him longer, but he had recently learned that when Jill sent him to the grocery store for pre-meal snacks like nuts and crackers, he bought double the amount on her list so he could nibble on them without risking upsetting her

by eating something she was planning on using. So far, she was not even aware of his extra purchases, but Grant had convinced himself that if she ever needed more than she had planned on, that was a scenario he could come out of looking like a true hero. Unless, of course, he had already eaten the spare supplies by then. It was a possibility that grew stronger with each passing hour.

Not surprisingly, by the time the clock struck noon, he was working with a dwindling supply of mixed nuts as he snacked on them while raking the leaves in the front yard; a process that was taking longer than Grant thought it should, due to the occasional gust of wind that was redistributing his nice, neat piles. At first, he tried to chase and catch the scattering leaves but quickly realized the process was futile. Instead, he chose to stand patiently, waiting for the wind to die back down before raking the leaves up again and trying to scoop them into the yard waste bin prior to the next gust. The waiting slowly evolved into an excuse to take a break and eat a few more nuts.

Quickly scrunching the bag up and shoving it into the pocket of his jacket, Grant scrambled to chew as fast as possible and hide his secret activities as the front door swung open and he expected to see Jill standing on the other side of it. Instead, Kinsey moped down the steps and approached him grumpily.

“Dad,” he started with an annoyed tone to his voice, “Mom won’t let me eat anything. Nothing. She’s starving me to death.”

The Four Corners of Winter

“I hardly think she’s starving you,” Grant stated through a mouth-full of nut-crumbs.

“Hey,” Kinsey fired back as he noticed the words his dad was using sounded like they crawled through a wind-tunnel full of debris, “what are you munching on?”

Grant put his right hand on Kinsey’s back and slowly turned him, matching his own maneuver, so that they were both soon facing away from the house, making it look suspiciously like some illegal activity was taking place between father and son in the Snyder’s front yard. “I might know of a way I can help,” he finally stated with his teeth clenched like a bad ventriloquist. Kinsey looked up at his dad, eyebrows furrowed, in total confusion. “Don’t look at me,” Grant nervously stated.

“Why-”

“Just act normal,” Grant jumped in, cutting his son off.

“This is far from normal,” Kinsey said quietly.

“Do you want the stuff or not?”

“What stuff?” Kinsey asked sincerely.

Grant looked around, including behind him, to make sure they weren’t being watched. Slowly, he pulled the bag of nuts out from his pocket, but only halfway. It was just enough to give Kinsey a glimpse and let him know what he was offering. Kinsey’s eyes quickly went wide with desire as Grant shoved the bag back into his pocket and looked around again.

“You want it?”

“Oh,” Kinsey said with a drawn-out moan, “I want it alright. I want it bad.”

“Then be cool,” Grant insisted. “Just be cool, man.”

“I’m cool... Hungry, but cool.”

“You have to keep this to yourself.”

“I’m not exactly in a sharing mood.”

“Good,” Grant said as he continued to swivel his head and make sure no one had started to watch them. “Let’s keep it that way.”

Kinsey’s mouth watered. He licked his lips as Grant pulled the bag back out of his pocket and quickly handed it to his son. “You just saved my life,” Kinsey said as he took the bag, opened it, and shoved his hand inside. He raised a handful of nuts to his mouth and smiled at it. “Mom tried to take it away and you saved it.”

Grant watched his son start chewing with intense relief and knew, right at that moment, that his bag of nuts was as good as gone.

CHAPTER THREE

Family

“Mom!” Kinsey yelled from a standing position in front of the big window in the living room which looked out at the front yard. “The Schoens are here!” Kinsey loved his mom’s sister, her husband, and all five of their kids, who each happened to be younger than he was, but he was mostly excited that the painful wait for food was almost over. The agony could have been much worse if his dad hadn’t shared his secret stash of nuts with him, but the aroma of cooking turkey now filled the house in such an inviting way that the anticipation remained nearly unbearable.

Once the greetings were over, his boy cousins were quickly asking to go outside and toss the football. Kinsey made them wait a couple of minutes while he scarfed down some tortilla chips covered in hot, spinach-artichoke dip before finally accommodating them with a game of “Flyer’s Up” that ultimately led to yet another game. This time it was “Two-Hand-Touch”

football.

The kids were in the front yard, and therefore the first to greet new arrivals, as Jill's other two sisters and their families showed up. All the girls and the adults went inside while the boys stayed out. The one exception was Ray. He remained outside and became the permanent quarterback for both teams until the call came for dinner. It wasn't that he was uncomfortable going inside. This was his second Snyder Thanksgiving, after all. He simply enjoyed activity, and throwing a ball around was more exciting to him than anything that could be going on inside the house.

The other men were watching football on the television, although the older girls had convinced them to switch over to the parade during commercial breaks, while the younger girls were up in Tatum's room, playing with her old dolls and going through her closet as they talked about how "cool" her clothes were.

Finally, the call came, and Kinsey thought that meant it was time to eat. Unfortunately, he would have to wait a little longer because his mom decided to start a new tradition. As the family gathered in a circle to pray before the feast, she wanted to have every person there quickly tell the group what they were thankful for. Kinsey could see the turkey on the counter, although it was still on the roasting rack and tented in tin foil waiting for Grant to carve it. Nevertheless, it was taunting him and torturing his

The Four Corners of Winter

tastebuds from inside its temporary hiding place. Even more, he was mentally drooling over the thought of his mom's sweet potato casserole hitting his tongue. As most of the youngest kids delayed things by showing their shyness and indecision, the anticipation was excruciating. But, attempting to keep his impatience under wraps, he waited and declared his thankfulness like everyone else.

The general consensus, particularly among the Snyders, was a genuine thankfulness for family. It was a theme of gratitude that had become exponentially more important to them since their first trip to Kadosh five years earlier; a lifechanging event that was extremely difficult but even more rewarding. It had given them a perspective on their lives, past, present, and eternal, that they wouldn't trade for anything.

