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PENCE

BLIND

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SIGHT



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Blind Sight

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DEDICATION

To the Sovereign God.
He is Lord of my life and Lord of my circumstances.

“You are my God. My times are in your hands.”

PSALM 31:14-15, NIV

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Friday, December 6

Sometimes the best place to hide is in plain sight. Peter Bishop didn't know whether or not that particular adage was true, but for his children's sake, he hoped it was.

Their lives depended on it.

Standing in line at the EconoAir ticket counter, Peter muttered in frustration. Flight check-ins were always tedious. Yet every second that Micah and Michelle stood exposed, their danger increased.

Peter flicked his eyes back and forth, scanning the steady flow of pedestrian traffic. Four women in dark blue uniforms paraded along, pulling small suitcases behind them. A gray-bearded man trotted in the opposite direction. A suntanned young couple stood in front of him, gazing into each other's eyes. The woman carried a bright yellow bag with *Cancún* printed on it.

Honeymooners.

Maybe.

Peter looked them over and wondered if they were also killers.

Something bumped his heels. Peter inhaled sharply, balled his hands into fists, and swung around to face a middle-aged brunette pushing a baby stroller.

She drew back, a flash of fear reflected in her eyes. “I’m so sorry. Did I hurt you?”

Peter mumbled a reply and an apology. He let out a quiet sigh and turned around, rubbing his eyes.

Got to relax.

But Peter knew he’d never relax until Micah and Michelle were safely on board EconoAir Flight 298, bound for Dallas. He glanced toward the ceiling-mounted TV monitors.

Still on time.

Departure time: 5:55 p.m.

He glanced at his watch: 5:16 p.m.

Peter felt his right eyelid twitch. He raised a trembling hand and tried to rub away the annoying tic. He had been careful to the point of obsession in planning the children’s escape. He had even ordered the children’s tickets from a public-access Internet terminal rather than his own computer, and had them mailed to a postal box he’d rented just for the occasion. But Peter knew that Sawyer Wynne’s people would catch even the tiniest slip. And if that happened, they would dispatch a conversion team.

The hit would be efficient, untraceable—and merciless.

Conversion. Nothing but a sanitary term for murder.

Peter would *not* let that happen. Thus, he had to proceed on the assumption that someone *had* uncovered his plan and that somewhere in JFK Airport a killer waited for them. Peter looked down at the two children standing beside him.

“Michelle,” he whispered, “do you have the envelope?”

The ten-year-old rolled her eyes and tossed her curly blonde hair off her shoulder. “Daddy! For the fiftieth time, yes, I have the envelope.” She reached into the front pocket of her faded denim jeans and pulled out a white business envelope, folded into thirds and already frayed along the edges. She held it up for her father. “See?”

Peter bit his lower lip and nodded. “Good girl. Put it back now and don’t give it to anyone except—”

“Uncle Thomas?”

Peter ran his fingers through her hair. “Right.”

“But, Daddy—”

“Shhhh.” Peter put his index finger on his lips.

A ticket agent signaled that she was free, and the honeymooners ambled toward the counter.

Peter and the children would be next.

“It’s almost time to go now. Micah, you still with us?”

Peter’s son stared straight ahead. Stringy brown hair tumbled into his eyes. Grim faced, Micah nodded.

Peter Bishop managed a weak grin and smoothed his son’s hair.

“Next, please,” called a sharply dressed young man.

“Over there.” Peter motioned toward the left.

“Come on, Micah,” Michelle said.

The boy put his left arm on his sister’s right shoulder and allowed her to lead him to the ticket counter.

Turning, Peter took a second to scan the crowd once more.

“Hurry up, Daddy!” Michelle called to him.

Peter strode over and handed the children’s e-tickets to the ticket agent. The young man took the tickets without comment, looked them over for a second, and began typing on his keyboard.

“The children are traveling alone?” he asked without looking up at Peter.

Something in his tone made Peter nervous.

