

THE
COMMAND
MENT

GOD IS NOT AN OPTION

ANNA
KITTRELL

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Commandment

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Dedication

To Inez. Thank you for hiding His word away in my
heart.

1

"It's late September, not the middle of July," Briar's mother said, blotting her forehead as she clipped down the walkway toward the car. "Seems Mother Nature didn't get the memo."

"Can I drive?" Briar jogged to the driver's side.

"We've already discussed this. You're not allowed behind the wheel until that thing comes off your leg." Her mother nodded toward the clunky black box strapped around Briar's ankle.

The infamous ankle monitor—aka life destroyer. Briar's electronic prison guard since age seven.

"But that's so ridiculous. What am I going to do, pick up a bunch of other unlevels and start a crusade? Come on, please? Only to the clinic. They'll never know."

"Don't argue. Get in." Her mother aimed the key fob at the car.

"You know, Mom, if you owned a cuffphone, like the rest of the population, you wouldn't need that old fob. The car would sense you coming and the door would pop open on its own."

Briar drudged around to the passenger side and climbed in, the headachy, sweet scent of floral air freshener hitting her between the eyes.

Her mom slid behind the wheel and clicked her seatbelt. "Buckle up," she said, double-glancing at her daughter. "What on earth is that on your head?"

“You noticed?” Briar pulled the seatbelt over her shoulder and snapped it, catching a section of long blue hair in the clasp. “I was chatting with Mouse online, trying to cheer him up.” She plucked the wig from her head, freed the strands from the buckle, and pushed the wig into her bag, causing her furry keychain to fall out onto her lap.

“He was sad about losing his dad.”

The little boy’s face had crumpled as he’d told her he wanted his dad back. She’d known how to make him feel better but had swallowed the comforting Bible verse on her tongue—one of many passages her grandmother had taught her as a child—and put on the silly wig instead. Blue hair was acceptable. Reciting Scripture would get her arrested. Sharing Christian faith was illegal by law of The Commandment. The crime carried an even stiffer penalty than skipping a SAP injection or disabling a fleshcard.

Not that either of those things meant anything to Briar. Her body repeatedly rejected the Serum to Accelerate Progressivism, meaning she had no need for the under-the-skin device that kept track of SAP levels in the brain. Her body’s intolerance of SAP was the reason she couldn’t take a walk around the neighborhood, or drive—or do anything that made life worth living.

Her mom flicked her gaze to the little stuffed lamb dangling from the metal ring. “For goodness sake, Briar, need I remind you that you have graduated from high school? You are far too old for stuffed animals and playing dress up.” She glanced over her shoulder and backed from the driveway, her mouth a tight pucker. “It’s time for you to grow up.” She snatched her oversized sunglasses from the dash and shoved

them onto her face.

“Not good advice to give someone majoring in child psychology, Mom. I actually want to be able to relate to the kids I’ll be working with face-to-face each day.” She picked up the stuffed toy handmade by her grandmother and shined its button eyes on her t-shirt. “Make that face-to-screen, in my case,” she muttered.

“Stop complaining. Your high school diploma is every bit as good as the ones received on that Greenfield High commencement platform—earned yours a full six months before the rest of the class, I might add. And your degree will be as commendable as those earned on the Greenfield College campus. Besides, don’t jump the gun. I have a good feeling about today.” Her mother gave half a dozen small nods. “Today may be the day we’ve been waiting for. Your brain might respond to the serum, and you’ll be free of that clunker around your ankle forever. Have a little faith.”

“Last time I checked, my faith is what the OLG was trying to get rid of.”

Operation Level Ground maintained a no-tolerance policy when it came to Christianity, and everyone knew it. The organization had long ago integrated the United States Postal Service, and now they owned cyberspace. OLG surveilled every email, video stream, blog, social media site, text message, phone call, and all other means of electronic communication known to man, to ensure nothing slipped past.

“Don’t get smart with me.” Her mother slid a hand from the wheel and pulled her sunglasses to the tip of her nose, throwing Briar a sharp look over the frames.