With the new Thanksgiving tradition complete, Grant prayed for the meal and then everyone took their seats and started loading up their plates. Kinsey quickly ran out of room and boasted that he would be going for round two in ten minutes or less. He dumped enough gravy over his potatoes and turkey to force his black pepper flakes into a breaststroke and then dove in with extreme enthusiasm. Truth is, it was closer to fifteen minutes before he reloaded his plate with sweet potato casserole, intentionally placing it where his roasted Brussels sprouts had been in an unsuccessful attempt to avoid the leftover gravy

puddles, but he did go for a round two that was about half the size of round one. And then... He was stuffed, much like the turkey had been. By the time people started slicing up the pies, Kinsey was done with putting food in his mouth. He decided that the sweet potato casserole had been his dessert and told his sister that he was already starting to look forward to making sandwiches out of the leftovers at lunchtime the next day. She shook her head with a grin, amazed by her little brother's obsession with food.

Other than Jill's sisters, who had kicked her out of her own kitchen and announced that they were on clean-up duty, everyone found a spot to watch football after dinner. The activity that came before the meal was complete, and the entire group was predominantly motionless. Kinsey was almost over capacity, full to a slightly painful degree, but still managed a contented smile as he closed his eyes and drifted off to sleep.

Grant was only minutes behind his son on naptime, but both Jill and Tatum stayed awake; Jill to keep her conversation with Ray going that had started at the dinner table, and Tatum to watch the Cowboys squeak out a win over the Commanders.

Ray was the last one to leave, and that was on purpose. He wanted to talk to the Snyders about Kadosh. Out of everyone who had been in attendance, they were the only five who had any experience with it. The Snyders had shared it with the family and

The Four Corners of Winter

some friends over the years and received diverse responses. Some were skeptical, unsure of what to believe, if anything at all, while others were fascinated and wanted to hear every detail. But, in any case, no one who hadn't been there could truly, fully understand what they had been through. So, in most settings, it had become easier to not bring it up in mixed company.

"Any word on the final return?" Ray casually asked, causing everyone to look at Kinsey who simply shook his head, indicating he didn't know anything new.

"Well," Ray started back in, "I've been praying about it a lot since we got back and..." Ray sighed before continuing, "I'm not feeling the pull this time. I think my time in Kadosh is already over. So, when you do get the call, I think you'll be headed back there without me this go 'round."

After a brief moment of surprised quiet, Grant spoke for the group. "We understand, but we'll miss you."

"Thanks," Ray responded. "In a strange way, I'll miss being there. I hope this doesn't sound like a cop-out, but when I pray, I feel like I'm being told that you've been called back but I haven't. Kind of humbling, actually. My ego wants to be part of it, but my ego isn't calling the shots."

"Can't argue with that," Jill chimed in. "It doesn't sound like a cop-out at all."

"I'm a little jealous," Tatum admitted. "I kind of wish we

didn't have to go back. Kadosh is never easy.”

“True,” Kinsey agreed. “But, when duty calls, we'll have to answer.”

“Know this,” Ray announced, “no one will be praying for you guys harder than I will be.”

“We know,” Jill said with a smile.

They truly appreciated the support, and they were all praying about the events to come, too. But the painful truth was, while they knew they would be going, they didn't know when, and like Kinsey's hunger, the anticipation was extremely difficult. Sometimes the gap between awareness and performance, or prayer and answer, is just as important as the events that bookend it. This was no different. God was giving the Snyders exactly what they would need to get through the difficult journey that lay ahead. He was filling them up with time together in order to combat the time they would soon have to spend apart.

CHAPTER FOUR

Transition

No one in the Snyder house was more excited to decorate for Christmas than Tatum. She was up and out of bed before 7:00 a.m. on Friday, the day after Thanksgiving, which was early for a non-school or church day, and in the attic removing boxes less than fifteen minutes later. Unfortunately for Grant and Jill, the door to the attic wasn't your typical ceiling one in the garage or the hallway. It was a miniature door in the wall at the back of their long and narrow, bedroom closet. Tatum had once commented to Kinsey that she figured it was about half the size of what she imagined a hobbit's door in the Shire would be if they could visit Middle Earth.

The kids had loved playing in that attic while growing up. It was the most common spot to conceal themselves during games of hide-and-go-seek. It had plywood flooring that made it look

like it was still under construction, and one overhead light that only illuminated about half of the extensive room. Full of boxes, luggage, and Tatum's old, yellow and white dollhouse that was as big as an ATV, there were countless places to hunker down while the seeker was on the prowl.

Kinsey even had a few sleepovers in the attic before his family began to separate themselves, especially in an emotional way, and Kinsey had withdrawn from both his parents and his friends. Thankfully, their first trip to Kadosh had changed all of that, and when they returned, they grew closer than ever. Kinsey had also re-entered the world of friendships. By then, however, he had grown up a little and decided not to return to the attic sleepovers.

The maturing young man was the last one to get up that morning. Not because he didn't enjoy decorating for Christmas, but because his room was the furthest away from the noise that his sister was making. All that racket had meant Grant and Jill were awake shortly after Tatum had gotten started and hearing every move their daughter made on the other side of their closet wall.

By 8:00 a.m., the entire family was sipping either coffee or hot chocolate, working together downstairs with Christmas music filling the air, and pulling both indoor and outdoor decorations from the boxes they had retrieved out of the attic.

The Four Corners of Winter

Grant had been resistant to a fake Christmas tree until the previous year when a bug infestation that resulted from his real tree caused Jill and the kids to gang up on him and force him to buy one on a giant discount after the holiday. This was going to be the first year the Snyders would be without a real tree. But even Grant agreed, once it was up, that the fake tree looked both real and beautiful. Only half joking, Grant had, in preparation for the day, purchased a few pine tree air fresheners from a local car wash and hung them as the first ornaments to make the real-looking, fake tree, smell about as real as an overwhelming, artificial pine scent could make it.

There was always a bit of lighthearted debate about which Christmas song was best. Grant had settled on For King and Country's version of "The Little Drummer Boy" because he loved the pounding drumbeat, while Jill had gone deep into her recesses and pulled out her mom's favorite "Come on, Ring those Bells" by Evie because it took her back to her childhood. Tatum was happy with anything from Alan Jackson's *Let it Be Christmas* album. Kinsey, who typically took a significant portion of his music cues from his dad and sister's country tastes, and a fair amount of both newer and classic rock'n'roll tunes, had a more surprising choice. He favored both the songs *O Holy Night* and *Silent Night* and didn't really care who was singing them. It could be Sarah McLachlan, Nat King Cole, Mariah Carey, or Percy

Sledge. It didn't matter. Those songs always made him stop and ponder the importance of the holiday.

