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SWORDSMAN

a novel by

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Author's Note

In the late 1970's, I began scribbling notes for a book and sending them off to my sister. I described images of a future world where war precipitated the loss of much of the global oil supply, and acts of biological terrorism had taken many lives. But in this world, all hope wasn't lost. A new source of energy that traveled through fiberoptic strands was hailed as the means by which humanity could move beyond mere survival mode. This technology made a cashless global economy possible, and aided in the enforcement of controlled population zones. Every person could be tracked via the use of micro chips (containing a person's entire history) imbedded under the skin. To ensure the survival of the majority during the transition, governmental policies were implemented to limit resources spent on caring for the elderly, the handicapped, and those who resisted necessary changes. In order to guarantee peace, there could be no "exclusive" belief system or culture. With all this in place, mankind's need for order and for material gain would be kept in perfect balance.

I could only write late at night as I juggled the responsibilities of work and family, so it was a slow process. In 1987, I thought I'd finished the tale of this future world and published the first edition of *SWORDSMAN*.

That novel was the skeleton of this one, but virtually *all* the scientific advances and cultural trends in the book you now hold were in the original novel. Although I have added a few new characters and more details, this version remains true to the original storyline.

To illustrate how we might arrive at the world portrayed in *SWORDSMAN*, I later wrote two prequels: *GATEKEEPER* and *SOJOURNER*, which contain the history of events and characters in this final book. These three books make up the *Fellowship of the Mystery* trilogy.

It's been more than 25 years since I began mailing those first notes to my sister. Amazingly, nearly all of the inventions and technologies described in the first edition of *SWORDSMAN* are

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in everyday use or within reach. Time has taken that which might have been considered a farfetched story and turned it into a plausible scenario.

I want readers to know, however, that this book isn't intended to give people a timetable for future events. It's a story . . . written to show the potential fruit of ideologies and attitudes that are blossoming in society today. It's an opportunity to see how our small, daily decisions (or compromises) foreshadow the decisions we will make concerning larger, more difficult issues. This is a tale about the impact of accumulated choices on our lives, on the lives of those around us, and on the generations to come.

“ . . . in the last days, there will come scoffers who will do every wrong they can think of, and laugh at the truth. This will be their line of argument: ‘So Jesus promised to come back, did he? Then where is he? He’ll never come! Why, as far back as anyone can remember everything has remained exactly as it was since the first day of creation.’”

2 Peter 3:3-4 [TLB]

CHAPTER ONE

A suburb of Dallas in the former state of Texas

"What are we doing here?" she whispered. She could see their breath blowing away in the cold wind.

"Shhhh!" he said, waving his hand down and creeping toward the house. When he reached the window, he slowly straightened up, raising his eyes just above the sill.

After a while, she began to think he'd frozen there. He hadn't moved as much as a finger in several minutes. She crawled over to where he'd pressed up against the building and she could hear singing. It reminded her of something, but she couldn't think of it right then and wanted to go. She reached over and jiggled his arm.

"Michael," she said in a hushed voice, "what in the world are you doing?"

He'd been so carried away watching the people in the house, the start of her touch made him lose balance and fall backward onto the ground.

"Someone's outside," a voice in the house said.

"Let's go see," said another.

A woman's voice said, "If someone's out there, invite them in!" and laughter followed.

Michael jumped up, grabbed Linda by the hand, and started running as hard as he could. He dragged her around the side of

the house, then through the yard and up a street, his long legs taking great strides. He ran so fast, Linda could hardly keep up and nearly fell several times.

When they got to the corner she managed to call out, "Michael! Stop! Are you trying to kill me?"

He leaned against a signpost and gasped, "Sorry . . . I thought they were going to catch us spying on them."

"What do you mean 'us'?" she asked, slightly indignant. "I wasn't spying on anyone. *You* were the one peeping in the window." Her eyebrows came together. "What were they doing anyway? . . . It sounded like they were just singing."

"They weren't just singing," he said, starting to walk.

Linda trotted a few steps to catch up with him. "Then what were they doing?"

"I don't know exactly."

"Who are they? Do you know them?" Her curiosity started to roll.

"Why? Planning on doing one of your 'in depth' reports on them?" He made little quotation marks in the air.