Briar smirked and tucked the lamb keychain into her bag. She lowered her gaze to the black box on her ankle. If by some chance her brain did accept the SAP injection, she'd be loose of the ankle monitor; but in turn, a fleshcard would be implanted in the back of her left hand to make sure her SAP level never dropped below the mandated amount. She shuddered. The thought of a chip being shoved under her skin set her nerves on edge.

The beep of an alarm filled the car. Briar glanced at the red light flashing on the ankle monitor and released a frustrated sigh. Her mom had forgotten to inform the OLG of her trip to the clinic.

"Dig the receiver out of my purse and text your appointment information to OLG headquarters." Her mother pushed the designer bag toward her.

Dig. Definitely the right word. Briar poked around in the overstuffed purse, finally pulling out a phone—the wrong one. She needed the government issued receiver, not her mom's personal cell. Why her mother insisted on holding onto that rigid old dumbphone instead of getting a cuffphone like the rest of modern civilization was beyond her. Briar tossed the thing back inside and then fondled it three more times before fishing out the right device.

"Booster?" she asked, keying in her I.D. number.

"No. Recheck," her mom answered.

Briar texted "recheck" to the headquarters' pre-programmed number. In a few seconds, the phone chimed. "That's the code." She unhooked her seatbelt, leaned down, and entered the digits into the ankle monitor's keypad. A twenty-minute timer appeared on the screen, the blue numbers immediately counting down the seconds.

“Hope we don’t have any driving issues,” she muttered, re-clasping the seatbelt. “You’d better hurry. Five o’clock traffic is about to hit.”

“We’ve been doing this since you were seven. You know the timer automatically adjusts to traffic conditions. Sometimes I swear you try rattling me for fun.”

Briar pressed her lips together, fighting a grin.

Nineteen minutes later, her mother pulled into the parking lot of Greenfield Medical Center. “There’s a good one.” Briar pointed through the windshield at a space near the front of the building.

Her mother eased the car between the yellow lines and killed the engine. “Right on time,” she said, glancing at Briar’s zeroed-out ankle monitor.

They exited the vehicle and walked up the sidewalk to the automatic glass doors. “Find us a couple of seats. I’ll get you checked in.”

Briar scanned the waiting room, settling on a pair of padded chairs against the far wall. After a moment, her mother joined her.

“At least they’re not terribly busy today.” She sat and began rifling through her purse. “Now where is that lipstick? I tucked a brand new tube in this morning.”

“Your lips are fine,” Briar said. “Red, as always. Like you’ve recently devoured a cherry popsicle—or a small animal. Why don’t you have them tattooed?”

“No, thank you,” her mother said, continuing to ransack her bag.

“Briar Lee.” A pretty woman in blue scrubs that Briar recognized as Nurse Sheila held open the door that led to the exam rooms.

Giving up the hunt for lipstick, Briar’s mother

stood and walked with her.

Briar uncurled the cuffphone from around her forearm. "Hold this for me until I'm finished?"

Her mother took the device and tossed it into her purse.

Briar cringed. "Couldn't you snap it on your arm? Now it's lost forever."

Her mother shook her head. "Nope. Thing's like a vice. Makes me claustrophobic."

A younger woman with yellow scrubs and a dark, messy-on-purpose bun met them in the small corridor.

"Briar," Nurse Sheila said, "this is Megan." She's interning at the clinic. I invited her to observe your procedure, unless you or your mother object."

"Fine with me." Briar smiled and shrugged.

"Of course, it's fine," her mother said as Nurse Sheila led them into a room containing an exam table and two chairs.

Familiar with the routine, Briar hopped onto the table as her mother chose the nearest chair. "Guess we came at a good time. That's the shortest stint we've ever experienced in the waiting room." She inhaled the disinfectant scented air, glad to rid her sinuses of Mom's cherry blossom car deodorizer.