Next up were the outside lights. The Snyders weren't attempting to win any contests, and certainly weren't trying to rival the Griswalds in Grant's favorite Christmas movie, but they weren't holding back either. They trimmed the house lines, the two big windows on the front, and the door frame in white, covered a half a dozen bushes and two trees in green, and those same tree trunks were wrapped in blue lights to honor the Seattle Seahawks. Grant would have preferred to honor the Huskies, but purple lights had proven too difficult to find. The final touch outside was an eight-foot tall, prefabricated "Star of Bethlehem" that they put on their roof. Back inside, there were a lot of knick-knacks and things they put out, too. And finally, the stockings were hung from the fireplace mantle to make the Snyder house at Christmas feel complete.

It was a two-day event, and by Saturday night they were all pretty wiped out. But, as had become custom, they sat and watched the original *Home Alone* movie which Grant and Jill had been excited to introduce their kids to a number of years earlier. They had eventually watched all the sequels and spin-offs, too, but nothing compared to the original. It was their clear family favorite, making everyone teary when the neighbor, Marley, got a visit from his son and his son's family, and the single movie that

The Four Corners of Winter

had become the standing tradition.

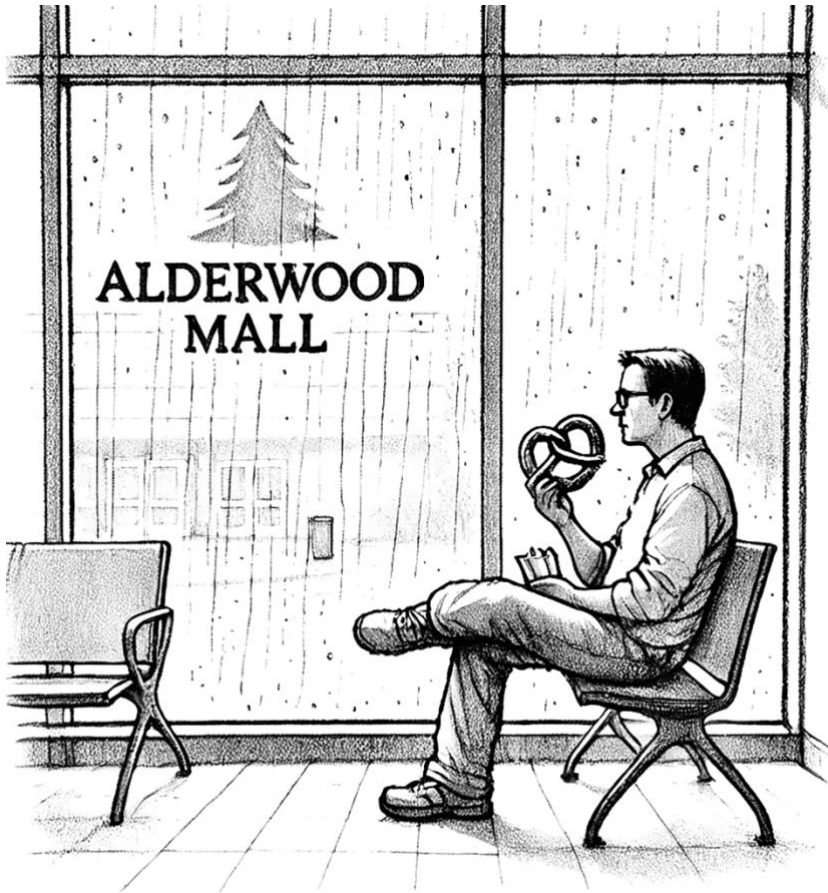
Each weekend that followed, someone got to choose their personal favorite Christmas movie, and the family would watch together. This meant, when it was Grant's turn, *National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation* was on. Kinsey was almost as predictable; he nearly always chose *Elf*. Tatum had learned that if she wanted to avoid groans and complaints about it not being a real Christmas movie from her brother and dad, she shouldn't pick *Little Women*, but that didn't always mean they were safe. When they were, she had them watching either *The Santa Clause* or *Fred Claus*. Jill took her choice old school. Way old school. She went with either *It's a Wonderful Life* or the original *Miracle on 34th Street*. Even though everyone picked their own favorites, they all enjoyed watching the movies again. Even Grant and Kinsey secretly enjoyed *Little Women*. But most of all, they enjoyed the fact that they were establishing traditions as a family.

Among them were the bowls of homemade popcorn they had on each movie night. As they sat down to watch *Home Alone*, it was the first thing they had eaten since Thursday night that wasn't made up of remains from that big meal. The food had mostly been sandwiches and various side dishes. Some sandwiches were open faced with turkey, mashed potatoes, and gravy. Others were turkey with mayonnaise and mustard. They all had one thing besides their composition of leftovers in

common though: deliciousness.

The next day was a typical Sunday. After showers and a small breakfast tide over, the family went to church together. The sermon was fittingly on being thankful, and the capper was a Peter Kreeft quote, “Thanksgiving comes after Christmas,” which appropriately bridged the gap between the two holidays while completely flipping the calendar around. It caused a lot of thought-provoking conversation amongst the Snyders on the car ride home, including Grant’s point that, technically and historically, the first Thanksgiving came way after the first Christmas. They all accepted that fact but decided that wasn’t the point of the quote.

Ultimately, they were all in one accord with the opinion that they were now full steam ahead in the holiday season that made them the most thankful: the season that celebrated the incarnation and proved that God loves us so much that He humbled Himself to the point of becoming a man, destined to be the sacrifice necessary to cleanse us of our sins. They all agreed that there simply was not anything to be more thankful for than the amazing truth of Christmas.