"Don't be a jerk, Michael. I mean, were they doing something weird or what?"

"Just forget it, okay?"

"Drop dead," she said, coming to a halt. She waited for him to notice she'd stopped and come back, but he kept walking. "Okay. Okay," she called. "You keep going, I'll come home when I feel like it. *If I feel like it!*"

Did he hear her? He didn't even slow down. What was with him anyway? She felt insecure and she didn't like it. Men chased *her* not the other way around. At least, that was the way it was supposed to be.

A surprising thought shot into her brain. *Wow. Maybe I've started to wrinkle or something. I'll definitely have to think about this.*

When Michael arrived home, it had begun to get dark and he could see the soft light of candles in some of the windows he passed. He entered the apartment through the kitchen and saw a light coming through the door to the living room. Stopping only momentarily to pick up a piece of dried fruit off the table, he

walked into the living room to find two people sitting on his couch, kissing. He could see the backs of their heads.

"Party's over, folks," he said, continuing past them on the way to his room. . . . Just what he thought. Two guys.

"Hey Michael, what time is everyone getting here?" one of them called.

"Everyone who?" Michael stopped and looked out of his room at the couple.

"You know. Everyone. Zac, Linda, Jody, John . . . everyone."

"That's funny, I don't remember inviting anyone." He wanted to say something else to make them feel unwelcome but changed his mind. Linda must've planned a party. Maybe it would cheer him up. But first, he needed to find the box. He tried to remember where he'd stashed it last. . . . Under the bed? Too obvious. Anyone could find it there. In the closet maybe. He scavenged around in the closet, beginning to sweat. . . . Where had he put that box? He pulled the drawers all the way out of his dresser and left them on the floor.

"Looking for this?" Michael turned to see Martin, the feminine half of the couple, standing in the doorway, holding the small, black box.

"Where was it?" he said, grabbing it.

"Under your bed," Martin said.

"Well, just stay out of my room and keep your hands off my things." Michael started searching for the wire now. "You got the wire, too?"

"No. We couldn't find it."

Wanting to end the conversation, Michael closed his bedroom door. Bending down, he reached between his mattress and box springs and soon located it. He sat on the bed and plugged the wire into the box. He felt very little discomfort when he put the other end of the wire up into his sinuses and worked the electrode into just the right spot. He sat for a moment with his thumb resting on the toggle switch for the box. When he flipped the switch the jolt sent him back on the bed where he lay perfectly still, allowing alternating waves of numbness and pleasure to undulate over him.

He felt a floating sensation for a time and then as though he'd been drawn down into something. Suddenly, he became aware of sights and sounds around him.

Where am I? Michael thought, looking around. He could hear music playing and see many people sitting in rows around him. . . . Church. He was in church and he was only ten years old.

His little sister, Jill, sat farthest down the pew. Next came Father, Mother, brother Ben, then himself, and finally, older brother Zachary.

When they all stood to sing, Michael's vision zeroed in on a particular man in the choir. Every time the song got to the word "Emmanuel," the old guy got almost half of it out before yawning. Michael finally succumbed to the suggestion and yawned.

"Ouch! Stop pinching me!" Ben said loud enough to be heard several rows away.

Heads turned.

Mother leaned down and whispered, "Then stop picking your nose!"

Michael giggled.

Without her even looking over, Mother's radar hand came around Ben and found its mark. Michael heard a snap and felt a simultaneous sharp pain as Mother thumped him right behind the ear.

The hymn finally wound down, and the usual coughing, book closing, and foot shuffling could be heard.

Pastor Ted raised his hands for silence in the sanctuary.

"Father," Pastor Ted began, "thank You for this glorious day. We are so happy we could greet it together with You this morning. . . . We are so grateful to be in Your house, partakers at Your table . . ."

Father coughed. Mother nudged him.

Pastor Ted continued ". . . and as we gather today, we will remember in our prayers those who are ill or in need. Sister Margot, who underwent surgery this past week . . ."

Michael looked at his fingernails, then at his shoes. Ben started fidgeting with something he'd taken out of his pocket, then showed it to Michael: A small race car he'd gotten with his allowance.

