

DAVID GREGORY

bestselling author of *Dinner with a Perfect Stranger*

best-selling

THE
LAST
CHRISTIAN

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A NOVEL

**THE
LAST
CHRISTIAN**

ALSO BY DAVID GREGORY

FICTION

Dinner with a Perfect Stranger: An Invitation Worth Considering

A Day with a Perfect Stranger

The Next Level: A Parable on Finding Your Place in Life

NONFICTION

The Rest of the Gospel: When the Partial Gospel Has Worn You Out

(coauthored with Dan Stone)

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**WATERBROOK
PRESS**

THE LAST CHRISTIAN

PUBLISHED BY WATERBROOK PRESS

12265 Oracle Boulevard, Suite 200

Colorado Springs, Colorado 80921

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ISBN 978-1-4000-7497-6

ISBN 978-0-307-45906-0 (electronic)

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Published in the United States by WaterBrook Multnomah, an imprint of the Crown Publishing Group, a division of Random House Inc., New York.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Gregory, David, 1959-

The last Christian : a novel / David Gregory. — 1st ed.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-1-4000-7497-6 — ISBN 978-0-307-45906-0 (electronic)

1. Artificial intelligence—Fiction. I. Title.

PS3607.R4884L37 2010

813'.6—dc22

2009046392

Printed in the United States of America

2010—First Edition

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Prologue

APRIL 3, 2088

see your neurons firing, Ray.”

The voice was familiar, one Ray Caldwell had known for decades. Bryson Nichols’s face came into view overhead.

I must be on my back.

He had no such sensation. He tried to turn his head to the right, then the left. It didn’t respond. He tried moving his fingers. No sensation. Panic swept through him. He was paralyzed.

“I brought you back to consciousness to let you know about the procedure.”

The procedure. On whom? There were no more procedures scheduled. Caldwell had canceled them all.

Nichols’s face slid in and out of view as he hovered above and behind, wielding surgical instruments with which Caldwell was all too familiar.

No... He wouldn't...

Nichols spoke calmly as he worked. “I do so apologize for having drugged you. But it was the only way. You know how much I’ve valued our working relationship—our friendship—these many years. I’d never do anything to jeopardize that friendship.

“But you were acting nonsensically, Ray. Halting the procedures at this point was sheer madness. I told myself it was the onset of disease, that you weren’t thinking straight. Or perhaps you were having cold feet about your own procedure. In any case, for your own good, I had to accelerate the schedule.”

Nichols paused, his upside-down face fixed in Caldwell’s line of vision, smiling. “Your alphas reveal your reluctance, but I do forgive your response, Ray. I know that, once the procedure is complete, we’ll see eye to eye.”

Caldwell examined Nichols's face as he spoke. He was calm, purposeful, self-assured. No trace of consternation concerning the crime he was about to commit.

"Oh, Ray, to be free at last from the constraints of biological intelligence. How I wish I were in your shoes!"

The room fell silent save for Nichols's movements and the methodical hum of neural scanners. Caldwell knew the routine. He had performed it himself numerous times, though not to completion.

Think! He had to think. Within the hour he would be disconnected from his biological brain...forever. If only he could talk, he could dissuade Nichols from—

Nichols's face reappeared. The procedure was ready, Caldwell intuited. Now was his final chance to change his destiny.

"...pat your hand, Ray. But I know you can't feel it. I want you to know that I'll be with you throughout."

Nichols leaned closer to Caldwell's face, his voice softening. "I have to admit, I'm envious. We had always planned on my being the one unveiled. And now it appears you will be the world-famous one—the first transhuman."

He straightened up. "I could be bitter, being supplanted by you in that regard. But of what value, ultimately, is the recognition we receive for our achievements? Is it not of minor importance compared to the contribution we make to the advancement of our species—of the evolution of the universe itself?"