PART TWO
Familiar

CHAPTER FIVE

Kinship

Since they last returned from Kadosh, the Snyders had begun to seek others out who had had a similar experience. It started when Grant, on a whim, typed the word Kadosh into a search engine. At first, he saw what he expected to see, and it confirmed what Kinsey had learned on their first trip to the islands. Kadosh was a Hebrew word that meant “set apart.” But a deeper dive showed that the type of set apart that the word referred to was that of being sacred or designated for a holy purpose. Grant had never thought about it in that way. He had only thought of it as his family being separated from one another. It had conjured up negative connotations, but that clearly wasn’t the original definition of the word. *Leave it to the enemy to take something God intended for good and use it for his evil purpose instead*, Grant considered. *Good thing God can flip that around; take what the enemy intends for evil*

and use it for good. His thought process continued as he reflected on what Kadosh had done to restore his family to the tight-knit unit God always meant for it to be. Furthermore, the experience had brought them to God, Himself. *What an amazing blessing.*

However, as the rabbit trail continued, he also learned Kadosh was the title of an Israeli film that had played at the Cannes Film Festival a couple of decades earlier, the title of many songs, even someone's last name, and that a "Knight Kadosh" was what they called a Freemasonic initiation ceremony. So, while Grant had not been familiar with the word before his entire family had been pulled out of their world and sucked into the one ruled by Raum, he was finally accepting that it was far more common than he had previously known.

It was a search Grant found himself going back to with increasing frequency. Each time he did, he scrolled through more and more pages of things he had already seen in order to ultimately get to the new stuff. A few months down the road, he finally hit on something that grabbed his attention like an oncoming freight train. It was a posting on some obscure social media platform called "talk," and the note by someone with the handle KYFamilyMan simply asked the question,

Has anyone out there ever been to a
place called Kadosh or heard of
someone from there named Raum?

The Four Corners of Winter

Grant felt his entire body sit back a few inches, then he leaned in close and read it again. He had known in his heart since their first return that others had returned, too, and that they must be out there, but this was the first proof he had seen. He went to the site, hoping to respond to the guy, but quickly discovered he needed to set up an account. He felt awkward and a little gun-shy about using his real identity for fear of people thinking he'd lost his mind, so he set up a new email address and used it to register for an account on the platform. He continued to aim for anonymity, so in both places, he simply called himself Kadosh Survivor.

Able to see more with a registered account, he noticed that the posting was over a year old and quickly confirmed that no one had responded to it in that time. He wasn't sure why, but he found it difficult to come up with the right words to say. He went back and forth, typing and then deleting, but ultimately settled on a reply far shorter than the allotment from the platform:

Yes. What island were you on?

After submitting, Grant just stared at it for a while. He knew it was silly to expect an immediate response, but he couldn't help himself. It was torture as he checked back almost constantly while he ended up waiting for several days before KYFamilyMan finally answered. But once he did, it was with a great deal of enthusiasm,

and the aftermath of that Band-Aid being ripped off was an onslaught of communication that came several times every day.

It turned out they had been on the same island and knew each other quite well. It was Qasim, one of the two men who had given Grant a place to sleep in their hut on his last trip to Kadosh. At first, they were just thrilled to reconnect. They caught up on what had gone on at home since getting back, including Qasim's family immigrating from Morocco to Bowling Green, Kentucky. Eventually, their conversation turned to the idea of searching for other people from Kadosh.

They started reaching out on additional social media platforms and slowly put together a private, world-wide support group. While the two of them were about 2,500 miles apart, they were both able to find people much closer to each of them, and families with this common experience started gathering to encourage one another. They met for coffee, shared meals, and had barbecues that were like Kadoshian family reunions.

It was a good thing, too. Grant was surprised to learn that some people had convinced themselves their trip to Kadosh wasn't even real. There were those who had decided it had to have been a dream, even when they had learned that they had shared it with other family members. Some had hidden it entirely because they thought they were going crazy. Most, however, knew it was real but, like the Snyders, had primarily been keeping

The Four Corners of Winter

it to themselves for fear of the reaction from those who could never understand what they had been through. It was a therapeutic endeavor for a lot of people who desperately needed it.

Almost unanimously, particularly once the mental and emotional healing had taken place, survivors agreed that Kadosh had changed their lives for the better. Yet, when the Snyders brought up the idea of a return trip down the line, everyone quickly refuted the concept. They said it sounded too scary, too dangerous, and too risky. They had made it out once but didn't want to press their luck a second time around.

While the entire family continued to try and find new survivors, and even recruit them for an eventual return, it slowly became clear that, while it resulted in a comfort at home, when it was time for their final return to Kadosh, the Snyders would be going alone.

CHAPTER SIX

Signs

The Alderwood Mall in Lynnwood, Washington had been a staple in the Snyder household since even before the family truly began. The mall opened in 1979 when Grant and Jill were barely out of diapers. They had spent time there when they were dating and seen it go through a lot of renovations over the years. The kids had been raised going to the mall for back-to-school shopping, to get their picture taken with Santa Claus, to watch movies, and just like they were doing on this particular day, to buy each other Christmas gifts. They had split up and intentionally gone to different parts of the mall to ensure their purchases remained a surprise.

Tatum was on the first floor of Nordstrom hunting for a present for her dad in the men's department. She had looked at ties, sweaters, and button-down shirts, but couldn't find anything

that she was excited about and also fit the “fifty dollars or less” budget restriction she had placed on all of her gifts that year to help her start saving a little spending money to take with her when she eventually went to college.

As she slowly turned in a circle hoping to spot more options, she began to take notice of the loud and repetitive pounding noise she was unexpectedly hearing. She looked up to where the sound seemed to be coming from but saw only the ceiling. She then glanced over to the large glass doors that led out to the parking lot. That’s when she noticed how dark it was outside and that it was pouring down rain, which she didn’t remember being in the weather forecast. The Northwest is known for precipitation so that wasn’t surprising, but the heaviness and volume of this rainfall was unusual.

~

Jill’s mind quickly drifted back to her last trip to Kadosh. Shortly after arriving, she had found herself in a dark forest. She had just banged her knee on a fallen tree when a similarly heavy rain had begun to fall. The lonely, frightened feeling she had experienced then suddenly returned to the pit of her stomach. Jill did not want to admit it to anyone, but she really had no desire to go back there. After all, the life she was living at that moment

The Four Corners of Winter

truly was a happy one.

She figured, since God already knew, she could at least confess her misgivings to Him and ask for the peace that only He could provide anyway. Briefly closing her eyes in the middle of Forever 21, she did exactly that.