"Bet it could do a hundred." Ben whispered to Michael.

Mother's radar hand found Ben's ear.

"Ow!"

Pastor Ted paused a moment too long for more breath.

"AMEN!" Father said, seating himself.

Pastor Ted looked around for the disturbance, "And for these flowers on the altar today. . ."

Father stood up again.

"I gotta go to the bathroom, Mom." Ben said without whispering.

She glared down at him and said under her breath, "You'd better be right back!"

Ben smiled triumphantly at Michael as he started past him toward the aisle.

"I gotta go, too, Mom." Michael said quickly, getting right behind Ben before she could reply.

Pastor Ted had about run out of prayer now.

"In the name of your Son, Jesus . . ."

"Thank God." Father said and sat down.

In the back, Ben tried the bathroom door. An usher quickly approached.

"Sorry. You boys will have to use the one in the balcony section. This one isn't working right." As the boys headed for the stairs, he added, "And no fooling around up there, you hear?"

Ben and Michael donned their most angelic faces and replied, "Yes, sir."

When they got to the top of the stairs, they looked around. Hardly anyone sat in the balcony. They went over to the corner near the bathroom door and stopped.

"You go first." Ben said.

"I don't need to go." Michael said.

"Me neither," Ben said before spotting the usher coming up the stairs. He quickly went in and closed the door. Michael stood outside, trying to look honest. The usher glanced over at him and then returned down the stairs.

Ben opened the door a crack. "He gone yet?"

"Yeah."

"Look what I found!"

Michael looked at the object in Ben's hand. It was a large, midnight-blue felt-tip marker. Michael's eyes got wide and he said, "What are you gonna write?"

Ben leaned forward and whispered, "How about 'Pastor Ted loves Mrs. Furguson'?"

Michael stifled a laugh. Mrs. Sue Furguson, the church

organist, was a huge, middle-aged woman, who wore enormous glasses and warbled when she sang. "Yeah!" Michael whispered back.

Ben closed the door and didn't open it for quite some time. Standing outside, Michael got rather bored before he noticed the usher walking toward him.

"Why are you still up here?" the man asked suspiciously.

He suddenly had second thoughts about Ben's activities in the bathroom. "My brother is . . . sick," he said, leaning against the door.

Ben heard Michael outside and thought for a moment. Then he started making what he thought would be believable throwing-up noises.

"Does he need help?" The usher showed concern now. It sounded as if Ben might be dying in there.

"Oh no!" said Michael. "He throws up all the time at home! He'll be okay in a minute."

Ben stopped the noises. "Well, if you say so . . ." the usher said. "I'll be back in a few minutes to see if he's okay."

As soon as the man disappeared down the stairs, Michael knocked on the door. "Ben. Ben, it's me. Open the door!"

Ben opened the door and his brother entered the restroom. There, neatly drawn above the toilet, an arrow-pierced heart proudly stated, "Ted 'n Soo."

"Ted 'n Soo?" Michael said. "I thought you were gonna write 'Pastor Ted loves Mrs. Furguson.'"

"Well I was. But after I thought about it, if they were in love, he wouldn't call her 'Mrs. Furguson' now would he? . . . Besides, I don't know how to spell Furguson."

"You're such a dummy!"

"Then *you* fix it!" Ben said, jamming the marker into Michael's hand.

They heard a knock on the door.

"Are you still in there?" the usher asked through the door. Michael and Ben's eyes grew wide.

"Yes . . . I'm in here with my brother. He's okay now. I'm just washing his face and stuff," Michael said loudly. Then he reached over and turned on the water.

"Do you want your mother?" the voice asked.

"Oh no!" he quickly blurted out. "She hates to miss church."

We'll be out in a minute anyway. Thanks."

"Okay," the usher said, "I'll come back in a minute and if you're still in there, I think I'd better get your mom."

"Ben," Michael said in a panicked whisper. "If he comes back and sees this," he pointed to the blue Ted 'n Soo heart, "we'll get killed right here in church! . . . Help me get it off!"

They used wet toilet paper, and blue ink ran down the wall in rivers. As they finished with each glob of paper, they put it in the toilet. Eventually, they ran out of toilet paper and used the tissues near the sink. Finally, the letters were barely visible.