“Y-yes. I paid the fee for unaccompanied children when

I bought the tickets. Here are the forms.” Peter handed the agent some papers. “Is there a problem?”

“No problem.” The young man’s voice sounded mechanical as his eyes scanned the paperwork. “Just need to make sure you’ve arranged for the children to be picked up.” He glanced up at Peter. “Thomas Kent will be meeting the children?”

“Yes.” Peter spoke through clenched teeth. *I don’t think everybody heard you. Why don’t you announce it over the PA system?*

The truth was, Peter hadn’t called Thomas Kent yet. Any phone contact with Thomas before the children were on the plane was an unacceptable risk. He *had* sent a few e-mails, but even those had been cryptic. Once the children were safely airborne, Peter would make a call from one of the airport pay phones.

The agent began typing again. “Checking any luggage?”

“No.” Peter’s fingers drummed a staccato rhythm on his trouser legs.

Come on. Come on.

Finally the agent put the children’s boarding passes into an envelope and handed them, along with a fluorescent green card, to Peter.

“Your flight will be boarding at Gate 9. These are the children’s boarding passes, and this card will alert security that you are permitted to accompany the children to the gate. When you get to the gate, give the card to the gate agent. She’ll tell you what to do.”

Assuming we get that far.

“Come on.” Peter herded the children off to the left toward the security checkpoint.

Ironically, going through security was the one thing Peter *wasn’t* worried about. The Fellowship would never plant one of their people in such an obvious place. True to Peter’s expectations, he and the children passed through

the metal detector and under the security personnel's watchful eyes without incident.

Once they were through security, Peter took the children to a small newsstand near Gate 21. He didn't want to wait at the boarding area any longer than necessary. He preferred the confined space of a newsstand, as it allowed him to keep an eye on everyone entering and leaving. They would stay put until the very last minute, then dash for Gate 9.

Peter had chosen EconoAir Flight 298 because its boarding time coincided with several arriving flights. He hoped the volume of travelers in the concourse would conceal them and interfere with any attempt to stop them.

Across the concourse, a high-pitched whine signaled an arriving flight. Peter peered through the inky blackness outside the windows as a magnificent silver and gold 727 lumbered into view. The jet's lights illuminated an oddly serene swirl of snowflakes drifting toward earth.

Peter swore under his breath. The last thing he needed now was a delay for deicing. He'd counted on airport security to offer some small measure of protection. Any delay could allow that tenuous protection to evaporate.

Winding down like a toy with dying batteries, the engines' screaming dropped off. A moment later, Gate 21's Jetway rolled toward the plane, attaching itself to the airliner's side like a giant parasite.

Not long now.

His plan was simple. They'd walk against the flow of arriving passengers, using them as shields, and if he timed it right, they would arrive at Gate 9 just as the attendant called for pre-boarding. He'd have no trouble getting the kids VIP treatment.

Ten-year-old twins traveling alone, one of them blind.

Across the concourse, a troop of men in dark suits and white shirts marched up the Jetway, briefcases and cell phones in hand, looking like a Fortune 500 drill team.

Not yet. Wait for the families.

He didn't have to wait long. People of all ages and sizes followed one another off the plane. A young woman with frizzy, platinum blonde hair and five earrings in one ear appeared, carrying a curly-haired toddler. A group of what appeared to be college students trailed after her. Soon the trickle of arriving passengers became a flood, surging up the Jetway and out into the concourse.

"Now!" Peter whispered to the twins.

He stepped from the safety of the newsstand, tugging Michelle's left hand. Her movement pulled Micah into action. His hand resting on her right shoulder, Micah followed with cautious, halting steps.

"Daddy, slow down! Micah can't go that fast."

"He's got to."

"Straight ahead, Micah," Michelle told her twin brother.

Micah nodded, fixing the corridor with a vacant but determined stare. His legs strained as he tried to match his father's pace.

Peter glanced over his right shoulder and hissed through clenched teeth. "Come on! Speed up!"