~

Grant reopened his eyes and took a bite of his Auntie Anne's pretzel. He looked down at it and wondered how soon he'd be stuck in Kadosh with food he had to catch, cook, and find a way to flavor with none of the conveniences of a modern American kitchen. He expected the peace he'd prayed for to come, but he had to admit that it wasn't there yet.

~

While it wasn't typical for Kinsey to be alone in a women's clothing store, he found himself, at that moment, holding a hanger out in front of him that displayed a top he thought his sister would appreciate. He pursed his lips and nodded his approval at no one in particular before turning toward the cash register, ready to make the purchase. As he started to walk, he noticed that the rain shower outside the window was slowing

down a bit.

Recollecting his slip and slide down the muddy hill in Kadosh, a grin suddenly crept up in the corners of his mouth as he also recalled meeting Pablo and Caleb for the first time shortly after his body finally came to a stop. *There are good things about Kadosh, too*, he thought. *Good people in a bad spot that need to come home.*

~

Jill's peace began to settle in as she thought about the barbecue they had hosted the previous July and the fact that her Kadoshian friend, Olivia, had brought her entire family, great-grandkids and all. She truly believed that both trips to the strange place had been worth everything they entailed, and she was gaining confidence that a third would be no different.

~

The flickering lights interrupted Grant's thoughts as everyone around him stopped in their tracks and started looking up in wonderment. He took his last bite of pretzel, crumpled up the wrapper, and tossed it in the garbage. *Is the storm causing power issues*, he wondered, *or is this something else?*

The Four Corners of Winter

~

As the lights continued to flicker and the whispers of the people around her turned into chatter interrupted by gasps, Tatum began trying to figure out where her family would be at that moment. They were supposed to all meet up at Panda Express in the food court, but that wasn't for another forty-five minutes. *If Kinsey is shopping for one of my parents, he's either here or at Macy's. If he's shopping for me, he's at Loft. My mom could be anywhere they sell clothes, and my dad is supposed to be shopping but is probably eating either a cookie or a pretzel.*

She looked up the escalator and considered the climb to the other floors of the store. A glance outside showed flashes of lightning, and the sound of thunder that followed caused her to flinch. She then looked out into the main part of the mall and decided that trying to find her dad was her best bet.

~

Kinsey had finished his cash transaction and exited Loft. He passed Eddie Bauer and took a left at the jewelry store. He walked by about another half dozen storefronts before reaching Auntie Anne's, right next to Cinnabon. He looked around and finally spotted a familiar face. His dad was staring up at the lights, which

had stopped flickering, as Tatum approached him.

“Hey, kiddo,” Grant said as he gave his daughter a side-hug. “Backup generator must’ve kicked in. Heard some pretty crazy thunder though, huh?”

“Yeah,” she responded as Jill walked up behind them, leaned over their shoulders, and put her arms around both of them, “where did this come from? Hey, Mom.”

“Hey,” Jill responded, “good question.”

Kinsey approached, and the family finished off their group hug as everyone around them seemed to go back to what they were doing with little more than a brief experience to talk about.

“I guess it’s over,” Jill announced as she pointed to the windows by Dave & Buster’s. Other than the wet pavement, you would never know that a storm had just been active. The sun was shining, and the sky looked as clear as it had on any day the Snyder’s could remember seeing in Washington State at that time of year. “Weird.”

“Super weird,” Grant admitted.

“You don’t think...” Jill started to slowly ask, “it had anything... to do with...”

“No,” Grant said, clearly understanding exactly where his wife was going with the question she was trying to get out. “That’s too big of a reach, even for Raum and even by Kadoshian standards.”

The Four Corners of Winter

“It wasn’t Raum,” Kinsey interjected as he pointed to a flashing exit sign. He lowered his arm, turned around to face his family, then lifted his arm again and pointed at another exit sign that was also flashing. They all spun around. Three exit signs were visible, all were blinking, but only the Snyders seemed to be paying any kind of attention.

“Does that mean we’re leaving?” Tatum asked.

“Not yet,” Kinsey answered. “But soon. Real soon.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Christmas Eve

The day before Christmas had a very specific schedule to it in the Snyder house. It was one that had evolved over the years, but by this point in their lives, it was pretty well locked into place. It started with a rule that everyone got to sleep in. So, as people woke up without an alarm, they had to keep the noise down to let everyone else sleep as long as their bodies would allow. The catch was that whoever slept the longest was responsible for providing breakfast for the rest of the family. It was their choice whether they went out and bought it or stayed home and cooked it themselves, but it couldn't be something as simple as a bowl, a spoon, a carton of milk, and a box of cereal. It had to be unanimously considered a proper breakfast that required some real effort on the part of the provider. It also made the morning a mystery which was part of the fun.

Kinsey was the big “winner” that year, and he made a large batch of scrambled eggs for the family. He never made the same scramble twice because what was in it always depended on what was in the fridge. He often incorporated leftovers, and that morning was no exception. The Snyders had tacos a couple of nights earlier, so Kinsey added some taco meat, ranch dressing, salsa, cheddar cheese, pinto beans, and green onions. He also made home fries with potatoes, butter, onions, and a variety of seasonings as a side dish. Grant announced that he thought it was their first Mexican Christmas Eve breakfast. Jill added that it might also be their best. Grant and Tatum agreed.

When the late meal was over and the kitchen had been cleaned up, it was time to watch some college football and start slowly getting ready to go to Jill’s sister’s house for an early dinner and present exchange. The gathering consisted mostly of the same group that had been at the Snyders’ for Thanksgiving, but Ray wasn’t there because he had flown to California to be with his family. The adults didn’t exchange gifts with one another, but they got one for each of the kids. It was a lot of fun and a lot of noise. The evening was also a pot-luck style dinner. Jill’s middle-sister’s contribution always depended on which fad-diet she was trying that season. This was the year she went gluten-free and offered up some “pizza bites” that included a crust that seemed to take four or five times longer to chew than it should have.

The Four Corners of Winter

Lucky for her, she had plenty of leftovers that everyone insisted she take back with her.