"Yes. The past few weeks have been pretty slow," the nurse said, unlocking a drawer and removing a small key from one of the compartments. "Before that, it was chaos. August was a blur of parents rushing in to get their kids' SAP boosters before school started. Things have pretty well settled down—thank goodness."

Briar held up her foot to the nurse, who unlocked the monitor and typed a code onto the keypad.

"Do you have the receiver?" she asked, lowering

Briar's foot before positioning the monitor on the counter next to a device port.

"Briar?" Her mother raised an eyebrow.

"I put it back in your purse."

"For Pete's sake." Her mother dove into the bag again, shaking her head. She excavated the device and the nurse settled it onto the dock.

Megan the intern stepped to the counter, her curious gaze on the ankle monitor. "Can I look it over? I've never seen one of the old models."

Briar tried to ignore the invisible kick to her gut. What Megan was saying—without actually saying it—was that SAP was very well received by the human body. Normal people responded to the serum at birth. Very rarely did a child remain unresponsive by the age of two. To remain unresponsive, or *unlevel*, as OLG liked to call it, into almost-adulthood was nearly unheard of—entirely unheard of in Greenfield, Oklahoma. Yet there she sat on the exam table.

Sheila nodded at Megan. "Bit of a relic, isn't it?"

Megan picked up the bracelet and turned it over in her hand. "Heavy. I've never held one over a couple years old. How long have you worn it?"

"Ten years. I got it when I was seven, soon after The Commandment was instated. My brain didn't respond to SAP. Still doesn't. You probably already knew that part."

"The OLG headquarters are alerted if the monitor travels outside the electronic receiver's range." Sheila pointed to the device on the dock. "The radius is a hundred and fifty feet, about half a football field." She opened a metal cabinet filled with neatly folded hospital gowns and chose a light blue one from the shelf labeled "medium." She handed the gown to Briar.

"In other words, Briar and her mother are very close." She winked and patted Briar's arm.

Briar rolled her eyes and mouthed the words, "too close."

"I saw that," her mother said. "Lucky for you I feel the same way."

Megan clunked the bracelet onto the counter next to the GPS receiver. "No fleshcard?"

"I'm SAP-less, remember?" Briar answered, unfolding the gown.

"Fleshcards measure the amount of serum in the body, and are implanted when the patient is leveled." Sheila cut in. "Briar's brain doesn't respond to SAP injections—she's never been leveled. A fleshcard can't monitor what isn't there to begin with, so it would be useless." She turned to Briar. "We'll give you some privacy so that you can slip into that fashion-statement of a dress. I'll be back in a couple minutes to escort you to the cellar."

Briar rubbed her hands together. "The *cellar*," she said in an evil whisper. "I can hardly wait."

~*~

Briar pulled off her disposable slippers and stepped barefoot onto the cold floor of the cellar—a glass-enclosed booth, deriving its nickname from the cyclonical scan that took place inside. She pulled the protective goggles from around her neck, placing them on her eyes.

"Actual or virtual view?" Paul the technician asked over the booth's intercom.

"I'm trying to decide." Briar chewed the inside of her cheek. Did she want to stare through the goggles at

a string of funny cat videos or watch the multicolored sensors swirl around her body at a zillion miles-per-hour? "Actual, please."

Today she'd watch the lightshow. Being trapped in the core of a glowing tornado would be a fun skit to play out for Mouse and some of the other kids she video chatted with. Never know, one of them might undergo the procedure someday, and her experience could help them face their fear. She, of course, wasn't frightened or even the least bit uncomfortable, having been through the same process over a dozen times.

"I'm going to fire it up. Stand still, please." The technician's voice came through the speaker.

"Can you play the windstorm track? The one that sounds like a tornado?"

Paul chuckled over the speaker. "Only for you."

"Thanks."

She planted her feet on the stainless-steel floor, smiling as the sound of rushing wind filled the booth. She could picture raindrops slapping against the panes of surrounding glass. Lights of green, red, blue, and every shade in between, swirled around her toes and then moved upward, faster and faster as it bathed her body in a whirling kaleidoscope of color that lingered around her head.