The same moment he felt someone brush against him. Peter whipped around, panic in his eyes. But the offender, a young man wearing baggy denims and a black T-shirt, didn't even notice. He continued down the concourse in his own private world. Peter felt a bead of sweat trickle down his spine. His fingers twitched as his eyes fixed on a ceiling-mounted digital clock.

It was 5:45.

Peter saw the sign at his left. Gate 12. The timing was wrong. They needed to run.

They plodded.

Peter urged his children on. "Come on. We've got to hurry."

"But Micah can't go any faster."

“I’ll take care of him.”

Peter stooped down and threw his arm around Micah’s thighs.

“Jump, kiddo.”

Micah brought his arms around his father’s neck, wrapping his legs around his waist.

Peter groaned as he hoisted the boy. He broke into a trot, Michelle keeping pace beside him. Overweight and out of shape, Peter winded quickly. His chest heaved. Sweat burned his eyes. He clamped his jaws tight and blew out hard through his teeth, moving as fast as he could while lugging ninety pounds of boy.

Peter heard an announcement break through the noise on the concourse. “We’ll now begin boarding Flight 298 with service to Dallas/Fort Worth. Will all first class and passengers needing additional assistance please approach the gate?”

No. Can’t wait in line.

Peter glanced at the sign to his left.

Gate 10.

Fierce pain shot through Peter’s back and down his right leg. He stifled a cry, dropping to one knee. “Can’t—carry—run!”

Michelle took Micah’s right hand, Peter his left.

“Clear path ahead,” Peter said between breaths. “Run straight. Now!”

Up ahead he saw the sign for Gate 9. A long line snaked its way from the gate out into the concourse.

Got to get them on board.

Peter bulldozed to the front of the line, pushing in front of a short, elderly woman. A heavy black purse dropped from her hand, spilling its contents as it hit the floor. A chorus of disapproving voices rose behind him.

“Wait your turn, jerk!” somebody shouted.

Leaning on her cane, the elderly woman fastened a glare on Peter that was so stern and wilting she must have

been a retired schoolteacher. “I believe I was here first, young man,” she said.

Peter ignored her, shoving the tickets at the gate agent. “I’ve got to get these kids on the plane right away.”

The gate agent, a middle-aged woman with arrow-straight black hair, pushed Peter’s tickets back toward him. “You’ll have to wait your turn, sir.”

Michelle spoke up. “Please. We’re traveling by ourselves. And my brother is blind.”

The schoolteacher’s expression softened. She smiled at Michelle and Micah, then said to the attendant, “It’s all right. Let the children go first.” Scowling at Peter, she said, “I have to pick up my things before I can get back in line anyway.” Another passenger bent down and helped her gather the contents of her purse. She moved to a nearby seat and began to repack it.

The gate agent scanned the boarding passes, then handed them back to Peter coolly. “You’ll have to escort the children to the plane,” she said, “and turn them over to the senior flight attendant personally.”

Peter nodded, shoved the ticket envelope in his hip pocket, and led the two children down the Jetway. As they rounded the corner, Peter stopped a few feet short of the airliner’s door. He knelt down beside the boy and girl, tears welling in his eyes. “Michelle, you’ll take care of Micah?”

“Yes, Daddy, but why can’t you come too?”

Peter caressed her cheek with the back of his hand. “I love you, honey.”

“But, Daddy—”

“Shhhhh,” he said and put his finger on her lips.

Peter reached over to Micah and gently turned the boy’s shoulders so that he faced him. “You won’t forget what I told you, Micah?”

Micah shook his head as his hands traced their way up Peter’s shoulders, to his ears, and felt their way around his

face. When his fingers crossed the moist trails under his father's eyes, they stopped. He brought his fingers, wet with his father's tears, to his own face.

Peter pulled his two children toward him and embraced them. "Come on. Let's get you situated."