Before returning home, the Snyders attended a Christmas Eve candlelight service at their church. The key verses their pastor referenced were John 1:1-5, 14:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

Kinsey fixated on the light versus dark part of the passage as he thought back to their last trip to Kadosh. They had been in the dark until the light showed up on Raum's island and chased the darkness away. He couldn't help but smile at what an amazing thing the presence of God really was. Continuing to listen, he heard the pastor as he preached on those verses for about a half an hour and then summed everything up with two quotes from C.S. Lewis' book *Miracles*:

“The central miracle asserted by Christians is the Incarnation. They say that God became Man. Every other miracle prepares for this, or exhibits this, or results from this.”

“In the Christian story God descends to re-ascend. He comes down; down from the heights of absolute being into time and space, down into humanity . . . But He goes down to come up again and bring the ruined world up with Him . . .”

The Snyders all went away overwhelmed by the warmth of God’s love, not just for them but for all of creation. They knew, too, that they were among the blessed few who had felt that warmth physically on Raum’s island in the middle of Kadosh on both of their trips to that strange world. It was that warmth, that presence, that made Kinsey smile in the middle of the sermon, and it brought a similar smile to everyone’s face on the car ride home. The possibility of feeling that amazing warmth again was one of the very limited number of things that excited them about going back.

The final tradition on the schedule for the Snyder Christmas Eve was the opening of a single present by each family member. They drew names from a bag to determine who each person was getting a gift from and then pulled the present that matched the draw from underneath the tree. They also opened them in reverse order of age which meant Kinsey got to go first.

He drew his dad’s name and was handed a rectangular box that had been wrapped, but not with his mom’s usual precision, so he knew this had truly come from Grant. He ripped the paper off and quickly lifted the top from the box to reveal a pair of

The Four Corners of Winter

black hurdle shoes that he immediately knew would go well with his track uniform. Tucked into the heel on the inside of one of the shoes was a bag of metal spikes that screwed into the bottoms. He jumped up and gave his dad a big hug and said his thanks before sitting back down to handle the shoes while he watched Tatum unwrap her present from him.

Kinsey was by far the worst in the family at wrapping presents. They were always overdone with too much paper, which made them poofy instead of tight and clean. This was no exception. In fact, it was probably the worst presentation of any gift Kinsey had ever given. But, as Tatum unwrapped it, it became clear why that was the case. He had rolled a large blanket and wrapped it without a box. While the presentation of the gift itself was horrible, the blanket was a pretty, teal-colored, polyester fleece material with the words *faith*, *hope*, and *love* written in white. Tatum immediately enveloped herself in it and told Kinsey how cozy it was. He said it was meant for their movie nights, but she could also take it to college with her. They exchanged hugs and thanks, much like Kinsey had already done with his dad, and then sat back down for the part they were both most excited for.

While Jill had drawn Tatum's name, and Grant had drawn Jill's, they made a special exception to the rules to account for the fact that the kids had teamed up to give their parents a single present. Jill's gift to Grant would have to wait until morning since

the “one gift each” rule was not negotiable.

Kinsey had saved up as much as he could, but Tatum had pitched in more than half because she was the one with a job. They handed over a simple envelope, and after a little gushing, Jill opened it to find a gift certificate to a bed and breakfast in Langley, Washington, where two college kids had spent a weekend between their sophomore and junior years after getting married, for a short honeymoon. Since then, they had also discovered a restaurant in nearby Freeland that had become their absolute favorite “anniversary spot,” so the possibility of going there immediately sprang to their mind as well.

Grant and Jill stared at the gift certificate for a moment, looked at each other, then at their kids, and tears formed in their eyes at the thoughtfulness and the realization of just how far they had come. Not just in their marriage as a whole since those college days, but specifically as a family since their first trip to Kadosh. It was a tender moment for all four of them.

They would be thankful for the memory of that moment sooner than they realized because the call for one last trip to that dreary world was approaching quickly.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Duty Calls

It had gotten quite late, and everyone was hustling off to bed. They prepared for slumberland while looking forward to a morning filled with breakfast casserole, the last day of Christmas music for about eleven months, and of course, both stocking stuffers and additional, bigger presents.

Kinsey brushed his teeth as he pulled down his covers, got his Bible out, laid it next to his pillow, and pushed the switch to turn on his reading lamp. He went back to the bathroom and rinsed out his mouth before saying goodnight to his parents and sister. Finally, he flipped the switch on the wall to turn off the overhead light in his room and closed the door.

As he crawled into bed, Kinsey climbed over his Bible, laid down next to it, pushed his pillow up against the headboard, picked up the only book he had made a habit of reading twice a

day, every single day for several years and counting, and opened it to where he had left off that morning before getting up to greet his family. That put him at the beginning of the thirteenth chapter of the Gospel According to Mark where the author was describing the signs of the end of the age and then transitioning into what had come to be known as the abomination of desolation. The part that stood out to Kinsey, and he couldn't be sure why since it was a warning for pregnant women, was the eighteenth and nineteenth verses which read:

Pray that this will not take place in winter, because those will be days of distress unequalled from the beginning, when God created the world, until now—and never to be equaled again.

Kinsey found himself fixated on that prophetic scripture as his eyes grew tired. He wondered what it was that was tugging at him. The Spirit within him was connecting to the passage, but he couldn't quite make sense of it. As his mind wandered, he thought about what a horrible time it was describing and how awful it sounded to be living in this world during that coming period. His heart grew heavy as he couldn't help but feel sorry for those who would have to endure it.

It was a lousy sentiment to end the day on, but slowly his thoughts faded, and he drifted off to sleep with the lamp still on. And, as he meandered into unconsciousness, the glowing ball from the lamp on the other side of his eyelids diminished nearly into oblivion. But soon, another light appeared inside of it, grew

The Four Corners of Winter

out of it, and then moved toward him at a much faster pace than the previous one had disappeared. It quickly enveloped him in a truly comforting way. It felt familiar, too.

Suddenly, Kinsey remembered having a dream leading up to his last trip to Kadosh. It featured a ball of light that he had looked into, and he had received the identical sensation. He remembered thinking that it was like being tucked into his own bed with a warm blanket.

This was it!

But instead of being something small enough for Kinsey to focus on and look into, this time the light was all around him, making this experience fit the “blanket idea” even better than the last one had. Suddenly, a voice interrupted the moment just as it had previously.