Ben peeked out the door. "He's comin' Michael! *Hurry!*"

Michael flushed the toilet and turned out the light as they hurried out, meeting the usher at the top of the stairs.

"Hi," Ben said, walking past the usher with a large smile. "I'm feeling just fine now."

The usher shrugged and followed them down, not noticing the water beginning to soak the carpet in front of the bathroom door.

Ben and Michael found their way back to their pew, squeezing in with sighs of relief. Mother gave them a look, and they both smiled, happy to be safe in her presence again.

More than fifteen minutes passed. Michael and Ben had all but forgotten the whole thing when it happened. Pastor Ted had somehow compared a fishing trip to being a "fisher of men." He'd gotten to the climax of his sermon when a thin stream of water began pouring off the balcony and down onto the hat of Mrs. O'Brien.

At first, Mrs. O'Brien sat in stunned disbelief as two, three, and then four more little strings of water came down on her shoulders and the seat on either side of her. Then, one large stream poured over the edge of the balcony. It danced briefly on the wide brim of her hat which promptly collapsed in her face, allowing the water to pour directly down the front of her dress. She stood and screamed.

Then, Michael saw himself and Ben in their old home on 22nd Ave. Father towered over them, holding in his hands a bill totaling \$705.26 for repairs to the plumbing, cleaning of the carpets, and replacement for Mrs. O'Brien's hat and dress. Mother, once summoned to the room, knew enough to stay out of arm's reach.

Father glared at her. "Going to church is 'good for business', huh? *Whose business? The carpet cleaners'? The plumber's'?*"

Mother looked down and said nothing.

"And *you*," he said, glowering at Ben, "you worthless little twit . . . You always have been useless and always will be! . . . *Worthless idiot!*" He bellowed, raising his hand to strike Ben again and again.

Mother covered her face and ran from the room. Their little sister wailed and grabbed Michael by the arm. "Mikey, Mikey! Make him stop!"

Michael, only slightly larger than Ben, moved between them. "Look, I did it too! Don't hit him anymore!"

Father, drunk and enraged beyond reasoning, turned on Michael full force. "I'll teach *you* to interfere!"

Everything in Michael cried out, *Run! Run!*, but he couldn't seem to move fast enough. He strained every muscle to get out of the way, but found himself only capable of the slow-motion run of nightmares. As the first blow struck the side of Michael's head, searing pain shot through him, and he sat up.

He looked around, grateful to be awake. Sitting in his dark room, he could hear the sounds of people laughing and talking in the next room and saw light coming under the door.

He got up and, on the way to the door, tripped over one of the drawers he'd pulled out during the search for his black box. He kicked another drawer out of the way before opening the door.

While he'd been unconscious, the living room had filled with people. Michael knew most of them, but there were a few he'd never seen before.

"I sure hope someone brought something cold to drink," he called out, stepping over and around guests sitting on the rug.

Just then a loud burst of laughter came from the kitchen. When he walked in, he found Zachary sitting in one of the chairs. A small group of people gathered about him while he told one of his stories. Zac could make almost anyone comfortable in any situation by telling them a joke or a story. Sometimes Michael wondered, *Would Zac blow up if someone taped his mouth shut?*

"Do you ever give that silver tongue of yours a rest?" he asked.

"It's better than sleeping my life away, brother dear." Zac said in a funny voice.

Michael could tell by the look his brother gave him the statement had serious implications. "I plead guilty, your honor," he said, trying to keep things light. "But if you'd stop stealing all the girls away from the party, maybe I could stay awake for a minute or two."

He found the beer and tried to get one open. It hadn't been chilled so he displayed a distinct lack of enthusiasm in the endeavor. The cap finally came off in his hand, allowing the warm beer to fizz out the top and plop onto the floor. He stepped out the door and stood outside watching the foam erupting from the bottle.

Zac came out and sat on the top step near Michael. He made no attempt at building up to the subject. "Aren't you getting a little carried away with that box?"

Michael put the beer on the railing and sat down. "I don't know. I think I can handle it. I mean, I don't need it, but it sure isn't bad, you know?"