Mouse would love this.

After a few moments, the cellar door popped open and Nurse Sheila escorted her back to the exam room to change clothes. The nurse waited outside the door then ushered her to the consultation office for what Briar referred to as the "after party" with Dr. Parker. She walked to the polished wood table and slipped into the large chair across from her mother.

"The doctor will be in shortly," Sheila said, closing

the door.

Her mother frowned and snapped her gaze up from her black coffee. "For heaven sake, Briar."

"My stomach's growling, so sue me. I'm hungry. It's not like I can help it." She rubbed her middle.

"Soon as this is over, we'll get some lunch. Drink some coffee to hold you over." Her mom lifted her Styrofoam cup in a mock toast and took a sip.

Briar slid from the chair and walked to the coffee station on the far wall. She poured a packet of hot chocolate mix into a disposable cup and added hot water from the coffee maker. "I wonder where they hide the cookies?" she asked, balancing on tiptoe to open a cupboard.

"Sit down." Her mom smacked a palm to the table to show she meant business.

At the sound of the doorknob turning, Briar slammed the cabinet shut and shuffled to the table, careful not to spill her drink.

A thirtyish man in pressed jeans and a long-sleeved navy-blue shirt walked into the room. "Good morning." He glanced at his watch and winced. "Make that good afternoon. I'm John Hartley, Dr. Bingham's physician's assistant." He stepped to the table and stretched out his hand to Briar's mother. "You must be Mrs. Lee. And you must be Briar." After shaking hands, he pulled out the chair at the head of the table and sat.

"PA?" Mrs. Lee frowned.

"PA-C, actually. I've already passed the Board."

"And who is Dr. Bingham? Briar sees Dr. Parker."

"Dr. Parker couldn't be here today. I assure you, I'm well informed of Briar's...unique case history. I've studied her file at length." He reached into his breast

pocket and rolled a small, iridescent cube to the table as if it were dice. "I have the results of her scan, and am prepared to discuss the outcome with both of you." He tugged up his sleeve and tapped his cuffed phone screen. From the cube, a virtual file folder emerged and hovered eyelevel above the table. A crease formed between his brows as he swiped through the flickering pages. "Mrs. Lee, the results are very concerning."

"Let me guess. Her results are the same as the past twenty scans. Despite the injections she's received every six months for the past ten years, Briar is unresponsive to the serum. Am I right? Those tiny thorn-shaped whatchamacallits, the 'God-zones' in the temporal lobes of her brain are still lit up like holiday trees, and no amount of SAP in the world will extinguish them. Is that about the gist of it, Mr. PA don't-forget-the-C? Same song, same dance. Sign off on her chart, give her the injection, and we'll return in six months."

"The scan did reveal Briar's Agathi are functional, as you assumed, Mrs. Lee. However, today the situation is more complicated than it's been in the past. Due to Briar's age, there will be no further injections. By order of The Commandment, the day Briar turns eighteen—" With his thumb and middle finger, he enlarged the type on the virtual document. "On October sixteenth, three weeks from now, she will report to the Alternative Research Center in Fleetwood, Montana for extended treatment. ARC officials will provide transportation by private jet to the facility." He swiped to a new document and pulled a stylus pen from his pocket. "I need for each of you to sign this acknowledgement."

Briar's swallow of hot chocolate backed up her

esophagus. The ARC? The Cadillac of treatment centers? He wasn't serious. Of course not. Mom managed to aggravate him, and he was bluffing.

Her mother shoved back from the table and stood. "Stick that acknowledgement in your Agathi, Mr. Smarter-Than-Thou. We're not signing anything. I demand to speak with Dr. Parker, immediately!"

"I already explained, Mrs. Lee, Dr. Parker isn't avail—"

"Go get me a real doctor, before I go marching up and down the hallways and find one myself," Her mother cut in.

A muscle twitched in the man's jaw as he tapped his cuffphone and dropped the stylus pen and unlit cube back into his pocket. "I'll interrupt Dr. Bingham." He turned from the table.