As they entered the jet, the senior flight attendant smiled cheerfully. She spoke to Michelle and Micah. "Well, hello. I hear you two are making this trip by yourselves."

Michelle nodded; Micah's empty gaze remained unchanged.

"Going to see your grandma for Christmas, maybe?"

Michelle shook her head. "Uncle Thomas."

The flight attendant smiled.

Peter broke in. "I'd better get going. Kiss your mother for me. I love you guys."

"Daddy?" Michelle's voice quavered. "Are we going to see you soon?"

Peter's lips pressed into a tight smile. "Go on, now."

The flight attendant took the boarding passes from Peter, then patted his shoulder. "Don't worry. We'll take good care of them." Turning to Micah and Michelle, she said, "Now, let's get you to your seats."

Michelle took Micah's hand and placed it on her shoulder. She stood there for a moment as other passengers squeezed by. Her eyes were red, but no tears came. Then she turned and led her brother down the aisle after the flight attendant.

Peter trudged back up the ramp and out onto the concourse. Tears blurred his vision as he stumbled through the milling crowd. He hated sending the children alone like this, hated staying behind. But it was the children's best chance of escape. If he could mislead the Fellowship long enough, they might have a chance.

Peter waited for what seemed like an eternity before the huge aircraft was pushed back from the gate. He gazed

through the windows, watching the jet until it receded from view.

“I love you, Justine.” Peter spoke the words softly.

There was still one thing he had to do before he returned to the Center. Across the concourse stood a wall of pay phones. Peter swiped a credit card through one, punched in a PIN, and quickly keyed in Thomas Kent’s number.

The phone rang once.

Twice.

Three times.

Someone brushed past him. Peter paid no attention.

Fourth ring.

He felt a sharp prick in his calf. A burning sensation followed instantly. Peter winced at the pain, then swung around. The old woman he’d pushed in front of stood beside him, smiling.

He heard the hiss of an answering machine picking up. “This is Thomas Kent. I’m not in. Leave a message if you feel like it.”

The woman’s face began to blur. Peter’s head swam. He heard the beep of Thomas Kent’s answering machine. Peter fought to stay conscious.

As his throat constricted, Peter choked out only a few words, “Save . . . my . . . children.”

He dropped the receiver and put his face in his hands. Peter staggered, trying to shake off the dizziness. He sucked in hard, but no air came. He tried to speak, but only an anguished gurgle escaped.

He thought the old woman smiled; then all went black.



“Help! Somebody help! Over here!”

The gate agent rushed from her post at the elderly

woman's cry. When she saw the overweight, balding man on the floor, she pulled a walkie-talkie from her belt. "Man down at Gate 20. Get the EMTs over here. Now!"

The old woman stood by, wringing her hands. "He just collapsed."

A small crowd gathered as the EMTs arrived and began working on the still figure lying by the window.

"He's crashed," one called out. "Get the defibrillator!"

Another tore Peter's shirt open and began chest compressions.

As a crowd formed, the little white-haired woman edged to the rear. Finally, she eased around and shuffled down the concourse, leaning on her cane. Out of sight from Gate 9, she lifted her cane and removed the tip, taking care not to prick herself with the small needle that protruded from it. Then she opened her purse, pulled out a boarding pass, and tore it in two. She dropped the pass and the cane tip in a trash can. She was glad. She didn't want to make a round-trip to Dallas, particularly in December. Too far from home. Too cold for a senior citizen to be traveling. Now she could go back to the Center, make a nice cup of tea, and put her feet up.

It felt so good to be useful. She had served Father Antoine well. As she shuffled down the concourse, a middle-aged brunette pushed a baby stroller from the newsstand. She rolled over to the elderly woman and regarded her with upraised eyebrows.

The grandmotherly woman nodded, then patted the brunette's hand. "All done," she said.

"And the children?"

"On their way."

A grin crept across the younger woman's lips. She held out her arm. The elderly woman took it. Leaving the empty stroller behind, they walked arm in arm toward the exit.