"No, I don't know, Mike. Why do you do it? You say you don't need it; and yet, as each day goes by, you're slipping away a bit more. And you don't seem any happier for it. In fact, you've been in quite a mood lately."

"Look, if I need a Father Confessor, I'll let you know, okay? I just need to work out some things. I can do it."

"I know you can," Zachary said quietly. "Just look out there." He pointed to the section of bright lights in the city. "We're all going to make it. Why, we can even see *real* lights over there. Soon the whole city might be wired again and it could be better than ever. I was afraid for a while, too. It's been scary at times, but lots of us have made it through all these transitions without getting coded. If we all stick together, they'll have to compromise with us eventually. Just look how little time has actually passed, and here we sit," he hesitated a moment, "almost back to normal."

Michael shot his brother a sideways glance. "Spare me the pep talk. It will never be 'normal' for us again, Zac. You know that as well as I do. What amazes me is how people can lose so much and forget it so quickly. They're ready to line up and start the whole mess over again on a handful of promises. . . . Maybe I can make it all come into focus soon, but I need to put some more space between myself and what's happened. I guess I'm

still hoping this is all a dream."

"*Aha!*" Zac exclaimed, "Dit you zay *dream*? Vot vus da dream about? You can tell da Doctor." Zachary rubbed his hands together and leaned toward Michael with his best "crazed psychiatrist" look. Michael couldn't help laughing.

"Are you ever serious, Zac?"

"Never for periods exceeding five minutes. Serious gives me warts."

"Don't change. I need someone like you in my life. I guess I take everything too seriously."

The kitchen door opened, and two girls peered out. "Are you guys coming in, or is there something about the two of you we don't know?"

"Jealousy will get you nowhere, girls," Zac said before he jumped up and ran after them.

Michael remained on the steps. Although he occupied a first-floor apartment, the hill-top location afforded him a view of the city. He scratched the stubble on his face and peered out at the lights.

He had to admit, when everything went so wrong he thought the whole human race would be canceled. A series of disasters spilled across the globe in rapid succession. An explosion on an international space station took the lives of all personnel before debris damaged numerous strategic satellites. Within minutes of reaching an agreement averting war with Russia over the incident, U.S. President Cole was assassinated. In a matter of days, his successor faced yet another crisis when thousands of people in the Northeast U.S. began dying of a fast-spreading contagion. While the eyes of the world were focused on these calamities, war broke out in the Middle East. Overwhelmed by the loss of satellites, ground equipment, and news crews, television media could only provide updates regarding bombed oilfields and the populations of several cities wiped out by nuclear blasts. Humanity let out a trembling sigh of relief when leaders signed a cease-fire agreement.

But the reverberations from these cataclysmic events were just beginning. Without a steady supply of oil, most forms of heat, refrigeration, lights, and transportation disappeared. In a bid to save as many lives as possible in America, the government ordered *all* persons in the northern half of the U.S. to submit to

martial law, quarantine, and relocation away from the cold and contamination. Michael remembered his own forced migration south. Did anyone know how many million people died during that winter?

Now, except for the land around the Mississippi River, where almost no one dared to venture, the south had become densely populated. News reports said most of the empty land to the north wouldn't be useable for several generations to come.

Despite extreme predictions by scientists, survivalists, and religious groups, technology *didn't* completely crash and the majority of Americans *didn't* perish. Discovered before the disasters, an oil-free source of energy, transmitted through fiberoptic cables, would soon do more than anyone ever dreamed. Instead of being reduced to cave-man status, mankind might actually take a gigantic leap into the future.

Michael looked out at the city again and marveled, *How can all this turn around so quickly?* His eyes found the area of bright lights again. Real lights. To his amazement, the new technology continued to expand everywhere. Soon, if they chose to, all people could have lights again. . . . Did he, Zac, and so many others want to acquiesce to governmental requirements in order to *get* those lights? If enough people held out for a compromise, would it happen?

He got his beer off the railing and took another sip. *A year ago, I thought each day might be my last. I thought if I didn't catch the disease, I'd starve . . . or freeze to death. Yet, here I am, with something to drink, clothes on my back, a place to live. Maybe Zac is right. Maybe, if we all stick together, life could have meaning again.*

He shivered. The night had gotten chilly so he decided to go back into the house.