"Yes, you run along and do that." Briar's mother lowered into the chair and rested her forehead in her hand. She cut her gaze up to her daughter's. "I won't let them take you to that godforsaken place."

Briar reached over the table and took her mother's hand. "It'll be OK. Dr. Bingham will talk to Dr. Parker and get this all straightened out."

"Darn right it'll get straightened out." She slid her hand from Briar's and pulled her purse to her lap. "Where'd I put those blasted tissues?" A tear splashed to the table as she plowed through her belongings. She finally came up with a wrinkled wad of paper.

"Whole thing's ridiculous. Locking you up like some wild animal," she said, dabbing her lower lids. "*The ARC*—right. Over my dead body. What do they think? That because you can't absorb SAP, you'll suddenly start preaching like a religious zealot and contaminate everyone in society? Even if you did start

spouting out Scripture—which you *wouldn't*—where would be the harm in it? All the rest of us have SAP in our brains to keep us from absorbing religion. Got this nifty little chip shoved under my skin to make sure of it.” She slapped the back of her hand, indicating her fleshcard. “Everyone—*everyone*—is immune to Christianity except those already locked away in the ARC.”

Briar sighed. “I’m aware, Mom, but it’s a huge rule. I’m worried about you challenging The Commandment. I’m nervous about going away, too. But I’m also a little excited. Maybe it’ll only be for a week or two. I might respond to whatever treatment the ARC offers. Adult therapy is probably more advanced. More radical. Isn’t it worth a try? Honestly Mom, I’m sick to death of the injections. They’re useless.”

Not to mention she could actually leave home for the first time in forever. Maybe even make a friend or two in the facility. Comrades who were experiencing what she was going through. A tiny spark of excitement zipped up her spine.

A man wearing a white lab coat and a stethoscope entered the room with the smug-looking PA-C in tow.

“I’m Dr. Bingham.” He nodded curtly at Briar and her mother then took his turn sitting at the head of the table. “You’ve met my assistant. Do you feel your questions or concerns were not properly addressed?”

The assistant physician set the cube on the table in front of Dr. Bingham and glanced at her mother. He cleared his throat and selected a chair to the right of Briar.

“That’s putting it mildly. Where on Mother Nature’s green earth is Dr. Parker?”

Dr. Bingham wove his fingers together and leaned forward on his elbows. “Dr. Parker is not at this facility anymore. He suffered a stroke four months ago, and is no longer practicing medicine. Currently, he is residing at a rehabilitation hospital on the east coast.”

Briar heard her mother’s throat click as she swallowed. “OK. That answers one of my questions. Here’s another one—what exactly is wrong with my daughter? We’ve been told over and over again that her Agathi are functional. Big deal. I can glance at those bright red splotches on her electronic imaging printout and tell you that. My question is *why* are they working? Never once has anyone on staff—including Dr. Parker—been able to give us the reason.”

Briar slowly stirred what was left of her now cold hot chocolate. She knew the reason. Her Agathi continued to thrive because her grandmother had prayed that the serum wouldn’t work. For the first seven years of Briar’s life, her grandmother had taught her about God. Right up until the night Granna Grace had died peacefully in her sleep—three days before the loving woman was to receive her SAP injection by order of The Commandment.

Granna Grace had prayed for that, too.

Since Briar’s brain was unfazed by SAP, the memories of her grandmother’s biblical teachings were alive and well, tucked snugly away in her temporal lobes between what Dr. Parker referred to as her “hippocampus” and her “substantia nigra.” In that tiny sliver of brain the OLG was so obsessed with.

Not only were her memories of Christianity still there, they became increasingly vivid as she aged. Many times, in childhood, she’d heard her grandmother pray aloud for God to use her to bring

about change. She'd heard Granna Grace ask God to protect her grandchild as Briar carried out His will.

No doubt about it, Briar's serum-resistant Agathi were all Granna Grace's fault.

And God's.