Nichols glanced to his right. "I can tell by your scan that you still aren't in full agreement." He cocked his head slightly. "Ray, are your gammas spiking? I recognize that configuration. Are you trying to tell me something?"

He turned back toward his patient and shook his head. "You never cease to amaze me. I doubt any of our colleagues could manipulate their brain waves with such ease. That's why I teamed up with you so many years ago. Always amazing."

Nichols stepped away from Caldwell's sight, then reappeared. "I'm putting you back to sleep now, Ray. When you wake up, everything will

be complete. Your misgivings, whatever they may be, will be alleviated. You'll be everything we have worked toward. Everything humanity has dreamed of for millennia. Our friendship, our partnership in this grand endeavor, will continue. Shortly you'll perform the procedure on me. The two of us will lead humanity into its greatest adventure." He smiled broadly. "See you on the other side."

With all his will Ray Caldwell commanded his arms to move, his legs to break free from the bands that held him to the surgical table. But it was no use. In a few moments he would lose consciousness. When he awoke, he would be missing the only thing that made life—existence itself, even—worthwhile.

Drowsiness stalked him. His mind began to swim.

Three hours and six minutes later Caldwell's new brain powered up. He awoke. Electronic impulses coursed through the silicon mass that his cranium now housed.

Terror seized him. He bolted upright and scanned the room. His gaze landed upon the smiling face of Bryson Nichols standing four feet away.

"O brave new world that has such people in it, Ray. How do you feel, my friend?"

Past Nichols, in a glass jar, he spotted the three-pound mass of gray matter that had been extracted from him. His terror subsided into resigned grief. What he had feared most had come to pass.

It was gone. Utterly gone. He had lost his connection.

THREE WEEKS LATER

I always expected to teach history. I never expected to make it. Making history is the stuff of inventors and politicians and astronauts. Not professors. Especially not those with both feet in the past.

Visitors to my office—and they are few, since no one is on college campuses anymore—are always struck by what they regard as the antiques. The brass doorknob that requires a physical key. The mechanical clock. The metal nameplate with “Creighton Daniels” etched into it. The sea of books.

Meeting me in my virtual reality office (identical to my physical one), students are always surprised by two things: the books and the smell. They are one and the same, of course. Have enough old books on hand, and you get a musty smell. No one knows that anymore, because no one owns books.

With the exception of the door and a large window directly behind my desk, my office walls are covered by floor-to-ceiling wood bookcases filled to overflowing. “Where’d you get all these books?” students ask. The less polite ones add, “And why do you have them?”

I like being surrounded by books. Always have, even as a kid. I used to visit my grandparents’ house and climb up in the attic and dig through dusty boxes looking for old kids’ volumes. *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, Harry Potter, the Planet Nine series...the classics.

“Why don’t you just experience those stories in virtual reality like the other kids?” my father would ask. He worried I’d fall behind the times technologically. Which I did. But I also cultivated a love of books and, with it, a love of learning.

By the time I finish explaining why I’m a bibliophile, most students scrunch their noses and ask, “What is that smell?” At which point I expose them to the delights of holding old books: the feel when you

take one off the shelf, the aroma when you open it, the hint of mustiness. There's nothing quite like it.

This particular Wednesday I walked down the deserted third floor of McMinnus Hall to my office and started my morning routine. I grabbed a cup of coffee, sat at my desk, took a bite into a toasted cranberry bagel, and pulled up my Grid interface.

"Good morning, Alistair."

Alistair appeared in one of the two chairs across the desk. "Good morning, Creighton. How did you sleep?"

"Well, thank you. Access CulturePulse, please."

Alistair frowned. "You still have seven dissertations to review before the end of the term. I can access the current one for you."

I sighed. Dissertation reviews. The bane of my profession. Having neural implants that enhanced reading speed and comprehension by a factor of eight didn't make five hundred pages of "National Stereotyping in Virtual Reality Programming and Its Effects on Preadolescent Cross-Cultural Relationships" any more enticing.