“You knew the time would come,” the voice bellowed, “and come it has. The people who remain trapped in Kadosh need you to show them the way out. They are being given a final chance, not because they deserve it, but because the grace of He who sends you demands it.”

“I know,” Kinsey softly replied as he enjoyed the coziness that covered every inch of him. “I’m ready.”

“Gather your family,” the voice roared in an authoritative but inviting tone just before the light sped away even faster than it had arrived.

“Wait, don’t go!” Kinsey yelled as he sat straight up in bed, suddenly wide awake and already missing the warmth he was enjoying only a moment earlier. He looked down at the Bible in his lap and re-read the verse he had been focused on when falling asleep. It started, “Pray that this will not take place in winter.”

Kinsey didn’t read any further. He put his Bible down and climbed out of bed. Briefly looking back at it, he considered the possibilities and then walked slowly to the door. He opened it and stepped out into the hallway. Tatum was already standing out there in front of her room.

“I just had the weirdest dream,” she whispered. “I was visited by what felt like the light from Raum’s island.”

“I had it, too.” Kinsey and Tatum both looked up, locking eyes for the first time since going to bed.

“So did we,” Grant said as he and Jill stepped out of their room.

“It’s time to go,” Jill added as everyone shared pensive glances with one another.

“Yeah, and I think it’s going to be cold,” Kinsey announced. “Really, really cold.”

CHAPTER NINE

Exit

The Snyders had long since recognized that they couldn't take things with them to Kadosh. Grant had a flashlight in his back pocket when they left the last time, and although he had no recollection of letting it go, it was waiting for him on the ground when they returned. But, on both of their previous trips, the Snyder family had arrived wearing the very same clothing they had on when they departed. With that knowledge, Kinsey's prediction of extreme cold, and the realization that their return to Kadosh was imminent, they found themselves digging through drawers and closets for all the snow gear they could find.

Had they not been so focused on their departure, the activity may have brought back memories of old ski trips up Stevens and Snoqualmie passes to the east of where they lived, north to Mount Baker, or even their solitary trip to Mount Bachelor in

Oregon. But they didn't have time to reminisce. Kadosh was calling, and Kinsey's weather forecast had added a reasonable element of panic.

Once everything was laid out in front of them, they began putting as many of their clothes on themselves as possible. Having decided they could always take clothes off when they got there, this seemed like the safest approach. It started with long underwear and socks, which sounds simple enough, but Grant felt like he needed a giant shoehorn to get into his twelve-year-old underwear bottoms and would probably need a pair of scissors to eventually get back out.

Next were jeans, another layer of socks, and t-shirts. This was all followed by snow pants, glove liners, and sweatshirts. Finally, they added boots, gloves, beanies, and thick, winter coats. Almost immediately, they discovered that their body movement had been seriously impaired. Collectively, they looked like four people of varying sizes all dressed up like Randy Parker in the movie *A Christmas Story*.

They discovered at the top of the staircase, when Grant and Kinsey collided and accidentally formed into what looked like one giant cushion, that two at a time would cause a traffic jam, and they were quickly forced to switch to a single-file line. They marched down the stairs like Imperial Stormtroopers following orders handed down through the autocratic Galactic Empire

The Four Corners of Winter

directly from Emperor Palpatine himself, and collected in a circle in the entry way to the house.

“I guess Christmas will have to wait,” Grant stated matter-of-factly.

“Sounds like we’re headed to Narnia,” Tatum quipped.

“What do you mean?” Jill asked sincerely.

“Where it’s always winter,” Tatum started to answer but turned to Kinsey to let him finish for her.

“But never Christmas,” he stated without missing a beat.

“Of course,” Jill acknowledged with a grin.

Grant opened the front door, ushered everyone outside, followed them onto the porch, and closed the door behind him. They began the slow trek into the woods. Had it not been for the swish-swoosh of their loud winter clothing rubbing against itself, the walk would have been performed in complete silence. Grant didn’t take a flashlight with him this time, and the difference in visibility was obvious. No one cared, though. They were too preoccupied with the dread that came from knowing they were all about to be split-up and that the time before the reunion they prayed would eventually come was likely going to be lengthy. It would certainly be full of adversity and struggle. Inevitably, they arrived at the spot where all four of them had disappeared and, ultimately, reappeared, twice.

Just as it had previously, the group’s collective heartrate

increased substantially. The silence continued as everyone reached out and grabbed one another's hands while forming a circle much like they had in the entryway of their house just moments earlier. They bowed their heads and closed their eyes while Grant began to pray for both wisdom and protection.

Just a couple of sentences into the prayer, they began to feel the familiar warmth surge within them and flow out of every square inch of their bodies. Eyes still closed, their hands gradually released from one another as they felt themselves begin to float off the ground.

~

Tatum steadily became aware of the same rushing sound she remembered hearing at this point of her journey the last time she left for Kadosh. She slowly opened her eyes, excited to see the beautiful colors she also remembered. Immediately, she was pleased to discover that disappointment wasn't going to be an issue as the luminescence came flooding toward her.

~

Kinsey once again took mental note of the steady pulse within the light. He remembered thinking it was like a heartbeat

The Four Corners of Winter

on his last journey, and suddenly the phrase *God is light* came to his mind. He stared in amazement at the awe-inspiring sight before him and wondered if this could be the very Spirit of God, the source of all life, transporting him to Kadosh to complete the task He had called the Snyder family to accomplish.

~

A longing developed inside of Grant as he watched the light begin to fade, and with it, the warm feeling that he had been experiencing since he was in the woods near home. However, as the light was replaced by darkness, another, albeit wholly different light, became visible in the distance. It was like a white line, expanding horizontally into the entire horizon ahead of him and then vertically until no darkness remained. Suddenly, absolutely everything was completely white.

~

As if Kadosh was revealing its current state to her, Jill realized that she had just watched, for the first time, the strange world come into view. Even more startling was the revelation that the entire place was encased in snow and ice.



PART THREE
Unfamiliar

CHAPTER TEN

Cold and Lonely

Tatum could feel the bitter chill through all the layers she was wearing. It was an arctic atmosphere that was unlike anything she had ever experienced before and that nothing could have prepared her to encounter. It was the direct opposite of the warmth she felt when the light visited her in the dream earlier that night. More than a persistent coldness, it felt like the complete absence of all heat.

~

Grant had always been what Jill called a “hot body,” and it wasn’t because of his masculine physique. She was frequently chilly, so she loved snuggling up next to her husband. He was her personal heat-source. Warmth often seemed to be emanating

from his body which is why he was happy in shorts, a tee shirt, and flip-flops, even if it was only forty-five degrees outside. Grant, however, had finally met his match. Even under more layers of clothing than he had ever put on, he was almost instantly aware that Kadosh was glacial.

~

The icy air had made its way through every layer of Jill's apparel, pierced the pores of her skin, and seeped into her bones. She checked her surroundings, but nothing looked familiar. How could it? Even if this was the very same spot she had landed in before, everything was now covered in a thick layer of white that wasn't there on either of her previous arrivals in any shape or form. This time it was omnipresent. The ground was white. There were still mountains, but they were blanketed, too. Even though there was snow everywhere, the altostratus clouds that produce snow, which Jill had always considered more of a bluish-gray color, were non-existent. Even the sky was white, like one giant cirrus cloud. The lack of color, quite literally, seemed to have taken over.

Unsure of where to go, but certain that standing in place guaranteed her to not only keep from getting any semblance of body heat going but also go absolutely nowhere, she lifted a boot

The Four Corners of Winter

out of the snow and took a very heavy step forward.

~

Planting it back down again, Kinsey's foot sank about ten or twelve inches into the fresh snow. As he noticed the eerie silence in the still air, he wondered where the other boys were, who was remaining from the small group he had previously left behind at their insistence, and how many new kids had arrived since he had last been in Kadosh.

Finally, his thoughts landed on Trevor in particular. Silently thanking God for another chance to save Trevor's life, he smiled in the hopes that he would be able to find the angry boy again. Then his smile grew bigger, and he let out a small but audible, partial chuckle as he realized how strange it was to be looking forward to seeing someone one who had never been anything but mean to him to such an extreme that he had, at one point, actually tried to kill him. *Forgiveness might even be better for the giver than it is for the receiver*, he thought as it slowly dawned on him for the first time that, at some point, he had forgiven Trevor without even noticing that he had done it. *Forgiveness. Only by the grace of God. Amazing.*

Kinsey continued walking until he realized that his breathing had become heavier. He felt it in his chest, but it was also evident in the steam clouds he made in front of his face with every husky

exhale. This was the first of many instances he would wonder about the length of time he had been walking. All he knew at this point was that it hadn't been long. That would eventually change drastically.

~

Tatum slowly began to feel her body warming up from the difficult work of simply walking. What made it so demanding was the fact that she was wading through the deep powder which acted like weights on her feet, and gravity was doing the rest. It reminded her of a lesson at school where they learned about the history of snowshoes.

She couldn't remember all the details, but she was pretty sure they had been invented around five thousand years earlier somewhere in Central Asia. She did remember, however, that they were designed to create a significantly larger footprint for the user, spreading the burden of their body's mass out over a larger area and making the kind of traveling Tatum was doing at that moment a lot easier. *When I find a place to bunker down, she thought, I might have to reinvent me a pair of those things.*

~

The Four Corners of Winter

While the idea of “hunkering down” sounded like a good one to Jill, especially the harder she worked because the increasing fatigue made rest so desirable, it also generated a bit of apprehension in her. She knew that if her body stopped moving without a fire to heat her surroundings, she would eventually freeze to death.

~

For the time being, Kinsey simply decided to keep going. He continued to hope that he would eventually find another boy, Trevor or not, but as minutes turned into hours, and the hours started piling up, Kadosh began to appear as barren as it did white. Each step grew more difficult, and Kinsey felt his body hunching over as his eyes grew increasingly heavy. *So much for track getting me into shape*, he thought. *The team should spend a couple of hours out here. We'd all be as fit as anyone in the district.*

He suddenly had an overwhelming desire for pizza and wondered where that thought had come from. He realized it had probably been the better part of a day since he had consumed any food or beverages. It was the first thought of hunger he could remember since he and his family had woken up from their dreams that told them it was time to go to Kadosh. He wondered exactly how many hours that had been and quickly excused

himself for wanting a hot slice of pizza. He didn't even care all that much what was on it. Everything sounded good to him in that moment. Well, not mushrooms, but everything else.

That's when it hit him; fatigue was truly setting in. He was exhausted and needed to find a place to rest before he passed out in the snow.

~

Grant stopped in his tracks and scanned the area for a place to take shelter, both squinting and blinking repeatedly because his eyes wanted to close so badly. *There has to be a cave or something around here somewhere*, he thought as his eyes finally shut. He felt his body grow heavy and his head jerk up as his eyes opened, and he tried to force them wide as he stiffened his body and stood straight up to keep himself from passing out.

Head swiveling, Grant frantically searched the area again for either a sign of life or some kind of shelter. Disappointed at the lack of prospects, he finally decided to keep himself moving and lifted one leg in front of the other in an attempt to both make progress and keep himself awake and alive.

~

The Four Corners of Winter

Tatum was growing more desperate with each step. It was no longer just her feet but her entire body that felt heavy. Even her arms began to feel as if she was dragging her knuckles through the snow like some kind of arctic Neanderthal. Her thoughts became foggy, her vision started to blur, and the speed of her motions felt like they were gradually reducing, until finally, everything suddenly went black.

Also by C.S. Elston

Now Available:

“The Four Corners”



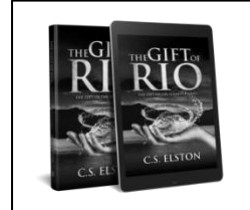
“The Four Corners of Darkness”



“The Gift of Tyler”



“The Gift of Rio”



Coming Soon:

“The Gift of Matias”



“The Gift of Amanda”





After award-winning stage work in the nineties, Chris Elston moved to Los Angeles where he wrote more than two dozen feature film and television screenplays. He has been invited to participate in screenwriting events for Cinema Seattle and Angel Citi Film Festival. In 2013, Chris left Los Angeles for the suburbs of his hometown, Seattle, Washington, to get married and start a new chapter in his own story. The journey of the chapter that followed eventually landed he and his wife in Northern Arizona where they now reside.