I did what I always do when faced with an unpleasant task.

"CulturePulse first, Alistair."

A hundred electronic images appeared in the air above my desk—the cultural items that received the most hits on the Grid in the previous twenty-four hours.

"Number one, please."

The image on the far left moved to the chair next to Alistair. It was an attractive young woman with short brown hair, dressed in a blue sundress and sandals. Her name was Jade, from Auburn, Michigan. She'd had a dream in which Jesus appeared to her.

The second image appeared, a young man dressed in a beige T-shirt and jeans. He'd had the same dream. I scanned the remaining images. Twenty-two of the ninety-eight were the identical story.

I picked up my coffee cup and leaned back in my chair. *How did all these people have the same dream? And why are they all from North America?*

An audio-only tap interrupted my thoughts. City of Champaign Police Department. *This can't be good news.*

"This is Creighton Daniels."

"Mr. Daniels—is it 'mister' or 'doctor'?" The voice was low, the speech slow.

"Either is fine. Is anything the matter?"

"Mr. Daniels, the Grid lists you as the primary contact for your father, Eli Daniels."

I sat up straight in my chair. "That's correct. Is he all right?"

There was a pause. "I'm sorry to have to tell you. Your father has committed suicide."

The police officer climbed out of his car when he saw me pull up in front of my dad's place. "Mr. Daniels? Officer Stefan Hixon."

We shook hands.

"You went to the morgue to identify him?"

I nodded.

"A crying shame, a man that young, in his eighties. At least it was painless. Did he give any indication?"

"No. Not to me, at least. They said he left a suicide message."

"Yeah, I need you to look it over and check out his place. This is all just a formality since they've done the autopsy."

We walked through the front door into the modest, sixty-year-old house where my dad lived his last two decades. Though we visited in virtual reality once or twice a month, I hadn't been to his house in eleven years. It looked the same: immaculate. My dad was a neat freak, a gene he had failed to pass along.

The officer started the visual. Dad was sitting at his desk at home, expressionless. But he was always expressionless. "This is just a simple message for those I leave behind," he said. "I'm fortunate to have had so many good friends and family, especially my university colleagues. I've appreciated you all. But now it's time for me to say good-bye. I've

been diagnosed with CJD, which has no cure. I haven't told anyone this, not wanting to burden you with my troubles. The doctors give me only a few months of rapid deterioration. I don't want to go out that way, and I don't want to be remembered that way. This is better for all of us. My fond farewell to you all."

That was it.

Why didn't he tell me? And why didn't he have more to say than a fond farewell?

The officer shook his head. "That's rough, man. I'm sorry." He glanced around the living room. "Well, I just need you to make sure everything seems normal. It's just you, I take it? No brothers or sisters?"

"No."

"A life partner?"

"His last one was years ago."

"Parents?"

"They're in Washington State. I don't think he's talked to them in years."

He nodded. "I get this a lot—only children having to do everything themselves. That's the way it is anymore, I suppose." He paused, then motioned toward the door. "I'll just wait over there. Take your time looking around. Just don't remove anything for now."

I walked slowly around the living room, kitchen, two bedrooms, and bath. Everything looked normal, but I wasn't exactly the best judge. I drifted into my dad's study and sat down at his desk. Everything on the desk top was in perfect order. I opened a drawer and glanced at some electronic accessories, neatly arranged. I opened another and pulled out a disheveled stack of papers. I wasn't sure what surprised me more, the papers or the disarray. Dad never kept things that way. I flipped through them. None seemed particularly important.

I looked in the bottom drawer. A bowl. Dad always ate popcorn at his desk. An old model electronic writing pad. I opened it. It was dusty—probably hadn't been used in years. I started to close the pad, then noticed that something had been tucked inside the cover pocket. I

pulled out an old-style digital storage device. No one had used these for two decades.

I glanced toward the front of the house. The officer had momentarily gone into virtual reality.

I slipped the device into my pocket.